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► **To cite this version:**

Sandra Laugier. Culture as Experience from Dewey to Cavell. Journal of Aesthetic Education, 2024, 58 (4). <hal-05003366>

**HAL Id: hal-05003366**

**<https://hal.science/hal-05003366v1>**

Submitted on 31 Mar 2025

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The Journal of Aesthetic Education, Volume 58, Number 4, Winter 2024, pp. 99-116 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press



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# Culture as Experience from Dewey to Cavell

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SANDRA LAUGIER

**Abstract.** *The expansion of art audiences and the creation of new forms, agents, and models of artistic practice have transformed the very definition of art, challenging elitist notions of “great art.” Dewey’s Art as Experience was essential to this transformation. This understanding and defense of an art that has not lost contact with ordinary audiences, which was film at first, extends to widespread cultural practices (internet videos, video games, TV series, popular music, etc.). They are places where artistic and hermeneutic authority is reappropriated and where agents are reempowered through the constitution of individual experiences. Yet the question of their status as art remains.*

*My first aim here is to use Dewey’s analyses in Art as Experience to assert not only the importance of popular culture in human lives but also its status as art. I shall bring together Stanley Cavell and Dewey, often seen as opposites in their approach to pragmatism, as inventors and defenders of an ordinary aesthetics; then, starting from Robert Warshow and Richard Shusterman, I propose a new theoretical inheritance of Art as Experience.*

In “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” Stanley Cavell wants to differentiate Ralph Waldo Emerson from John Dewey, and from pragmatism in general, by the tone of his democratic aspiration.<sup>1</sup> The question is therefore which Emerson we wish to inherit today: the precursor of pragmatism or the radical thinker of individualism.

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Cavell's position towards pragmatism appears obviously unjust, notably towards defenders of democracy like Dewey or towards William James who claimed a part of the Emersonian legacy. It is precisely in the democratic demand, however, that Cavell hears what is different in Emerson, even if we find more than an echo of Emerson in Dewey, who never ceased to refer to his debt regarding Emerson.<sup>2</sup> Dewey, like Emerson, demands commonality and appeals to the ordinary or everyday life shared by all men; and both call for an ideal community. But in the Emersonian approach to commonality, there is nothing of a consensus or a rational agreement. A characteristic of Emerson's politics is his critical dimension, a perfectionist refusal of society such as it exists—a refusal to recognize it as belonging to oneself—as soon as one searches for perfection, or a better version of oneself. Hence the notes of hatred for his contemporaries that sometimes sound in his work, which only justifies itself by a hatred of oneself: "Emersonian Perfectionism requires that we become ashamed in a particular way of ourselves, of our present stance, and the Emersonian Nietzsche requires, as a consecration of the next self, that we hate ourselves, as it were impersonally."<sup>3</sup>

The audiences for art have changed since the end of the last century. Due to a lack of study, adequate theoretical tools, and clear awareness of culture's shift toward "the common," philosophy has not yet sufficiently observed or analyzed this democratization of art in the age of digital media or the constitution of a new set of values through the mass distribution of television series. And yet what we are witnessing today is simply the realization of what Emerson, Dewey, and Cavell called for: an art anchored in the spectator's experience and in everyday life,<sup>4</sup> an art that is not cut off from ordinary life or placed upon a pedestal.

In 1939, Walter Benjamin reflected on the effects of new technical possibilities for reproducing musical and plastic works of art; today, the expansion of the audience for art and the creation of new forms, agents, and models of artistic action and practice thanks to the digital turn have transformed the very definition of art and are contesting elitist understandings of "great art." Erwin Panofsky, in his 1936 essay "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," was the first to insist on the fact that "film was first and foremost created as popular entertainment without aesthetic pretension, and 're-established that dynamic contact between art production and art consumption, which . . . is sorely attenuated—if not entirely interrupted—in many other fields of artistic endeavor.'"<sup>5</sup> Today, this understanding and defense of an art that has not lost contact with its audience extends beyond cinema and into television series and other widespread cultural practices (such as internet videos). A profound transformation of the cultural field and its hierarchies is underway, as evidenced by the academic world's change in attitude towards television series. TV series, previously seen as either mind-numbing or ideologically driven mass-market products—or as guilty pleasures for

intellectuals in need of entertainment—have now become objects of study. Above all, and in line with the thinking of Cavell and with the pragmatist aesthetics that came before him, they have come to be seen as sites where artistic and hermeneutic authority is reappropriated and where spectators are reempowered through the constitution of unique experiences. The question of their status as *art* remains. My goal here is to use Dewey's analysis in *Art as Experience* to affirm not only the importance of popular culture in our lives but also its status as art. As Dewey clearly stated: "Popular arts must have flourished, but they obtained no literary attention. They were not worthy of mention in theoretical discussion. Probably they were not even thought of as arts."<sup>6</sup>

Reflection on popular culture and its "ordinary" objects—such as "mainstream" movies—leads to a transformation of theory and of criticism, as Cavell was one of the first to realize. Cavell is less concerned with inverting artistic hierarchies or the relationship between theory and practice than with the transformation of self, necessitated by our encounter with new experiences. The framework that he proposed for cinema—that of cultural democracy—is also valid for TV series. To use it, we must also prove the need for TV criticism and define its form—a challenge raised by the great critic and analyst of popular culture Robert Warshaw, who, in *The Immediate Experience* (a title that has the ring of a pragmatist proclamation), maintained that:

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.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the question of popular and of "mass" culture, it is a question of our capacity for unique aesthetic actions and choices in the midst of everything that is offered to us. This is a point Dewey also made when he insisted on the agency of the art lover, who contributes as much to the making of a work as its author does. In claiming this, he went against a museum-based understanding of the fine arts and saw art as an essential practice and driver of social action and thus a practice and driver of real democracy, if democracy is understood not only as an institutional construct but also as the requirement that one participate in public life. This explains why thinking about

popular culture is equally important in Dewey's *Art as Experience* and in *The Public and Its Problems*.

Cavell only rarely referred to Dewey explicitly, and he may even seem to have neglected Dewey. But we know from Cavell's autobiography, *Little Did I Know*, that he read and began to teach *Art and Experience* and *Human Nature and Conduct* quite early on, starting in 1948 at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA)—even before becoming interested in Wittgenstein who, on Cavell's first reading, appeared to contribute nothing more than what Dewey had. Cavell even wrote a seventy-page article on Dewey for one of his professors at UCLA, Donald Piatt.<sup>8</sup> And in an unpublished article from 2008, he acknowledges in a quite stunning way that "the first philosopher from whom I absorbed standards of intellectual seriousness and creativity was in fact John Dewey."<sup>9</sup>

Dewey, Cavell, and Warshow are deeply involved in the democratization of culture, which is the only way to democratize democracy itself and is the only form of citizen education based on self-trust and self-confidence.<sup>10</sup> The arrival of popular culture onto the artistic scene displaces our conceptual categories, which have been challenged by the waning of autotelism and of an aestheticizing understanding of art. It definitively validates pragmatist aesthetics, which refuse to make art a sphere of activity separate from ordinary life or to see an individual creator as the sole "maker" of a work. It leads to reconsidering the relations between art and democracy, to doing away with fixed or institutionalized (whether politically or culturally) definitions of each of them, and instead to organizing them pragmatically around actual and shared values, practices, and forms of life. In this context, we may no longer define popular culture solely as "entertainment" (even if that is part of its social mission) but as a collective labor of moral education and as the production of values and ultimately of reality. This culture (comprised of popular movies, TV series, music, videos shared on the internet, etc.) plays a crucial role in reevaluating ethics and in constituting real democracy on the basis of images, scenes, and characters and of values that are expressed and shareable.

The question for Cavell remains that of the criticism that one can produce (and share) of this experience. His philosophical ambition in *Must We Mean What We Say?* was to situate "modernism" during a period when criticism itself was struggling with skepticism and had to re-create self-trust out of the ashes of experience. Cavell explains what led him to write about cinema at a moment when no other philosopher was interested in it:

Film had for me become essential in my relation to the arts generally, as the experience of my extended bouts of moviegoing in New York and Los Angeles and Berkeley proved to me . . . Philosophers, it seemed, had almost without exception left the field alone. Should

this be taken for granted? Or oughtn't the fact of this neglect itself inspire suspicion? Given my restiveness with philosophy's treatment, or avoidance, or stylization, of human experience—a restiveness that is a treasured inheritance from my early reading of John Dewey and of William James—what better way to challenge the avoidance than through the worldwide phenomenon of cinema?<sup>11</sup>

Later, Cavell again evokes both Dewey and James when he describes what he owes to their critique of empiricism: “to take a fundamental, I hope imperishable, insight of Dewey's and of William James's—the way the classical empiricists distort or stylize experience.”<sup>12</sup>

This dissatisfaction or agitation in the face of philosophy's *avoidance* (a key concept in early Cavell) of experience—and in particular by philosophy that claims to be rooted in experience—is indeed what Cavell owes to his reading of Dewey, even if for him this reading was not sufficient to describe the unique experience of cinema.

### Popular Culture and Ordinary Aesthetics

In spite of the progress that has been made in the philosophy of film, we are lacking analyses of the ethical stakes, modes of expressivity, and moral education at work in TV series and in the experiences of their viewers. We may begin with Cavell's *reading* of films, with how it is anchored in the works themselves, and with his way of showing that a film (taken as a whole, including its actors and production) brings its own intelligence into its making. It is this intelligence itself that educates us, leading us to recognize and appreciate our own tastes as movie fans and thus to come to know ourselves. This reading is even more valuable for TV series, and it opens the way for a pragmatist approach to our relations to the filmographic and televisual fields.

An ordinary aesthetics must defend not the specificity of the individuals who create works nor works as such but a common and shareable aesthetic experience. One of Cavell's aims and greatest achievements is to have shown the “intelligence that a film has already brought to bear in its making,” which amounts to letting a work of art *have its own voice* in what philosophy will say about it.<sup>13</sup> Understanding the relation of cinema to philosophy thus implies learning what it means to “check one's experience,” to use the expression from *Pursuits of Happiness*<sup>14</sup>—that is, what it means to examine one's own experience and “let the object or the work of your interest teach you how to consider it.”<sup>15</sup> This means that one must educate one's experience so that one can be educated by it. There is an inevitable circularity at work here: *having* an experience requires trusting one's experience. This role of trust in education makes popular culture an essential resource for moral education.

Self-trust is thus not the umpteenth subjective foundation; it is reliance on our experience. But upon what reliance is it founded? "The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded?" And if there is not a self in whom to trust, or who is the initial foundation for self-reliance, Emerson continues: "To talk of reliance is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies because it works and is."<sup>16</sup>

To speak about self-reliance is to refer to a reflexivity that is already too static in relation to what reliance really is (practicality). It is in displaying the practical (not cognitive or epistemological) dimension of trust in oneself that Emerson noted (in a characteristic about-face) that the expression "self-reliance" is poor and external and that he proposes "that which relies." "Relies," being bizarrely used in the absolute in a refusal of a thinking-over of the self, avoids the reflexivity, belonging to definitions of the subject, of all illusion of a knowledge that would have the self look at itself in order to find something, a certainty or confidence. Self-reliance functions as pure practice, not as a subject or object of reliance. It is not any more active than passive, and its practicality ("it works and is") permits it to challenge the mythology of reflexivity and the mythology of agency. Self-reliance is trust not in a given self but in one's own experience.

Transcendentalism orders the self—contrary to skepticism and to the theory of traditional knowledge—to trust in its experience. This apparently naive idea is at the center of Emerson's thinking because it states his conceptions of reliance and experience and radically calls into question the duality of activity and passivity. For Emerson, practice is also a form of patience. To discover contact with the self is to discover the world through trust in experience. This entails the ability to trust in the experience of the object (as in approaching film) in order to find the right words for describing and expressing it. For Cavell, it is the viewing (repeated and often collective or communal) of films that leads to trusting in one's own experience and acquiring, through this, an authority over it: "To subject these enterprises and their conjunction to our experiences of them is a conceptual as much as an experiential undertaking; it is our commitment to being guided by our experience but not dictated by it. I think of this as checking one's experience."<sup>17</sup> Beyond the labels of transcendentalism and pragmatism, it is indeed empiricism that is involved here: "I mean the rubric to capture the sense at the same time of consulting one's experience and of subjecting it to examination, and beyond these, of momentarily stopping, turning yourself away from whatever your preoccupation and turning your experience away from its expected, habitual track, to find itself, its own track."<sup>18</sup> It is on this point that the paradoxical yet crucial link between experience and trust is established. It is necessary to educate one's experience in order to trust in it:

"The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust."<sup>19</sup>

We again note the ambiguity and the reversal of the Kantian legacy. It is not necessary to surpass experience by way of theory but rather to run counter to what is—in traditional philosophy—the very movement of knowledge (which is also what leads to skepticism). It is somehow necessary to surpass theory by way of experience, to educate one's experience, and it is this movement that defines reliance in oneself (in one's experience) as well as the paradox of self-reliance: one cannot have experience (the education of experience) before having trust, and vice versa:

The American inheritance of Kant is essential to making up Transcendentalism, and hence it goes into what makes Emerson Emerson and what makes Thoreau Thoreau. Encouraged by them, one learns that without this trust in one's experience, expressed as a willingness to find words for it, without thus taking an interest in it, one is without authority in one's own experience.<sup>20</sup>

Cavell noted with regard to Warshow that when criticism turns to such objects, a specific form of attention is required—a kind of "personal writing." It is only by trusting oneself that one can write about an entirely unique kind of experience, one that is both particular and shared:

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.<sup>21</sup>

For Cavell, there is a parallel between the relationship of cinema to high art and the relationship of ordinary language philosophy to "high" philosophy. In both cases it is a matter of a change in orientation and a shift of importance towards life, following one of Dewey's insights in *Art as Experience*. Philosophy, then, is connected to the education that cinema provides, which can be defined as each person's *cinematographic autobiography*, to use Cavell's concept: the way in which our lives include fragments of movies and the way in which we orient ourselves in relation to these key moments, which are just as much a part of our experience as the dreams or real moments that haunt us are. Cinema, like TV series, presents us with important moments, moments of transformation—moments that in real life are fleeting and indeterminate or that require years or an entire lifetime to understand. Such

understanding requires a form of autonomy, of “self-reliance,” to use Emerson’s concept: learning to trust one’s experience and to render one’s judgment self-sufficient.

### An Education

In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell defined philosophy as “the education of grown-ups.”<sup>22</sup> This definition parallels his goal in his works on cinema (where he focused primarily on Hollywood movies), which is to assign popular culture the role of changing us. For Cavell, as for Dewey, the value of culture lies in its capacity to transform us, and philosophy consists in “bring[ing] my own language and life into imagination” and in “a convening of my culture’s criteria, in order to confront them with my life and words”: “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*.”<sup>23</sup>

Cavell also calls this philosophical undertaking “moral education” or “pedagogy,” as in the subtitle to *Cities of Words, Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. This pedagogical claim regarding the task of philosophy recalls Dewey’s involvement in the science of education. For both authors, the educational value of popular culture is more than anecdotal; it defines how both “popular” and “culture” (in the sense of *Bildung*) ought to be understood in the expression “popular culture.” The vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public* (in Dewey’s sense) rather than the institution and valorization of a socially targeted corpus. Popular culture does not refer to a primitive or inferior version of culture but rather to a shared democratic culture that creates common *values* and serves as a resource for a form of self-education—or more specifically, a form of culture of the self, a subjective perfecting or subjectivation that occurs through sharing and commenting on ordinary and public material that is integrated into ordinary life.

Cavell is however deeply dissatisfied with Dewey’s concept of education, as he discusses it in the essay on Dewey I quoted earlier:

I may be wrong in this sense, but if I am right it is not alone professionally, but also personally, disheartening to me since the first philosopher from whom I absorbed standards of intellectual seriousness and creativity was in fact John Dewey, as I had to recognize that I had turned away from a life as a musician and determined to return to graduate school for my first courses in philosophy. This happened primarily in a pair of courses taught at UCLA in the late 1940s by Donald Piatt, who was proud to announce on more than one occasion in my hearing that he had taken eleven courses from George Herbert Mead, who became Piatt’s dissertation advisor at the University of Chicago.

I want to say why, for all my admiration for Dewey's achievements, I find him by now almost impossible to read with pleasure, hence to try to study further."<sup>24</sup>

Maybe Cavell thinks Dewey's *Experience and Education* lacks examples. More deeply, Cavell and Dewey diverge on the place of the ordinary. For Dewey then, the aesthetic is "no intruder in experience from without . . . [but] is clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience."<sup>25</sup> This requires a gesture of defamiliarizing what is normally before our eyes because we are usually otherwise occupied when "in" the everyday. What is ordinary must be made to appear as aesthetic and cannot conversely remain just mundane. But for Cavell and Warshow, the everyday, ordinary experience is, in a sense, all the experience we need. The *given* is not, for example, sense data or an unstructured preexperience but "the confusing multitude of stimuli"<sup>26</sup> we face in the contemporary world of pop culture. This conception of experience is constitutive of an ontology.

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.<sup>27</sup>

We need to understand this "source of data" to be experience itself and not a "humdrum" that needs to be clarified in order to become an actual experience, or really *having an experience*, or a fragmented experience that needs to be unified. As Emerson put it: "The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of man. Here are the materials strewn along the ground."<sup>28</sup>

This building of the self from "strewn" materials is what Warshow had in mind when he wrote that we are all self-made men (women). The democratization of artistic production promised by Romanticism is thus realized in the new artistic forms and modes of participation and interaction that digital technology allows, opening the way for new forms of subjective authority. I use the word *democracy* here because it is a question of our capacity for individual expression and unique aesthetic actions and choices. What is meant by popular culture today is no longer exactly popular in the social or political sense in which certain arts—songs, folklore—once were popular, even if popular culture sometimes 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 conversations. Popular culture serves as a site for “the education of grownups,” who, through this intermediary, return to a form of education and cultivation of the self that takes place through sharing and commenting on public and ordinary material that is integrated into ordinary life. It is in this sense that we are all self-made women and men and that cinema was originally at the heart of “popular culture” and the stakes of inventing and consolidating an actual criticism of popular culture—as Warshow notes:

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.<sup>29</sup>

We need to rethink what we mean today by popular culture by connecting it more clearly to the notion of the *public*. TV series are the sites of the education of individuals, an education that amounts to a form of subjective perfecting through sharing and discussing public and ordinary material, which is integrated into individuals’ lives and is a source of conversation.

It is in this sense that, to cite Warshow again, “we are all self-made men.” Cinema is at the heart of popular culture: “Movies . . . are the most highly developed and most engrossing of the popular arts, and . . . seem to have an almost unlimited power to absorb and transform the discordant elements of our fragmented culture.”<sup>30</sup> In reading this passage, one cannot help but transfer the remark to TV series, which are certainly—even more than movies—a repository of all of culture and absorb and recycle elements from music, video games, classic television, and movies. That which Cavell claimed for popular Hollywood movies—their capacity to create a culture shared by millions—has been transferred onto other corpora and practices, in particular, onto TV series, which have taken up, if not taken over, the task of educating the public. Cavell’s argument in *Cities of Words* was both ethical and perfectionist, if we redefine morality in new terms: no longer in terms of “the good” or judgment but rather in the *exploration* of our forms of life. For Cavell, there is an affinity between cinema—*good* movies—and a particular understanding of the good, an understanding that is foreign to so-called “dominant moral theories.” The importance and benefit of extending this aesthetic and ethical method to include TV series is equally ethical, for these works are as shared and public as movies were in the twentieth century; they reach a significant audience and play an educational role. Perhaps even more clearly than cinema, they make it possible to anchor the value of a work in the experience one has of it.

Cavell’s ordinary aesthetics deliberately goes against the traditional critical approach, in which there is an obsession with art as a *separate domain*—a view criticized by Dewey before him—with the mystique of the individual

creator, and with “representation” and image to the detriment of the ordinary experience of seeing a movie, which is the subjective—but always shared—experience of *public* material. For Cavell, cinema is a form of shared experience; in movies it is a matter less of aesthetics than of *practice*—an ordinary practice that connects and reconciles the private and the public, subjective expectation and the sharing of the common.

The forms of popular culture that interest Cavell are those that are capable of transforming our existences by educating and cultivating our ordinary experience not only in the sense of training our aesthetic taste but also in the sense of a moral training that is constitutive of our singularity. It is as if Cavell pursued Dewey’s ambition by applying it to specific objects, what Warshow names “the actual life of culture.” Cavell, combining Emerson’s analyses (in his essay “Experience”) and Dewey’s (in his chapter “Having an Experience” in *Art as Experience*), emphasizes that it is important to be able to *educate one’s experience* in such a way that one can have confidence in it and in this way to live it. Cinephilia is a form of education of the self, and series-philia is even more so. This education does not occur through exposure to a set of universal masterpieces (even if such TV classics do now exist) but through the constitution of one’s personal list of favorite movies or series and of scenes that are appropriate to various circumstances or occasions of one’s life when they are remobilized.

The question is, again, what the ordinary does to philosophy. Cinematographic art, whether in the form of movies or TV series, is “popular” art because the experience of it underlies ordinary experience, just as Dewey maintained that aesthetic experience is emblematic of experience in general. This experience is *moral*—both mysterious and ordinary, personal and public. It is ordinary because nothing is more shareable and self-evident than going to see movies or watching shows and talking about them, and these are often moments in which we reenact our agreement in language. It is a mysterious form of knowledge, this coming to know what counts for oneself, and there is nothing easy or immediate about it. The only source for verifying one’s description of what counts is *oneself*—whence the role of confidence, of trust in one’s own experience,<sup>31</sup> which is the source of moral perfectionism and the only basis for public education and public moral expression.

Cavell discusses “the importance of importance” in chapter 3 of *Pursuits of Happiness*. Television series continue the realist quest for the ordinary and the pedagogical task undertaken by cinema of providing an inseparably subjective and public education. Let us recall here that Cavell’s point of departure for his study was Tolstoy’s move to replace the question of art’s essence with that of its *importance*. Importance is not something extra, an afterthought. To master a concept, in Wittgensteinian terms, we must know what role a word plays in our usages, which amounts to knowing its role, its

importance in our lives, its place within our form of life. To master a concept is thus to know its importance: our criteria of usage spell out what counts for us, in the sense both of what is identified as falling under a concept (what “counts as”) and of what arouses our interest and represents a value for us. This priority of importance and mattering over the beautiful and the true (or the redefinition of the latter in terms of the former) as concepts governing ordinary experience is the heart of Cavell’s definition of a culture of the ordinary. This does not imply some falsely revolutionary inversion of values but rather a new assessment of importance.

Wittgenstein called for just such a new assessment of importance and of what counts in an essential passage in the *Philosophical Investigations*, where he calls for 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.<sup>32</sup>

This shifting of the *important* to the heart of thought can be said to define the ontology of popular culture, which constitutes a family (in the Wittgensteinian sense of family resemblances) rather than a distinct domain. There are clear connections here to pragmatism and its radical pluralism because it is reality itself that is defined by the arts and their implication in our experience.

### **Elementary Forms of Shared Experience**

Public and popular forms of cultural production are democratic in the sense that, as demonstrated by the proliferation of blogs, amateur criticism, or even just any conversation about a popular series demonstrates, they ascribe to each individual the capacity to *trust his or her judgment*. TV series and the place that they and their worlds have come to occupy in spectators’ lives demonstrate the relationship of the series to individual experience and the fact that they pursue the pedagogical task undertaken by popular cinema—that of an inseparably subjective and public education. This intertwining of the private and the public is also an intertwining of modes of constitution of the public and is equally expressed in new modes of subjectivation by the public.

Television series are typically collective works, and in a sense they are detached from the individuality of their creators. The best series (with a few exceptions, such as those by David Lynch) definitively do away with the mythology of the great author. They are also determined by the materiality

of the work and by those who make it, as Dewey emphasizes.<sup>33</sup> Cavell includes in “the intention” of a work its authors, actors, and technicians, its production constraints, the expectations of the public in scriptwriting, and so on. This ordinary aesthetics of series opens the possibility of shifting the hierarchies of aesthetic interest by making clear the moral and intellectual value of ordinary practices and the expressivity of overlooked figures, as in, for example, classic series such as *Sex and the City*<sup>34</sup> and *The Wire*,<sup>35</sup> which gave voice to women and to Black youth respectively and depicted their forms of life.

TV series connect the private to the public in a new way.<sup>36</sup> In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey defined the public on the basis of an encounter with a problematic situation, in which people experience a specific difficulty that they initially perceive as being part of private life. According to him, the concept of the public is the response to this difficulty, a response that is never predetermined and that emerges through the interactions of those who decide to give the problem public expression. Understood in light of this theory of the public, television inherits the task that Cavell saw as belonging to popular cinema: the moral education and constitution of a public.

Cavell explicitly took the popularity of cinema as his starting point. This realist quality comes not from any aesthetics or theory of “representation” but rather from “minding”—the interest actually mobilized by the popular—and from the care and commitment the popular in fact commands. What distinguishes cinema from other arts is this collective interest: everyone (at least at the time when Cavell was writing his first works) *cares* about movies. This new meaning given to mind as care (attention rather than spirit) is essential to Cavell’s pragmatism.

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.<sup>37</sup>

And, of course, this is even more obvious in the case of TV series.

Thus, cinema belongs to *the shared experience of minding*, and from this emerges a new, pragmatist definition of culture. Cavell does not speak of seeing a movie but rather of “moviegoing”: it is not so much a matter of aesthetics as of a democratic practice that connects and reconciles the private and the public. This means that, as Dewey insisted, it is the experience of a work and its continuity with everyday life that is primary. The very invention of cinema challenged what Dewey called “a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience.”<sup>38</sup>

The educational value of popular culture is essential to its democratic quality. Today, this allows us to define what must be understood by

“popular” in the expression “popular culture” and to revisit the concept of “pop culture”—a colloquial abbreviation that does not make it any easier to take these arts seriously. For Cavell and for Dewey, the stakes of our relation to popular culture are political. Cavell dismisses the line of thought that claims that all art passes through a “popular” stage in its infancy, as if there were a natural hierarchy or evolution from popular art to great art, and as if were possible to measure an art’s life span and to see it as a living being with a period of youth and of maturity. Panofsky’s view was that cinema took up the popular genres of tragedy, romance, crime, adventure, and comedy when moviemakers understood that these genres “could be transfigured . . . by the exploitation of the unique and specific possibilities of the new medium.”<sup>39</sup> But for Panofsky, it is a matter of exploring new *aesthetic* possibilities; he does not consider in detail the practical possibilities of a widespread sharing of experience, the inclusion of this experience in the viewer’s private life, or the education of one’s viewing.

Moviegoing transforms our existences by educating our ordinary experience, shaping inseparably our aesthetic tastes and our morality, or our moral styles. This is never as obvious as in our choice of the films or series that mark moments of our lives. The ordinariness of popular culture emerges in our capacity to define our uniqueness through our allegiances and values in relation to it; I am thinking here of things like the “Top 5” lists in the film *High Fidelity*<sup>40</sup> and more recently, in the adaptation of the Nick Hornby novel, the series *High Fidelity*<sup>41</sup> (starring Zoë Kravitz), through which the characters not only enumerate but literally *are* their tastes. Thus, the way in which each individual creates their experience out of cinema makes it a democratic art: the democracy of the singular.

### **A Democratic Ontology**

By recalling the democratic stakes of cinema, we are better able to perceive what is at stake for pragmatist aesthetics in TV series, whether through the validation of individual experience, the social nature of pragmatism, or the democratic dimension of art. It remains to be seen how we can go even further and understand TV series as pragmatist art par excellence within the present context, in which cinema has acquired the status of art and is defined as “high end” popular culture—frequently in contrast to TV series.

No reflection on ordinary aesthetics can ignore the issue Cavell confronted in refusing both the critic’s contempt for forms seen as degraded and the contempt of intellectuals who might comfortably claim an interest in popular culture while maintaining the conviction that they occupy a position of superiority with respect to it. And it is even more difficult to convince people of the intelligence of popular TV series than it was for Cavell to convince readers of the intelligence of remarriage comedies. Today it is

widely understood that there is a hierarchy between “quality” series (which are usually somber, cynical, and male-dominated) and the rest, a distinction that mirrors the hierarchy between “important” films and commercial movies.

The stakes have not changed since the birth of modernism, which had to affirm itself in terms of self-trust. When Cavell’s book *The World Viewed* was published, Rosalind Krauss considered it an “extreme curiosity”<sup>42</sup> from the point of view of those theoreticians of cinema who were readers and admirers of Serguei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, and Andy Warhol. According to Krauss, Cavell combined historical ignorance with an inability to distinguish between *important*—that is, experimental—cinema and a form of entertainment that barely merits being called “cinematic.” The similarity to arguments made against television series by cinema purists is obvious. But this redefinition of the important is the hallmark of Cavell’s approach to popular culture. In “More of the World Viewed,” which Cavell wrote several years after *The World Viewed*, he contests the possibility of determining the importance of a film from a solely theoretical or historical point of view.<sup>43</sup> In art as in politics, *I alone can say what counts and can determine the importance and significance of the movies or series that I see.* This is the deeply *democratic* aspect of the experience of cinema, which stands in contrast to the condescension that marks conventional approaches to the aesthetics and criticism of popular culture, especially of TV series.

### Characters as Vehicles and Sources of Values

The material of television series allows for contextualization, historicity (thanks to regular rhythms of viewing and their duration over the long term), and the familiarization and education of perception through our attention to the expressions and gestures of characters whom we come to know. Here we may think, for example, of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,<sup>44</sup> a feminist work intended to morally transform a co-ed adolescent audience, which depicts an apparently ordinary teenage girl who is capable of fighting evil. In both mainstream movies and TV series, rather than the mystique of the author, we see the emergence of the force and impact of an actor’s embodiment of a character.

The characters of television fiction are so well anchored, morally guided, and clear in their moral expressions—without being archetypal—that they can be “released” and opened to the imagination and usage of all viewers, “entrusted” to us—as if it were up to each of us to take care of them. Hence the great importance of the conclusions to series, which must teach their viewers to go on without them. *Lost*,<sup>45</sup> *Mad Men*,<sup>46</sup> and *The Americans*<sup>47</sup> are recent and admirable illustrations of the work that series do to guide us in separating from their characters. The movie or television actor or actress

has the mysterious capacity for what Cavell defined as “photogenesis”: the ability to make themselves perceptible to spectators and thereby to constitute the spectator’s experience. Thus, the modes of expression of TV series actors (their moral texture, style of speech, and gesture) are a veritable moral resource offered by popular culture. The question of morality is shifted toward the development of a common sensibility that is both presupposed and educated/transformed by the sharing of values.

Series create care and awaken affectivity through the representation of moving figures or situations. Their very form gives them their moral value and expressivity: the regularity with which viewers frequent them, the integration of characters into viewers’ ordinary and familial lives, viewers’ initiation into new and initially opaque forms of life and lexicons, viewers’ attachment to characters, and the methodology and modes of narration of series. This leads to revising the status of morality and locating it not in rules, transcendental norms, or principles of decision-making but rather in attention to ordinary behaviors, to everyday micro-choices, to individuals’ styles of expressing themselves and making claims. These are transformations of morality that many philosophers, weary of overly abstract metaethics and overly normative deontological ethics, have called for. Some, like Martha Nussbaum, have tested this form of ethics on literary material. But the material of television series allows for an even more developed contextualization and a historicity of the public–private relation. One of the tasks of series philosophy would be to demonstrate, through a reading of the moral expressivity constituted by a series, the individual and collective moral choices, negotiations, conflicts, and agreements at the basis of moral representation: the choices and trajectories of fictional characters, the twists and turns of the plot.

In US series such as *Lost*, *Six Feet Under*,<sup>48</sup> *Game of Thrones*,<sup>49</sup> and even *The Walking Dead*,<sup>50</sup> there is a perfectionist moral quest that has democratic aims because it seeks to be widely shared. Beyond their differences, these shows are all based on the desire to give public expression to despair and on the hope that new conversations will be born—what Cavell called “cities of words.” They testify to a hope in the educability of viewer, who is obliged to pay attention, to mind. For both Warshow and Cavell, such perfectionism in the aesthetic and pragmatic imperative to invent a public defines popular culture and its “genres.” For Dewey, “the sense we now have for essential characteristics of persons and objects is very largely the result of art.”<sup>51</sup> Cinema’s characteristic is its internal reference to genres, the specific modality of its investigation into its own expressive potentialities. Other art forms appeal to the notion of genre, but they do so retrospectively in order to classify earlier works or to differentiate one work within a genre. In contrast, cinema and series only exist within genres: there is no essence of cinema just as for Wittgenstein there is no essence of language and just as for Dewey

there is no essence of art. Popular culture is defined by the *creativity* specific to genre, which drives the creation of popular works and provides an expressive grammar.

## Notes

1. Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 216.
2. John Dewey, "Emerson—the Philosopher of Democracy," in *The Middle Works*, vol. 3 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977).
3. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), 16.
4. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigree, 1980), chap. 1.
5. Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures," in Daniel Talbot, ed., *Film* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 18, quoted in Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 30.
6. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 191.
7. Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre & Other Aspects of Popular Culture*, expanded edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), xxxvii.
8. Stanley Cavell, *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 245.
9. Stanley Cavell, "Dewey and Experience" (unpublished manuscript of April 13, 2008), cited with permission of the Cavell estate.
10. Albert Ogien and Sandra Laugier, *Le principe démocratie: enquête sur les nouvelles formes du politique* (Paris: Découverte, 2014).
11. Cavell, *Little Did I Know*, 423.
12. Cavell, 497.
13. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 10.
14. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 12.
15. Cavell, 10.
16. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Essays, First and Second Series*, ed. J. Porte (New York: Vintage, 1990), 39.
17. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 10.
18. Cavell, 12.
19. Cavell, 12.
20. Cavell, 12.
21. Stanley Cavell, "After Half a Century," in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, 292.
22. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125.
23. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125, italics mine.
24. Cavell, "Dewey and Experience."
25. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 48.
26. Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, xxxvii.
27. Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago University Press, 1988), 183, italics mine.
28. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1982), 99.
29. Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, xxxviii.
30. Warshow, xxxviii.

31. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 12; Dewey, *Art as Experience*, chap. 3.
32. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), §118.
33. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, chap. 1 and 3.
34. *Sex and the City*, written and produced by Darren Starr, aired 1998–2004, on HBO.
35. *The Wire*, written by Ed Burns and David Simon, aired 2002–2008, on HBO.
36. Sandra Laugier, *Nos vies en séries* (Paris: Climats Flammarion, 2019).
37. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 4–5.
38. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 10.
39. Erwin Panofsky, cited in Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 30.
40. *High Fidelity*, directed by Stephen Frears, distributed by Touchstone Pictures and Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2000.
41. *High Fidelity*, developed by Veronica West and Sarah Kucserka for Hulu, 2020.
42. Rosalind E. Krauss, “Rosalind Krauss on Dark Glasses and Bifocals,” *Artforum* 12, no. 9 (May 1974): 59–62, <https://www.artforum.com/columns/dark-glasses-and-bifocals-212808/>
43. Stanley Cavell, “More of the World Viewed,” in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film, Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 162–230.
44. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by Joss Whedon, aired 1997–2001, on The WB, aired 2002–2003 on United Paramount Network.
45. *Lost*, created by J. J. Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber, and Damon Lindelof, aired 2002–2010, on ABC.
46. *Mad Men*, created by Matthew Weiner, aired 2007–2015, on AMC.
47. *The Americans*, created by Joe Weisberg, aired 2013–2018, on FX.
48. *Six Feet Under*, created and produced by Alan Ball, aired from 2001–2005, on HBO.
49. *Game of Thrones*, created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, aired from 2011–2018, on HBO.
50. *The Walking Dead*, developed by Frank Darabont, aired from 2010–2022, on AMC. See S. Laugier, *TV-Philosophy: How TV Series Change Our Thinking*, and *The Ethics and Politics of TV* (both at Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2023).
51. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 294.