



**HAL**  
open science

## Film as Moral Education

Sandra Laugier

► **To cite this version:**

Sandra Laugier. Film as Moral Education. Journal of Philosophy of Education, 2021, 55 (1), pp.263-281. 10.1111/1467-9752.12551 . hal-03745159

**HAL Id: hal-03745159**

**<https://paris1.hal.science/hal-03745159>**

Submitted on 3 Aug 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Published as Sandra Laugier, “Film as Moral Education”, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55, no. 1 (2021)

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-9752.12551>

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12551>

Abstract

Stanley Cavell was the first to account for the transformation of theory and criticism brought about by reflection on popular culture and its ‘ordinary’ objects, such as so-called mainstream cinema. However, Cavell is less concerned with reversing artistic hierarchies than with the self-transformation required by our encounters with new experiences, and with the moral education they provide. According to him the value of a culture lies not in its ‘great art’ but in its transformative capacity, the same capacity found in Emerson’s ‘moral perfectionism’. This new accent on examining the educational value of films as public occurrences of ethical theorising points towards the analysis of linguistic and aesthetic expression in a larger corpus works of ‘popular culture’, hence to going beyond Cavell’s focus on the classical Hollywood movie.

**Sandra Laugier**

### **Film as Moral Education**

One may recall the furore at the Hollywood Oscars that followed the proposal, in the autumn of 2018, to create a new ‘popular film’ category—which would have led to awards for ‘blockbusters’ such as *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018). Opponents have argued that the Oscars reward films that are *by essence* both ‘great’ and popular, from *New York-Miami*, 1935, to *Gladiator*, 2001. But in our century? For at least a decade, the chances of a ‘popular’ film (with a large audience such as *Black Panther*, a landmark *experience* for millions of viewers) being appreciated and recognised by film institutions have been low, and there is a certain self-righteousness in proposing the creation of a specific category for films that remain in fact excluded from recognition. (*Black Panther* had predictably left the Oscars with a couple of technical rewards.)

The polemic made it possible to realise how difficult it is for film critics and institutions to take into account the reality and power of ‘popular’ culture. Art audiences have been transformed since the end of the last century; this democratisation of art in the digital age has not yet been sufficiently observed and analysed by philosophy. What we are witnessing, though, is the realisation of the demand, formulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson and then by John Dewey (1934, chapter 1), for an art that is rooted in ordinary experience and in everyday life, an art that is not *cut off*, apart from common experience. Stanley Cavell (1926–2018) has powerfully accounted for the transformation of criticism brought about by reflection on popular culture. Cavell was less concerned with reversing artistic hierarchies or inverting the relation between theory and practice than with the self-transformation required by our encounters with new experiences and with the education provided by them.

While Walter Benjamin had reflected in 1939 on the effects induced by the appearance of new technical possibilities for the reproduction of musical and plastic works, now—at a time

when audiences for the arts have been broadened—the installation, through the digital turn, of new forms, new actors and new models of artistic actions and practices, have transformed the very definition of art, challenging elitist conceptions of ‘great art’. It is a profound change in the cultural field and its hierarchies that is taking place.

Following Stanley Cavell's reflections, popular film and TV have imposed themselves as a place of re-appropriation of artistic and hermeneutic authority, of re-empowerment of the viewer through the *constitution* of his singular experience. The question that remains is that—as with *Black Panther*—of their definition as *art*. But popular culture has proven, for Cavell, a resource for education. Is there still any sense today in talking about ‘popular culture?’ Or has this sense been transformed to the extent that we now use the expression without really knowing what we are saying—or, to take the title of one of Cavell's early essays, without *meaning* what we say? (Cavell, 2002 [1969]).

The great critic Robert Warshaw, the author of *The Immediate Experience*, and the author of remarkable analyses of popular culture, put it thus:

We are all ‘self-made men’ culturally, establishing ourselves in terms of the particular choices we make from among the confusing multitude of stimuli that present themselves to us. Something more than the pleasures of personal cultivation is at stake when one chooses to respond to Proust rather than to Mickey Spillane, to Laurence Olivier in *Oedipus Rex* rather than Sterling Hayden in *The Asphalt Jungle*. And when one has made the ‘right’ choice, Mickey Spillane and Sterling Hayden do not disappear; perhaps no one gets quite out of sight of them. There is great need, I think, for a criticism of ‘popular culture’ which can acknowledge its pervasive and disturbing power without ceasing to be aware of the superior claims of the higher arts, and yet without a bad conscience. (2001 [1962], p.xxxvii)

In his masterpiece, *The Claim of Reason*, published two years before *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) but written decades earlier, Cavell defined philosophy as the ‘education of grownups’. In his major works on cinema—*The World Viewed* (1979), *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981) (on remarriage comedies), *Contesting Tears* (1997) (on melodrama) and *Cities of Words* (2004) (which covers the entirety of his teaching at Harvard, alternating between lessons in philosophy and studies of films)—Cavell's parallel goal is to give popular culture (Hollywood movies in particular are his main interest) the power to change us. According to Cavell, the value of a culture lies not in its ‘great art’ but in its transformative capacity, the same capacity found in the ‘moral perfectionism’ of Emerson and Thoreau. Philosophy consists in ‘bring[ing] my own language and life into imagination’, in ‘a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life’,

and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words my imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself, along the lines in which it meets in me. (Cavell, 1979, p. 125)

The question of philosophy is: can we imagine continuing to grow after the end of childhood? Cavell's philosophy defines growth—once childhood and physical growth are over—as the capacity to change. This capacity is at work in Cavell's favoured object of study, the apparently minor genre of remarriage comedies, which stages the characters’ mutual education and their transformation through separation and reunion.

In this light, philosophy becomes the education of grownups... The anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups, this is not natural growth, but *change*. (*ibid.*)

You have in these films a new assessment of importance, which is what Wittgenstein called for when he asserted the importance of ordinary language philosophy and attention to ordinary life.<sup>1</sup> Cavell connects this line of thinking about our education in film, and the movies and characters and moments that matter to us, to the project of film criticism:

The moral I draw is this: the question what becomes of objects when they are filmed and screened—like the question what becomes of particular people, and specific locales and subjects and motifs when they are filmed by individual makers of film—has only one source of data for its answer, namely the appearance and significance of just these objects and people that are in fact to be found in the succession of films, or passages of films, that matter to us. To express their appearances, and define those significances, and articulate the nature of this mattering, are acts that help to constitute what we might call film criticism. (Cavell, 1984, p. 183)

Cavell also gives this philosophical enterprise the outdated name ‘moral education’ or ‘pedagogy’, as in the subtitle to *Cities of Words*. For Cavell, whose childhood and youth were haunted by Hollywood movies, the culture in question is popular cinema, whose productions reached the greatest number at the time. The educational value of popular culture is not anecdotal. Indeed, it seems to me to define what must be understood both by ‘popular’ and by ‘culture’ (in the sense of *Bildung*) in the expression ‘popular culture’. Within such a perspective, the vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public* rather than the institution and valorisation of a ‘quality’ corpus.

The way in which Cavell has claimed the philosophical value of Hollywood cinema—placing it on the level of the greatest works of thought without, however, thinking of cinema as great art—may have seemed too easy, demagogic or populist, as if such a claim could not be real. What Cavell claimed for mainstream Hollywood cinema in the 1970s has been transferred to other practices and bodies of work, such as television series, which have taken over from cinema, if not replaced it, in the task of educating adolescents and adults. Television series, like cinema, now take responsibility for the education of the public.

What is meant by popular culture today is no longer exactly popular in the social or political sense in which certain arts—for example, songs or folklore—were popular, even if it draws on the resources of these arts. When it comes to defining our shared, accessible heritage, we must think instead of the material of ordinary conversation. At a certain time—and still today in certain milieus—this could have been a recent film or a controversial book. Today, among the young and a good number of adults, it is just as often a television series. Popular culture turns out to be a site for ‘the education of grownups’, who, through this intermediary, return to a form of education and cultivation of the self. This is subjective improvement (*perfectionism* is sometimes called *meliorism*) and, more exactly, a subjectivation that takes place through sharing and commenting on public and ordinary material that is integrated into ordinary life.<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that ‘we are all self-made men’ and that cinema, for Warshow and Cavell, is at the heart of ‘popular culture’ and the stakes of its criticism.

Such a criticism finds its best opportunity in the movies, which are the most highly developed and most engrossing of the popular arts, and which seem to have an almost unlimited power to absorb and transform the discordant elements of our fragmented culture. (Warshow, 2001 [1962], p. xxxviii)

## THE DEMOCRACY OF CINEMA

It is for this reason that we must take Cavell seriously when, in *Pursuits of Happiness*, he associates the argument of *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) with that of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Obviously there was at the time something shocking in this, and this very scandal is what interests Cavell. It is not the association of cinema and philosophy that is scandalous (it has become all too common), but rather making them equal in their competence and capacity to educate and shape. The philosophical relevance of a film lies in what it itself says and shows, not in what criticism discovers in it or develops in relation to it. This perspective on popular film introduced by Cavell now applies to television series, art forms that not only maintain contact with their audiences but also educate them.

In *The World Viewed*, Cavell's starting point was the popular nature of cinema, which he connected to a certain relation to ordinary life: an intimacy with the ordinary. A first aspect of this intimacy lies in cinema's integration in the ordinary lives of movie enthusiasts. In an excellent essay on the ontology of cinema in Cavell, Emmanuel Bourdieu defined cinema's realism by its entanglement with our ordinary life:

Cinema is common, ordinary, shared aesthetic experience, implicated in and bound up with everyday life (a movie before or after dinner and before returning home; a night perhaps spent dreaming of it; breakfast, etc.). (2000, p. 57)

One of Cavell's goals, and one of his greatest successes, is to make apparent the intelligence (that is, understanding) that a film has already brought to bear in its own making, which also amounts to 'letting a work of art *have its own voice* in what philosophy will say about it'. This is not only a methodological point, for it supposes that cinema is equal to philosophy as a mode of approach to the world. Consequently, cinema interests us as *experience* and not as *object*, and this is the basis of an ordinary criticism and theory of cinema.

Understanding cinema's relation to philosophy thus implies two tasks: First, learning what it means to 'check one's experience', to use an expression from *Pursuits of Happiness*; that is, to examine one's experience and 'to let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it' (Cavell, 1981, p. 10). This means that it is necessary to educate one's experience in such a way that one can be educated by it. There is an inevitable circularity here, which Emerson pointed out: *having* an experience requires having confidence in one's experience. Second, finding the words to express one's experience. This theme is central in Cavell's work: the will to find one's voice in one's story, against the temptation of inexpressiveness.<sup>3</sup> The possibility of *having* an experience is inseparable from the question of expression and the possibilities, which cinema explores, for human beings' natural expressivity. This discovery, rooted in a reading of Wittgenstein, is Cavell's mode of approach to cinema and it serves as his entry into its different genres: the conversations in remarriage comedies do not duplicate ordinary conversations, but *express* a relation to ordinary words. 'A mastery of film writing and film making accordingly requires a mastery of this mimesis of ordinary words' (Cavell, 1981, p. 12).

The fact that this conversation is not ‘only’ discourse, and implies what Cavell calls photogenesis—the projection of living characters onto the screen to speak these words—shows that this conversation can only exist in cinema, that it even constitutes the experience of cinema, and that it inscribes the ordinariness of language in cinema: (talking) films put us in the presence of a body and a voice, of the life of ordinary language. Thus, to find the ordinary would be to find an adequacy between our words and our world; it would be to come closer to our experience. This is the claim of popular and democratic culture, already expressed by Emerson:

I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; Greek art or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. (Emerson, 2000, p. 57; as cited in Cavell, 1981, p. 14)

For this, it is not a matter of the critic interpreting, but rather letting the film say what it has to show and hearing what it says: its voice. This means letting oneself be educated by the experience of the film and finding passivity in the experience and its repetition. For Cavell, cinema is a response to scepticism, to the loss of an experience that escapes me, but it is not a way of recovering an inaccessible experience, of regaining the world in the projection of the world: it is instead a mode of recognising the loss. The paradox of the idea of a *return* to the ordinary is that one returns to something one never had, ‘where we have never been’ and are still longing for.

The genre of remarriage comedies expresses this aspiration to return to the ordinary—acceptance of repetition, and of the everyday—which in these films is only possible through death (the loss of the other and of the world), and then rebirth. The genre marks a unique proximity between the experience of cinema and what constitutes our experience as ordinary. The experience of these films makes it possible to ‘be interested in one's own experience’.

[People bear these films] in their experience as memorable public events, segments of the experiences, the memories, of a common life. So that the difficulty of assessing them is the same as the difficulty of assessing everyday experience, the difficulty of expressing oneself satisfactorily, of making oneself find the words for what one is specifically interested to say. (Cavell, 1981, p. 41)

Cinema, answering the Emersonian call for democratic and ordinary art, is able to depict everyday reality. Our experience as viewers comes out of an ordinary, shared culture—access to the ‘physiognomy’ of the ordinary: to quote Emerson's ‘The American Scholar’ again, ‘the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life’ (2000, p. 57). The idea that the highest culture is shared culture is one of the fundamental values Cavell defends in ‘Film in the University’, the post-face to *Pursuits of Happiness*. Cavell teaches us that an ordinary aesthetics of cinema must defend not the specificity of the individuals who created a work, or the singularity of a work, but rather our common aesthetic experience—for example, the experience of a movie viewer who goes to see a movie less for its director than for the actors in it, whom they liked in earlier films and now want to see again in new incarnations (‘the same, but different’, as Cary Grant says in *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937)).

The experience of cinema is at once mysterious and ordinary. Here, we touch on the very finitude of the experience of film, which is always repeatable but always circumscribed. In

spite of new viewing conditions that have been established over the last several decades (with videos, DVDs and so on) the temporality of film is always the temporality of finitude. There is always a moment when it stops, and this feeling is part of the experience of a film, making it a type of the ordinary experience of life.

This proximity between the experience of cinema and what makes our experience ordinary—its evanescence and endurance—constitutes the pedagogic and democratic aspect of the cinematographic experience, which comes out of shared *care*.

Rich and poor, those who care about no (other) art and those who live on the promise of art, those whose pride is education and those whose pride is power or practicality—all care about movies, await them, respond to them, remember them, talk about them, hate some of them, are grateful for some of them. (Cavell, 1979, pp. 4–5)

Another democratic characteristic of the experience of cinema is that in cinema we like the exceptional as much as the common: the movie enthusiast is by definition eclectic (in a way the art or literature enthusiast is not always). Panofsky had already noticed this element: if cinema is important for us, it is because it has not lost contact with a wide audience, unlike the traditional great arts. Panofsky was the first to insist ‘on the fact that film was first and foremost created as popular entertainment without aesthetic pretension, and revitalized the connections between artistic production and consumption, which are more than tenuous—if not broken—in many artistic disciplines’ (as cited in Cerisuelo, 2000, p. 19). This is the basis of the relation of cinema to its genres. ‘In the case of films’, Cavell writes ‘it is generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like typical ones. You don't even know what the highest are instances of unless you know the typical as well’ (Cavell, 1979, p. 6).

## THE MORAL IMPORTANCE OF FILM

Cavell's goal is to propose a change of perspective—which he sometimes calls a *revolution*—on cinema and popular culture in general. In order to do this, it is necessary to truly take cinema seriously, to see its importance—to accept, for example, as Cavell indicates in his essay ‘The Thought of Movies’, that Hollywood movies have as much to tell us about certain questions (such as the possibility of establishing contact with the world) as philosophy as we know it does; that reflection on scepticism in Capra is as radical as it is in Hume or Kant. The ‘nightmare of criticism’ is to be unable to see ‘the intelligence that a film has *already* brought to bear in its making’. The perspective on popular film introduced by Cavell now applies to television series and to everything that comes out of the exploration and mixing of ‘genres’: possibly through the creation of a specific universe based on its own culture and system of references to popular culture, which it produces (the cult *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is an example of this, and its showrunner had an explicit educational ambition).

Cinema is not (or for Cavell, not foremost) a matter of art: it has to do rather with shared experience. In this respect, cinema heralds the reign of television series. Cavell does not speak of seeing a film but of ‘moviegoing’. It is less a matter of aesthetics than of *practice*, a practice that connects and reconciles public and private, subjective expectation and sharing in something common. Cinema's relation to popular culture shifts as a result. From the outset, Cavell nullifies a response that would claim that every art, in its youth, goes through a ‘popular’ phase. He sees two biases in such a response: first, in the possibility of measuring

the lifespan of an art and seeing it as a living being with a youth and adulthood, and second, in the hierarchy between or evolution from popular to great art. Panofsky wanted to show that cinema took up the popular genres of tragedy, romance, crime, adventure and comedy 'as soon as it was realized that they could be transfigured ... by the exploitation of the unique and specific possibilities of the new *medium*' (Panofsky, 1959, p.18, as cited in Cavell, 1979, p. 30). The word 'transfigure' can here be understood as the creation of another figure, another representation or expression (the 'dynamisation of space' or 'spatialisation of time', and the ability to show several events unfolding at the same time, are 'possibilities of the cinematographic *medium*'). The theme of cinema as the exploration of new aesthetic possibilities is fairly central to the philosophy of film but does not interest Cavell. For Cavell, cinema is important because of its place in our lives and its exploration of genres, and because of its capacity to absorb and produce fragments of our experience—an essential aspect of popular culture and which ordinary criticism must account for. Television series as part of our ordinary forms of life have this kind of importance.

No reflection on popular culture can ignore the force of Cavell's question, and in particular his rejection both of the critic's contempt for forms seen as degraded and the condescension of the intellectual who claims interest in series or popular film while remaining certain of a position of superiority over the material. Cavell bases his hermeneutic work on 'the intelligence that a film has *already* brought to bear in its making' (Cavell, 1981, p. 11). The perspective Cavell introduces on popular cinema and the demand it places on criticism is now, in my opinion, valid for television series and for everything that emerges out of the exploration and mixture of 'genres' of culture.

The shift in interest to 'ordinary' objects such as movies and television shows leads to a transformation in aesthetics, *and* in ethics: a new beginning for democratic thought and education, one based on Emersonian self-reliance and a Deweyan conception of the public. In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey defines the public as emerging from a problematic situation: individuals experience a certain problem they initially see as arising from private life, and a solution is arrived at through the interactions between those who decide to give public expression to this problem.

Understanding culture as given allows a redefinition of popular culture: not as pure entertainment devoid of value but as a work of moral education. Popular culture (film, television shows, music, Internet videos, video-games) now plays a crucial role in reformulating ethics and in the political and social constitution of democracy. In *The World Viewed* Cavell took the 'popular' nature of cinema as his starting point, connecting it to a certain relationship to ordinary life: a kind of intimacy with the ordinary; the integration of film into the viewer's ordinary life; its imbrication in everyday life and in constituting the viewer's experience. Cavell took its point of departure directly from the *popular* character of film, What distinguishes cinema from the other arts is this collective *interest*: everyone (at least at the time when Cavell wrote his first books on film) is involved in it, *cares* about it. The educational value of popular culture is essential to its character as a democratic progress. Hence television series becomes the place for the education of individuals who thus return to a form of subjective perfection through the sharing of and concern for public and ordinary material, integrated into their lives, through concern for the characters, their choices, their actions and their dilemmas. Any reflection on television series<sup>4</sup> is really about the collective elaboration of an ordinary ethics, through the works but also through the conversations it generates (in both the public and the private spheres). The question of democracy is then also that of our capacity for individual expressiveness, action and singular aesthetic choices.



Rather than being an elitist matter, art has become an essential driving force for social intervention and innovation—and therefore a force for the creation of real democracy, if democracy is understood not as an institution but as a requirement for equality and participation in public life. You do not need a diploma to go to a film and especially to feel competent to judge it. In the same way, as Austin, the master of the philosophy of ordinary language, suggested, you need no technical expertise to speak ordinary language and be able to say ‘what we say’.

The shift in interest towards ‘ordinary’ objects such as cinema or television series hence leads to a transformation of aesthetics. The theoretical challenge of references to popular cultures is fundamental: it is not a question of drawing from a reservoir of examples but of reversing the hierarchies of what matters. This allows a new beginning of the thought of democracy, and its perfectionist foundation, in Emersonian self-reliance and the Deweyan conception of the public. To see the interest of popular culture therefore requires an ordinary approach to philosophy and a particular conception of morality. Morality is classically conceived as a set of general rules or principles to be implemented. Popular culture completely shifts these boundaries, showing that literary and cinematographic works or television series have a strong ethical dimension and that they accomplish the moral education of the public. The ordinary virtues of these works inheres in the way morality is found, not in examples or general rules, but in *any* character in novels, films or series, in ordinary situations of life, where we are faced with particular ethical problems at each moment. The moral dimension developed by film is far from an ethics of duty and the idea of great universal principles that would apply equally to all. Ethics is not confined to judgement and action: it is also in the way people are and hence in the way a character is presented. The attachment over time to characters in television series and films that evolve is due to these characteristics that are not usually brought into the realm of morality. Indeed there can therefore be a form of moral education provided by figures who are *not* exemplary. Dewey, in *The Public and its Problems*, defines the public from a confrontation with a problematic situation where people experience a specific disorder that they initially perceive as private life, and where the answer emerges through the interplay of those who decide to give it public expression. This makes it possible to redefine popular culture not as worthless entertainment but as public moral educational work. Cavell articulated the nature of film in terms of a certain relationship to ordinary life, an intimacy with the ordinary, the integration of cinema into the ordinary life of the moviegoer, its entanglement in everyday life and the constitution of his experience. An ordinary aesthetic must no longer defend the specificity of the creative individualities of the work but the common and shareable aesthetic experience.

Language is not only to be considered in its descriptive function, or even its agentic one, but as a perceptual instrument, allowing for the finesse and adjustment of perceptions and actions. This makes it possible to go beyond classical moral conceptions in a new way and to consider different moral approaches: the way people are, natural expressions and reactions, the moving texture of personalities, the constitution of characters in the long term and the expression of a vision of the world through discourse and personal style. Such an approach must be based on a fine perception, on the appropriate expression and education of sensitivity (of the spectator or the public). It is in public moral expression (in the form of the choice of words, the style of conversation, a way of being) that the moral vision of a person, or a character, is developed, which in turn works that of the receiver. Moral attitude or competence consists in perceiving, not objects or situations, but the possibilities and meanings that emerge in situations and between people. It also consists in anticipating and improvising in a relevant way at every moment one's perceptions and thoughts, and in

constantly reworking one's moral positions and sensations in conversation with the characters. In the end, this radically transforms—and this is undoubtedly the essential point of these analyses—the meaning of reception: to be transformed and affected in these interactions, one must also be an agent.

Emmanuel Bourdieu, in the essay cited above, explains that one of the characteristics of cinema is its internal reference to genres, as a specific modality of its examination of its own expressive potentials. Of course, other arts also appeal to the notion of genre, but retrospectively, in order to classify the productions of the past or to distinguish themselves within a genre. For Cavell, on the other hand, cinema only exists in its genres, and this defines its popular nature: there is no essence of cinema or authorial mystique. In contrast to aristocratic distinctions and to the privileges of high culture, popular culture proposes the model of the self-made spectator who creates their taste through their favourite genres: action, romantic comedies, Westerns, science fiction, vulgar-comedies-for-teens, vampire movies, to list but some.

For Cavell, the constitution of these genres, and their pregnancy, rests on a specific property of film creation: its collective nature. The production of a cinematographic work is a collective enterprise that mobilises not only the film's team, led by its director, but also, indirectly, the entire community of other filmmakers and all their works, since team members are always likely to participate or to have participated in the making of other films produced by the community in question. Henceforth, the system of reference relative to which the work of art was understood—that is, the author and his unique inspiration—dissolves. To understand a cinematographic work, it is necessary to find a system of reference that transcends individual wills and inspirations. This system of reference is the collectively constituted genre (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 44).

Stephen Mulhall (2008) has very convincingly described what sets Cavell's approach apart from those of other philosophers of cinema. The dominant approach of philosophy of film consists in describing the essential properties of the medium in order to prescribe its possibilities and possible genres. Cavell, on the other hand, advocates describing certain artistic successes or certain genres in order to describe the possibilities of the medium—just as, for Wittgenstein, there is no 'essence of language' that would prescribe its norms and usages, and no definition of our concepts that would determine their possible future application.

We may here turn to Victor Perkins' powerful analysis:

I do not believe that the film (or any other medium) has an essence which we can usefully invoke to justify our criteria. We do not deduce the standards relevant to Rembrandt from the essence of paint; nor does the nature of words impose a method of judging ballads and novels. Standards of judgement cannot be appropriate to a medium as such but only to particular ways of exploiting its opportunities. That is why the concept of the cinematic, presented in terms of demands, has stunted the useful growth of film theory. (Perkins, 1972, p. 59)

Cavellian genres are *a posteriori* reconstructions of structures that have functioned in practice, and they are defined in relation to a certain body of actual works—for example, a group of comedies produced within a given period, such as the 1930s and 1940s, and within a

certain structure of production, such as the large Hollywood studios of the time. Hence as Bourdieu puts it:

The expressive possibilities of cinema as an aesthetic medium are created by their realisation. Thus, for Cavell, the potentialities of the medium—in particular its technical potentialities—are not even possibilities as such as long as they haven't been given meaning within a particular work. (2000, p. 47)

A genre of cinema or television is thus not an *a posteriori* principle of classification, or a normative system, but rather a creative force. '[The genre strives] toward a state of absolute explicitness, of expressive saturation. At that point the genre would have nothing further to generate' (Cavell, 1981, p. 30). Thus, none of the traits that enter into the definition of a genre is a necessary and sufficient condition for belonging to this genre—the list of characteristic traits is 'radically open-ended'. And the absence of a trait characteristic of a given genre (for example, the absence of a heroine's mother in remarriage comedies) can always be made up for by a 'compensating circumstance'. However, belonging to the remarriage comedy genre does seem to suppose that the heroine be a woman on a quest for perfection and that the starting-point of the film be a divorce, or something of that order, and its endpoint be (something like) her remarriage. But this structure does not constitute a set of properties necessary and sufficient for a given work to belong to a genre, the list of properties that defines a genre is never closed.

It is a genre's openness and creativity that allows for its productivity, including in the derivation of new genres: for example, the perfectionist quest in the genre of melodrama; remarriage or the equivalent (reconciliation/conversation) in romantic comedies or comedies for teens such as *Knocked Up* or *Superbad* (Apatow, 2007; Mottola, 2007). Not to mention the productivity of genres in television series, which have clearly inherited the conversational capacities of couples in Hollywood comedies, which provide them with the grammar of their expressions, interactions and emotions.

There is thus, in genre, an aspect of empowerment for later generations of characters. In an apparently banal comedy, *The Holiday* (Nancy Meyers, 2007), genre has a determining role, allowing the heroine of one of the storylines (Kate Winslet, whose character discovers an entire series of remarriage comedy films during a trip to California, where she meets an old screenwriter and a young composer) to find the strength to reject her former, toxic lover and to express new confidence in herself. *The Holiday* is sprinkled with micro-extracts of films (including *The Lady Eve* and *His Girl Friday*), which underscore this heritage and the expressive fecundity of the genre.

A genre provides an expressive grammar, including for the spectator, who—like the heroine of *The Holiday*—finds within it resources for their own sentiments and situations. This ordinary pedagogical aspect has been radicalised in television series, which are explicitly sites of ordinary expression. They are themselves fed by moments of conversation in recent or classic comedies, which make up their referential and moral universe (think, for example, of the constant allusions to television or movie characters in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Lost* or *How I Met Your Mother* or the more recent *Love*). The spectator's ordinary expertise turns out to be a capacity for expression that comes from knowledge, even mastery, of a genre (Laugier 2010). Once again, a genre is not an essence—its worth lies in the expressive possibilities it opens up for actors and spectators. Thus, the remarriage comedy genre proposes a grammar of moral education, which Cavell elaborated in *Cities of Words*.

The democratic nature of cinema and television series is also found in this capacity for education. This is because, as Cavell notes, cinema shows the important moments of life, when life changes imperceptibly—moments which, in real life, are fleeting and indeterminate, or whose importance it takes years or an entire life to understand. In order to rethink the concept of popular culture, it is necessary to understand that cinema is not a specialised art and that it can transform our existences by educating our ordinary experience.

## THE PUBLIC

No reflection on popular culture can ignore the question confronted by Cavell, who rejects both the critic's contempt for forms seen as degraded and the condescendence of the intellectual who claims interest in television series or popular movies while remaining certain of a position of superiority over the material. The perspective Cavell introduces on popular cinema and the demand it places on criticism is now, in my opinion, valid for television series and for everything that emerges out of the exploration and mixture of 'genres' of culture. The education provided by these series comes from the fact that they are polyphonic, contain a plurality of singular expressions, stage arguments and debates, and are permeated by a moral atmosphere. There is an education provided by the very form in which television series are presented, and the radical turn that took place in series that were produced in and after the 1990s (*ER*, *Friends*, *The West Wing* see Laugier, 2019, 2020): the integration of characters into viewers' ordinary and familiar lives; viewers' initiation into new forms of life and new, initially opaque vocabularies that are not made explicit, without any heavy-handed guidance or explanation, as there was in earlier productions.<sup>5</sup> This methodology and the narrativity of series are what make for their moral relevance and power. But this leads to revising the status of morality—to seeing it not in rules and principles of decision making, but rather in attention to ordinary behaviour, to everyday micro-choices, to individuals' styles of expressing themselves and making claims. Some philosophers, weary of an overly abstract meta-ethics, have already called for such transformations. The material of television series allows for even greater contextualisation, historicity (regularity, duration), familiarisation and education of perception (attention to the expressions and gestures of characters the viewer learns to know, attachment to recurring figures integrated into everyday life, the presence of faces on the 'small screen').

This answers the question raised by Cavell concerning the moral function of 'public' works and the form of education they generate in the public *and* the private they create. This intertwining of the private and the public is also an intertwining of modes of constituting a public. The address to the public/audience also becomes the constitution of a public discourse and its norms. Morality is constituted by the claims of individuals, and by the recognition of others' claims, the recognition of a plurality of moral positions and voices within the same world, hence the polyphonic nature of television series, the plurality of singular expressions, the staging of arguments and debates and the moral atmosphere that emanates from them.

Television series re-articulate the private and public differently—they create their audience by slipping into private life.<sup>6</sup> In order to understand this, it is necessary to take seriously the moral intentions of the producers and scriptwriters of television series and movies, as well as the constraints imposed on these fictions—here again in line with Cavell's reading. Breaking with traditional criticism, which made the intelligence and meaning of films a by-product of critical interpretation, Cavell affirmed the importance of the collective writing of films, and of the function of screenwriters, directors and also actors in creating films' meaning and educational value. It is therefore necessary to show, within the moral expression constituted

by television series, the moral choices—both individual and collective—negotiations, conflicts and agreements that are at the basis of morality: the choices and itineraries of fictional characters, plot twists, conflicts, reconciliations, slips of the tongue and repressions. To see this, we need only think of the importance, within adolescent culture, of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, conceived by its creator, Joss Whedon, as a feminist work intended to morally transform a co-ed adolescent audience by showing an apparently ordinary girl who could also fight; or of the show *How I Met Your Mother*, which makes it possible to take different perfectionist trajectories across various ordinary life situations of young adults and the variety of regimes of expression that constitute their grammar and solutions.

The perspective on ordinary culture inaugurated by Cavell and Warshow makes it possible to perceive the moral importance of television series, which now generate immense interest in the intellectual world, but for which a critical discourse befitting the richness of the material and the creativity of the discipline has not yet been found. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that those interested in these series lack resources for reconciling the moral education they gain from frequenting these series and their characters with their status as enthusiastic fans and with the conceptual overstimulation generated by the material's richness and diversity, typical of popular culture.

If we also recall that in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey defines the public on the basis of a confrontation with a problematic situation where people experience a particular difficulty that they initially perceive as coming from private life and where the answer, never given in advance, emerges out of the play of interactions of those who decide in turn to give it public expression, we realise that television, understood in this way, inherits the moral education at stake in popular cinema. The characters in television fiction can be 'let go' and opened up to the imagination and usage of all; 'entrusted' to us, as if it were up to all of us to take care of them by taking care of ourselves. It is particularly clear at the conclusion of a show. Indeed, they show trajectories of personal transformation and exigence and testify to a hope for the educability of the spectator, who is obliged to pay attention, familiarise himself or herself and little by little shape herself, like the child Wittgenstein describes (citing Augustine) at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*, who is integrated into a form of life.

The movie or television actor or actress has the mysterious ability in what Cavell called 'photogenesis': the capacity to make himself or herself perceptible to spectators, and thereby to constitute the spectator's experience. In popular cinema as in television series, we can see the emergence of a specific entity that once again subverts the mystique of authors or works: the moral type constituted (on the model of family resemblance) by an actor or actress's different roles or phases. Television series and the place that they, and their universes, have taken in the existences of spectators have only confirmed this incorporation to experience. The educative force of television series indeed lies in their integration into everyday life, in ordinary and repeated contact with characters who become intimates—no longer on the overused model of identification and recognition, but rather the model of frequenting, familiarisation and attachment: processes that leave open the possibility of the other's independence and unknowability. In this way, television series continue the quest for the popular cinema's pedagogical task of creating an inseparably subjective and public education.

This intertwining of the private and of modes of constituting a public translates into new modes of subjectivation by the public. This brings us back to the question of *what counts* for one. Cavell noted with respect to Warshow that once criticism begins to focus on these public

objects, it requires both a specific attention and ‘personal writing’, which can be defined by care for the self.

While the likes of T.S. Eliot and Henry James ... are great artists, unlike those who create the comic strip *Krazy Kat* and write Broadway plays and make Hollywood movies, the latter say things he (also) wants to hear, or rather things he (also) can and must understand his relation to; this relation manifests the way he lives, his actual life of culture. He concludes that to say what he finds in these more everyday concerns he needs to write personally, but it seems clear that the reverse is equally true, that he wants to attend to them because that attention demands of him writing that is personal, and inspires him to it. (Cavell, 2001, p. 292)

## AND ITS PROBLEMS

Cavell and Warshow are deeply committed to the democratisation of culture, the only way to democratise democracy itself and to educate citizens based on self-confidence.<sup>7</sup> The entry of popular culture into the arts shifts our conceptual categories. It leads to rethinking the relationship between art and democracy, ending fixed or (politically and culturally) institutionalised definitions of both and re-organising them around effective and shared values, practices and forms of life. In this context, we can redefine popular culture no longer as ‘entertainment’ (even if this is also its mission), but as a collective work of moral education, through the production of values and, ultimately, of reality. The role of this culture (blockbusters, television series, music, videos broadcast on the internet and suchlike) thus becomes crucial in our ethical re-elaborations and in the constitution of real democracy based on images, scenes, and characters’ expressed and shareable values. For Cavell, the question remains of the criticism that can be produced (and shared) in relation to this experience, and it is his ambition in *Must We Mean What We Say* to situate ‘modernism’ this period—where criticism itself comes up against scepticism, and rebuilds self-confidence on the ‘rubble’ of experience. The forms of popular culture we are interested in here are those which are capable of transforming our lives by educating and cultivating our ordinary experience, not only in the classical sense of a formation of aesthetic taste—but also in the sense of a moral formation constitutive of singularity. Cavell insists that it is important to be able to *educate one's experience in this way*, so as to have confidence in it and thus live it—radically combining the analyses of Emerson (as particularly seen in the essay ‘Experience’) and Dewey (who explores what it is ‘To have an experience’). Cinema is self-education, and even more so are series: not by selecting a certain number of universal masterpieces (even if there are any) but by building up one's personal list of favourite films or series, of scenes appropriate for each circumstance, remobilised for each occasion in life.

The ordinary realism of cinema and series therefore does not come first of all from their description of reality but from their inclusion in ordinary life and their role in the constitution of self. Democratic art, therefore, and democracy of the singular are created by the way in which each person is making their own experience. This even gives a new meaning to the expression ‘to have an experience’: this becomes a task to make something one's own, to appropriate it, in order to constitute one's personal taste. The question is, again, what *the ordinary* does to philosophy. The art of filmmaking in the form of a film or television series is a ‘popular’ art also because its experience underpins ordinary experience. As Dewey asserts of aesthetic experience, it is the emblem of experience in general. It is then a *moral* experience—at once mysterious and ordinary, personal and public. Ordinary, because

nothing is more shareable and obvious than going to see films, watching series and talking about them—that it is often the stuff of moments when we replay our agreement *in* language. Mysteriously, knowing what is important to you is not easy or immediate in this case. The only source of verification of description is *oneself*: hence the role of trust, of fidelity to one's own experience (Cavell, 1981, p.11; Dewey, 1934, ch. 3), the source of moral perfectionism and the basis for public education and moral expression. Cavell thus refers to 'the importance of importance' in *Pursuits of Happiness* (the title of the third chapter of that work). The television series thus continues the search for the ordinary, and the educational task undertaken by the cinema—of an education that is inseparably subjective and public. This does not imply a false revolutionary inversion of aesthetic values, but rather a new assessment of importance, which Wittgenstein called for when he asserted the importance of ordinary language philosophy and attention to real life.

Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? (As it were all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.) What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand. (Wittgenstein, 1958, § 118)

It is, then, a question of exploring, in the field of moral expression and observation, the possibility of describing and highlighting importance and mattering. Importance is here understood as part of moral perception itself. It is *in and through* moral expression (that is, in the choice of words, style of conversation, way of being) that the moral vision of a person, or a character, is elaborated. The attention to moral expression is based on an articulation between cognition, perception and expression. The emergence of importance is then part of moral perception. It is a matter of 'recognising ... gestures, manners, habits, turns of language, turns of thought, [and] facial styles, as morally expressive—of an individual or a people. The intelligent description of these things is part of the intelligent, sharp description of life, of what *matters*, what makes a difference, in human lives' (Diamond, 1991).

The starting point of Cavell's investigation is indeed to reiterate the gesture by which Tolstoy substitutes the question of the essence of art for that of its *importance*. Importance is not a supplement. Mastering a concept, again in Wittgensteinian terms, presupposes knowing what role the word can play in our uses, which amounts to knowing its role, its importance in our lives, its place in our form of life. Mastering a concept therefore means knowing its *importance*: our criteria for use state what counts for us, in the double sense of what is identified as falling under the concept (count for) and what arouses our interest and is of value to us, *counts*. This focus on the important and *mattering*, as concepts governing ordinary experience, is at the heart of Cavell's definition of a culture of the ordinary.

What remains, then, to be explored, is the mode of appearance of this *hidden importance* of things, the way we are essentially blind to it—that is, *meant* to be blind to it, in order to share the adventures of the characters we like or hate or are interested in. Could importance *of some kind* be essentially dissimulated from us? To overcome scepticism and this vulnerability is to overcome our inability or refusal to *see what matters*: 'to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things—that is to fail the perception that that there *is* something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong'. This is at the core of the redefinition of ethics, and of the pursuit of happiness, through the search of importance and the recognition of our failures to acknowledge importance.

Any of the arts will be drawn to this knowledge, this perception of the poetry of the ordinary, but film democratises the knowledge, hence at once blesses and curses us with it. It says that the perception of poetry is open to all, regardless as it were of birth or talent, as the ability is to hold a camera on a subject, so that a failure so to perceive, to persist in missing the subject, which may amount to missing the evanescence of the subject, is ascribable only to ourselves, to failures of our character; as if to fail to guess the unseen from the seen, to fail to trace the implications of things—that is to fail the perception that that there *is* something to be guessed and traced, right or wrong—requires that we persistently coarsen and stupefy ourselves. (Cavell, 1984, p. 14)

This revelation of one's own pertinence, of the possibility and above all the necessity of making use of who one is, is something that all Cavell's readers and students owe him. This redefinition of the task of philosophy, the pursuit of happiness, through the search of importance (what is important to me, what is important to us) and the recognition of our failures to acknowledge importance, to 'guess the unseen from the seen', may be Cavell's main teaching.

We involve the movies in us. They become further fragments of what happens to me, further cards in the shuffle of my memory, with no telling what place in the future. Like childhood memories whose treasure no one else appreciates, whose content is nothing compared to their unspeakable importance for me. (Cavell, 1979, p. 154)

The injunction to appropriate and re-collect one's experience and *what counts* within it, to take yourself seriously, defines the new demand of the *culture of the ordinary*.<sup>8</sup>

[Warshow] expresses his sense of the necessarily personal in various ways in his opening essay ('The Legacy of the 30's')—namely, a sense of the writer's having to invent his own audience of the writer's having to invent all the meanings of experience (p. 16), of the modern intellectual's 'facing the necessity of describing and clarifying an experience which has itself deprived him of the vocabulary he requires to deal with it'. (Cavell, 2001, p. 292)

Here again we discover perfectionism in the aesthetic demand to find and invent an audience, as a 'personal' search for words to describe an experience that *has precisely deprived you of the vocabulary necessary to deal with it*. This is both a definition of popular culture and the expression of a new requirement for ordinary ethics and politics. It is also a radical reformulation of the aims and forms of moral education. Popular culture is indeed the place for 'becoming who we are'; for 'the education of grownups' who, through it, can arrive at a perfecting of the self: the process of becoming a subject by becoming part of, discussing, and sharing material that is both public and private, woven into everyday life.

*Funding acknowledgement: This publication (book) has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement N° 834759)*



## NOTES

1 On Ordinary Language Philosophy and Cavell see Laugier S., *Why We Need Ordinary Language Philosophy*, Chicago U. Press, 2013, Klevan, A (July 2020). *Ordinary Language Film Studies*.

2 See Klevan, A, (2000), *Disclosure of the everyday. Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film*, Flicks Books, and Laugier, S. 2013.

3 See Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are* (OUP 2017).

4 See my monthly column in *Libération* since 2013, devoted to popular series and how they aim at the moral education of the public: <https://www.liberation.fr/auteur/sandra-laugier/>

5 See Sabine Chalvon-Demersay, 'La confusion des conditions: une enquête sur la série télévisée Urgences', *Réseaux*, vol. 95 (1999): pp. 235-283.

6 See Laugier, 'Séries télévisées: éthique du care et adresse au public', *Raison publique*, no. 11 (2009), and Norris 2017.

7 See Albert Ogien and Sandra Laugier, *Le principe démocratie*, La découverte, 2014 and *Antidémocratie*, 2017.

8 On the need to take oneself seriously, see Cavell, *Little Did I Know* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 297.