Narration and Spectatorship in Moving Images
Narration and Spectatorship in Moving Images

Edited by

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The essays in this volume were drawn from presentations at the conference “Narration and Spectatorship in Moving Images: Perception, Imagination, Emotion” held July 20-23, 2006 in Potsdam-Babelsberg, Germany. The conference was organized by the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (HFF) “Konrad Wolf” in cooperation with the Center for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image at the University of Central Arkansas. We would like to acknowledge the conference host Peter Wuss and the German Conference Team: Thomas Schick, Tobias Ebbrecht, Wietske van der Schaaf, and Susanne Eichner.
INTRODUCTION

In the arts and humanities there is a new vitality, a new spirit of enquire, a new level of confidence in the future, all stemming from the resurgence of an old idea: the idea that it is possible to conduct rational investigations of non-rational or perhaps even irrational areas of human experience such as art, music, and motion pictures.

For more than ten years the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image has maintained a forum for the free exchange of ideas regarding the nature and function of cinema and moving images of all kinds. Through frequent communications among scholars via the Internet and the publication of The Journal of Moving Images, as well as conferences in Lawrence, Kansas; Copenhagen, Denmark; Pecs, Hungary; Grand Rapids, Michigan; and Potsdam, Germany; the Society has maintained a marketplace of ideas.

The contribution to the public wealth of this rich and diverse array of scholarly thought is all the more remarkable when it is placed in the historical context of a larger academic community that increasingly, from the 1960's through the end of the century, coalesced around a fervent commitment to consensus scholarship and ideological orthodoxy favoring political correctness at the expense of honest research and independent thinking. This commitment was especially pervasive in the arts and humanities (as opposed to the sciences), and in film theory tomes were written by holders of secure chairs at major universities solemnly incanting and sanctifying the dogmas of an all-encompassing Grand Theory (see Bordwell 1996). And once having acquired the aura of the sacred, the Theory could not be questioned; it could only be adhered to.

Grand Theory owed a lot to the culturalist movement that spread its ideology over the arts and humanities in the waning years of the twentieth century. One of its underpinning assumptions was that language and culture construct an infinitely malleable reality. Both hard core Marxists and academic utopians embraced the idea. It served them well as they battled the fixed tenets of religion, the aesthetic basis of art, and the traditions of western liberal democracy. They believed they could rebalance the relative power of all their interests by the simple act of renaming. They established in the academy new criteria for evaluating both works of art and works of scholarship that were neither moral nor
aesthetic nor even rational, but were instead political. Their rapid and widespread success in the university, the press, popular culture, and the capitols of the western world seemed to confer legitimacy upon both their agenda and their methods. All of the arts and humanities in the university were consumed in the epidemic of culturalism, and the field of Film Studies was especially vulnerable. Film was seen as a literal extension of language, and as such was enlisted as a major tool in the construction of the new orthodoxy.

The guardians of the orthodoxy sanctimoniously patrolled the boundaries of the various fields of the arts and humanities throughout the last decades of the twentieth century. The concept of a marketplace of ideas with its implications of competition and uncontrollable outcomes was anathema to a culture that held cooperation and consensus as its highest values. This is the historical context in which the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image was founded, and in which it has steadfastly maintained a forum for the free exchange of ideas.

The founding of such a group was possible because during the same period, the last decades of the twentieth century, there were individuals working in the arts and humanities who, at great risk to themselves, were openly skeptical of the reigning paradigm and its underlying assumptions concerning the arbitrary construction of all knowable reality from language and culture. Cognitivists, as they came to be called, assumed that the universe is governed by laws that we can eventually come to understand, and that even language and culture are products of natural evolution and function within defined boundaries. Allying themselves with colleagues from the sciences, cognitivist scholars began seeking substantive, durable answers to the fundamental questions inherent in their various disciplines. Their work was facilitated by the internet, which made it possible for individuals separated by great physical distances and formerly insurmountable disciplinary barriers to communicate easily and freely. And though they evinced what E.H. Gombrich called “the scientific temper” they were perhaps freer than their colleagues in historically scientific disciplines to extend the implications of research into possible theoretical explanations of how motion pictures and other media are perceived and understood as entertainment, art, and philosophy.

But although they may freely theorize about the relationships of minds, films, and cultures, at some point their notions are tested by the actual production of films that are shown without their prior knowledge or consent to viewers all around the world. Like theoretical economists who must live with the facts of actual economies, cognitive film theorists must live with the facts of actual movies, television, digital games, and more.
And like economists, they enjoy the painful privilege of occasionally seeing their most cherished theories disconfirmed in the marketplace. Because film is both physical and representational, and also comments upon the world, cognitive film theorists find themselves at the center of interdisciplinary research, scholarship and speculation about the nature of media, of mental activity, and of culture.

The Society recently met in Potsdam, Germany at the invitation of Peter Wuss and his colleagues at the Hochschule fur Film und Fernsehen “Konrad Wolf” (HFF) to exchange ideas and engage in spirited debate concerning narration and spectatorship in moving images, and to celebrate its tenth anniversary. We, the editors, collected the papers from the Potsdam conference and in the present volume offer a selection of them for the general reader. Since the hallmark of these Society conferences is that of an open market, acceptance of papers is by jury decision; there is no orthodoxy and no party line. Critics might add that there is no consistency, no unified theory. There is some justification for such an opinion in that the goal is not that of achieving consensus or of exhibiting evidence, arguments and examples in support of a priori ideological positions. The goal is to shed light on heretofore seemingly intractable problems, to offer better explanations of observed phenomena than have been offered before, to revise theories or develop new ones, and always to seek the truth while remaining cognizant of the possibility that one may eventually be proven wrong. For scholars of a certain temperament, proceeding in this way is high-risk adventure; it is living on the edge. And it is an irresistible attraction. These twenty essays, though similar in their preference for the scientific method and the marshalling of evidence over ideological orthodoxy, are diverse to an extent unimaginable outside a global free market. The writers, nearly equally divided by gender, of various political stripes, and representing universities in a dozen different countries, discuss some topics that might be found in orthodox film theory such as metaphor, emotion and empathy, and others that are largely outside the boundaries of conventional film writing, such as filmic universals, the biological spectator, and realism. All are presented for the reader’s evaluation and potential enjoyment in the pages that follow. Let us briefly consider the topics addressed in each chapter.

**Universals in Film**

Torben Grodal begins his essay “Bio-Culturalism: Evolution and Film” by alluding directly to the controversy concerning the possibility of
intensely debated issue within film studies is whether the film experience is socially constructed as claimed by social constructivists, for instance modernity theorists, or whether the biological underpinning of that experience imposes some universal features, as argued by cognitivists.

He thinks that indeed there are such universals and offers as evidence that in films made especially for children there are recurring features that have proven successful with young audiences cross-culturally. But, perhaps surprisingly, he does not then conclude that the furnishings of children’s stories—princesses, stepmothers, castles, carriages, etc.—are surface manifestations of innate programs. Nor does he accept the possibility that their recurring presence can be explained as archetypes: “They do not consist of innate archetypes. They represent sophisticated products of cultural evolution.” But even if the furnishings of children’s stories are not biologically given, children’s capacities for appreciation of attachment and attention to agency relationships are innate, and evolution is at the heart of his argument. The concept relating evolution, biology and culture, he would call bio-culturalism. Grodal explains the matter as one of varying time horizons:

Thus the dispute between social constructivism and bio-culturalism is mainly about whether all mental parameters can be changed within the short time of ‘modernity’, and whether some parameters are more flexible than others.

Nikolai Khrenov in his essay “Cinema as the Redemption of Archetypal Reality” finds universals in film as well, and thereby separates himself from the “social constructivists” identified by Grodal. But rather than ruling out the possibility of archetypes as an explanation, he offers Jungian archetypes as the key to understanding why some films succeed while other fail. He notes that the “[f]ilms of Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Dovzhenko are filled with archetypes.” He argues that Eisenstein’s films are popular “not because they are revolutionary, but because they are archetypal by nature.”

Rather than buying into contemporary film theory, Khrenov turns it upside down by offering that three popular theses underpinning film analyses have not created archetypes, but themselves rest squarely upon ancient archetypes: film analyzed 1) as art history in the Platonic tradition and of Aristotelian mimesis, 2) as a product of 20th Century “Ideational universals in our experience of motion pictures, and by extension the possibility of universals in our experience of the world.

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Culture”, and 3) as “the other side of downplaying the authorial level of meaning” as in Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author.”

Both Grodal and Khrenov exhibit an independence of thought that is greatly admired among their cognitivist colleagues and delightfully intriguing to their editors. Yet neither is overtly inconsistent with basic assumptions related to the possibility of universals that we have espoused in our ecological approach to cognitive film theory, though admittedly our positions are more Aristotelian than Platonic. We assume that there is a real world and we can know it; that we have developed capacities to observe some objects, events and relationships directly, and others we can know only indirectly; that our perception is lawfully constrained, but not rigidly mechanistic; and that we were not designed to watch movies; that we view movies with perceptual capacities evolved in other times for other purposes (Anderson 1996; Anderson and Anderson 1996, 2005).

The Biological Spectator

In subject position theory, which Bordwell identifies as the second leg of the two legged stool of Grand Theory (the other leg being culturalism.), the spectator is constructed, positioned, and perhaps sutured into the text. He is therefore an abstract construction and not a biological spectator. Recognizing a biological spectator is another matter altogether, a matter that was avoided until cognitive theorists forced the issue by emphasizing the role of human perception in film viewing (Anderson 1996). Both Charles Eidsvik in his essay “Neurotransmitter Persistence, Narrative Structure, and Emotion,” and Robin Curtis in “Expanded Empathy: Movement, Mirror Neurons and Einfühlung,” take a step beyond perception, perhaps two steps, in that they speak not only of the emotions that result from perception, but also about the firing of neurons and the roles of neurotransmitters in human experience.

Eidsvik scolds his colleagues for clinging to the comfort of abstractions concerning perception and emotion as related to sounds and images on the screen rather than wading into the “messy neurochemicals and complex interactions of real-world emotions.” He argues that if we want to move beyond abstract generalizations about such matters as the role of narrative in eliciting emotional responses in real viewers, then we must prepare ourselves to use the data from the work of neuroscientists in our explanations. We must be able to “explore the quirky subcortical circuitry that handles narrativity in the brain.”

Curtis explores in some depth the possible role of “mirror neurons” as the connection between the actions we observe and our visceral emotional
experience of those actions. Ultimately she asks, “To what degree is there a correspondence between the aesthetic ‘form’ offered by time-based images and our capacity to mirror internally what we see?”

Realism

If one chooses to see the motion picture as an extension of language, either as an actual language, or as language-like (and this has been the fashion for some time), then the implication is that motion pictures function as collections of symbols and referents; as sets of representations woven from threads of complex codes. Viewers get meanings from these representations, to the extent that meanings are possible, by reading them, by carrying out an elaborate set of decoding operations that they have learned from viewing many movies and a lot of television.

But if this were true, especially if this were the only avenue for gaining meaning, movies and television would be about as popular as homework at a junior high school. Clearly our access to motion pictures is much more direct, more universal, and much easier than reading. The reason is that, while we have to be taught how to read, we do not have to be taught how to watch a movie; we can all do it. We have no special equipment for movie viewing, but fortunately we don’t need any because the movie has been carefully constructed to interface with the visual, auditory, emotional, cognitive system that we already possess and generally use for other purposes. This is why realism is so important. Movies with a high degree of realism can be viewed and understood just as we view and understand the world. Realism makes movies accessible to the widest possible audience. Movies can be comprehended by everyone who can comprehend the world around them. Realism allows motion pictures to function not as coded representations, but as surrogates, as stand-ins for the objects and events of the world. We know that a movie is “only a movie,” but if it looks and sounds real, we process it directly and easily.

Daniel Barratt and Bruce Hutchinson explore in considerable detail some of the complex contingencies and implications of realism in their essays, “Assessing the Reality-status of Film: Fiction or Non-fiction, Live Action or CGI?” and “Understanding Character Motivation: A Process-Oriented Approach to Realism.”

Metaphor

It is reasonable to ask whether essays that vigorously embrace and defend a Bazinian conception of realism can be followed by essays
upholding the value of metaphor without conflict, without one’s negating
the other? In conventional culturalist orthodoxy there would, of course, be
no conflict. If film is a language, or at least language-like, its strings of
symbols could refer directly to their conceptual referents or take the more
complex form that relates two normally unrelated concepts as metaphor.
But if one has argued that film need not be symbolic, that images and
events on the screen can stand-in for actual images and events as
surrogates, and be processed directly as though they were objects and
events in the world rather than as symbols of objects and events in the
world, then such an argument would seem to be an obstacle to an
explication of metaphor.

But what if, as Kathrin Fahlenbrach suggests in her essay, “Embodied
Spaces: Film Spaces as (Leading) Audiovisual Metaphors,” metaphors are
deeply embedded in the cognitive structures of our mind? She argues that
such structures do exist, and, “[i]t is obvious that not only language refers
to these metaphorical structures of our cognitive system, but also other
visual, acoustic and audiovisual media.” If she is correct, then might it not
be possible to perceive the objects and events of the film directly (not as
symbols) and relate to them viscerally, cognitively, and emotionally as
metaphors? Fahlenbrach apparently thinks so. She concludes that
“...audiovisual media are especially qualified to concretize in a most
realistic way the metaphorical structures of our thinking and perceiving.”

Codruta-Elena Morari in her essay, “Forms Mirroring Feelings:
Iconicity and Empathy in Visual Metaphors and Non-Narrative
Structures” argues that empathy is the key to understanding cinematic
metaphors. “Visual metaphors ...elicit in us two types of responses: the
tendency to abstraction, and the tendency to empathy.” She continues by
suggesting that,“...the strength of visual metaphors relies on the dynamics
of merger between conceptual content and sensible images...” The
connection to our feelings is through the phenomenality of the object for
Morari, a concept that seems remarkably close to the power of realism
expressed in the previous chapter.¹

**Emotional Gratification and Film Genre Selection**

For several decades it was generally conceded in the arts and
humanities that when speaking of emotion Freudians held the high ground.
If semiotic theory provided explanations about how we interpreted film

¹ For a further discussion of metaphors in motion pictures see Kennedy & Chiappe
2005.
If semiotic theory provided explanations about how we interpreted film texts, then Freudian or perhaps neo-Freudian theory explained our emotional involvement with such texts. Feminist film theorists in particular followed Laura Mulvey into labyrinths of scopophilia, voyeurism, and the male gaze.

Now, only a few years into the new century, Anne Bartsch in her essay, “Meta-Emotion and Genre Preference: What Makes Horror Film and Tear-Jerker Enjoyable?” cites several writers who have offered an emotion-centered approach to the explication of film genres, and none of them can be classified as Freudians. She goes on to address such questions as whether “genre preference is a preference for a specific kind of emotion,” how anyone can prefer “horror related emotions like fear and disgust to comedy-related emotions like fun and entertainment,” and why one sub-genre may be preferred over another when both seem to arouse the same sorts of emotions.

Her explorations of these issues are both thorough and insightful, and in the end she concludes that “Genre preference is not a preference for emotions like fear disgust or sadness per se...The gratification potential of genre-related emotions critically depends on a set of gratification cues that are implicit in the narrative and stylistic conventions of the genre.”

Mette Kramer in her essay, “The Epistemology of the Gaze” is committed to understanding “women’s general preferences for two types of plot—romances and melodramas—from a naturalized and functional perspective.” Kramer describes her method with admirable clarity:

The functional approach here radically contrasts with the Freudian view and Mulveyan gaze theory (1975/1989), which have formed central paradigms in psychoanalytic-semantic film theory and have been used to understand spectatorial subjectivity.

Kramer argues that women ultimately choose genre films such as romances and melodramas because they are useful to them. She argues that they are selected “by the average female spectator in order to train and support emotional and cognitive states within the spectrum of pleasure and pain in a way crucial to her self-preservation.” Even acknowledging the shortcomings of Hollywood films, Kramer finds that narrative motion pictures offer reasonably safe avenues for exploring cognitive and emotional strategies in a world that is too complex to explore in one lifetime.
Engagement and Aesthetics

The concept of diegesis, the notion that a motion picture depicts a world of places and people and events that is bounded by the fiction that invents it, has proven very useful to theorists who attempt to explain the magical properties of cinema. Diegesis is often defined as the world available to the fictional characters of a film, and this is a perfectly serviceable definition, except that the sparks of magic result from the tentative, temporary breechings of the boundary by the non-fictional viewer. But how do the breechings occur? How does the viewer enter into the world of the movie? Is it, as we have argued elsewhere, because the motion picture presents arrays of light and sound that we process just as we process such arrays in the real world, coupled with our capacity to set apart, to frame, that we can enter, if only temporarily, into the diegetic world of a movie and return safely from it?

For Rolf Kloepfer in his essay, “The Sea Inside: On the Principles of One’s Own Performance of the Other,” it is not so much a matter of entering the world of the film as it is of internalizing that reality in one’s self. For him, “the spectator’s competent interaction with a film is the complementary inner performance of what the work offers...” The viewer’s engagement with the film is crucial. All the work that has gone into the production of the film is directed toward this end. The engagement is cognitive, emotional, and involves the will to participate, experience and understand. Kloepfer makes his argument with a moving explication of Alejandro Amenábar’s Mar Adentro (The Sea Inside). The value of the film is in the involvement the viewer develops with the characters, particularly the hero Ramón, a paraplegic who wishes to end his life.

[T]he will of the individual plays a central role: the desire to know, the wish to feel, and the ability to fearlessly encounter the impulsive forces and face the infinite possibilities within us in our interaction with others (and the infinite in us and in front of us, like the sea).

The great Danish filmmaker Carl Theodore Dreyer, quoted by Casper Tybjerg in his essay, “Rhythm and Image in Dreyer’s Films,” says, “[I]f you see a man in a movie perform a certain act, this will produce in you a completely comparable reaction.” Tybjerg explains that Dreyer offers observations about several varieties of rhythm that serve similarly to engage the viewer. Dreyer’s contribution seems all the more remarkable in light of the discussions of “mirror neurons” in other essays in the present collection.
Empathy

Although the human capacity for empathy may play a major role in our engagement with a motion picture, the concepts of empathy and engagement should not be folded together. Empathy, the capacity to share another’s emotions, has been recognized in western literature as a basic feature of human experience since the time of Aristotle. We can assume that the capacity for empathy is longstanding and widespread but apparently varies in degree from one person to another, and in some autistic individuals is almost completely missing.

It is this capacity to put ourselves in the situation of another person, and to feel and think like that person in that situation that apparently underpins the art of acting and the intense pleasure of theatre going and movie viewing. One suspects the same may apply to literature, dance, and a number of other human activities.

Manana Machabeli in her essay, “The Importance of Empathy in the Actor’s Art,” explores empathy as the basis of acting in both mimetic and anti-mimetic traditions. She then reports an experiment carried out with actors in an effort to assess their level and quality of empathy. She and her colleagues confirmed that actors are empathetic. “We concluded that empathy represents a specific psychical ability which embraces cognitive, emotional and motor components, and that these components are both the material and the means of creating an art-image.”

Margrethe Bruun Vaage in her essay, “Empathy and the Episodic Structure of Engagement in Fiction Film,” offers a view based upon a conception of imagination rooted in the literature of philosophy. She argues that engagement in motion pictures can occur because, “the spectator imagines what happens on the screen as if he believes it.” She explains how a spectator can both imagine that he believes the fiction of a motion picture and care about the characters and their problems. Empathy serves to “fill the gaps in the narrative,” to “create suspense,” allow “for aesthetic enjoyment and appreciation,” and promote “self-reflection.” She concludes that “[e]mpathy is a dynamic phenomenon, in its essence making the perceiving subject move between different positions—and thus it contributes to making the fiction film experience dynamic.”

Video Games and Virtual reality

Unlike classical narrative cinema, where we have suggested that it is realism that facilitates our entry into the diegetic world, the writers of the essays in this chapter argue that it is a sense of presence, a feeling of being
there, that engulfs the viewer/participant in the multiple worlds of virtual reality. A virtual world can apparently be realistic or not; it doesn’t seem to matter. What matters is that a configuration of technology presents information simultaneously in multiple sense modes with the potential for participant interaction, as when the participant turns his head or walks or reaches, and the information changes appropriately. According to Nadezda Mankovskaya in her essay, “Virtual Reality in Moving Images: Psychology of Aesthetic perception,”

The diffuse mode of virtual reality perception is, in many respects, transforming the classic image of the world, making it more lamellar and thus deprived of any habitual reference system, free from gravitational laws, normal dimensions, uniformity, etc.

She maintains that “acceptance of kinetic illusions of impossible objects and events has become the aesthetic norm.”

Aleksander Väljamäe and Ana Tajadura-Jiménez, in their essay, Perceptual Optimization of Audio-visual Media: Moved by Sound,” note that “[d]uring the past decade, a substantial body of research revealed brain mechanisms involved in the integration of different sensory inputs into a unified perceptual world and confirmed that our perception is multisensory in its nature.” If in reality our perception is of the world and not of specific sense modes, then the problem that remains for those who would construct a virtual world is that they must present information in selected sense modes that will lead to the perception of a whole, unified world that seems unmediated. What are the minimum requirements for information in each sense mode? How do the various sense modes interact? Can fidelity in one mode compensate for lack of fidelity in another? In order to shed light on such issues, Väljamäe and Tajadura-Jiménez report on actual experiments carried out in the laboratory under controlled conditions.

**Play and Comedy**

Peter Wuss in his essay “Overcoming Conflicts by Play,” observes that the cognitive approach was first used by film scholars “as a kind of Trojan horse to find a way into the consciousness of film viewers.” He finds “connections to essential psychological functions and systems such as motivation, cognition, emotion, and imagination,” in play. He writes:

Play or play behavior is interwoven with film in various ways: the actions on the screen often include moments of play, the creative process of film-
making makes use of various kinds of play behavior, and the experience of watching a film appears to be based on a kind of internalized play behaviour.

Play is easy to recognize in the activities of children and animals, but its role in the lives of adult humans is not so well understood. If Peter Wuss is right, if play is so interwoven throughout the collective phenomenon of cinema from production to spectatorship, there may indeed be elegant explanations for many of the features of film style and viewer enjoyment, in contrast to which many ideological and psychoanalytic explanations of the past decades may in the future appear quite clumsy.

One might reasonably ask whether play is in any way related to comedy. Kevin W. Sweeney in his essay, “Cognitive Film Theory and Film Comedy,” seems to answer a tentative “Yes.” He recounts that there are a number of theories of comedy, from “social corrective”, to “relief” to “incongruity”, which he categorizes as “unitary” models. He wants to “split the difference” between the unitary theorists and the pluralists, “while preserving the plurality of distinctive comedic forms and the diversity of social uses of humor, and at the same time allowing for analysis of different forms of film comedy from a cognitive perspective.” He illustrates his argument with examples from Keaton’s The Navigator and The General, and Hitchcock’s North by Northwest.

The Aesthetics of Reflexivity and Reexperience

There is the possibility when reading a book, attending a play, watching a movie, listening to a symphony concert, or engaging with any other work of art, of attending to it to the exclusion of all else, of getting lost in it, being involved, becoming absorbed. One could argue that from both the artist’s viewpoint and the patron’s, this is ideal, that failure to engage with the work of art constitutes failure for the artist and boredom for the patron. Yet some theorists, with Bertolt Brecht at the forefront, have advocated that artists intentionally create moments of estrangement, defamiliarization, bracketing, stepping-back-from the work. And one should note that this “disruption of the smooth process of reception,” in order to gain an “awareness on the audience’s part,” has been widely practiced by artists of various media for several decades, and widely accepted by theorists as valid. It would seem that the best argument that

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2 For additional discussion of film comedy from a cognitive perspective see Eitzen 1999.
can be made for such practices, although not necessarily the only one made by advocates of the practices, is that they make the art patron aware of the work as a constructed work of art, and that this allows for contemplation, and perhaps aesthetic appreciation of it as art. The case is yet to be made that either our understanding or aesthetic appreciation of art actually proceeds in this way.

Tamás Pólya does not attempt to make that case, but in his essay “Omitting Depth Cues: The Aesthetics of Perceptual ‘Reflexivity’,” explores a number of devices that promote what he chooses to call perceptual reflexivity as opposed to conceptual reflexivity. He lays out a number of ways in which the usual depth cues inherent in the filmic image can be thwarted, and suggests that “in such cases it is precisely the omission of depth cues that induces a disruption of the continuous, unconscious experience that leads to a state of quasi-awareness in the viewer, on the borders of conscious and unconscious processing.” Pólya maintains that this disruption starts processes that lead to “an aesthetic effect through changes induced in cognitive processing by purely perceptual stimuli.”

Another intriguing issue is the possibility of reading a book, attending a play, watching a movie, listening to a symphony concert, or engaging with any other work of art that one has encountered once or perhaps repeatedly in the past. In his essay, “Cognition and the Aesthetics of Reexperience,” Henry Bacon argues that “[a]esthetic reexperience is not only extremely common, it is a basic category of aesthetic experience as a whole.” When one thinks about the matter for a moment, it becomes apparent that he is correct. We do reread our favorite books, and watch our favorite movies over and over, and most notably, we attend operas and symphony concerts because we expect to hear our favorite music once again. Bacon sorts out some possible reasons for our seeking to reexperience works of art.

Works Cited


CHAPTER ONE

UNIVERSALS IN FILM
An intensely debated issue within film studies is whether the film experience is socially constructed as claimed by social constructivists, for instance modernity theorists, or whether the biological underpinning of that experience imposes some universal features, as argued by cognitivists. I will discuss some concepts for synthesizing historicism and biological universalism within an evolutionary framework (cf. Barkow et al. 1992) that I will call bio-culturalism. It is worth noting that an evolutionary frame of explanation is at its very core a historicist explanation. The main difference between the two is that bio-culturalism emphasizes that some layers of culture are determined by biological processes with a time horizon of million of years whereas other layers may change fast. Central features in the human brain support flexibility and quick adaptations on some levels in order to fulfill relatively stable long term goals, defined on other levels.

Thus, the dispute between social constructivism and bio-culturalism is mainly about whether all mental parameters can be changed within the short time of "modernity" and whether some parameters are more flexible than others. Bio-culturalism implies hierarchal models with slow-changing fundamental features at the bottom of the brain-body architecture that provides universality to cultural products. However, there is flexibility at other levels that allows for historically specific combinations and developments, like the function optimization processes analyzed by David Bordwell (1994). Furthermore, Bio-Culturalism presupposes that cultural development has some features in common with the evolutionary development of gene-transmitted features because cultural items compete with each other by functional fitness in relation to innate dispositions.

Let us begin by focusing on a concrete example of how universal constants and cultural variables intertwine in successful stories and films for children. Films for children are in some respects simpler than films for adults. However if films for children manifest universal features this indicates that humans are not born with a clean slate. If children’s fiction presupposes innate features, it seems improbable that the slate then is
wiped clean at pre-puberty. So, children’s film is a central test-case for the nature-nurture debate.

I emphasize that the stories that I am dealing with are the successful ones, some of them even globally successful. Stories compete for attention and for circulation just as the different species compete for survival. Success is not necessarily a measure of quality but it is a measure of mind-grabbing qualities. Folk tales have circulated through millennia across the Eurasian Continent and North Africa (for an overview of historical evolution cf. Diamond 1997). Successful films catch the attention of millions of viewers worldwide. It is thus a kind of survival of the fittest competition among stories in the struggle for attention, for circulation, for being retold and remade.

Many very successful films for children have as their main theme and emotional driver the loss and eventually the restoration of attachment. *Lassie Come Home, Snow White, Bambi, Finding Nemo, E.T., Spirited Away,* and I could go on, all deal with attachment in jeopardy, they deal with exploration, and they deal with coping with fear. The pattern of attachment and fear is also dominant in fairy tales; and exists in non-western films and stories for children. As a genre such films about attachment in jeopardy may be called ‘attachment films’. Most of the rest of films for children deal with empowerment. My intuition is that whereas fear and attachment concerns are more dominant in films for smaller children, films about empowerment become increasingly dominant in films for older children, like the first *Harry Potter* where the initial loss of attachment is mainly a prelude to empowerment sequences, and empowerment is of course central in the numerous films with supermen and superwomen. Empowerment stories bleed into those action and adventure films in which fear is nearly absent. Empowerment stories dominate films for adolescents, especially boys, due to the hormonal change in puberty. The attachment theme may also be transformed into a theme of establishing a romantic bond (Grodal 2004, Kramer 2007), as in *The Little Mermaid,* or *The Beauty and the Beast,* where girlish attachment to the father is supplanted with a love bond.

Many attachment stories mix the theme of attachment lost and attachment re-established with themes consisting of chase-play. Francis Steen and Stephanie Owen (2001) have pointed out that to play hunter and hunted, that is, to engage in chase-play, is a quasi-universal feature of mammal offspring. Chase-play enables mammal offspring to train to hunt and to avoid being prey before being confronted with the real thing.

Winnicott (1971) and Bowlby (1969) have analyzed how children deal with attachment, for example by means of transitional objects like dolls.
Playing with dolls is a human universal and as such seems to be an adaptation similar to the oldest mammal-typical play, the chase-play. Children play with dolls and thereby accustom themselves actively to deal with attachment problems. To play demands that you take a double perspective: that of the active parenting agency and that of the child. Children thereby expand their symbolic coping potentials. Such double perspective-taking is also very typical of stories for children. *E.T.*’s protagonist Elliot is a child in need of care, but then he forges his own attachment by caring in a parental manner for little E.T. The Nemo story is told from the perspective of Nemo as well as that of his father. Snow White’s loss of attachment by her mother’s death is compensated for by the double role of caring for and being cared for by the dwarfs. In *Spirited Away* the girl Chihiro has to rescue her parents who have been transformed to pigs. Attachment stories are symbolic laboratories in which children may try to work out vital problems, just as chase play has been adaptive to prepare for predation and for avoidance of being prey.

The protagonists, the agencies, in attachment films differ on the surface level. Protagonists can be an animal like Bambi or Nemo, a child-animal duo as in *Lassie*, or some childlike alien and a child, as in *E.T.* The universal features of protagonists, of agencies, are defined at a very general level, similar to that described by the actantial models of structural narratology, and agencies have feelings, intentions and action capabilities. Furthermore, the way in which the stories are told is canonical; they progress in time towards goals. Structuralists like Greimas (1966) provided descriptions of the fundamental features of folk tales that are still instructive. For instance Greimas made transformation models that use a hierarchal model of constants and variables and turning points called trials that have inspired my understanding. However, structuralists described the narrative mechanics as some kind of text-logics, and that does not explain much.

In contrast, bio-culturalism can explain some of the reasons for these universal features of successful stories for children. Attachment concerns are innate adaptations typical of all mammals that cannot be conditioned, and they are underpinned by oxytocin and vasopressin, two derivates of estrogen hormones (cf. Fisher 2004). It is also an evolutionary adaptation to interpret the world as determined by agencies, because the mental modeling of intentional agencies such as animals and other humans has been all-important for human survival in a Pleistocene environment. All causal phenomena are attributed to an agency that is provided with attention, consciousness, emotions and goals, even thunder and wind may be interpreted as intentional agencies (Boyer 2001, Barrett 2004). The
mental bias for agency-models is so forceful in human brains that they can easily be attributed to toys, as in Toy Story, to a fish, as in Finding Nemo, and even to dots, as shown by the film experiments of Michotte in the 50s (cf. Arnheim 1974) and as shown in the use of dots in the old video game Pac Man.

Especially for small children salience is more important than concrete realism in the portrayal of agency. To talk and to show human behavior should, if realistic, imply a human body, but in fairy tales even trees may speak and become agents. Animals like Bambi, Nemo, or the lion cub in The Lion King, or the toys in Toy Story or in Andersen’s toy fairy tales are visually or mentally salient. So the realism of protagonists is one of abstractly defined agencies with attention, feelings, and goals that act as ghosts in the machines, just as some rudimentary facial features like eyes and mouth are important (Agency as core self is dealt with in Panksepp 2001). But for the rest of the body it seems as if mind-grabbing visual salience is just as important.

The stories are, as mentioned, canonical. The canonical narrative is determined by fundamental features of the brain architecture, as I have argued elsewhere (Grodal 1997, Grodal 2006). In the case of children it is also determined by cognitive constraints that would make it impossible to follow a story with a non-canonical narrative structure.

Many aspects of visual salience draw upon module-supported innate capabilities, such as motion, color, etc. (on visual modularity cf. Zeki 1993). Nemo and his father have eye-catching red-and-white stripes. The body posture and facial expressions of protagonists are clearly linked to emotional states, as we know from Goofy’s changes from upbeat posture to downbeat posture. Salience and interest is also elicited by means of more specific mental mechanisms. To be eaten is still, for instance in Finding Nemo or The Beauty and the Beast the superior threat, and teeth are the most prominent type of scare in numerous stories, despite the fact that since our exodus from the Pleistocene environment, teeth have been a relatively unimportant threat for humans. Fear of teeth is thus very probably supported by an innate adaptation.

Mickey Mouse behaves in some respects as an adult; however his head is an exaggeration of the neonate head to body ratio of 1 to 4, and not the adult ratio of 1 to 8. The neonate, baby proportion triggers innate attachment-related cuteness responses, similar to those triggered by Bambi’s helplessness, especially on ice. The exaggerated eye-size of Bambi and Nemo or the little mermaid is salient by means of similar innate triggers. Not to speak of the way in which exaggerated hip-to-waist ratios are used to create salience to sex differences; Tinkerbell in Peter
Pan, and the little mermaid, for instance, have exaggerated hip-to-waist-ratios. Interest may even be triggered by very basic triggers such as fast motion. Especially animated films heavily rely on a cultural enhancement of bio-based triggers. The number of innate features in the brain is very big, and they are therefore an inexhaustible source for making new salient features and combinations of features.

Having discussed some quasi-universals, let me briefly turn to some historically specific elements. Whereas there is universalism and/or a biological disposition manifested in a series of fundamental parameters of children’s film, and in the use of specific perceptual-emotional triggers, there is obviously a very great deal of variation caused by historical factors on other levels, from individual auteur idiosyncrasies to social determinants. The role of evil stepmothers and stepfathers in fairytales and films reflects the way premodern societies enhanced a preference for their own offspring, compared with modern societies less pronounced preferences for own offspring. Lassie Come Home links the loss of attachment to economic crisis and working class living in Britain in the 30s. E.T. and Free Willie link attachment loss to ecological concerns. The classical mother in the first half of Bambi is supplanted with a nurturing father in the second half, just as Finding Nemo has a nurturing father. Although the reason given for father Nemo’s care is the death of Nemo’s mother, as in Bambi, you may also find a motivation in an increased divorce rate that makes fatherly care more probable, especially because Nemo’s quest for reattachment also indirectly becomes a quest for a new mother, Dori. Part of the Ocean life of little Nemo gets its salience by references to California pre-school and primary school life, to vegetarianism and fear of dentists. Furthermore, Finding Nemo caters to an audience that has become familiar with underwater life by watching numerous nature programs. Spirited Away criticizes modern materialism with a background in traditional Japanese values. Thus, many levels and fields within a story consist of variables that can only be described in a specific historical context. Even if such variations from one point of view are surface variations, they may from another point of view be extremely important, for instance differences between a racist and non-racist portrayal of the world. Biocultural conflict and cultural development does not take place at deep levels on which changes may take millions of years, but at those ‘surface levels’ where we have freedom to change. From a bio-cultural point of view the description of surface variations demands even more specific historical analysis.

To think that cultural products should be purely a product of universal biology is obviously quite meaningless. The question is rather to what
extent culture enhances and specifies nature or to what extent a specific
culture or subculture within a given period of time produces a complete
rewiring of the brain as implied by strong constructivism, for instance in
modernity theories. A complete rewiring seems improbable, because many
stories that have been popular previously are also popular today, probably
because they have assembled features that trigger innate dispositions.
Homer’s *Odyssey* or *Iliad* are still remade. Central aspects of Asian or
European feudalism are still able to catch the imagination of young
children and adolescents. A feudal world of kings, princesses, single
combats, etc. survive in modern culture, for instance in *The Lion King* and
*Lord of the Rings*; and if we go to a related field, video games for children
and adolescents, it is often a totally Medieval world, with knights, swords,
honor etc., and the very popular *World of Warcraft*, like *Star Wars*, has
strong roots in a pre-modern world. You might characterize stories and
themes that have proven their mind-grabbing qualities through decades,
centuries or even millennia as having ‘retold qualities’. The question is to
determine whether such attractions are supported by the genetic DNA
stream or exclusively supported by the cultural stream of tradition.

Dan Sperber (1996) has pointed out in his "epidemiological" theory of
culture that just as it is impossible to describe the impact of bacteria and
vira on people without describing the bodies of those people that host and
transmit the germs, so cultural impact cannot be described by exposure
alone, we need minds that are receptive when exposed. That does not
mean that exposure is unimportant. Exposure and habituation are
important for determining preferences. If the Disney Corporation was not
globally present to expose children all over the world, they would not have
the positive feelings toward Disney’s products based on familiarity. But
the products also succeed because they conform to a series of mental-
biological constraints and try to optimize innate dispositions, although
they at the same time may pack such products with historically and
ideologically specific elements.

So, stories for children are not innate programs on the surface level,
they presuppose a cultural stream. They do not consist of innate
archetypes. They represent sophisticated products of a cultural evolution.
But they need to satisfy some innate specifications, like having attachment
concerns, obeying rules for basic agency-description and being canonical.
In other words, the stories need to be able to function in children’s brains
and to fascinate their bio-components. The stories function in some ways
as tools for the children to cope with attachment problems.

Cultural studies often adhere to a strongly Saussurean position that
implies that the meaning of a given element is defined in relation to all the
other elements in a given culture. Many types of culturalism furthermore have epochal causal essences such as ‘enlightenment’, ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’ or ethnic essences to provide homogeneity within a given epoch or subculture. However, from the point of view of bio-culturalism, there are simply too many causal chains in culture to guarantee such an epochal or subcultural homogeneity. In contrast I will suggest that cultural elements have a functionality that has relative autonomy. By that I mean that many cultural products appeal to relatively narrow activity spaces. Culture consists of many different activity spaces as well as of many different cognitive spaces and domains. The different dispositions are made to deal with different situations and their totality is pragmatic, not one of inner consistency. This point of view is inspired by developments within evolutionary psychology. Tooby and Cosmides (1997), for instance have pointed out that our brains are like a Swiss army knife, an assembly of many different abilities, each geared to solving a specific problem. Culture provides increasingly sophisticated representations of such problems, say the sophistication by which Miyazaki or the Pixar group develops salient representations of attachment concerns, fear, chase, or exploration.

Our fascination with a given cultural element is often elicited within a specific context and that may protect the fascinations from the dominant cultural norms. We have antagonistic emotions, elicited by different situations and activity spaces: we hate and love, are selfish and altruistic. Fighting and warfare is one activity space, attachment relations another, stories of altruism a third. Even if modern cultures often have a more positive evaluation of altruism and a more negative evaluation of aggression and hate, more primitive emotional reactions may be cued by isolating such reactions to specific contexts. Many fairy tales have some trials that demand altruism and other trials that demand fighting. Prince Erik and the little Mermaid support each other with bonding and altruism, whereas Erik cruelly kills the evil witch, and that is accepted despite the conflict with modern cultural norms. That the witch is evil means that she belongs to an out-group and her preferences are different than those cued by following the mermaid and therefore – despite modern moral norms - make lethal violence legitimate. By doing good deeds a hero may get a magical prop, like a sword or a magical wand. Then the sword is used to kill somebody in some other space. Thus, altruism and aggression are linked to different activity spaces. They may, however, be intertwined, as in the decisive battle between Peter Pan and Captain Hook, where Peter Pan’s male aggressiveness is directly linked to a protection of Wendy and her concern for her little brother.