

Want/Need: A Reassessment from the Perspective of Stanley Cavell's Emersonian Perfectionism

Raffaele Ariano

(Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele – Milano)

ariano.raffaele@hsr.it

Articolo sottoposto a *double blind peer review*

Abstract: This article attempts to reframe the concepts of want and need, typical of screenwriting studies, in terms of Stanley Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism, and follows up some of the philosophical and cultural-historical implications of this reframing. Beginning with a discussion of the difficulties and opportunities of an interdisciplinary inquiry that crosses the now well-guarded boundaries between philosophy of film, film studies, and screenwriting manuals, the article then goes on to provide a literature review of the concepts of want and need. It considers the limitations of existing attempts to philosophically ground these concepts in terms of Aristotelian virtue ethics and argues that Cavell's notion of moral perfectionism is a more fit candidate for the task. Finally, it refers to the analytical framework of Howard S. Becker's sociology of the arts to provide a hypothesis on the relation between the perfectionism of the screenwriting concepts of want and need and American culture. Overall, the article sets out both to deepen our philosophical and cultural-historical understanding of the concepts of want and need, and to use them to extend Cavell's analysis on the perfectionism of American cinema beyond the limits of the handful of authors and film genres he took into account.

Keywords: Stanley Cavell, Perfectionism, Want, Need, Screenwriting, Howard Becker.

1. *Introduction*

The aim of this article is to provide a survey of the debate on two related concepts – *want* and *need* – that are a common staple for screenwriting manuals, to then attempt their philosophical reassessment from the perspective of Stanley Cavell's moral perfectionism. On the one hand, I am convinced that this reassessment can be a first step in a clarification process to eventually make these concepts suitable for the scientific enterprise we call film studies. On the other hand, it could be a way to broaden the scope of Cavell's inquiry into the Emersonian perfectionism of American films, while not simply focusing on a film, a genre or a director that Cavell did not take into account, as William Rothman does for in-

stance¹. Rather, it can expand Cavell's inquiry by linking perfectionism to writing practices and narrative structures deemed (by some at least) to be widespread in Hollywood cinema. Last, the closing remarks will use the interpretative framework offered by Howard S. Becker's sociology of the arts, and in particular his notions of convention and cooperation, to try to formulate a hypothesis on how to conceive of the relations between American culture, Cavell's notion of perfectionism, and the screenwriting practices described by the concepts of want and need.

2. *The complex relation between film studies, philosophy of film, and screenwriting manuals*

Leaving sociology aside for the moment, the topic I am addressing is situated at the intersection of three discourses whose reciprocal relationships are both complex and problematic. Two of them, film studies and the philosophy of film, are academic disciplines. This means they find their place within the institutional context and are subject to the epistemological standards of modern academia, and that their purposes are, generally speaking, theoretical rather than practical. The third discourse is the one developed in screenwriting manuals, and in the multifarious galaxy of screenwriting courses, workshops, and seminars held mainly, but not exclusively, in film schools. Screenwriting manuals present the reader with practice-oriented knowledge that could be described as prescriptive: their discourse is validated not from a scientific method of research, but from their supposed "effectiveness". The promise to the reader, whether an experienced screenwriter or a beginner, is that, by following the suggestions and generalizations contained in the manual, he or she will be able to write a good, or at least a better, screenplay. Despite the insistence of screenwriting teachers such as Robert McKee that good screenwriting is about «forms, not formulas»², it is hard to shake the feeling that these manuals tend to present themselves as providers of a catch-all wisdom, with their authors coming across more as "gurus" than scholars.

It is not surprising, then, that film scholars tend to be suspicious of screenwriting manuals. Viewed from the perspective of empirical accuracy, the generalizations these books draw concerning the narrative structure of films seem to employ overly broad strokes. On the other hand, although it can be said that such manuals and courses enjoy *some* success, it is not clear in what way and to what extent they influence the actual activity of film-makers. David Bordwell, who together with Kristin Thompson³ seems to be the only prominent film scholar to

¹ W. Rothman, *Must We Kill the Thing We Love? Emersonian Perfectionism and the Films of Alfred Hitchcock*, Columbia University Press, New York 2014.

² R. McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, HarperCollins, New York 1997, p. 3.

³ K. Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1999.

Want/Need

systematically take them into account, shows that waves of screenwriting manuals «have been published for nearly a century, proliferating at moments when the industry welcomed outsiders»⁴, and argues that they enjoyed a significant resurgence in the 90s and 2000s. However, Bordwell states that «[w]e can't take these manuals wholly on faith – we'll need to test them against finished films»⁵, implying that he considers screenwriting manuals more part of the cultural and social context of contemporary Hollywood film-making than reliable sources for a scientific study of the subject. Only Patrick Cattrysse seems more optimistic. Although he admits that «from an academic's point of view, the practitioner's terminology is considered imprecise and confusing», he is convinced that «bridging the gap between theoreticians and practitioners would benefit both parties», and envisions the creation of an «interlingua» able to «launch (or perhaps re-launch) a discipline called Screenwriting Studies»⁶.

When philosophy is brought into the equation, things become even more complicated. Daniel McInerny convincingly underlines the near ubiquitous presence in screenwriting manuals of references to Aristotle – especially to his *Poetics*, but also to the *Nicomachean Ethics*⁷. He also puts forth an Aristotelian account of the concepts of want and need, to which I will return. Nevertheless, McInerny's attempt at bridging the gap between philosophy and screenwriting manuals stands virtually alone in contemporary scholarship. The exact relationship between the philosophy of film and film studies, too, is a debatable matter. After having described philosophy of film as «a subfield of contemporary philosophy of art», Thomas Wartenberg dwells upon its at least partial overlap with the subfield of film studies we call film theory⁸. Wartenberg's solution to the problem – that the difference lies in the fact that philosophy of film, like philosophy in general, but unlike film theory, has to address «the grounds for its own existence»⁹ – is unsatisfying, as film theory also seems to be interested in discussing its own epistemological and methodological foundations, as exemplified both by film theory traditions directly influenced by philosophy, such as the Marxist and Lacanian “screen” theory of the 1970s¹⁰ and the phenomenological

⁴ D. Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2006, pp. 27, 247-248.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ P. Cattrysse, *The Protagonist's Dramatic Goals, Wants and Needs*, in *Journal of Screenwriting*, 1 (1), 2010, 83-97, p. 84.

⁷ D. McInerny, *Internal Needs, Endoxa, and the Truth: An Aristotelian Approach to the Popular Screenplay*, in *Film-Philosophy*, 17 (1), 2013, pp. 81-95.

⁸ T. Wartenberg, *Philosophy of Film*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), Available HTTP: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/film/> (accessed 6 June 2022).

⁹ *Ibidem*. For a wider account of Wartenberg's understanding of philosophy of film as a discipline, see T. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*, Routledge, Abingdon 2008; ed. it., *Pensare sullo schermo. Cinema come filosofia*, a cura di R. Mordacci, Mimesis, Milano 2011.

¹⁰ See for example L. Mulvey, *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*, in *Screen*, 16, 3, Autumn 1975, pp. 6-18.

strain of the 1990s and 2000s¹¹, and by film theorists, such as Sergej Ėjzenštejn with his *The Film Sense*¹², not influenced by philosophy but highly engaged with theoretical discourse. Hence, the general problem remains unsolved, and with it the question of the legitimacy of applying such technical terms as «perfectionism», derived from the philosophical debate, to the study of film. Given the impossibility of solving the problem of the relationships between film studies, philosophy of film, and screenwriting manuals here, my argument will assume what I would call a “local” and “hypothetical” theoretical stance. The aim of my article will be to formulate a hypothesis to be used in further research, rather than draw up a clear-cut solution to a pre-existing theoretical problem.

3. *Want (or desire) and need: a survey*

Screenwriting manuals usually ignore, or at least show limited interest in, distinctions that are shared heritage for academic narratology, for instance those between story (*fabula*) and plot (*sjuzet*), or between reader/viewer and narratee¹³. Yet this does not mean that their focus is not on the narrative structures of films. On the contrary, almost everything they contain is intended as an attempt to unveil the structures of (allegedly good) popular narratives. This also – I would say especially – holds true with regard to character construction, including the concepts of want and need, which constitute the object of my article.

The idea that story design and character design cannot be separated finds a typical justification in the manual by McKee¹⁴. To support his claim that «Structure is character, character is structure»¹⁵, McKee establishes a distinction between «characterization» and «true character». While characterization is simply «the sum of all observable qualities» of the character, true character is the core of humanity that is both revealed and changed by the choices the character makes «under pressure»¹⁶, that is, in those moments in the film where conflict brings about the story’s «turning points». This means that all the narrative structures identified by McKee – set-ups and payoffs, plots and subplots, acts, midpoint, crisis, climax, resolution scene, etc. – are indeed not only connected to, but in some sense derived from how the true character of the protagonist has been built. The «spine of action» of the film depends on the character’s «dramatic goals» and on the specific level on which his or her dramatic conflicts are situated (whether they are inner, personal, social, physi-

¹¹ See V. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, and L. U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 2000.

¹² S. Ėjzenštejn, *The Film Sense*, Meridian Books, New York 1957.

¹³ P. Cattrysse, *The Protagonist’s Dramatic Goals, Wants and Needs*, cit., pp. 91-93ff.

¹⁴ R. McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, cit., pp. 100-109.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 100.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 101.

Want/Need

cal or any combination thereof). Therefore, it can be said that from the perspective of contemporary screenwriting manuals, character construction is the keystone of the narrative structure of the film.

To come to our main topic, screenwriting manuals often argue that complex characters (and interesting stories) arise from a conflict between the want (sometimes referred to as the desire) of the main character and his or her need. Wants and needs can be opposed both along the axis of revelation of the true character and along the axis of its change. This means that, as the story unfolds, a need that contradicts the character's want may be revealed. Alternatively, the conflict between the character's want and need may have been made clear to the spectator from the beginning. In both cases, a crucial dramatic dimension of the story will revolve around the protagonist's ability or inability to become aware of this conflict, and to change or not change accordingly. In this perspective, a happy ending will be one where the protagonist finally drops his or her want in order to embrace his or her true need, whereas in a down ending this change does not occur.

Cattrysse provides a useful synopsis of some recurring examples in screenwriting manuals. *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942, US), for instance, is the story of a man, Rick (Humphrey Bogart), who «wants to forget about Paris and bury himself in Casablanca», but whose *need* is to «discover what happened in Paris (in order to regain his proper self)». In *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959, US), Joe (Tony Curtis) «wants to cheat Sugar» into a sexual relationship, but what he actually *needs* is to love Sugar and be truthful to her. And so forth (nine further classic examples can be found in Cattrysse's article¹⁷). I think that this exercise can easily be carried out with more recent and narratively less conventional American films too. For instance, we could say that in *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014, US), Riggan (Michael Keaton) *wants* to have a comeback as a successful Broadway director, but what he really *needs* is a kind of love and sense of self-worth that no audience will be ever able to grant him.

Cattrysse also draws up a useful taxonomy of screenwriting manuals according to whether they understand the opposition between wants and needs as a contrast between external and internal goals, or between conscious or unconscious goals¹⁸. The first group includes Margaret Mehring, who distinguishes between outer physical struggles and inner psychological ones¹⁹, Christopher Vogler, who distinguishes between the external and the internal «journey» of the character²⁰, Paul Lucey, who accordingly distinguishes between an A-sto-

¹⁷ P. Cattrysse, *The Protagonist's Dramatic Goals, Wants and Needs*, cit., p. 86.

¹⁸ Ivi, pp. 85-89.

¹⁹ M. Mehring, *The Screenplay. A Blend of Film Form and Content*, Focal Press, London 1990, p. 195.

²⁰ C. Vogler, *The Writer's Journey. Mythic Structure for Storytellers & Screenwriters*, Michael Wiese Productions, Studio City, CA 1992, p. 17; ed. it., *Il viaggio dell'eroe. La struttura del mito ad uso di scrittori di narrativa e di cinema*, a cura di J. Loreti, Dino Audino, Roma 2020.

ryline and a B-storyline²¹, and Craig Batty²². McKee, with his distinction between «conscious» and «unconscious desires»²³, David Trottier²⁴, and Mark McIlrath²⁵ belong to the second group. A gloss can be added to Cattrysse's useful taxonomy. In his recent seminars, McKee expressed a renewed definition the problem, but it has not yet found a place in his writing. Namely, alongside the opposition between conscious and unconscious desires, he posited the character's need for human «flourishing» and to become «a self-fulfilled human being»²⁶. This definition cannot be understood as running along either the axis of internal/external, or of conscious/unconscious goals; rather, it brings the topic onto the soil of Aristotelian ethics.

Cattrysse convincingly argues the inadequacy of both the internal vs external and the conscious vs unconscious dichotomies. His proposal of a redefinition does not engage with philosophical concepts, but rather shifts the problem from what could still be described as a *sui generis* narrative analysis to a study of audience involvement: Cattrysse's solution, in fact, is that the want/need conflict should be understood as the conflict between what the character wants at the level of story, and what the character «should do» according to the way the plot presents the story vis-à-vis the moral value system of a specific audience²⁷. McInerny takes his cue from Cattrysse in sketching his «Aristotelian approach to the Popular Screenplay», but conceptualizes the morally normative dimension of the conflict between wants and needs along quite different lines²⁸. Focusing on McKee, and such Aristotelian classics as *Poetics*, *Rhetoric*, *Topics*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, McInerny argues that the dramatic conflict in popular screenplays that opposes the want and the need of the main character can be understood as an Aristotelian dialectical debate between different concepts of happiness, that is, between a trivial, narrow-minded idea of happiness (what the character wants, in line with some culturally received idea of happiness) and a more refined and rational one, expressed by the need for the human flourishing that only a virtuous life can afford.

²¹ P. Lucey, Paul, *Story Sense. Writing Story and Script for Feature Films and Television*, McGraw-Hill, London 1996, p. 51ff.

²² C. Batty, *Wants and Needs: Action and Emotion in Scripts*, in *ScriptWriter*, 31, 2006, pp. 12 – 18.

²³ R. McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, cit., p. 38.

²⁴ D. Trottier, *The Screenwriter's Bible. A Complete Guide to Writing, Formatting, and Selling Your Script, Third Edition. Expanded & Updated*, Silman-James Press, Los Angeles 1998, p. 24.

²⁵ M. McIlrath, *Creative Treatments*, in *ScriptWriter*, 17, 2004, pp. 34 – 37; M. McIlrath, *Beyond Aristotle*, in *ScriptWriter*, 26, 2006, pp. 38 – 42; M. McIlrath, *Story Patterns*, in *ScriptWriter*, 35, 2007, pp. 39 – 44.

²⁶ R. McKee, *Genre: Long-form TV Series Day*, seminar conducted at Regent's University, London, 13 November 2016.

²⁷ In the closing section of this article, I will offer sociological considerations that can be considered a different way of arriving at part of Cattrysse's same conclusions.

²⁸ D. McInerny, *Internal Needs, Endoxa, and the Truth: An Aristotelian Approach to the Popular Screenplay*, cit.

4. *A reassessment from the perspective of Cavellian perfectionism*

Towards the end of his article, McInerney writes: «against post-structuralist conceptions of narrative meaning, an Aristotelian approach to the popular screenplay affirms that there is, because of the common end of our human nature, only one true story about the human good»²⁹. The universalistic cast of such a statement – perfectly in line with the rationalist universalism of Aristotle's virtue ethics, but less so with the striking variety of the images of happiness presented by Hollywood films – is what, in my opinion, suggests a Cavellian reassessment of the problem. If our intention is to ground the concepts of want and need philosophically, we will have to do it in ways that are compatible with the moral pluralism of American popular film narratives. The “Emersonian” perfectionism discussed by Cavell seems a fit candidate for the task, as it does not envision the attainment of any final state of perfection (virtue) normatively common to all rational beings.

This does not mean that Aristotle plays no role in what, refashioning a pre-existing technical term in his own way, Cavell calls perfectionism. In the opening pages of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, the book where Cavell first systematically put forth his idea, the list of thinkers whose work offered an at least limited contribution to his reflections does indeed include Aristotle³⁰. *Cities of Words*, Cavell's second book-length presentation of the concept, devotes an entire chapter to Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*³¹, in which, together with some peculiarly Cavellian reflections on the similitudes between Aristotle's method and John Austin's method in *A Plea for Excuses*³², he attempts to connect Aristotle's idea of the other to what Cavell finds in Ludwig Wittgenstein's later philosophy³³. In the end, however, the main focus is on the classical Aristotelian notions of happiness, virtue, and friendship. Yet Cavell's list of perfectionist authors by no means stops at Aristotle, insofar as it also includes the likes of Plato, Augustine, Montaigne, Pascal, Rousseau, Kant, Mill, Arnold, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Dewey, and even Heidegger and Wittgenstein³⁴. It is an extremely heterogeneous group, and

²⁹ Ivi, p. 92.

³⁰ S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1990, p. 5; ed. it. *Condizioni ammirevoli e avvilenti. La costituzione del perfezionismo emersoniano*, a cura di M. Falomi, Armando Editore, Roma 2014.

³¹ S. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2004, pp. 352-372.

³² J. L. Austin, *A Plea for Excuses: The Presidential Address*, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 57, 1956 – 1957, pp. 1-30.

³³ See S. Cavell, *Knowing and acknowledging*, in *Must We Mean What We Say: A Book of Essays. Updated Edition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002 (ed. originale 1969), pp. 220-245; S. Cavell, *Part Four: Skepticism and The Problem of Others*, in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, pp. 326-496.

³⁴ S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, cit., p. 5

one that does not fit within any of the three main metaethical schools – not within Consequentialism, or Deontology, or even the Virtue Theory inspired by Aristotle – that make up the contemporary debate in moral philosophy. This theoretical syncretism derives from the fact that Cavell conceives of perfectionism not as «a competing theory of the moral life, but [as] something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought»³⁵, a dimension of the moral life, as it were, that «any theory of it may wish to accommodate»³⁶. Elsewhere, he also describes perfectionism as a «register», as well as the «precondition» and «beginning», of «moral thinking»³⁷. It is equally significant that in the genealogy of moral perfectionism Cavell also includes texts by literary authors (Dante, Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, and George Bernard Shaw, among others) and two American film genres that he identifies and discusses in *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*, as well as *Cities of Words: the «Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage»* and the «Melodrama of the Unknown Woman»³⁸.

For the sake of clarity, I will begin by briefly recalling perfectionism as set out by Cavell in his close reading of these comedies and melodramas. In his opinion, the Comedies of Remarriage often show a couple whose relationship has something incestuous about it. It is the entanglement of two individuals who, in a sense, are not yet fully formed and whose process of individuation is not complete, and thus they need to separate from each other in order to seek what Cavell recurrently calls an «education». In *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941, US), for example, Jean (Barbara Stanwick) and Hopsie (Henry Fonda) entertain the fantasy of having known each other since childhood, of being so to speak brother and sister. The origin of their love is projected into the pre-genital phase of their psychosexual development (Cavell obviously has Freud in mind here); it is thus understandable that they both have a fear of sexuality, as symbolized by Hopsie's scientific absorption with snakes, a typical sublimation of the subject, and Jean's horror at them. Hence, they need to grow apart in order to change and reveal themselves to themselves³⁹. Similarly, in *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934, US), as Cavell writes, «[t]he intimacy conditional on narcissism or incestuousness must be ruptured in order that an intimacy of difference or reciprocity supervene»⁴⁰.

Sometimes, it is specifically the woman whom these comedies show to be in need of an education and who must threaten to or actually leave the marriage,

³⁵ Ivi, p. 2.

³⁶ Ivi, p. xxxi.

³⁷ S. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, cit., p. 222.

³⁸ S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1981; ed. it. *Alla ricerca della felicità. La commedia hollywoodiana del rimatrimonio*, a cura di E. Morreale, Einaudi, Torino 1999; S. Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1996.

³⁹ S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, cit., pp. 45-70.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 103.

Want/Need

at least temporarily, because the gender role society has assigned her, the role of wife and mother as it is conceived at that time in history, is not compatible with the attainment of full moral autonomy – see, for example, the battle of the sexes between the characters of Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn in *Adam's Rib* (George Cukor, 1949, US)⁴¹. In this respect, Cavell finds that the Comedies of Remarriage provide a comedic translation of the dramatic, but also ethical and political, conflict that is portrayed by Ibsen in his theatrical piece *A Doll's House* («HELMER: [...] First and foremost you are a wife and a mother. // NORA: I don't believe that any longer. I believe that I am first and foremost a human being, like you – or anyway, that I must try to become one»⁴²), but also re-enacted by such film dramas as *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robert Benton, 1979, US)⁴³ – or, going beyond Cavell's time, the recent *Marriage Story* (Noah Baumbach, 2019, US). Cavell goes as far as to state that the Comedies of Remarriage of the 1930s and 40s should be considered a chapter within the history of American feminism⁴⁴.

On the other hand, in these comedies Cavell sees marriage as having the role that friendship plays in as diverse perfectionist authors as Plato, Aristotle, Emerson, and Nietzsche. In perfectionism, a significant other – a master of philosophical truth-telling like Socrates, a virtuous peer, but also a book of genius in which, as Emerson writes, «our own rejected thoughts [...] come back to us with a certain alienated majesty»⁴⁵ – has the role of catalyzing and fostering moral change. It is the example offered by this other, the way in which he or she emblemizes the individuality and freedom that the subject might attain, that sets the perfectionist process in motion. When an actual marriage takes place – usually in the form of a *remarriage* – the erotic relationship appears as the arena in which, in Cavell's reading of these comedies, this perfectionist intercourse unfolds. Sometimes it is the screwball heroine who is shown as exemplary, the freer one of the pair who is closer to the pursuit of desire – such as Katherine Hepburn's character in *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938, US)⁴⁶; at other times, it is the male characters who lead, usually not because they are virtuous or pious, but because they are the typically American breed of street-smart, down-to-earth scoundrels portrayed by Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*, or Cary Grant in *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940, US)⁴⁷ – heroes of the ordinary, so to speak.

⁴¹ See S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, cit., pp. 189-228 and S. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of Moral Life*, cit., pp. 70-81.

⁴² H. Ibsen, *Et dukkehus*, 1879, Eng. ed., *A Doll's House and Other Plays*, Penguin, London 2016, p. 252; see S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, cit. pp. 20-23.

⁴³ S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, cit. pp. 26-27.

⁴⁴ Ivi, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁵ R. W. Emerson, *Self-reliance*, in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Random House, New York, 1950, p. 145.

⁴⁶ S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, cit. p. 111-132.

⁴⁷ Ivi, pp. 161-187.

A similar perfectionist aspiration runs through the films that Cavell calls Melodramas of the Unknown Woman. The sole, substantial difference – as substantial as the difference between comedy and drama – is that in this case the female protagonist finally understands that, given the present state of the society and culture she lives in, a significant other with whom she might mutually pursue a perfectionist education is nowhere to be found. In these melodramas, love and marriage, for Cavell meaning the socialization of desire, the attainment of a public dimension from the supposedly most utterly private sphere (a topic that Cavell draws from his interpretation of Wittgenstein), must be forgone in order to pursue freedom and individuality: this is the case of the protagonist of *Now Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942, US)⁴⁸, and again of *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937, US), who finally understands, in Cavell's words, «that she is free to leave not just this marriage but any marriage, which she had allowed herself to believe would transform her»⁴⁹.

Even from the brief summary expounded so far, it is apparent that Cavell's discussion is closely linked to virtually every other aspect of his philosophy⁵⁰ and, most importantly, that the perfectionism he finds in his close readings of individual films is of a very distinctive kind. It is a perfectionism first of all embodied in a very specific set of cinematic conventions, belonging to what we could call two subgenres of 1930s and 40s Hollywood comedy and melodrama: they entail specific character and plot types, specific themes, a certain sense of rhythm, and use of film form more generally, specific ways of indulging audiences with clear-cut happy or down endings, etc.⁵¹. Secondly, it is a perfectionism in which a core “Emersonian” idea is fleshed out through reference to a set of topics, authors, and philosophical debates which, however diverse and wide-ranging, form the specific intellectual path of Cavell's philosophy: Wittgenstein and the ordinary, otherness and publicity, democracy, feminism, Heidegger, psychoanalysis, etc.

However, nothing in Cavell's close readings contradicts the possibility of taking a step back from the specific film genres and philosophical topics he is interested in and looking for films that, in a more general way, embody an idea of character (character construction as well as character development) that we can deem analogous to the concept of the self that Cavell builds through Em-

⁴⁸ S. Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of Moral Life*, cit., pp. 227-246.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 280.

⁵⁰ The literature on the subject of Cavellian perfectionism is considerable, but see at least: P. Donatelli, *Moral Perfectionism and Virtue*, in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 45, n. 2, Winter 2019, pp. 332-350; the issue *Perfectionism and Pragmatism* of the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, edited by P. Donatelli and S. Laugier, II, 2, 2010; S. Laugier, *Recommencer la Philosophie: Stanley Cavell et la Philosophie en Amérique*, Vrin, Paris 2014; D. Lorenzini, *Ethique et Politique de Soi: Foucault, Hadot, Cavell et les Techniques de l'Ordinaire*, Vrin, Paris 2015; E. Hammer, *Ethics and Politics*, in *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*, Wiley, Hoboken 2002, pp. 161-190.

⁵¹ For a convincing account of the historical evolution of the conventions of romantic comedy as a film genre, see L. Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2011.

erson. This task becomes feasible, especially if we leave aside Cavell's dealings with his two film genres and make reference to the "blueprint" of perfectionism that, drawing inspiration from Henry David Thoreau⁵², and even more so from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Friedrich Nietzsche, Cavell sketches in the opening chapters of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. Here, Cavell describes the «Emersonian» perfectionism he is interested in as the «idea of being true to oneself – or to the humanity in oneself, or of the soul as on a journey (upward or onward) that begins by finding oneself lost to the world»⁵³; or again, as an idea of «the absolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible, without falsifying itself»⁵⁴, where the emphasis is «before all on becoming intelligible to oneself»⁵⁵. Hence, perfectionism is «a call for a change expressed as a (re)turn» to the self⁵⁶. This exhortation to change implies the «double picture, or picture of doubleness» of what we are. Perfectionism sees the self as having «always been attained» and at the same time «always having to be attained»⁵⁷; this self is such that «it can contain, let us say, an intuition of partial compliance with its idea of itself, hence of distance from itself, space for consciousness of itself, or of consciousness denied»⁵⁸. To put it differently, Cavell's Emersonian perfectionism is the idea that at any given moment of our lives we have within us the capacity for change. The certainty concerning this capacity derives from a specific ontological and anthropological stance that, drawing upon authors like Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud, sees us not as monolithic beings, perfectly transparent to ourselves, but rather as contradictory, opaque, split. Such is our condition, not just in certain phases of our life – although moments of existential crisis make it more apparent – but always. Therefore, we cannot imagine a state of final perfection that will render further acts of self-knowledge and self-expression impossible, or meaningless; nor can we determine the direction of our change in advance. Perfectionism, writes Cavell, «does not imply a single, or any, direction, hence, in one sense, no path (plottable from outside the journey)»⁵⁹.

Once we have fallen back on this "thinner" characterization of the concept of perfectionism, the parallels between the idea of subjectivity therein and the one implicit in the screenwriting notions of want and need become easy to identify. Regardless of whether we understand the want/need dialectic in terms of the opposition between inner and outer goals, conscious or unconscious desires, or in terms of human flourishing, direct equivalents can be found in

⁵² See S. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* [1972], The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1981.

⁵³ S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, cit., p. 1.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. xxvii.

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. xxxi.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. xxx.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. xxi.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. xxxi.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. xxxiv.

Cavell's invocations of change and of being true to oneself, and the responsibility to make oneself intelligible. On the one hand, it seems possible – although certainly at the price of losing the fascinating complexity of Cavell's close readings – to repeat Cattrysse's abovementioned exercise and describe the «controlling idea» (McKee) of Cavell's perfectionist comedies and melodramas through the notions of want and need. So we could say, for example, that *His Girl Friday* is the story of a woman, Hildy (Rosalind Russell) who *wants* to leave her job as a Chicago reporter to build a traditional family in the suburbs with a dull insurance broker, but whose *need* is to embrace an idea of herself as a woman and of marriage that is compatible with self-development and adventure; that *Stella Dallas* portrays a woman, the title character played Barbara Stanwyck, who *wants* to better herself and be accepted by high society, but actually *needs* to shake off the entire hierarchy of values implicit in this idea of betterment⁶⁰; that in *Kramer vs Kramer*, Ted (Dustin Hoffman) is a man whose *want* is to be undisturbed in his successful career as an advertising executive, but whose *need* is to discover in himself a caring father; etc. On the other hand, Cavellian perfectionism might be seen as a way to re-describe and further what is already implicit in the formulation of screenwriting manuals. The narrative arcs of the characters recalled in section three of the article – those of *Casablanca*, *Some Like It Hot*, and *Birdman* – can be defined as perfectionist in the same way as such screenwriting manual commonplaces as the idea that interesting characters are intrinsically split between what they are and what they could become, between what they think they know about themselves and what they could discover, between what they have managed to discover and what they are able to make intelligible to others through their words and deeds. In other words, perfectionist can be considered to be the idea, often held by screenwriting teachers, that “good” stories are either about self-revelation, change, or both, as well as the ultimate idea that comedies are films where such endeavors are successful, and dramas where they end in failure. At this point, as foreseen, a Cavellian perfectionist rather than Aristotelian description of our two concepts seems to hold a twofold advantage. It allows us to significantly broaden the scope of Cavell's reflection on perfectionism in cinema to include all those films that have been written or can be analyzed according to the concepts of want and need. At the same time, it is able to deepen our understanding of the two concepts and offer them a philosophical framework, without straightjacketing the films they should be able to generate and describe within an overarching, universalistic idea of virtue.

⁶⁰ For the sake of the argument, I have simply produced an equivalent of Cavell's brilliantly inventive, but also contrived, line of reading the film as presented in *Cities of Words*. If I had to follow what I believe is actually the significantly more tear-wrenching and trivial idea controlling the film, I would have written something along these lines: «but actually *needs* to sacrifice that dream so her daughter can fulfill it in her place».

5. «The inner agenda of a nation»

If my attempt to broaden the scope of Cavell's notion of Emersonian perfectionism is convincing, Cavell's idea that there is a deep connection between perfectionism and American culture also receives additional corroboration and might be worthy of further investigation.

Since the time of his early book on Thoreau – in a passage which later became famous: «Why has America never expressed itself philosophically? Or has it – in the metaphysical riot of its greatest literature?»⁶¹ – Cavell asked himself if the perfectionism of the American transcendentalists could be understood as the one native American philosophy. In his abundant writing on Emerson and Thoreau, Cavell maintained that they provided a country of immigrants with «a philosophy of immigrancy»⁶²; that Emerson defined the role of «the philosopher in American life»⁶³ and worked towards an «inheritance of philosophy not only for himself but for America»⁶⁴. For Cavell, the American transcendentalists were the thinkers who, more than any others, gave the founding myths of America – ideas of individuality, democracy and future, the exaltation of an ordinary life and freedom to be rediscovered against both the authorities and the aristocratic traditions of “old” Europe – the depth and complexity of philosophical reflection⁶⁵. Cavell also explicitly links cinema to this cultural and philosophical “difference”: Cavell's book on remarriage, for example, describes these films as a utopian expression of the «inner agenda of a nation»⁶⁶ and alludes to the United States' Declaration of Independence – the well-known passage on the rights of «life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness» – already in its title. And it is also significant that, even before any direct engagement with the American transcendentalists and the Comedies of Remarriage on Cavell's part, the reason for his interest in classic Hollywood movies adduced in *The World Viewed* can be linked to his appreciation of the anti-aristocratic and democratic spirit of American culture: what is striking, Cavell argues, is that, in exactly those decades during which virtually every other art had turned to the self-reflexivity, specialism, and

⁶¹ S. Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, cit., p. 33.

⁶² S. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: MA, 1994.

⁶³ S. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, pp. 3-26.

⁶⁴ S. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 83. Also see the essays collected in S. Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003; and S. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: MA, 2005, especially pp. 111-131 and 213-235.

⁶⁵ It is in this perspective that we can appreciate the full importance of Cavell's defense of Emerson and perfectionism in general from the accusation of implicitly endorsing an anti-democratic and elitist idea of society, variously leveled by authors of the likes of John Rawls, John Updike, and Harold Bloom: see S. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, cit., pp. 33-63 and 129-138.

⁶⁶ S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, cit., p. 18.

antagonism towards the audience typical of avant-garde and modernist practices, Hollywood cinema had miraculously retained its mythological and popular aura⁶⁷.

Probably due to his philosophical upbringing in the analytic tradition, Cavell does not usually frame his reflections in specifically social and historical terms, not even when dealing with topics – such as the relation of certain thinkers and film genres with the recurring cultural myths of America – in which such an approach would be more directly called for. Thus, we would be looking in vain if we were to search Cavell's *oeuvre* for a clear-cut answer to the question of how this relation should be conceptualized – whether in terms of historical influence, or the capacity of thinkers and films to “express” widespread values and ideas, or to “mirror” and “bring to consciousness” pre-existing social relations, etc. It is true, within the general economy of Cavell's work, that this omission does not seem particularly problematic. As his reflections on perfectionism and America are usually limited to a handful of authors and directors, a hermeneutic approach focusing on their subjective intentions and authorial outlooks can still be considered adequate. But what about the concepts of want and need? How can we understand the relation between the idea of America and the supposed perfectionism of concepts such as those of want and need, whose definition and epistemic value are so vague, and whose original “authors” cannot be named, because they are an a posteriori description of widespread, pre-existing writing practices?

Becker's classic sociology of the arts textbook, *Art Worlds*, might perhaps come to our aid⁶⁸. Cultivating what he calls a «congenital anti-elitism» in line with a «tradition of relativistic, skeptical, “democratic” writing about the arts», Becker applies the theoretical instruments of the Chicago school of sociology to an understanding of art as essentially a «collective activity»⁶⁹. In the context of this inquiry, which at one point Becker describes as a «sociology of occupation applied to artistic work»⁷⁰, artistic conventions are understood as «patterns of cooperation». Conventions are the socially and historically grounded «shared understanding» that makes it possible for a varied array of social actors – not only art producers, but also distributors, support personnel, teachers, policy-makers, and even audiences – to form the «networks of cooperation» in which art works can be produced, circulated, and consumed. The extent to which a specific convention or set of conventions needs to be shared among the different types of actors varies and is a matter of empirical study: for example, in order to take part in the network of cooperation that makes up a certain art world,

⁶⁷ S. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film. Enlarged Edition* [1971], Harvard University Press, Cambridge: MA, pp. 3-15 and 25-37.

⁶⁸ H. S. Becker, *Art Worlds. Updated and Expanded Edition* [1982], University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. xxiii, xxv, 1-39.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

Want/Need

audiences (or art consumers, to be more neutral) usually need to know only those conventions that are necessary for them to have an appropriate aesthetic, that is, «emotional and intellectual response» (where what “appropriate” means changes from time to time and from art world to art world); they do not need to be familiar with all the conventions which would have been necessary had they wanted to participate, for example, as art producers, or distributors. However, the audience’s knowledge of *some* conventions at least is a necessary condition for an art world to exist: without it, the audience would not have a framework in which to understand the art works and thus would lack any reason to provide art producers with the symbolic, economic, and word-of-mouth support to sustain them in the future.

In this theoretical framework, the concepts of want and need, as well as more generally all the concepts used in screenwriting manuals and courses, can be understood as an attempt by teachers and theoreticians to create explicit awareness of sets of conventions concerning character and plot construction that have been shared practices within the screenwriting sub-section of the art world of Hollywood cinema. Why such explicit (renewed) explanations of traditional practices is at times needed can be explained with reference to both Bordwell and Becker. Bordwell’s abovementioned remark that screenwriting manuals proliferate when the film industry is more in need of outsiders⁷¹ is coherent with a general tendency described by Becker: «culture industries» like cinema, the publishing world and music, distinct in that they produce and distribute for mass audiences whose taste and reactions cannot be completely predicted, tend to encourage anyone to propose distribution ideas and entrust the process of selection to the “Darwinian” process of the market, thus unloading on prospective art producers at least part of the costs of production⁷² (in the case that interests us, the cost of writing a finished screenplay to be submitted to a film producer).

Another tendency of the culture industries described by Becker brings us back to the topic of the relations between America and the perfectionism of the concepts of want and need. Unlike art worlds such as those of contemporary art, experimental theater or atonal music, with an economic sustainability calibrated on limited audiences and the resulting ability to make use of a very specialized and even esoteric set of artistic conventions, culture industries like Hollywood cinema need to rely extensively on conventions that are known to all or almost all members of society, «deeply embedded in the culture», and available to «people who have little or no formal acquaintance with or training in the art», in order to enable collaboration with their wide audiences⁷³. Some of these conventions might be medium-specific and owe their familiarity to the mass success of the medium itself: for example, the fact that a film lasts about 120 minutes, that a femme fatale might at some point betray the male leading character, that a love

⁷¹ D. Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, cit., pp. 27, 247-248.

⁷² H. S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, cit., p. 126.

⁷³ Ivi, pp. 41-45.

story with a great deal of humorous moments will probably have a happy ending, etc. Other such conventions are not medium-specific, instead depending on wider cultural dynamics that only cultural, historical, and social sciences might try to account for. An example of this second category is offered by the way the plot and character construction conventions set out by the concepts of want and need tap into psychological, moral, and even political notions of subjectivity that are widespread in American culture – the same that Cavell tries to appreciate in philosophical terms by linking them to the authorial influence of Emerson and the academic notion of moral perfectionism.

Cavell's work on perfectionism can be described as an attempt at a «popular philosophy», in the sense given by Immanuel Kant and John Dewey, whose democratic aim is pursued through a movement between multiple “high” and “low” layers: on the one hand, by re-elevating Emerson and Thoreau to the inherently “high” enterprise of philosophy, showing that their literary production, known by generations of young Americans, had taken the idea of self-reliance in the *American way of life* to the level of a philosophical worldview; on the other, by offering a perfectionist reading of a handful of Hollywood films that are sophisticated enough to welcome such a reading and at the same time popular enough to be shared cultural heritage, thus using them to bring philosophy back from the specialized sterility of academic discourse⁷⁴ to the wider cultural conversation. This article suggests that this process of “democratization” can be pushed even further, to the point of bypassing concerns over cultural legitimacy or the distinction between “high” and “low”: by accepting the sometimes frowned-upon (but only by academic scholars) concepts of screenwriting manuals into the academic study of film, by using conceptual analysis to connect them to the philosophical discourse, and by referring to sociology to account for their ubiquitous position in American film-making and culture at large.

⁷⁴ See S. Cavell, *An Audience for Philosophy*, in *Must We Mean What We Say*, cit., pp. xvii-xxix.