Editorial

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For an Ordinary Aesthetics

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The impetus for this special issue comes less from conventional debates in philosophical aesthetics itself and instead from one area of recent work on ethics. More specifically, our turn to aesthetics has been inspired by a rich conversation that has emerged in recent years between anthropology and philosophy on the idea and importance of the ordinary. Oftentimes, the ordinary continues "to be treated as a residual category of routine and repetition punctuated by the disruptions of the event."[1] Many similarly continue to think of ethics as principally concerned with rules and their infringement, as a domain constituted by judgements made some distance from the everyday. But this new body of work has powerfully questioned these assumptions. Veena Das explains that ordinary ethics by contrast examines "What is it that blocks our ability to see the everyday and hence to imagine the ethical as inhering in the quotidian rather than standing out and announcing its presence though dramatic enactments of moral breakdown or heroic achievement."[2] In this sense, she writes, it "allows us also to think of the unethical as growing within the forms of life that people inhabit – it is, thus, not a matter of eliciting opinions about what behavior is considered ethical or unethical, or of cataloguing cultural practices on which we can bring judgment from an objective, distant position but rather of seeing how forms of life grow particular dispositions."[3]

As these debates continue to develop, we began to see a further need for thinking about the possibility of ordinary *aesthetics*, a field which though intimately tied up with ethics, merits its own inquiry. Lest we be misunderstood, we do not mean to suggest that ordinary aesthetics moves us into some distinct or rarefied arena of human life (i.e. away from ethics). As Wittgenstein famously writes, "aesthetics and ethics are one."[4] In the *Lecture on Aesthetics,* he elaborates further that "in order to get clear about aesthetic words, you have to describe ways of living. We think we have to talk about aesthetic judgements like 'this is beautiful,' but we find that if we have to talk about aesthetic judgements, we don't find these words at all, but a word used something like a gesture, accompanying a complicated activity."[5] What gives life to aesthetic concepts then is their embeddedness within human forms of life. It is part of the texture of the everyday, in poetry and painting for sure, but also farming, caring for a friend, and watching serials. We see ordinary aesthetics therefore as picking up and taking forward several threads that have been identified by research in ethics and posing new questions.

But we can specify this connection still further. In describing her work over many years with the family of a woman she calls Sita, Das speaks, for instance, about numerous moments of small talk in which a family grudge would appear and then quickly disappear. The tensions between relatives, however, never drew Sita into open fights. "There were many stories of resentments that were woven into the texture of these relations

1 Das, "What Does Ordinary Ethics Looks Like?" 54.
2 Ibid., 55.
3 Das, *Textures of the Ordinary*.
4 Wittgenstein, *Notebooks,* 77e.
5 Wittgenstein, *Lectures,* 11.

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that were on the surface marked by civility, adherence to the rhythms and routines of everyday life."[6] But at the same time, inert objects scattered in the home – a never-acknowledged gift of a fan, embroidered pillows, a scarf she knit – "were allowed to be brought into conversations with a sense of something wrong, or rather something not being quite right – within Sita's relationships." Das calls such exchanges "the aesthetics of kinship" because "they maintain the equanimity of a willing acceptance of everyday life while also gnawing away at the hinges on which it moves."[7] Not only is there an aesthetics *of* the ordinary, then, but there is also a way in which this aesthetics signals certain possibilities embedded within everyday life, including for things normally blocked by given categories to be expressed.

To our minds, it follows from these insights that what counts for aesthetics cannot be known in advance, as if a set of determinate concepts and judgments were waiting in reserve to be deployed, and all that was required was a consultation with a book of rules. Rather, aesthetic concepts – and indeed their importance[8] – depend on the context and character of their use.[9] They are to be discovered again and again; they are something we do. When Wittgenstein says that getting clear about aesthetics means describing a way of living, we do not take him to be saying that its meaning is determined by this background, however, but rather that our form of life "allows us to see them clearly"[10] – that aesthetics pertains to our capacity to describe against the background of a form of life, "against which whatever I could express has its meaning."[11] It is, said differently, a "basic requirement of descriptiveness that alone can give life to our concepts, to flesh them out."[12] Descriptiveness gives us a sense of the coiled relationship of aesthetics and ethics. As Cora Diamond puts it:

> the capacity to use a descriptive term is a capacity to participate in the life from which that word comes; and that what it is to describe is many different kinds of activity. We make the different forms description takes, as our forms of talk about the world and ourselves develop and change. To this point I now want to add that, although the terms we use will have a place in a network of evaluative thought, to participate in the life in which the terms are used does not mean that one must share those evaluations [...][13]

Description, understood in this way, is exploratory and not merely mimetic. Because nothing is guaranteed ahead of time, because there are no rails that mark out the way forward, description can also change "the way we look at things." Or, as Iris Murdoch explains, it can effect a "difference of vision," say of what is important, rather than a "difference of choice. It shapes less a theoretical point of view than a manner of attending to the texture of being, a way of perceiving an action or expression or gesture."[14] Murdoch writes:

> When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.[15]

But if the essays here agree on the importance of the ordinary for aesthetics, they do not all share a single sense of what that term means. While we cannot possibly do justice to the range of conceptions in play, it is worth teasing out the difference between two that are especially salient in this context, and that are inspired respectively by pragmatists like Dewey and modernists like Wittgenstein, at least as his work has been developed by Cavell. On one side, we have a view of the everyday as a reserve or resource, a utilitarian place of routine that we recognize or at least know how to find, and which we can be drawn upon to extend or

6 Das, "Ethics, Self-Knowledge, and Life Taken as a Whole," 539.
7 Ibid.
8 Laugier, "What Matters."
9 Brandel, *Moving Words;* Brandel and Motta, *Living with Concepts*; Benoist, *Toward a Contextual Realism*.
10 Laugier, "The Will to See," 10.
11 Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 16.
12 Das, *Textures of the Ordinary*, 306.
13 Diamond, "Losing your Concepts," 265.
14 Laugier, "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary."
15 Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality."

transforms the concerns of art. Under the sign alternatively of everyday aesthetics or the aesthetics of everyday life, the emphasis is on elevating neglected categories in judgements of taste that are embedded in everyday life but are not conventionally deployed in professional art-worlds or aesthetics. It takes us, in other words, beyond the exclusive emphasis in aesthetics on art and to an alternative dimension of experience.[16] On the other side, however, is the view we have begun to rehearse, in which the ordinary is seen as already uncanny, fantastic, and strange, as vulnerable, as discovered in its loss, as something needing to be achieved again and again.[17]

One of the most prominent exponents of the first view, Yuriko Saito[18], has argued that among Dewey's lasting influences has been the insistence that attention be paid not to a given class of objects or activities, but to the nature of having an experience. As Saito reads him, Dewey's fundamental insight was that everyday humdrum lacks coherence and structure, and hence is anaesthetic, and it is only when we have an experience with the requisite structure that it becomes aesthetic. 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."[19] This requires a gesture of defamiliarizing what is normally before our eyes, since we are usually otherwise occupied when "in" the everyday. What is ordinary must be made to aesthetic and cannot conversely remain just mundane. Saito and others have recognized that the implication could seem to be that having an aesthetic experience of this kind something about the everyday-ness of everyday is lost but suggest in response that we could also say that the anesthetic is simply a part of the aesthetic texture of the everyday.

One of the chief challenges for everyday aesthetics, at least for those committed to developing this classificatory sense, is the potentially "unwieldy" character of the term itself. If what counts as ordinary for different people is varied, how, Saito wants to ask, is it that we know what to include? Here Saito turns to a set of practices and objects that "transcend cultural borders" – eating, pursuing hygiene, seeking shelter – since these are "generally regarded as ordinary, commonplace, and routine" and serve primarily "utilitarian" purposes.[20] Such a view, Saito contends, allows us to talk about the everyday in general while making room for "cultural differences" – in her case, the incorporation, or we might say subsummation, of "Japanese aesthetics" into a broader field while retaining its "cultural context." The suggestion, said more simply, appears to be that culture is a way of describing merely local variations on a universal human theme. What unites such objects and activities is, for Saito, that their practical use tends to eclipse their aesthetic potential which it becomes our job to activate.

Saito and others have been criticized for being focused on the utility of the everyday for art-practices, and the categories of the everyday that have been overlooked by art worlds – one thinks maybe also of work like Ngai who calls for the elevation of the zany or the cute. But what such critics call for, in turn, is for aesthetics to provide conceptual grounds for the continuation of standing aesthetic discourse into a new region. In other words, they call for the extension of professional forms of scrutiny to mundane activities and practices. Consider, for example, the work of Thomas Leddy, for whom the point of everyday aesthetics is precisely to inquire after those aesthetic experiences assumed to fall outside the domain of conventional aesthetics – classically nature, mathematics, and of course, art. Leddy is quick to point out that some have tried to reconcile such a desire with Kant through the category of the agreeable. But this would assume a distinction with judgements of the beautiful Leddy and other proponents are not willing to concede.

Leddy's aesthetics shares with Saito a conviction that the point is not the formal properties of ordinary objects and acts themselves, but the fact that an aesthetic experience could be had of all sorts of objects and acts, or as he puts it, in a particular sort of relationship between subjects and objects. The simple distinction with conventional aesthetic is that the experience can be prompted by all manner of situations and does not

16 See, for example, Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*.

17 On the importance of this difference, see also Guetti, this issue.

18 See especially the widely cited *Everyday Aesthetics* and *Aesthetics of the Familiar*.

19 Dewey, *Art as Experience,* 48.

20 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*.

follow from properties of things experienced. Consider an example of a word Leddy considers important to everyday aesthetics – "nice":

> "What do you think of the sound of the foundation in my garden?" – "Nice." This is an aesthetic judgement, although at a very simple level. Note that if we speak of a person as "nice", this is not an aesthetic claim. This is so, even though aesthetics may enter into our judgment about a person's niceness. "Nice" is a moral quality when applied without qualification to a person. However, it is not usually a moral quality when applied without qualification to a house or garden.

Such a distinction seems to reinforce the idea that judgments are either moral or aesthetic, and that they are primarily concerned with judgements as experiences. The everyday just expands the scope. Leddy makes a related argument about how experiences can be "pushed" too far in one another or another. Something ordinary, he says, to a Schopenhauerian artist or a Zen master "reach beyond its ordinary limits."

> It would seem that we need to make some sort of distinction between the aesthetics of everyday life ordinarily experience and the aesthetics of everyday life extraordinarily experienced. However, any attempt to increase the aesthetic intensity of our ordinary everyday life-experiences will tend to push those experiences in the direction of the extraordinary. One can only conclude there is a tension within the very concepts.[21]

But is everyday life not already a resource of conceptual thought? Is it necessary for experience that we provide a foundation from worlds of art or philosophy?[22] How would we account for such a need? With regard for the desire to catalogue, might we ask, after Wittgenstein, whether a definition is really what we're after? Must all these experiences and tensions and discordances be "resolved?" Perhaps, what links one example and another, isn't so much a common of a transcendental proposition, but something more like a family resemblance. Read against the grain of Leddy's claim, could we describe the torment of the desire to "leave" or "transcend" the everyday precisely what is at stake in the ordinary? Instead of "raising" ordinary judgments up, perhaps the point is to bring them down, as Emerson puts it, to reclaim or re-achieve more accurately the everyday?

Let us turn then to the other approach. Cavell's reading of the *Philosophical Investigations'* "everyday aesthetics of itself" moves us away reifications of the everyday (simply replacing other categorical judgments or artistic cannons with ordinary ones) and looks instead to how a text itself *leads* back to ordinary uses. In other words, such an approach to what we are calling ordinary aesthetics doesn't take ordinary uses for granted; instead, it responds the temptation to drive words *out* of their ordinary uses, a temptation itself seeded in the everyday. Cavell begins with a response to, or transformation of, a Kantian problem: Why human reason seems to pose questions to itself that it can neither avoid nor answer? Especially in his work on Wittgenstein, Cavell's interest is what he calls the "disguised literary claims that *PI* seems to make in transforming this question." Wittgenstein's practice, Cavell says, is to think and write within persistent earshot of reason's dissatisfaction with itself, and which tends to show that "what we accept as the order of the ordinary is a scene of obscurity, self-imposed as well as other-imposed, fraudulent, you might say metaphysical." Cavell's point is that in a sense, an aesthetic concern is central to the work of the *Investigations* – a point he made earlier in "Declining Decline" about ethics – namely to lead us out of the philosophical muck that arises from the metaphysical response to this dissatisfaction.[23]

If the task is to lead words back to their ordinary uses, the *Investigations* also purports to offer what Wittgenstein calls a "perspicuous presentation" – a quality he elsewhere describes as offering a kind of lucidity and conviction offered by formal proofs. But is the idea then that the everyday has some kind of equivalent or analogy of the subliminity of proofs? Cavell has an ingenious way of interpreting this knot. Wittgenstein had earlier been interested in proofs because they offered a means (if idealized) not of telling us something new, but of telling us something about the "ground of everything empirical...," where this "ground is as open to view, and as ungrasped, as what there is to be grasped essentially."[24] If formal proofs fall away in

21 Leddy, "The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics," 18.

22 Brandel and Motta, *Living with Concepts*.

23 Friedlander, *Faces of the ordinary*.

24 Cavell, "The *Investigations'* Everyday Aesthetics of Itself," 28.

Wittgenstein's account, what takes their place is found in a literary form articulated in ordinary language. Such a form would need to achieve much of what is achieved in the proof – at least its completeness, pleasure, and sense of something breaking off. In the *Investigations* at least, this requirement explains the aphoristic quality of the writing.

The ordinary, Cavell writes, "has its own possibility of perspiciousness," a way of seeing connections and experiencing their unity, "as if discovering a new manifestation of the concept in discovering something new about the ordinary." This ordinary perspicacity is the "answer to the disorientation" that issues from philosophical problems; it is a form of response one might find in certain works of poetry or a piece of theatre.[25] The pleasure of this form of expressiveness comes in what it offers as a response to the torment that issues from the craving for generality without denying it, and which it achieves by leading words back home from their "metaphysical capture," where they have friction. By finding ways of reordering ordinary words, such experiments can lead to moments of clarity, not because they are lined up "like premises to a conclusion" but because they are themselves the bottom line. Reading poetry is pleasurable, in other words, because it helps us to see the world in the right way, to see things anew, and to find the right word for the right context. If a philosophical problem has the form, "I do not know my way about," the perspicuous presentation offered by the literary also the problem to be broken off, call it freedom, a sense of an ending.[26]

What we have taken to calling ordinary aesthetics then is not invested in an inversion of aesthetic values, or even a revolution in their hierarchization, but a transformation in our assessment of importance. As Laugier earlier wrote:

> This displacement of values toward *the important* and *the personal* defines popular culture and its genres. The injunction to appropriate and re-collect one's experience and what counts within it defines the new demand of the *culture of the ordinary*, far from laments about the alienation caused by the so-called "mass culture". We may discover perfectionism in the aesthetic demand to find and invent an audience, as a "personal" search for words to describe and accept our experience.

Philosophy, Cavell once wrote, 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."[27] Such a moral education is to be found throughout popular culture, indeed not just in "high art."

1 Ordinary Aesthetics, Criticism, and Democracy

Cavell was no doubt among the first to account for the transformation of theory and criticism brought about by reflection on popular culture and its "ordinary" objects. He is, however, less concerned with reversing artistic hierarchies or inverting the relation between theory and practice than with the self-transformation required

25 On the argument that the literary character of Wittgenstein's writing is tied up with its "teaching method" and its "transformative ethical aim," see especially Karen, "*A Different Order of Difficulty: Literature after Wittgenstein*."

26 Eli Friedlander sees this as an inheritance from the Romantic response to the Kant in the form of the fragment. The Romantic fragment, he argues, "must give the feeling of being perspicuous of itself. It is not only right, but its perspicuity is a matter of being pitched just right (this is related to its wit). Its rightness is convincing and thereby liberating… Secondly, the fragment is to be related to the idea of the systematic whole by way of its capacity to intensify (or infinitize) reflection, or its capacity to encompass its relation to the idea" (Friedlander, "Meaning Schematics in Cavell's Kantian Reading of Wittgenstein"). "One can think of romanticism," says Cavell, "as the discovery that the everyday is an exceptional achievement. Call it the achievement of the human." (Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary)* This romanticism then is a "romanticism of the ordinary" (Laugier, "The Ordinary, Romanticism, and Democracy").

27 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 125.

by our encounters with new experiences. From this point of view then, is there still any sense in talking about "popular culture?", Of setting apart such a place within aesthetics? Or has this sense been transformed to the extent that we now use the expression without really knowing what we are saying, without meaning what we are saying?[28]

In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell defined philosophy as the "education of grownups." When his attention turned to cinema, he came to see a similar task at work in popular culture, in its capacity to change us.[29] The value of a culture, he argued, lies not in the greatness of its art, but in its transformative capacity (a capacity one finds in the "moral perfectionism" of Emerson and Thoreau).

> 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*.[30]

Cavell gives this philosophical task the outdated name of "moral education" or "pedagogy." For Cavell, whose childhood and youth were haunted by Hollywood movies, the culture in question is popular cinema. The educational value of popular culture is not merely anecdotal. It defines what must be understood both by "popular" and by "culture" (in the sense of *Bildung*) in the expression "popular culture." The vocation of popular culture is the philosophical education of a *public* rather than the institutionalization and valourization of a socially sanctioned corpus. Some might worry that claiming a philosophical value for Hollywood cinema – placing it on the level of great works of art without, nevertheless, thinking of cinema as great art – seems too easy, even demagogic, or populist, as if such a claim could not be made in earnest. But for Cavell, cinema is not, or not foremost, a matter of art. Rather, it has to do with shared experience. He writes not about a film but of "moviegoing." It is 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.[31]

In what sense then does popular culture need criticism? Robert Warshow writes, in *The Immediate Experience*:

> 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.[32]

The problem of popular, and for that matter "mass," culture is therefore the issue of our capacity for individual aesthetic actions and choices amid everything offered to us. Dewey makes a similar point by insisting on the agency of the art lover, who contributes as much to the making of a work as its author. Such a claim pushes against a museum-based understanding of the fine arts and sees 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 as the requirement that one participate in public life. Cavell says about Warshow that when criticism turns to such objects, a specific form of attention is required, and a kind of "personal writing" takes hold, since it is only by trusting oneself that one can write about an entirely unique kind of experience, one that is simultaneously particular and shared:

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28 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*

29 Cavell, *The World Viewed*; Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*; Cavell, *Contesting Tears*; Cavell, *Cities of Words*.

30 Idem.

31 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.

32 Warshow, *The Immediate Experience.*

> 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.[33]

This democratization of culture is the only way to democratize democracy itself, and its only form is citizen education based on self-trust and self-confidence.[34] The arrival of popular culture onto the scene displaces our conceptual categories, which have been challenged by the waning of autotelism and of an aestheticizing understanding of art. It validates, moreover, key aspects of a 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, and instead to organizing them pragmatically around actual and shared values, practices, and forms of life. Perhaps then we might redefine popular culture: no longer as "entertainment" (even if that is part of its social mission, or its capitalist control) but also as a collective labour of moral education, as the production of values and ultimately of reality. This culture plays a crucial role in the revaluation of ethics and in constituting real democracy on the basis of images, scenes, and characters – on the basis of values that are expressed and shareable.

What is meant by popular culture 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, or finding oneself, in a heritage, a cultural inheritance, we must think instead of the material of ordinary conversation; a sharing that is not given but articulates a claim. As a site for the education of grownups, popular culture amounts to a cultivation of the self, or more exactly, a subjectivation that takes place through sharing and commenting on public and ordinary material that is integrated within ordinary life. It is in this sense that "we are all self-made men."

> 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.[35]

One of Cavell's goals, and one of his greatest successes, was to make apparent the intelligence (understanding) that a film 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. Understanding popular culture's relation to philosophy thus implies two tasks.

First, learning what it means to "check one's experience," to borrow 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."[36] 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: the will to find one's voice in one's history, against the temptation of inexpressiveness.[37] The possibility of *having* an experience is inseparable from the question of expression and the possibilities, which say cinema explores, for human beings' natural expressivity. This discovery serves as Cavell's entry into its different genres. Take his favoured cinematic object of study, the apparently minor genre of remarriage comedies, which stage characters' mutual education and their transformation through

33 Cavell and Robert, "After Half a Century."
34 Ogien and Laugier, *Le Principe Démocratie*.
35 Warshow, *The Immediate Experience*, xxxviii.
36 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 10.
37 Laugier, *Le mythe de l'inexpressivité*.

separation and reunion. 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, words in daily conversation.]"[38] Lest we be accused of elided the particularity of aesthetic forms, 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 ordinary language.

To find the ordinary would be to find an adequacy between our words and our world, 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; what is Greek art or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.[39]

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. That is to say, its voice. This means letting oneself be educated by an experience by finding passivity in it and in its return. The genre of remarriage comedies famously expresses this aspiration to return to the ordinary – acceptance of repetition, of re-marriage, and of the everyday – which here 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."

By responding to the Emersonian call for democratic and ordinary art, cinema describes an everyday reality. Our experience as spectators comes out of an ordinary, shared culture, draws on access to the "physiognomy" of the ordinary. To quote Emerson, "the literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life."[40] An ordinary aesthetics must defend not the specificity of the individuals who created a work then, nor 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 he or she liked in earlier films and now wants to see again in new incarnations. Ordinary aesthetics pertains to a common and shareable aesthetic experience.

Another democratic characteristic of this experience is that we like the exceptional as much as the common. Here another particularity. The cinema enthusiast is eclectic, in a way the art or literature enthusiast is not always. Panofsky already noticed this characteristic quality. If cinema is important for us, it is because it has not lost contact with a wide audience, unlike the so-called traditional, or high, arts. Panofsky was also 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."[41] 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."[42]

Cavell's proposes a change of perspective – he sometimes calls it a *revolution* – on cinema and popular culture more broadly. This requires taking cinema seriously, to see its importance, to accept, for example, 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, say, that reflection on skepticism in Capra is as radical as it is in Hume or Kant.[43] We take Cavell seriously when he associates the argument of *It Happened One Night* with that of *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Obviously, there is something shocking in this, and the

38 Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 12.
39 Emerson, "The American Scholar," 57. Cited in Ibid., 14.
40 Ibid., 57.
41 See Cerisuelo, "The Importance of Cinema," 19.
42 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 6.
43 Cavell, "The Thought of Movies."

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 the equality of their competence and capacity to educate.

The philosophical relevance of a film lies in what it itself says and shows, not in what criticism discovers in it (as though it were hidden) or develops in relation to it. 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," art forms that not only maintain contact with the public but also educate it, possibly through the creation of a specific universe based on its own culture, which it produces.[44] Cavell rejects therefore both the critic's contempt for forms seen as degraded and the condescension of the intellectual who claims interest in popular culture while remaining certain of a position of superiority over the material.

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 they do so retrospectively, in order to classify the productions of the past or to distinguish themselves within a genre. Cinema, on the other hand, only exists in its genres, and this defines its popular nature: there is no essence of cinema or authorial mystique. In contrast to aristocratic distinction, popular culture opposes the model of the self-made spectator who creates his or her taste through their favourite genres.

The dominant approach consists in describing essential properties of the medium in order to prescribe its possibilities and possible genres. Cavell, by contrast, 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' excellent 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.[45]

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, the 1930s and 1940s, within a certain structure of production, the large Hollywood studios of the time.

A genre provides an expressive grammar, including for the viewer, who finds within it resources for her own sentiments and situations. This ordinary pedagogical aspect has been radicalized 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. The spectator's ordinary expertise turns out to be a capacity for expression that comes from knowledge, even mastery, of a genre. 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. 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. If we are to rethink the concept of popular culture, it is necessary to understand that cinema is not a specialized art and that it can transform our existences by educating our ordinary experience.

44 Laugier, *TV Philosophy*; See also Brandel, "A Parody in Berlin."
45 Perkins, *Film as Film*, 59.

2 A Matter of Importance

The approach that Cavell developed for the "golden age" of American popular cinema, and which we have until now described as a cultural democratic theory, has a specific character, but it can be extended to other forms of popular culture. We have said that this approach is premised on "the intelligence that a film has *already* brought to bear in its making." Take the television series and everything that emerges out of the exploration and mixture of "genres" of culture. The success of the series seems to come from the fact of its polyphony. A series contains a plurality of singular expressions, stage arguments, and debates, and these are permeated by a moral atmosphere. Sabine Chalvon-Demersay has analysed the type of education provided by the very form in which television series are presented, and the radical turn that took place in the 1990s: the integration of characters into spectators' ordinary and familiar lives. Viewers' initiation into new forms of life and new, initially opaque vocabularies that are never quite made explicit, without heavy-handed guidance or explanation, as were conventional earlier.[46] This methodology and the new narrativity of series are what make for their moral relevance. 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, and to individuals' styles for 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 perhaps allows for even greater contextualization, historicity (regularity, duration), familiarization, 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 and words on the "small screen").

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

The series re-articulates the private and public differently than the darkened theatre does. They create their audience by slipping into "private" life.[47] The perspective on ordinary culture we have tried to follow Cavell in developing 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 popular culture today 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, itself 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 which 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 realize that television, understood in this way, inherits the moral education at stake in popular cinema. 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, familiarization, 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 ordinary and popular cinema's pedagogical task of creating an inseparably

46 Chalvon-Demersay, "La confusion des conditions."
47 See Laugier, *TV Philosophy*.

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 does not imply a false revolutionary or ironic 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 on earth rather than ideals.

> Where does our investigation get its importance from, since it seems only to destroy everything interesting, that is, all that is great and important? … What we are destroying is nothing but houses of cards and we are clearing up the ground of language on which they stand.[48]

This is a redefinition of the task of philosophy – the pursuit of happiness – through the search for importance (what is important to me, what is important to us). As Cavell writes:

> 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 with their unspeakable importance for me.[49]

The injunction to appropriate and re-collect one's experience and *what counts* within it, to take oneself seriously, defines the new demand of an *ordinary aesthetics*, where fragments of culture become part of our experience, hence of reality.

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48 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* 118.
49 Cavell, *The World Viewed,* 154.

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