8. Cavell and the Magic of Cinema

PIERGIORGIO DONATELLI

1. At the Origins of Cinema

The World Viewed is a fascinating, dense and enigmatic book by Stanley Cavell on the ontology of cinema, understood as a fact of experience that leads us back to our fundamental existential dimension as individuals displaced before the world that passes before our eyes.[1] The world viewed on the big screen in the dark movie theater is our world, but we are not in it, we are present to it by looking at it from the outside, we own it in this mythological way. This is the magic of film, according to Cavell: "How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen."[2] A magic that repays us for our loneliness and sadness by making them stand out against the background of the world seen on the screen, fabulous and mythical: "movies also promise us happiness exactly not because we are rich or beautiful or perfectly expressive, but because we can tolerate individuality, separateness, and inexpressiveness. In particular, because we can maintain a connection with reality despite our condemnation to viewing it in private."[3]

The connection with reality is achieved, as if by magic, in the experience of the transfiguration of our events and our earthly presence, which take on the sharp contours and the solid texture of the world on the screen, just as, when leaving the cinema (an experience that belongs more and more to the past), picking up the thread of ordinary occupations and thoughts seems strange and our daily dwelling is

1. William Rothman and Marian Keane, *Reading Cavell's "The World Viewed": A Philosophical Perspective on Film* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2000). See also Rothman, *The Holiday in His Eye: Stanley Cavell's Vision of Film and Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021).
2. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 40.
3. Ibid., 213.

transformed by the memories and impressions that are still in our eyes. As Wittgenstein remarked:

> When you come out of a movie onto the street, you sometimes have the experience of seeing the street and the people as if they were on the screen and part of the plot of a movie. How come? *How* does one see the street and the people? I can only say: I have the fleeting thought, for example, "Perhaps *this* man will be a main character in the plot." But that's not all there is to it. Somehow my attitude toward the street and the people is like the one toward the action on the screen. Perhaps something like mild curiosity, or enjoyment. – But initially I can't even say all that.[4]

That which confines us where we are, all that which is unexpressed and unreached, the melancholic contingency and finitude of our lives, is transfigured by the world viewed on the screen, which penetrates into our own. This is the promise of happiness that cinema holds for us.

Cinema arrives with its magic at the moment when all the great arts, from painting to the novel to theater, are in their modernist phase, questioning the power to possess the world through their work, on the canvas, in the fabric of narrative, in theatrical performance. They question the realism of art, the power to recreate the world and make it inhabitable. This theme offers the enigmatic thread of Cavell's thoughts in *The World Viewed*.[5] In experiencing the loss of the creative power discovered by Romanticism, modernism unmasks the fables of the arts, as Nietzsche had already done in *Human, All Too Human*, criticizing the trust he had placed in them in his earlier writings:

> It is not without profound sorrow that one admits to oneself that in their highest flights the artists of all ages have raised to heavenly transfiguration

4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume 2*, ed. G.H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), §493.
5. I explored the difficult and enigmatic place of modernism in *The World Viewed* in my "Rethinking Modernism in Stanley Cavell's *The World Viewed*," in *The World Reviewed,* ed. Jeroen Gerrits (forthcoming). See also Daniel Morgan, "Modernist Investigations: A Reading of *The World Viewed*," *Discourse* 42, nos. 1-2 (2020): 209-40.

> precisely those conceptions which we now recognize as false: they are the glorifiers of the religious and philosophical errors of mankind, and they could not have been so without believing in the absolute truth of these errors. If belief in such truth declines in general, if the rainbow-colours at the extreme limits of human knowledge and supposition grow pale, that species of art can never flourish again which, like the *Divina Commedia*, the pictures of Raphael, the frescoes of Michelangelo, the Gothic cathedral, presupposes not only a cosmic but also a metaphysical significance in the objects of art.[6]

The arts, facing the challenge of modernism, are forced to return to the bare conditions of their activity, to the fact of space and color on the canvas, to linguistic form, word and sound. In philosophy, Wittgenstein follows a similar path when he returns to the power of words and gestures in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Having emptied the structure of the philosophical tradition and its theories, he returns to the primitive scenes of life, to the simple words taught to children in the quote from Augustine that opens the book, or, in section 2, to the words exchanged by builders who pass bricks, slabs and beams to each other, and this is the only language they use and the only life they lead. We cannot trust philosophical constructions because they no longer have the right to claim their theses and demand our understanding; the words they use are shrouded in a haze that makes clear vision impossible. The great problems of the philosophical tradition do not offer genuine issues, they must be dismantled to return to the rough ground where words are used in specific circumstances, motivated by interests woven into life. As Wittgenstein writes, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life."[7]

We must, however, summon the broader cultural scene that, between the two centuries and in the first decades of the twentieth century, challenged and unsettled the conventions of bourgeois life, revealed its tics and obsessions, as in Schnitzler's stories and Freud's clinical cases, and returned to the power of the body, to the fact of sexuality, which appears as an incomprehensible construction once we have

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6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, ed. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 102.
7. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §19.

challenged the bourgeois second nature that shapes it into feelings and virtues such as modesty and chastity. How romantic, out of time, and childlike Joachim and Ruzena seem to us in Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, the young Prussian Junker moved by a confused and immature need for order, and the entraîneuse he has wrested from the obscure profession, how strange and disturbing is the world of conventions and order, threatened on all sides by the intrusion of a new reality, represented by the crawling and threatening urban life of Berlin. This is how the two protagonists are seen by their worldly friend Bertrand:

> To him Joachim and Ruzena seemed creatures who lived only with a small fraction of their being in the time to which they belonged, the age to which their years entitled them; and the greater part of them was somewhere else, perhaps on another star or in another century, or perhaps simply in their childhood.[8]

For Hermann Broch, romanticism indicates a state of exile from the present world and of incommunicability; its power to bring human beings together has waned. We should also remember that these were the decades of the great sexual experiments transfigured in Witkiewicz's rutilant novels, and of the reversal of the perversions newly invented by psychiatry into their festive enactment, which would reach its zenith in the Berlin on which Nazi violence would soon descend.

Against this background of a crisis of conventions that forces a return to the constitutive facts of human existence, to the fact of language, to our earthly location, to the encounters of bodies and souls, Cavell brings in the classic Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, accompanied by a series of European films – which, as he notes, have earned the right to be considered acceptable in America as films, and not just as foreign films. Cinema appears on the scene as the last traditional art, although he points out that from its beginnings it also existed in a modernist state, as in revolutionary Russia, which he does not consider in the book. In the decades of modernism, cinema comes from another world. In fact, it was produced in Hollywood

8. Hermann Broch, *The Sleepwalkers: A Trilogy*, ed. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Vintage International, 1996), 79-80.

in the same years that the great intellectuals of the German-speaking world, fleeing Nazism, emigrated to California, from Adorno to Brecht to the Manns, exiled from the great European culture. Cinema enters the scene innocent and unaware of the torments that grip the other arts and the whole of cultural production. Cavell plays magnificently and enigmatically with this contrast. When the other arts are in crisis, when culture and politics have lost the power to represent the world by returning it to us as a place we can inhabit and claim as our own, cinema offers us the world, establishing a natural relationship of trust with its audience, touched by the grace of projection on the screen and its storytelling.

2. Ontology and Criticism

Both aspects, the ontology of the world projected on the screen and the stories told in these films, are brought into focus in Cavell's book. The ontology that appears in the subtitle ("Reflections on the ontology of film") refers in the first place to the world viewed on the screen, to its projection in front of the viewers who watch it unseen.

> A screen is a barrier. What does the silver screen screen? It screens me from the world it holds — that is, makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me — that is, screens its existence from me. That the projected world does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality.[9]

Playing with the word "screen," Cavell argues that the fundamental ontological fact is that the world I am present to is screened by the screen on which it is projected, making me invisible and screening its existence from me, so that this world and its audience are ontologically separate. Cavell also plays with temporality, since the world on the screen does not exist now, it is in the past, or it can convey a sense of the future, as Cavell argues in his remarks on the later set of films commenting on the appearance of color. We are not present to it, and it is not our present. Its temporality is different from ours, in which we can embrace the future situated in our present, make pacts and treaties

9. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 24.

and promise to keep them, whereas on the screen time is "visually preserved in endless repetition, an eternal return, but thereby removed from the power to preserve us; in particular, powerless to bring us together."[10] That is why the human commonwealth is returned to us on the screen as a mythological fact. On the other hand, it is precisely the world of cinema, with its intense reality, that projects our existence into an unreal state. In the dark hall of the movie theater "we are displaced from our natural habitation within [the world], placed at a distance from it. The screen overcomes our fixed distance; it makes displacement appear as our natural condition."[11] The magic and transformative power of film lies in this relationship between the screen and its audience, between two worlds that speak to each other mythologically.

In our relationship to the screen, Cavell uncovers the skepticism that haunts our existence — not the intellectual problem (the arguments about the existence of other minds and the external world), but the existential question of whether our attunement to the world and to human community is grounded, the skepticism revealed in the vivid and unpleasant perception that the spontaneous agreement and sympathy (in Wittgenstein's expressions[12]) of words, gestures, and actions in the whirl of life can be broken at any moment: again in Broch's words, the

> uneasiness in which things imperceptibly moved out of their places and in which every social gathering, although it ought to have presented an integral aspect, began to disintegrate into something that was disconcertingly multifarious, something that somebody or other, by means of decorations, garlands and banner, had combined into an artificial unity, against his own better judgment. [...] the curse of the casual, of the fortuitous, that spreads itself over things and their relations to each other, making it impossible to think of any arrangement that would not be equally arbitrary and fortuitous.[13]

"Film is a moving image of skepticism," writes Cavell:[14] in satisfying our senses by taking a view of a reality that does not exist, exiled from our natural home, we come

10. Ibid., 214.
11. Ibid., 41.
12. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, II, §699.
13. Broch, *The Sleepwalkers*, 642-43.
14. Cavell, The World Viewed, 188.

to terms with our lack of knowledge about what grounds our trust in reality and others. This faith in the world and in human community returns to us as a secular mystery, a matter to be mastered by leading it back to the exercise of life instructed by cinema, when its power radiates in memories, in conversations, in the friendships it nurtures and in the rhythms of everyday life. Cinema explores the experience of skepticism that haunts our existence, revealing its different sides: isolation, acknowledgment and the creative dimension it opens. As Cavell writes:

> It was always part of the grain of film that, however studied the lines and set the business, the movement of the actors was essentially improvised – as in those everyday actions in which we walk through a new room or lift a cup in an unfamiliar locale or cross a street or greet a friend or look in a store window or accept an offered cigarette or add a thought to a conversation. They could all go one way or another. Our resources are given, but their application to each new crossroads is an improvisation of meaning, out of the present.[15]

Returning to our everyday life, filled with the memory of the scenes, the words exchanged, the gestures and the atmospheres — all that imbues the movement of the human body, the gaze and the gestures with a magical depth — our own actions and gestures are mobilized, their application to a new crossroads open and full of possibilities. It is in this mythological dimension, reflected in one's present reality, that we discover the power of cinema to intensify existence, to turn it away from the mechanical and predictable course of hours and days. The ontology of cinema provides us with the facts about our existence and the instructions for making it a mobile matter, where we can take turns that depend on us and our freedom. Under the title of ontology the dimension of an ethics and politics of cinema is revealed. Cavell develops it fully in his later writings on cinema, and in a rich and festive way in *Pursuits of Happiness* where he stages the couples of the remarriage comedies as miniature portraits of the political covenant that holds society together.[16]

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15. Ibid., 153.
16. See Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981), 151.

I have described some aspects of the ontology of cinema. Ontology, however, cannot be examined without delving into the stories and characters of the films, into what is properly film criticism, while ontology offers a theory of cinema: "it is arguable that the only instruments that could provide data for a theory of film are the procedures of criticism."[17] Under the lens of criticism, we find the stories of these films, the depth and virtuosity of human conventions in which the facts of life, temporality, mortality, separateness and intimacy are woven. Cinema offers us the world in all its spontaneity and candor, which is precisely what modernist art declares it can no longer do, which is why it is forced to return to the power of the medium itself, to the canvas that shows itself in its physicality, to the words that strike us in the form of signs, to the sound that is composed into music. On the other hand, films naturally offer us a world that arouses our interest and emotions, and becomes the subject of conversation, and creates the kind of companionship represented by friends and strangers gathered in front of the big screen in a movie theater. It is the world projected and seen under such conditions that comes back to us as if by magic, as well as its stories, in which the same characters appear over and over again, the actors, Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, Katherine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Chaplin and Buster Keaton, etc., and the familiar types they embody, the reporter, the sergeant, the spy, the quack, the dance-hall hostess, the fallen woman, the sheriff, and so on. Cavell writes:

> After *The Maltese Falcon* we know a new star, only distantly a person. "Bogart" *means* "the figure created in a given set of films." His presence in those films is who he is, not merely in the sense in which a photograph of an event is that event; but in the sense that if those films did not exist, Bogart would not exist, the name "Bogart" would not mean what it does.[18]

Actors in classic Hollywood cinema are stars, they shine with an immense singularity and individuality, their own and that of the types they embody, which together create a world inhabited by these characters who return again and again in the world of these films:

17. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 12.
18. Ibid., 28.

> One recalls the lists of stars of every magnitude who have provided the movie camera with human subjects — individuals capable of filling its need for individualities, whose individualities in turn, whose inflections of demeanor and disposition were given full play in its projection. They provided, and still provide, staples for impersonators: one gesture or syllable of mood, two strides, or a passing mannerism was enough to single them out from all other creatures. They realized the myth of singularity.[19]

At a time when modernist art is no longer able to engage us in a world, and with it society is distancing itself from the conventions in which human individuality finds its expression, cinema magically offers us a world in which we naturally place our trust, populated by a myriad of diverse and subtle individualities that captivate us and convey the nuances and twists of our existences in this dramatic form.

3. The Modernism of *The World Viewed*

When Cavell writes *The World Viewed*, he expresses his surprise that such an art could have flourished apart from the problems and anxieties of modernism.

> If film is seriously to be thought of as an art at all, then it needs to be explained how it can have avoided the fate of modernism, which in practice means how it can have maintained its continuities of audiences and genres, how it can have been taken seriously without having assumed the burden of seriousness.[20]

Cinema naturally won the conviction and enchantment of its audience, captured it with its candor, free of intellectual seriousness and attitudes. There are only the captivating individualities of Katherine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwick, Cary Grant and Spencer Tracy, the types they embody, the words they speak with a conviction that cannot be questioned, preserved from skeptical doubt. This is the naturalness, the

19. Ibid., 35.
20. Ibid., 14-15.

candor, and the total frankness of the characters that populate classical cinema. The natural state of Hollywood is that of romanticism and the nineteenth-century transcendentalism of Thoreau and Emerson, their faith in words, in the instruments of labor, in the elements of nature, their trust in the human community and in the American Constitution (celebrated in the body of comedies that Cavell comments on in *Pursuit of Happiness*). It is from the standpoint of such faith that they test whether each word, action, and daily act of trust can be claimed from one's own point of view; if the government is unjust, I cannot recognize it as my government: "under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison," writes Thoreau.[21]

The task is to assess whether the spontaneous trust we place in what we have in common — in nature, in language, in human response, and in the choices of government — is well placed, whether we can claim that "common" as our common, or whether it is instead a particular that excludes us. In *The World Viewed*, transcendentalism is in the background. It will come to the fore later. In this book, it is European romanticism, literary and philosophical, that provides the framework (at one point Cavell mentions Kant, Hegel, Blake, and Wordsworth; and a century later Heidegger and Wittgenstein).[22] In romanticism, he finds the place of such an appeal to the common, to what gives gravity and verticality to our activities, the place where this appeal is at once confronted with the acknowledgment of what is shared as well as with the occasions of isolation, when we are forced into our privateness and the world is no longer our world, language does not provide us with the words to give voice to our secrets, and the choices of government make us outlaws.

It is not surprising, then, that Cavell reads both the romantic and the modernist problematic in the question of acknowledging a world that we are always on the verge of losing. This romanticism shares with modernism the goal of maintaining our conviction in reality. Modernism does this by returning to the power of the medium itself, while romanticism can rely on the tradition that has made the medium a trustworthy tool through which the artist can naturally express what she

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21. Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, ed. Tammy Roberts, Mical Moser, Don LePan, and Craig Lawson (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2011), 47.
22. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 22.

wants to mean with her work, and which is equally naturally received by her audience. In his comparison with modernist painting to which he devotes an entire chapter, Cavell writes:

> The works of Pollock, Louis, Noland, and Olitski achieve in unforeseen paths an old wish of romanticism — to imitate not the *look* of nature, but its conditions, the possibilities of knowing nature at all and of locating ourselves in a world. For an old romanticist, these conditions would have presented themselves as nature's power of destruction or healing, or its fertility. For the work of the modernists I have in mind, the conditions present themselves as nature's autonomy, self-sufficiency, laws unto themselves. [...] This is not a return *to* nature but the return *of it,* as of the repressed. It is the release of nature from our private holds.[23]

Modernist painting returns the conditions of nature to us as our common possession, freed from the private hold to which we have subjected them, and it achieves this by making the conditions of nature emerge as a repressed fact, the fact of color and the spatial location of the work of art, thereby demanding the acknowledgement of our own conditions, our location in the world, our being in front of something in a certain position and direction, our total presence at a given time and place.

Modernism and romanticism share their aims, which are those of realism, but it is crucial for Cavell to separate classic Hollywood cinema from the modernist experience, which in this book is that of American abstract painting, except for the comparison with Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*, whom he considers the progenitor of the modernist store of cinematic obsessions, "Fashion, The Man of the World, Crowds, The Child, War-Sketches, Pomps and Ceremonies, The Military Man, The Dandy, Cosmetics, Women and Courtesans, Carriages."[24] The modernism of painting that Michael Fried examines is contrasted with Hollywood, but we could rather set up the contrast between Hollywood and Europe, which is also a contrast of social and historical experiences in the same decades, the 1930s and 1940s. On the one hand, we have the United States going through the Great Depression, weaving

23. Ibid., 113-14.
24. Ibid., 43.

hopes and new solidarities: these are the themes that will be central to the examination of remarriage comedies in *Pursuits of Happiness*, where marriage represents the political covenant and crisis is the occasion to return to the terms of the agreement, personal of the couple and political of the nation, and democracy emerges precisely as the locus of this kind of conversation, where crises and skepticism are taken up again and again as occasions for assessing and transforming the terms of the mutual agreement. On the other side of the ocean is Europe, recovering from the Great War and radicalizing the sense of crisis and loss experienced with the thrill of dancing on the abyss before the rise of Nazism and the painful sense of a world at an end expressed by Wittgenstein in 1930:

> I realize then that the disappearance of a culture does not signify the disappearance of human value, but simply of certain means of expressing this value, yet the fact remains that I have no sympathy for the current of European civilization and do not understand its goals, if it has any. So I am really writing for friends who are scattered throughout the corners of the globe.[25]

By considering this contrast, we can explore the affinities, not explicitly mentioned by Cavell, between the romantic spontaneity and candor of Hollywood movies and European modernism — the latter being a relevant context of Wittgenstein's philosophy and the unifying motif of Cavell's first published book of essays, *Must We Mean What We Say?* Such affinities might be described as follows.

The ontology of film tells us about the mythological condition in which cinema is revealed, which concerns the fact of the projection of the film, the world viewed on the screen, a world of pictures moving through time (pictures and temporality) that we witness by being present to a world that is past, in the sense that it is constitutively past because we are not part of it, its time passes without us; and it is also a world that has passed, it is complete without us and therefore finished, dead, or perhaps we are dead to this world, which we therefore inhabit, haunting it like ghosts. *The World Viewed* (in the first edition) concludes with the following paragraph:

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25. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6.

> A world complete without me which is present to me is the world of my immortality. This is an importance of film — and a danger. It takes my life as my haunting of the world, either because I left it unloved (the *Flying Dutchman*) or because I left unfinished business (*Hamlet*). So there is reason for me to want the camera to deny the coherence of the world, its coherence as past: to deny that the world is complete without me. But there is equal reason to want it affirmed that the world is coherent without me. That is essential to what I want of immortality: nature's survival of me. It will mean that the present judgment upon me is not yet the last.[26]

In the world viewed, complete without me, projected on the big screen, we find satisfaction for our desire for immortality and for our belief that the world (nature and society) is a grand enterprise that goes on without us, without our contribution; it responds to the need for relief and liberation from the burden of being chained to our responsibilities, to our individual role, to the destiny of being separate individuals, prisoners of the here and now. But it also urges rebellion against the prospect of our disappearance, and motivates the desire to devote all one's energy and the difference one can make to the things of the world with an exalted sense of self.

Another aspect is Cavell's description of the narrative form of film, the types that animate it, familiar figures and actors who return in various recurring situations. The typical exemplifies the mythical, Cavell writes, referring to Thomas Mann's essay, *Freud and the Future*. Mann comments on his discovery of the mythical in the series of novels that comprise *Joseph and His Brothers*, where, as he moves from the narration of bourgeois and individual events to the stories of the Bible, he encounters life lived mythically, individual existence embodying the great figures of the past, Cleopatra living as the embodiment of the myth of Aphrodite, Caesar "imitating" Alexander, and Napoleon lamenting that modern consciousness would not allow him to present himself as the son of Jupiter Ammon, as Alexander had done. Behind the gigantism of these historical figures, which seems at odds with our contemporary individual lives, lies a crucial aspect of the human condition. Thomas Mann writes:

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26. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 160.

> For man sets store by recognition, he likes to find the old in the new, the typical in the individual. From that recognition he draws a sense of the familiar in life, whereas if it painted itself as entirely new, singular in time and space, without any possibility of resting upon the known, it could only bewilder and alarm.[27]

In the typical we can perceive the individual and embody it in our existences: we model individuality by following the highest lesson offered by the examples we draw from the past, and in this way we can become exemplary for others. Moreover, by living the typical in one's own life, by giving form to our own character and recognizing it in others, we shift the temporality of life into the celebration of past figures and situations that return in the present conditions, locating ourselves in the mythical dimension of the typical. Thomas Mann continues:

> His character is a mythical role which the actor just emerged from the depths to the light plays in the illusion that it is his own and unique, that he, as it were, has invented it all himself, with a dignity and security of which his supposed unique individuality in time and space is not the source, but rather which he creates out of his deeper consciousness in order that something which was once founded and legitimized shall again be represented and once more for good or ill, whether nobly or basely, in any case after its own kind conduct itself according to pattern. Actually, if his existence consisted merely in the unique and the present, he would not know how to conduct himself at all; he would be confused, helpless, unstable in his own self-regard, would not know which foot to put foremost or what sort of face to put on. His dignity and security lie all unconsciously in the fact that with him something timeless has once more emerged into the light and become present; it is a character; it is native worth, because its origin lies in the unconscious.[28]

Against the background of this splendid analysis offered by Mann, we can understand the mythical role of the types in classical cinema, the reporter, the sergeant, the

27. Thomas Mann, "Freud and the Future," in *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), 421.
28. Ibid., 422-23.

sheriff, the deputy, and so on, and the actors who embody them, who are these types. And then there are us, mesmerized by this mythic revelation about our individual existences, where we glimpse forms that transcend the unpleasant contingency that holds them together. For Cavell, this is the natural mode of revelation of cinema. As he writes:

> One might say that what De Sica and Bresson (and others) have shown is that there is something of the type in us all, something of the singular and the mythical. It is not merely that we occupy certain roles in society, play certain parts or hold certain offices, but that we are set apart or singled out for sometimes incomprehensible reasons, for rewards or punishments out of all proportion to anything we recognize ourselves as doing or being, as though our lives are the enactments of some tale whose words continuously escape us.[29]

In the rambling finitude of our lives, we can read the transfigured return of characters that lift us out of time, into a mythical dimension. It is this revelation that instructs us in everyday life, illuminating it with unexplored possibilities and untaken turns. By shaping the contingent flow of events, memories, and expectations according to an exemplary model, we transform our lives by situating ourselves in conversation with the great personalities who inhabit this mythic dimension, freeing our existence from the sense of being imprisoned in the place and time of our earthly settlement, which is now revealed as full of unseen possibilities. I am echoing here a line of thought that Cavell has elaborated under the title of *moral perfectionism*. John Stuart Mill gave voice to this ethical possibility of elevation, which is also a form of habitation in our earthly existence, when he envisioned education as training to feel the absence of noble aims and aspirations as degrading. We need "to have a feeling of the miserable smallness of mere self in the face of this great universe, of the collective mass of our fellow creatures, in the face of past history and of the indefinite future." And continues:

> Thus feeling, we learn to respect ourselves only so far as we feel capable of nobler objects: and if unfortunately those by whom we are surrounded do not

29. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 180.

> share our aspirations, perhaps disapprove the conduct to which we are prompted by them — to sustain ourselves by the ideal sympathy of the great characters in history, or even in fiction, and by the contemplation of an idealized posterity: shall I add, of ideal perfection embodied in a Divine Being?[30]

This conversation with the great characters of history, in the works of the imagination, and with those who are placed in an idealized posterity, offers us an image of the dwelling of the self in this mythic dimension, where the words, characters, and events of the past or from elsewhere in the imagination become present to us, establishing a conversation in which we can live transfiguring our own present existence. Cavell will fully develop the concept of moral perfectionism at the time of the completion of his book *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*,[31] but we can find echoes of it in his elaboration of the mythological inhabitation of our lives that follows in Mann's footsteps.

We can also see how this complex description of the naturalness and magic of Hollywood cinema corresponds to a precise characterization of European modernism that is evoked by the quotation from Thomas Mann and that we can now illustrate more precisely. Both aspects that Cavell highlights, the ontology of the screen and the types that populate it, are part of European modernism. A distinctive modernist experience is summoned here, which can be specified as the crisis of realism and its conventions, the crisis of psychological and social contextualization, and the emergence of the world as something created by the forces of writing alone, and of human beings as typical figures, presences filled with the situations created for them. This is precisely what Milan Kundera describes when he comments on the modernist novel of Central Europe:

> Here we are seeing a quiet but radical shift in aesthetics: the idea that for a character to be "lifelike," "strong" artistically "successful," a writer need not

30. John Stuart Mill, "Inaugural Address to the University of St. Andrews," in *Essays on Equality, Law, and Education: Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XXI*, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 254.
31. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism — The Carus Lectures, 1988* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

> supply all the possible data on him; there is no need to make us believe he is as real as you and I; for him to be strong and unforgettable, it is enough that he fills the whole space of the situation the novelist has created for him.[32]

The mythology of cinema and of its types described by Cavell falls within Kundera's modernist framework. In the European experience, trust in the world and in others, and therefore in ourselves, having abandoned its natural objects, the nation, social rituals and roles, the Form taken by maturity, is pushed back into the infantilized private, where it steals words from their common circulation and uses them to propose novel constructions. Mann himself pauses to consider that the emulative model — according to which, by admiring and loving one's own mythic ideal and following in its footsteps, one shapes one's own life and creates something new and individual — is appropriate for children; we are like children imitating the great.[33] However, in the modernist experience — and we should set Mann aside for our purposes — this learning is also a theft, it is a stubborn and proud declaration of one's immaturity, and the most pertinent author is therefore Witold Gombrowicz with his *Ferdydurke*. The works of modernists like Gombrowicz, and we must add Kafka, are constructions that rely neither on verisimilitude nor on allegory; they establish a world through the power of words alone (words stolen and employed in a new space) and create characters who are types without psychological depth, like the individuals who inhabit the novels of Gombrowicz and Kafka.

The conclusion I wish to draw is that Cavell characterizes the natural state of classical Hollywood cinema in modernist terms, with an implicit reference to the European experience as described by Kundera. European modernism works around the experience that tradition has disintegrated, and the individual is left with the task and urgency of recovering words that are now empty, stealing them to compose constructions in which every word and gesture counts because they cannot rely on the larger background. In this context, the imaginative world of art takes on a mythological depth, populated by personalities that tower like mythical figures.

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32. Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts*, trans. Linda Asher (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 64.
33. Mann, *Freud and the Future,* 426.

American cinema, on the other hand, does not face a crisis, it expresses a culture that has the resources to rely on itself. It earned the trust of its audience by inventing its own world: "the films of Hollywood constituted a world, with recurrent faces more familiar to me than the faces of the neighbors of all the places I have lived."[34] This condition creates a myth that naturally casts a spell on the audience, thus defeating the modernist demand to prove its continuity with the art of cinema in every new instance. On the other hand, this natural reliance on the medium of film leads to an equally natural self-questioning of the medium itself, of its strangeness to its world and of our displacement from it, which is the central experience of film, revealing its power to offer us a world only at the price of absenting us from it.

4. Ordinary Experience and Democracy

Cavell insists on the experience of the viewer. Recalling the origins of the book, he writes that when he chose film as the subject of a seminar in aesthetics in 1963, one promising advantage seemed to be that "the absence of an established canon of criticism would mean that we would be forced back upon a faithfulness to nothing but our experience and a wish to communicate it."[35] The appeal to experience brings us back to the pioneering popular culture critic Robert Warshow and his idea of immediate experience, the natural trust we place in the world we see on the screen.[36] To bring us into his perspective Cavell begins by recalling a long list of films that can give us an idea of the countless afternoons spent at the movies, later remembering names, scenes and passages of conversation while talking about them with friends, absorbing them into everyday life by making these characters more familiar companions than one's neighbors[37]. The cinema that claims the attention devoted to it in this book is a cinema that, without questioning the distinctions between high and low that exist in other forms of art, such as music and the novel, opens itself to the experience of everyone and transcends the hierarchies between

34. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 36.
35. Ibid., xx.
36. See Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
37. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 9-13.

the popular and the noble arts. *The World Viewed* is about this problem. "Why are movies important?," asks Cavell.

> Music, painting, sculpture, poetry — as they are now sought by artists of major ambition, artists devoted to the making of objects meant as the live history of their art — are not *generally* important, except pretty much for the men and women devoted to creating them. [...] But 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.[38]

At a time when societies have lost the ability to articulate their worlds in cultural representations, in the imagination of art, religion and politics, cinema comes to capture us again with its world projected on the screen, with its stories that make actors and types familiar to us and end up becoming intimate companions of our memories and conversations. This is the classical cinema examined in *The World Viewed*, cinema as part of American popular culture in the 1930s and 1940s, the United States recovering from the crisis of 1929 with seemingly limitless reserves of energy and hope.

Classical Hollywood cinema was born with an inherent democratic potential. This is another important thesis for Cavell. It knows how to talk about what ordinary people are interested in; it gives voice to the thoughts, desires, and conditions of ordinary people. It is concerned with ordinary experience because it banishes traditional hierarchies between educated and popular audiences: "in the case of films, 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."[39] The democratic potential lies in the conversation that takes place in the condition of equality that cinema establishes among its audience. Each person is placed on an equal footing in her

38. Ibid., 4-5.
39. Ibid., 6.

experience as a spectator and in her capacity to constitute an audience; her competence is built through the companies that come together by talking about the films they have seen: "It is the nature of these experiences to be lined with fragments of conversations and responses of friends I have gone to movies with. And with the times of sharing just afterwards."[40]

This shared experience is first and foremost that of the humanistic tradition. Cavell's entire body of work in the various fields unfolds around the tracks of a humanistic conception of intellectual work, unfolding a conversation with works that establish a tradition by listening to the voice of those who produced them — and once he arrives at the formulation of the concept of moral perfectionism, he illustrates in a sumptuous way how an ethical tradition can be constituted through the conversation that imaginative works establish with one another: works of philosophy, religious writings, critical, psychoanalytic, and sociological essays, poetry, novels, plays, and films.[41] Cinema, with its specificity, is part of this conversation, relating to the audience through the setting of the movie theater in the years when movies were seen and then remembered to become part of public culture. Therefore, the term ontology should not be misunderstood: the techniques, types and genres — the various automatisms that define the medium of film, as Cavell calls them — are conditions acknowledged within a tradition that demands personal response and a willingness for education. Against the idea that it is possible to proceed along a technical study of cinema, removed from the claim of experience and personal judgment about what matters to us in films, Cavell defends the study of cinema as a region of humanistic criticism of imaginative works, in agreement with what the great critic Robin Wood argued and practiced. The appropriate form of criticism is that which arises from the critic's total response to the work of art, which has as its opponents theory and ideology imposed by policing the response of one human being to the conviction and urgency with which another human being shapes her ideas in a creative work. The critic, like the artist, must surrender, if only provisionally, to her immediate experience (to recall Warshow's concept). As Wood writes:

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40. Ibid., , 9.
41. See Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 4-6. See also *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

> The richness of the work of Dickens and Hitchcock goes with their ideological helplessness: the stance outside their respective societies which alone would make possible a conscious ideological restructuring would automatically make *im*possible the richness, dependent as it is upon their role as entertainers within society, and upon a certain degree of trust of intuitive-emotional impulse.[42]

It is only by surrendering to one's experience, by provisionally submitting to the ideological world of an author, that we can emotionally and intellectually follow the subtle complexities of its structure, to then proceed by examining this experience, reflecting on it, having educated our experience through this encounter.[43]

The appeal to ordinary experience is also claimed by the philosophy of ordinary language, by Wittgenstein's and Austin's. In film criticism, the relevant notion of experience is that of the natural viewer, just as there are natural, native speakers who are the sources of knowledge when we question the meaning of words in the philosophy of ordinary language. The important scenes in a film are "all that native viewers accept as significant. Enough to guide the empirical discovery of the *a priori*. Why not? Criticism, as part of the philosophy of art, must aspire to philosophy. Its goal is the native view; the de-sophisticated."[44] What is the philosophy of ordinary language about? In his first book he had answered with the following words:

> The philosophy of ordinary language is not about language, anyway not in any sense in which it is not also about the world. Ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about. The philosopher appealing to everyday language turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself.[45]

This is what cinema does, it talks about everything that interests ordinary people, it does not try to prove anything, but invites its audience to assess whether what has

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42. Robin Wood, "Levin and the Jam. Realism and Ideology," in *Personal Views: Explorations in Films*, rev. ed. (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 109.
43. Ibid., 117-18.
44. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 202.
45. Cavell, "Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 89.

struck them in an exchange of glances or in a conversation can shed light on their own experience. The urgency with which we try to remember a scene in a movie is similar to the urgency with which we need to remember a dream that suddenly fades away upon waking, with its reserve of mystery and revelation, even though movies are not dreams because we watch them and we are present to the world projected on the screen, whereas we are not present to our dreams, we dream them.[46] This urgency reveals the interest we take in our experience, in what is important in life. Movies teach us what is important to us, we test movies against our own experience, while allowing them to instruct us through the gifts of pleasure and companionship they offer. (We must also remember that *The World Viewed* is a "a kind of metaphysical memoir"[47] about a time in his life when going to the movies was a normal part of his week, and movies were seen only once and remembered: "I wrote primarily out of the memory of films," and if memory went wrong that is also a matter of interest that concerns his personal response to those films. Returning to his experience of movies a decade later, Cavell writes that this way of enjoying movies gave immediacy and depth to memory and helped build a culture based on what everyone could recall from memory, thus constituting a public memory).[48]

Cinema teaches us to assess experience through experience, to consult our own experience while subjecting it to scrutiny, which is the critical key set forth in *Pursuits of Happiness*:

> Checking one's experience is a rubric an American, or a spiritual American, might give to the empiricism practiced by Emerson and by Thoreau. 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: coming to attention. The moral of this practice is to educate your experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust.[49]

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46. See Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 211.
47. Ibid., xix.
48. See Cavell, "The Thought of Movies," in *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 26.
49. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 12.

This dimension is intimately political and democratic, asking us to confront the culture that speaks on our behalf, the popular culture that gives voice to common interests and aspirations, and to test whether we individually can claim them (the critical term is "claim" which offers title to the volume *The Claim of Reason*),[50] whether each of us individually can assert with our own voice and claim as consonant with our individuality what is common, the language and political agreement that holds a society together.[51] Cavell's elaboration of the democratic theme is inseparable from his philosophical and epistemological defense of the individual, who is called to educate herself through experience in order to be able to assess the common that speaks on her behalf, to subject it to verification and thus to ascertain whether it can withstand the compromise between aspirations and reality or whether the present in which she lives cannot be so claimed and its rejection, that is disobedience, is necessary. These are the themes of the transcendentalist democrats who would later become the protagonists of Cavell's work, Thoreau and Emerson.[52]

The fact of equality and democracy is also represented in film by the prominence of the individuality of the type and star who recur in them, where the social role is in the background, it appears arbitrary or anecdotal, so that "movies have an inherent tendency toward the democratic, or anyway the idea of human equality. (But because of film's equally natural attraction to crowds, it has opposite tendencies toward the fascistic or populistic)."[53] However, the political community, like the reality that film establishes, has an eminently mythical character, as we have already considered.

> The myth of movies tells not of the founding of society but of a human gathering without natural or divine backing; of society before its securing (as in the Western) or after its collapse (as in the musical or the thirties' comedy, in which the principals of romance are left on their own to supply the legitimacy of their love). It shares with any myth the wish for origins and comprehension which lies behind the grasp of human history and arbitration.[54]

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50. See Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
51. See Sandra Laugier, "Popular Cultures, Ordinary Criticism: A Philosophy of Minor Genres," *MLN* 127, no. 5 (2012): 997-1012.
52. See Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*.
53. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 35.
54. Ibid., 214.

The myth of cinema cannot ground democracy, it is placed outside the necessary temporality of life, where we tell stories about its origins and offer arguments for its legitimacy. The role of cinema is different: film, in its mythological revelation, evokes the fact that the human community survives the loss of authority it has suffered. "The myth of film is that nature survives our treatment of it and its loss of enchantment for us, and that community remains possible even when the authority of society is denied us."[55] The broader background of the world and nature, as well as that of the human and political community, is magically restored to us as myth and offers us the occasion to pursue the non-mythological work in our daily lives, motivated by it. At the time of completing *Pursuits of Happiness*, whose chapters were written in the years immediately following *The World Viewed*, Cavell discovers in the fast talk and brilliant dialogues of the protagonists of these couples, left alone to legitimize their love, a pattern of conversation that instructs us on how to weave the fabric of democracy out of the miniature social contract that is marriage. He teaches how to receptively unfold the myth of cinema taking facts of life that would otherwise cause horror and impassiveness — the fact of the limitation and finitude of human endeavor — as occasions for laughter, companionship, and instruction.

5. The End of a World

The natural power of cinema to offer us a world to inhabit and to find our own voice ends perhaps a little after the two golden decades of the 1930s and 1940s. It begins to end as color undermines the inherent drama of black and white, as actors, those specific familiar presences, age, as the types who unified a world with their constant presence disappear. It also ends because society is changing, and with it the reserve of hope that nourished it. As Cavell writes:

> We no longer grant, or take it for granted, that men doing the work of the world together are working for the world's good, or that if they are working for the world's harm they can be stopped. These beliefs flowered last in our films

55. Ibid.

> about the imminence and the experience of the Second World War, then began withering in its aftermath.[56]

Later cinema is part of another story. Cavell bluntly states: "Neo-Hollywood is not a world."[57] *The World Viewed* does not end the game, however; color, new characters who are no longer mythological individualities, the 1960s and shattered hopes give way to new continuations into another future. Hitchcock, Antonioni, and Polanski introduce other stories of cinema, new narrative threads that we can understand precisely by registering the fact that the natural mesmerizing power of classical cinema has been exhausted and cinema has reached its modernist phase imbued with intellectual attitudes. *The World Viewed* dwells on this continuation in several chapters including the one on color. The dramatic revelation of the world was the prerogative of black and white; color changes things radically, it remains entangled in fantasy, first of all that of make-believe with a film like Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood*; whereas when color becomes a necessity of the medium, it creates a world that is neither the past world of black and white nor that of fiction, but a futuristic feeling that expresses the premonition that the world we inhabit is already the future, as in *Red Desert*. In contrast, in masterpieces like *Vertigo* and *Rosemary's Baby*, color has the power to evoke a private fantasy, a privately created world. In Polanski's film, when Mia Farrow reads the headline in *Time* magazine asking, "Is God Dead?," she finds a dark announcement that concerns her. "In the absence of God, it is up to her to create God. And what is thus created, in isolation, is not God."[58]

Cavell has left us many writings on later cinema, including on Hitchcock, Bergman, and Rohmer, and yet it is clearly the miracle of classical Hollywood that captures the largest audiences with works that withstand the most sophisticated intellectual criticism, and it is the historical and personal experience of going to the movies, that give him the material for his reflective experience of film. After *The World Viewed*, the underlying theoretical framework changes, the modernist problematic disappears, as does the characterization of films in terms of types, and the concept of genre as a unifying entity enters the scene with the discovery of the

56. Ibid., 62.
57. Ibid., 76.
58. Ibid., 88.

comedy of remarriage in *In Pursuit of Happiness* and the related genre of the melodrama of the unknown woman in *Contesting Tears*.[59] However, these are books in which the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s returns as the protagonist. The history of cinema continues, but the magical power of creating a world is no longer repeated. In an interview given in Paris in 1999 on the occasion of the French translation of *The World Viewed*, Cavell commented on a critic's claim that film as we know it is essentially finished:

> It struck me not only that some such sense has been recurrent in the modern history of the arts, but specifically that I had felt some such way in writing *The World Viewed* — that an original relation to film, some pretheoretical trust, had been broken, causing stronger sense of discontinuity than, say, any development since the advent of the talkie. Without trying to give more details, what I can reconstruct is that I was writing as if I were an emissary from another time, foreign, and it is not clear whether I was coming from the past or from an unexplored future; that is, it is not clear whether I was trying to refresh the memory or to shake the imagination of my noncontemporaries.[60]

Film theory and criticism continue to draw on Cavell's teaching to continue his conversation about the present of cinema and its new forms, such as television series, but it is this moment in American cinema that has given Cavell a world from which to speak to us and one that we can visit by engaging with his books.[61]

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59. See Cavell, *Contesting Tears. The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).
60. Cavell, "Concluding Remarks Presented at Paris Colloquium on *La Projection du monde,"* in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 282.
61. The present article is a translation, with minor revisions and additions, of the Introduction, "Cavell e la magia del cinema," to the Italian edition of Cavell, *The World Viewed*: *Il mondo visto. Riflessioni sull'ontologia del cinema*, trans. Paolo Babbiotti, ed. Piergiorgio Donatelli (Imola: Cue Press, 2023).