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## Cognitive Film and Media Ethics

Wyatt Moss-Wellington

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p. iv

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# Introduction

Cognitive film and media theories have traditionally pursued descriptive rather than prescriptive goals: they tell us what our responses to screen media *are* rather than what they *could be*. Ethicists working in the cognitive tradition, such as Carl Plantinga, Murray Smith, Margrethe Bruun Vaage, and Noël Carroll, and phenomenologist-compatibilists, such as Jane Stadler and Robert Sinnerbrink, have effectively described how emotional responses to media's provocations inform moral judgment.<sup>1</sup> That is, cognitive media ethics has been, until now, a metaethical and descriptive rather than a normative enterprise, where metaethics addresses the various means of answering *ought* questions, and normativity more directly addresses how we *ought* to behave. This body of literature offers reasonable explanations of moral responsiveness to screen characters with an eye to psychological and evolutionary perspectives on moral judgment. However, it is not always clear how this information might help us answer deliberative ethical questions arising from such media: how do the cognitive sciences help us evaluate rather than describe the moral content of a story or appraise rather than survey the ethical issues facing current film and media practice and industry? This book extends current groundwork in cognitive media studies to these more normative goals, and in so doing establishes an applied approach to cognitivist media ethics and its associated hermeneutics. Throughout this volume, I introduce methods by which current developments in the social sciences can be applied to our assessments of media and storytelling arts, including the moral elements of media production and reception. Ultimately, this book reveals how cognitive media studies can help refine our necessary ethical evaluations of films, screen media, news media, social media, and the culture that develops around them. It makes the case that normative ethics can be a scholarly rigor rather than the individualized, doctrinaire moralism the term "normative" might evoke.

The key problem with which I begin is that nature cannot tell us how to act, and nor can descriptions of natural phenomena. The more our scientific inquiries uncover about the mysteries of the universe we mutually inhabit, the richer

<sup>1</sup> For Stadler, the affective turn unites both cognitive and phenomenological film theory. Jane Stadler, "Cinema's Compassionate Gaze: Empathy, Affect, and Aesthetics in *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*," in *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship*, ed. Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 28–30.

our thinking about its operations may become, but none of this solves our inherent predicament in merely being; any ethics drawn from social sciences must very carefully account for this dilemma, that of “the autonomy of morality.”<sup>2</sup> There is no clear purpose laid out with respect to nature other than simply survival, and we must, it seems, determine what to do day by day, our series of *ought* scripts, without firm guidance from science or nature. As Michael D. Jackson notes in *Existential Anthropology*:

Evolutionary biology reminds us that there are 50 million species of life on earth, hence 50 million solutions to the problems of survival. Human societies, though less diverse, may be viewed in the same way. But each is a solution, not only to the problems of adaptation and subsistence, but to the problem of creating viable forms of existence and coexistence.<sup>3</sup>

The question therefore arises: who are we to say that any of these solutions are, in fact, wrong? Social science and ethics seem at first to be strange bedfellows. And yet we must make these determinations, as the alternative is simply no action at all. If all action entails degrees of causal consequences, and we must act, then we need frameworks for decision-making, and this book argues that such frameworks will be better the more evidence for the likely consequences of actions they are willing to encounter.

Cognitive science and moral psychology present *is* claims about how people arrive at their *ought* claims; moving in the reverse, to use those *is* foundations to answer *ought* questions is much more problematic.<sup>4</sup> In fact, some theorists doubt that knowledge in moral psychology can or should be extrapolated to any normative *ought* claims at all.<sup>5</sup> But if our object of study is human communications in their mediated and persuasive capacities, and we aim to evaluate both their rhetorical effects and potential moral consequences, then some evidenced modeling of moral thoughts and behavior can assist in rendering such judgments more realistic in their causal projections.<sup>6</sup> Sinnerbrink writes, “Even if we could produce an evolutionary explanation of, say, racism or sexism, that would still leave open

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Nagel, “Ethics as an Autonomous Theoretical Subject,” in *Morality as a Biological Phenomenon: The Presuppositions of Sociobiological Research*, ed. Gunther S. Stent (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 198–205.

<sup>3</sup> Michael D. Jackson, *Existential Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), xxi.

<sup>4</sup> See David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1896] 1978), 469.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Dworkin, “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25, no. 2 (1996): 87–139.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Framing Moral Intuition,” in *Moral Psychology*, vol. 2., *The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 47–76; Kelby Mason, “Moral Psychology and Moral Intuition: A Pox on All Your Houses,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89, no. 3 (2011): 441–458.

the normative question of its moral wrongness or its cultural-political dangers, which is not a question readily addressed using scientific theories.<sup>7</sup> This may be true, but while evolutionary biology or social science may not directly answer those questions, it can certainly inform an answer to them. Scientific theories and knowledge must have a place at the table in developing a mutual determination of how we ought to proceed; the challenge is to define what sort of place that should be (and as such, it is also the remit of this introduction). At the political level, for instance, we might like to see policy-making more informed by climate science, and at the individual level, we might observe that carbon labeling on food products arms consumers with the evidence to make decisions more in line with their values.<sup>8</sup> Evidence improves our ethical frameworks for decision-making, and so science ought to be part of ethical deliberation—and this should be true, too, of the questions of narrative and art we have traditionally contended with in the humanities. The place of science’s descriptive *is* questions in normative ethics is really quite simple: while science will not tell us what moral ends anyone should have in mind, as this is a question that can never be concluded, it will help us test our theories of the consequences of certain actions, and therefore assist in developing the means to achieve an agreed-upon moral end (the implication that human sciences are best suited to support consequentialist ethical frameworks is addressed in the second chapter, and emerges from a history of ethical approaches to screen media).<sup>9</sup>

Recent works in cognitive media ethics, in particular Plantinga’s *Screen Stories*, but also surveys of the field such as Sinnerbrink’s chapter “Cinempathy” in *Cinematic Ethics*, have been self-avowedly metaethical in their lines of questioning.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, my aim here is not to make a claim for the way film or screen media “operates” ethically: as a place of moral experimentation, as a moral teacher, or as an intersubjective negotiator. Cases have been made for all of these moral experiences; I agree with Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley that “narratives allow us to try out solutions to emotional and social difficulties through the simulation of these experiences,” with bell hooks that “even though most folks will say that they go to movies to be entertained, if the truth be told lots of us, myself included, go to movies to learn,” and with Jane Stadler that “the kind of connectedness to others which is both embodied and illustrated in film”

<sup>7</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (London: Routledge, 2016), 85.

<sup>8</sup> Adrian R. Camilleri et al., “Consumers Underestimate the Emissions Associated with Food but Are Aided by Labels,” *Nature Climate Change* 9 (2019): 53–58.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua Greene, “From Neural ‘Is’ to Moral ‘Ought’: What Are the Moral Implications of Neuroscientific Moral Psychology?” *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience* 4, no. 10 (2003): 846–849.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Plantinga, *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 80–106.

occasions an ethic in situating the spectator within its relationally causal world.<sup>11</sup> Yet it is a fundamental principle of social narratology that stories perform many social functions concurrently, and any text can offer these ethical utilities at the same time as the means to contradict its potential for contributing to moral concern.<sup>12</sup> Instead, in the ensuing chapters I want to elaborate how mediated storytelling may serve us *better*, how it could be improved. Toward this end, I address a multiplicity of ethical questions arising in media studies: questions regarding the conditions under which screen stories are produced, the ideas they promote, how audiences respond to those ideas, how they are then discussed and analyzed by theorists and other commentators, and the intersecting relationship between these ideas and the ethical actions they might inspire.

In this book, “ethics” and “morality” signify the same field of study with slightly different connotations. I use “ethics” to suggest a more deliberative consideration of future actions that entails, at the very least, a pressure to be aware of its alternatives; this need not be a scholarly deliberation, but it is a reflexive one. “Morality” suggests somewhat more intuitively generated and culturally informed processes of reaction and arbitration, both internally and within rule-bound publics. In this I differ from, for instance, accounts by Emmanuel Levinas that have given ethics primacy as informing an initial “encounter” and express morality as a post hoc application of rules governing behavior.<sup>13</sup> For Levinas, ethics is intrinsic response and morality is later thought—the opposite of how I am using the two terms and the opposite of how they tend to be used in psychology literature. In a way, I am interested in bridging the space between somewhat deterministic notions of moral judgment in predictively motivated experimental psychology and the deliberative struggle of ethics in philosophy, which establishes the reader as a freethinking agent. In the following chapters, I show how the cognitive humanities can look backward to past evidence of moral behaviors in order to look probabilistically forward in deciding on ethical courses of action.

This book does not, I must stress, advocate any manner of regressive or unthinking moralism—a charge that has been leveled against both ethically normative modes of investigation and hermeneutic moral criticism. The word “normative” and its derivation from “norms” suggest notions of human normalcy, a traditional bugbear in the humanities. Coupled with this is a suspicion

<sup>11</sup> Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley, “The Function of Fiction Is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 3 (2008): 183; bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 2; Jane Stadler, *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 61.

<sup>12</sup> Wyatt Moss-Wellington, *Narrative Humanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 45.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

of the imperial terminology of morality and ethics, carrying with them the post-colonial baggage of appeals to Eurocentric authority. Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey write that “for the film theorists of the 1970s, the terms *moral* or *moral criticism* have been tainted with severe ideological connotations to mean a reinforcement of the dominant political ideology.”<sup>14</sup> This tradition of minimizing directly moral critique in academic discourse continued, of course, long after the 1970s. For instance, Robert Stam continues to take issue with the “Victorian associations” of the word “morality” and its use in cognitive media studies.<sup>15</sup> For Alain Badiou, meanwhile, the language of contemporary ethics simply *is* conservative propaganda.<sup>16</sup> But questions of ideology favored in cultural studies similarly ask how people arrive at systems of ethical belief, and a load of meaning applied to the term “ideology” conceals agendas of ethical inquiry on behalf of the researchers themselves that in turn hedge their more normative and less relativist principles. As Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton put it, “The importance of reifying ‘ethics’ is itself a part of an ethical project.”<sup>17</sup> Wayne C. Booth noted in 1988 that despite the recantation of ethical modes of engagement with fiction, moral language remains prevalent yet buried in the discourse of many fields of cultural criticism:

It is practiced everywhere, often surreptitiously, often guiltily, and often badly, partly because it is the most difficult of all critical modes, but partly because we have so little serious talk about why it is important, what purposes it serves, and how it might be done well.<sup>18</sup>

This observation remains true even after the (meta)ethical turn, and it is one founding principle of this book that if we are honest about the ethical values we bring to our practices of analysis and evaluation, they will be better. It is harder work to locate Hanna Meretoja’s “sense of possibility . . . the ability to see alternatives to what is presented to us as self-evident and inevitable,”<sup>19</sup> and it is this rigor that I insist upon: reconfiguring past philosophic preoccupations with truth and belief to render them more specific about the ways in which belief

<sup>14</sup> Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey, eds., *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 245.

<sup>16</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 38.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Hanna Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 90.



contributes to action, and actions affect others—and then to suggest new courses of action.

There is good reason, however, for a suspicion not so much of any moral discourse, but of moral certitude—and this is perhaps especially true in the context of increasing group polarization in digital media landscapes.<sup>20</sup> The whiff of polemic carries with it a moralism that has not extended itself to reflect upon a lineage of diffuse cause and consequence, as when one studies any moral action deeply one must be open to its lack of definitive genesis, with its cultural and biological antecedents both unendingly heritable and invisibly distributed; and when one is open to the lack of a definitive genesis, one is also open to a dialogue with no moral center, no point at which one may halt to dole out sins. Oblique approaches to ethics and professional lexicons full of hedging terms find their impetus here: hedging language signals the recognition of such a heteronomy. This recognition in turn explains why writing in the humanities comprises more hedging terms than other scholarly disciplines.<sup>21</sup> Still, at some point *enough* conviction must necessarily be untethered from doubt to carry forward into action. The radical political action many humanities scholars yearn for thrives on moral certitude, yet moral certitude is at the same time recognized as a problem, and so philosophers of media are concerned with qualities of media that may inspire self-doubt and disbelief: reflexivity, emotional distancing, and all manner of countercultural, experimental production techniques that call for an audience to stop and to think. Historically, media theorists have wanted political convictions both fortified and questioned in media: presumably, convictions the theorist agrees with fortified, and those they don't, questioned.

At worst, however, hedging language can “introduce conjecture and inference as reliance” or misrepresent the aggregate of an important scientific consensus.<sup>22</sup> To this end, the rigors of cognitive science can reveal and open a discourse upon normative values that are otherwise held intuitively or implicitly, airing them and calling for precision in lieu of conjecture or inference.<sup>23</sup> In this book I argue for a language that is forthright about its moral goals but reasonably tentative about its conclusions. The rigor of normative reasoning is independent of dogma or self-certainty. There is room in cognitive theory, I believe, for an earnestness

<sup>20</sup> For a good, current treatise on this polarization: Robert B. Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in Its Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> Hassan Soodmand Afsha, Mohamad Moradi, and Raouf Hamzavi, “Frequency and Type of Hedging Devices Used in the Research Articles of Humanities, Basic Sciences and Agriculture,” *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences* 136 (2014): 70–74.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas E. Ott, “Hedging, Weasel Words, and Truthiness in Scientific Writing,” *Journal of the Society of Laparoscopic Surgeons* 22, no. 4 (2018): 1–4; Adriana Bailey, Lorine Giangola, and Maxwell T. Boykoff, “How Grammatical Choice Shapes Media Representations of Climate (Un)certainty,” *Environmental Communication* 8, no. 2 (2014): 197–215.

<sup>23</sup> Guy Kahane, “The Armchair and the Trolley: An Argument for Experimental Ethics,” *Philosophical Studies* 162, no. 2 (2013): 421–445.

in ethics that retains both the rigor and self-critique that have been so valuable in past media and cultural studies. Just as empiricism and science do not make claims on behalf of truth or proofs or ontic certainties, only probabilities that we should proceed with and incrementally revise, so too must a consequentialist ethics admit the flaws in any moral position, as well as the uncertainty surrounding projected consequences of future actions, and make its cases for least-worst or least-problematic solutions. We can have an earnest, normative ethics without moral certitude, as this is precisely what being and nature have provided for us: we can know nothing absolutely, least of all a purpose to living, but still we must act.

When we are honest about our ethical commitments, they become vulnerable as they are rendered more contestable; they are subject to counterclaims and testing against evidence. It is far easier, but less rigorous as Booth notes, to leave moral readings implied. This is true, too, of political ideologies, as Sarah Kozloff writes:

Nearly all politically inclined film theorists avoid declaring their own political orientation. Their writings rest on a not-said presupposition of shared values and ideologies. Of course, scholarship should not be about the author herself, and one wants to present one's arguments as if they were purely objective. But when discussing ideological and social aspects of our field, perhaps open self-disclosure provides important perspective. Perhaps using "I" as opposed to passive voice constructions also makes the author take responsibility for the views she espouses.<sup>24</sup>

In my case, the moral and political ends cognitive science will be motivated toward could be broadly defined as harm minimization and improving equality across a global populace; other moral ends are considered important insofar as they support these two primary goals.<sup>25</sup> For instance, some freedoms will support harm minimization and fairness while other types of freedom may impede them, which makes freedom secondary to other moral ends in my framework. A sense of justice likewise must support harm minimization, or it is not truly justice (the problems of justice and consequence are considered further in the following chapters). Similarly to Kozloff, Plantinga observes:

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Kozloff, "Empathy and the Cinema of Engagement: Reevaluating the Politics of Film," *Projections* 7, no. 2 (2013): 1.

<sup>25</sup> What Jonathan Haidt calls "moral foundations" I am characterizing as the more active "moral goals," as Haidt is making an *is* claim that emphasizes intuitive judgments, while my aim here is to clarify for the reader the moral ends of my own *ought* claims. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

Ideology, politics, and social responsibility are all thoroughly and inextricably dependent on moral value, and any sort of specific position on ideology or social responsibility presumes fundamental moral principles. The ideological and political positions of estrangement theorists are themselves rooted in moral suppositions about how people *ought* to be treated, what stance *ought* to be taken in relation to dominant culture, or how spectators *ought* to respond to screen stories. That these assumptions mostly go unexamined is a weakness of much ethical theory, such that one could almost see moral value as the *repressed* of contemporary film and media theory. Critics are so eager to avoid “moralism” that they ignore or deny the place of moral principles in their own thought.<sup>26</sup>

This book is equally concerned with notions of scholarly rigor: the rigors of ethical honesty, of backing one’s claims with evidence, of the kind of thinking-through of thoughts that cognitive science is good at, and of normativity itself. Normativity has its very own rigor, too, and this is what I will argue for in the first part of the book: the rigor of advancing the question “so what?” Once theorists have established firm evidence for our moral responsiveness to media’s emotive and empathic suggestions, how should we then behave? The rigor of normativity is not about knowing the answers to these things with certainty; it is about simply broaching the question that is begged by the descriptive and metaethical work we have so far achieved, extending ourselves not simply to ask but to answer the question “so what?” Normativity *is* a rigor.

The following chapter charts a history of ethical debates in film and media studies, the philosophy of art, aesthetics, phenomenology, literary theory, and narratology to identify the traditions from which the field of cognitive media studies emerges and to suggest its future directions. Throughout this opening chapter, I build my own case for a consilience of rigors on which *Cognitive Film and Media Ethics* is predicated: the procedural rigors of consequentialism, the socially distributed rigors of contemporary cognitive science, the rigors of traditional narrative humanism that encourage consequentialists and social scientists to account for a variety of agentive perspectives and phenomenal positions, and most of all, the rigor of normativity that agrees to advance all such foundational descriptive rigors to more active conclusions. Chapter 2 moves to clarify a consequentialist ethical framework applied across case studies throughout the volume. In contrast to the union of virtue ethics and intuitionism that characterizes much prior cognitive work, I propose a humanistic consequentialism that integrates notions of human limits, capabilities, and shifting responsibilities. Chapter 3 runs with the analogy of rigors developed thus far to address the myriad problems

<sup>26</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 155.

that arise in any moral evaluation of media texts using cognitive science as a tool: problems of evaluating simulated actions in fictive storytelling, the potentially confounding heteronomy of personality and cultural variation, and distinguishing ethical and political approaches to cinema. Addressing these problems allows us to be more specific about what kinds of ethical claims can and should be made concerning media texts; this chapter thereby sharpens some of the problems in a normative approach to cognitive media studies and further outlines the perspective and methods that will be carried through the rest of the chapters in this volume. The remainder of the book offers five case studies, revealing how this normative work might be performed in various contexts.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 analyze a number of filmic case studies to make separate ethical points. Chapter 4 addresses the use of spectatorial cognitive dissonance in focusing audiences on substantive moral elements within feature films. It finds the films of David Lynch wanting in their minimization of the consequences of gendered violence and looks at alternative, more positive uses of moral dissonance on screen. Chapter 5 investigates a particular kind of cognitive dissonance, that of humor, using Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren's benign violation theory to compare satiric comedy in suburban ensemble films with other forms of American "shock" humor in domestic settings.<sup>27</sup> This chapter is interested in how benign violations may help us isolate an ethics of comedy in media. Chapter 6 turns to politics in cinema more specifically, using concepts in social psychology and anthropology (in particular limerence and liminality) to explain some of the ethics embedded in romantic comedy cinema engaging with explicitly political themes. This chapter demonstrates the productive unity of cognitive and phenomenological approaches that Sinnerbrink calls for in *Cinematic Ethics*. These three chapters address concerns in cinema ethics, as film art has been a primary medium through which much prior cognitive work in screen media ethics has taken place. There is evidently something about the conventions of cinema that reaches deeply within the self-narratives of many people. Given this historic use of film as a philosophic catalyst, I too acknowledge the value in beginning with the foundations of past analytical work, moving outward comparatively to other media; in the final two chapters, I focus on television, and news and social media.

Chapter 7, which critiques the inherent self-flattery of some more recent dialogues on "quality" television, addresses why it may be that film remains such an important touchstone for so many, why it is such an impressive vehicle for investigating the relations between feeling and thinking, as Amy Coplan has it, putting one "in the mood for thought."<sup>28</sup> In contrast, this chapter looks at formal

<sup>27</sup> Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, "Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 8 (2010): 1141–1149.

<sup>28</sup> Amy Coplan, "In the Mood for Thought: Mood and Meaning in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*," in *Blade Runner*, ed. Amy Coplan and David Davies (London: Routledge, 2015), 118.

aspects of millennial television that could be construed as a kind of bullying. It observes some confluences between the normalization of abusive behaviors in various popular television formats and rising support for populist leadership styles. However, it also looks forward to a potential new televisual canon that decenters the white male antihero and that is produced under less problematic industrial conditions. While Chapter 7 broadens the scope of this volume to include television ethics, taking a cue from recent works such as Plantinga's *Screen Stories* that extend theories cultivated in film studies to other screen media, Chapter 8 moves outward again to think through contemporary issues in news media and social media in the age of promotional saturation, fabrication and fakery. It concludes with some thoughts on how we might address those problems in the very place that many of my colleagues might feel their greatest ethical and political impact being made: the classroom. Throughout this book, my focus is on popular media forms that are globally dominant, such as narrative film, and their effects on the world; this final chapter, in addressing news media and social media, presents two other popular formats that are integral to the ways in which we understand our place in the world and that inform how we choose to behave toward others.

To air our normative views is to render them subject to analysis; to make moral arguments vulnerable occasions the prospect of improving them. An earnest normativity does not allow theorists to wallow in cataloging the crimes of the past, but instead puts the onus on them to proffer suggestions for action. If we care about treating one another kindly, equally, and offering better, freer lives for all those who have suffered at the hands of a fortunate few, then we owe it to everybody to improve our normative claims through the rigors of clear, open, evidenced debate. The committed responsibility of these sorts of analytic and scientific rigors is precisely the pressure that cognitive theories have put on media studies in the past. This book is an extension of what I feel is cognitivism's most productive ethos.

# 1

## Cognitive Media Ethics

### The Story So Far

Cognitive science at times appears to have as many meanings as it does people who identify as cognitivists. To some, it simply indicates an empirical grounding from which to approach all fields in human studies; to others, it is a productive interdisciplinarity between old and new fields in social science and philosophy studying the human and the mind, from anthropology and linguistics to neuroscience and artificial intelligence; and to scholars like myself, it is both of these things as well as its own kind of scholarly rigor, that of a procedural thinking-through of human emotions and thoughts and experiences, charting the evidence of their causal relationships.<sup>1</sup> Cognitivism is valuable as a unique kind of precision: it puts pressure on theorists not to simply state the ways in which culture produces ideology, but to explain each step in the process whereby ideas and actions are generated and distributed in the social world. This does not mean that cognitive theory cannot be practiced poorly or that it is immune to critique (in its best iterations, care is taken to guard against overly deterministic or “computational” metaphors). Yet it does at the very least entail an ongoing pressure not only to cite empirical evidence for one’s claims (from any discipline that studies the mind or human sociality), but to elaborate procedurally the many paths between precognitive responses, conscious meaning-making, rehearsed attitudes, behavior, and its consequences for others, that adjacent theories might gloss. In this regard, the rigor of cognitivism is that it elaborates processes, causes, and consequences rather than assumes them connotatively—all the better, I think, to support consequentialist ethical positions. In this chapter, I survey recent work in cognitive film, screen, and narrative media ethics (abbreviated as “cognitive media ethics”), point to some of its foundations in earlier theories, and indicate how my own normative perspective will build upon their insights.

Cognitive approaches to media ethics in the past have come down to four Es (different, albeit, from the four Es of 4EA cognition): thus far, *ethics* has been reducible to *emotion*, *empathy*, and *engagement*. In 2016’s *Cinematic Ethics*,

<sup>1</sup> For others, cognitive studies may signify an emphasis on biological rather than cultural explanations of human behaviour, although this seems more a cognitivism of anti-cognitivists than a position taken by many of my colleagues.

Sinnerbrink wrote that the contributions cognitivism has made to the field of cine-ethics consist largely in the theorizing of two fields—emotion and empathy—and thus the field is broadly emergent from the “affective turn” in both film philosophy and ethics.<sup>2</sup> The metaethics of cognitivism has indeed been concerned primarily with filling out descriptions of the ways in which formal qualities in media can provoke different kinds of emotion and empathy to differing ends of moral evaluation. Take, for instance, Margrethe Bruun Vaage’s recent work, *The Antihero in American Television*, which characterizes the ethical experience in television as a movement back and forth between the pleasures of fictional relief and the moral pointedness of reality checks; reality checks invite spectators to concentrate on moral consequences the narrative may previously have encouraged them to disregard.<sup>3</sup> In these works, formal qualities in media inspire emotions that form the persuasive power of screen media texts.<sup>4</sup> In some ways, these concerns in cognitive media ethics succeeded a movement that began in the Chicago neo-Aristotelian school of literary ethics, which emphasized the ways story “positioned the audience in relation to characters,” giving evaluation and judgment “a significant role in the trajectory of emotional responses generated by plots.”<sup>5</sup> Yet one of the first significant interventions made by the cognitive media theorists moved against an inherited terminology of empathy, engagement, and in particular the moral politics of “focalization,” which were modified extensively in works by Noël Carroll, Murray Smith, and Carl Plantinga. Elaborating on some of Carroll’s earlier work on sympathy and antipathy, Smith argued in 1995’s *Engaging Characters* that we do not merely identify with characters, we form allegiances that are based upon moral values rather than simply focalization (in his terms, “alignment”), and that fictive moral systems can encourage us to feel an allegiance to the least-wrong character in a given scenario rather than to morally perfect characters representative of absolute principles, including those shared by the viewer.<sup>6</sup> These allegiances were more complex—messy, even—than the determinism of past perspectival theories that suggest we simply align with those we identify with. Vaage has joined Smith in extending this perspective, too, to make clear the point that character alignments and allegiances developed in narrative are not necessarily allied to moral principles held outside of fictive worlds; and those identified as the most moral characters may not receive the most viewer support, either, potentially as

<sup>2</sup> Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 80–106. On the affective turn: Stadler, *Pulling Focus*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> Margrethe Bruun Vaage, *The Antihero in American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, passim.

<sup>5</sup> James Phelan, “Narrative Ethics,” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014), last modified December 9, 2014, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-ethics>.

<sup>6</sup> Noël Carroll, “Toward a Theory of Film Suspense,” *Persistence of Vision* 1, no. 1 (1984): 65–89; Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).



we do not feel as akin to moral paragons as we do to protagonists on a journey of moral learning, and one common viewing pleasure is to observe the moral growth of protagonists with whom the viewer feels allied.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the recent work in cognitive media ethics, from Plantinga to Vaage, has attempted to anatomize these character evaluations in order to understand how they operate. All are similarly motivated by a view that the moral reasoning applied during media engagement diverges from convictions spectators may hold outside of media, so the work of the analyst should be to explain those discrepancies and how media navigates them by harnessing cognitions predating formats such as film and TV (especially forms of sympathy/empathy) to produce its entertaining effects. For instance, Vaage's concepts of fictional relief and reality checks are drawn from theories developed in moral psychology, in particular Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt's "dual-process model of morality" and Albert Bandura's "moral disengagement," to demonstrate how media acts upon inclinations that are not necessarily unique to spectatorship.<sup>8</sup> So the appeals to pathos that make up moral reasoning through narrative can be medium-specific, while the cognitive processes they rely upon are not.

One idea that Smith's book inaugurated, with its broadly ethical cast, was a somewhat surprising divorce of empathy and ethics as inherently, uncomplicatedly causal: we could no longer assume that one fundamentally presaged the other. Smith suggests that the very imaginative process of empathy, feeling what we *imagine* another to feel, does not mean we fuse our goals with the other in any way, and this is true, too, of fictive characters.<sup>9</sup> A new lexicon has since developed that is careful to point to the spaces between types of empathy and any ethics drawn from modes of character engagement: we can have sympathy for, wishing well for, affiliation with, recognition of, or projection onto a character, for instance, and each different relation to character may equally differentiate moral responses to the text. This trend of complexifying both descriptions of varying levels of empathy and allegiance, and the assumed effects of empathy and allegiance, has proceeded apace. In 2009's *Moving Viewers*, Plantinga advised steering clear of "trendy" distinctions between empathy and sympathy altogether, as their imprecision opens up many dialogues speaking at cross-purposes.<sup>10</sup> Not

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Cumming, Gabriel Greenberg, and Rory Kelly, "Structures of Allegiance and Morality," SCSMI Virtual Conference, June 18, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt, "How Does Moral Judgement Work?" *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 6, no. 12 (2002): 517–523; Albert Bandura, "Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency," *Journal of Moral Education* 3, no. 2 (2002): 101–119.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 97. Similarly, Ed Tan insists that empathy and emotion are not causal, as "empathy does not always result in an emotion"; ethics is absent from this account. Ed Tan, "The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema: Notes on a Psychocinematics of Mind Reading," in *Psychocinematics: Exploring Cognition at the Movies*, ed. Arthur P. Shimamura (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 339.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 99–101.



only this, the emotions that theorists of empathy and sympathy were attempting to extricate often arrived together with other, observer-specific emotions; similarly to Smith, Plantinga notes that because all emotions are mixed and are far from discrete, we never quite fuse emotional states with another.

Dialogues on the nature of empathy exist at the crossroads of many disciplines, and as such, the debate is broad and often confusing, with many overlapping and interrelated definitions. As Stadler writes:

In contemporary film criticism there is little consensus regarding how to differentiate empathy from related terms including sympathy, the vicarious experience and embodied and imaginative simulation that cinematic narratives facilitate, the involuntary sharing of affective states via emotional contagion, the ethical deliberation often involved in perspective taking, or moral emotions such as compassion.<sup>11</sup>

One suspects it is best not to kick a hornet's nest and proclaim a strident definition for all to follow, and to be diverted into assessing descriptive claims of the nature of empathy would run contra to the objectives of this book—and yet clarification of one's own terms seems necessary in such a contested space. A distinction I have found helpful and that I will carry through the book is that between cognitive and affective empathy. Clearly it is possible to imagine the emotions of another without vicariously feeling them. To bring a moral point to this, a torturer, for example, derives very different emotions from their imaginings of what a victim is going through. So we can have a cognitive empathy, which refers to a concept of another's experience, and an affective empathy, which is when we vicariously feel an affect associated with or "congruent" to that experience. We can also let "empathy" be an umbrella term that refers to a complex set of interrelated processes each worthy of its own examination. What is often missing from accounts of felt empathy as a moral dimension in responses to screen fiction, though, is how that empathy may translate to belief and then behavior, which are more ethically evaluable than any experience of empathy itself. While there are many interesting studies on the nature of emotional mimicry via screen fictions, on formal qualities of narrative media and their effect on Theory of Mind, or on mirror neurons and what they mean for empathy, what is often less apparent is how that empathic experience might then be marshaled to draw particular moral conclusions, or extended to feelings toward nonfictive others outside of cinema, or who is

<sup>11</sup> Jane Stadler, "Empathy in Film," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, ed. Heidi Maibom (London: Routledge, 2017), 317.

included and who is excluded from moral conclusions derived from the empathic experience.<sup>12</sup>

Plantinga's *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement*, released in 2017, is perhaps the most comprehensive book yet addressing the metaethics of screen media from a cognitive perspective. Plantinga argues for an "engagement theory" in lieu of the emotional "estrangement theory" so familiar in film studies, clearly drawing from Kozloff's notion of a "cinema of engagement," itself reaching back—as many cognitive media ethics do—to find support in Smith's *Engaging Characters*.<sup>13</sup> Plantinga's wide-ranging study is underscored by the conviction that it is the rhetorical power of emotions that makes screen stories persuasive, and thus we should study the emotions elicited in media engagement (and particularly character engagement) to understand their moral impact. To that end, he suggests a number of cognitive mechanisms that are contingent upon emotional responses to persuade. *Narrative formats* rely upon and activate *schemas*, with their causal sense-making from habituated, cognitive shortcuts.<sup>14</sup> *Paradigm scenarios* can be thought of as two related types of schemas: association of a situation to an appropriate emotion, and of emotion to an appropriate action. As actuated in narrative media, Plantinga calls these *narrative paradigm scenarios*, and he sees them as coupled to genre conventions.<sup>15</sup> So to Plantinga, it is through rehearsal and repetition of emotional associations to their consequences in media that moral concepts become habitual—but as narratives are spaces where schemas and paradigms are revisited, so too can those stories be places where they are redirected to new moral associations. All of these processes rely upon an emotive engagement with screen characters to be relevant to the ethical self (and they contribute to a sense of the moral language of a time and "cultural ecology" that feeds back in terms of "attunement" to persuasive messages). Plantinga's model of change in this regard is largely similar to that of Carroll. Carroll offers a relatively simple model in explaining how character engagement might generalize back to schemas: when films furnish characters that some audiences may have intrinsic biases toward (such as ethnically or sexually diverse characters) with traits that are commonly received as morally favorable (such as courage and heroism), films can overwhelm negative identity associations with positive ones.<sup>16</sup> Those positive associations are then better able to

<sup>12</sup> Katalin E. Bálint and Brendan Rooney, "Narrative Sequence Position of Close-Ups Influences Cognitive and Affective Processing and Facilitates Theory of Mind," *Art & Perception* 7, no. 1 (2019): 27–51; Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*; Kozloff, "Empathy"; Smith, *Engaging Characters*.

<sup>14</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 56–57.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 232–233.

<sup>16</sup> Noël Carroll, "Moral Change: Fiction, Film, and Family," in *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship*, ed. Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey (London: Routledge, 2014), 43–56.

prime responses to others in the world outside of the cinema. This is a valuable insight that also chimes with the prevailing theories of engagement in cognitive studies since Smith's *Engaging Characters*.

In *Cinematic Ethics*, Sinnerbrink mooted four major branches of ethical theory in film philosophy: the Cavellian, the Deleuzian, the phenomenological, and the cognitive. Sinnerbrink summarized some of the primary objections raised against the cognitivist approach so far:

It is one thing to explain the appeal of action movies with high levels of violence, or the fascination exerted by pornography, quite another to draw normative conclusions about the desirability or otherwise of such popular forms of audiovisual culture . . . Other critics acknowledge that cognitivism offers powerful explanatory theories of the underlying causal processes involved in our experience of cinema but that this does not mean it provides a suitable hermeneutic framework for film interpretation or aesthetic evaluation.<sup>17</sup>

Sinnerbrink himself recommends a pluralist approach, drawing from the strengths and uses of each theory. The “uses” of cognitive research thereafter appear mostly restricted to explaining how we respond emotionally to screen media and how this might affect our empathy for fictional characters. As he puts it, “Adopting phenomenological and cognitivist approaches to affect and emotion can help us better explain the processes involved in our aesthetic and moral engagement with film.”<sup>18</sup> These approaches still relegate the cognitive to descriptive and explanatory potentials rather than prescriptive or hermeneutic ends. The essays in the present book both extend concepts in cognitive media studies to acts of interpretation and evaluation that have been the province of earlier humanities, and move beyond its few focal points—empathy, emotions, and engagement—to integrate further concepts from cognitive science, social psychology, anthropology, and related fields into ethical discourse.

It should be noted, too, that ethics has thus far been only one minor concern within the broader field of cognitive media studies, which has tended to the problems of aesthetic understanding perhaps more so than ethical evaluation, as evidenced in Smith's recent work, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*.<sup>19</sup> There is a culture among cognitive theorists, too, of distancing oneself from the perils of evaluation, which has largely been provoked by the need to fortify oneself against commonplace critiques of psychology's integration in film and media studies.<sup>20</sup> That is, cognitivists had to answer to the charge that the language of

<sup>17</sup> Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Murray Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> As Ian Jarvie has it, “One set of problems [Hugo] Munsterberg did not shirk, but that all these works of analytical philosophy totally shirk, is questions of judgment, assessment, and value. There

art exceeds that of science in its particularization of diverse cultural contexts and ineffable structures of feeling, and ergo the generalist, universalizing language of science could not tell us much at all about art.<sup>21</sup> This in turn responds to a tendency, especially among media and cultural theorists hostile to cognitivist interventions, to take an exceptionalist view of narrative and art: that the interpretive nature of human communication elevates creative modes above the arbitrating vocabularies of the sciences, and therefore it should be immune to the sorts of generalizations science provides. Indeed, the recognition of multiple and individualized interpretations is important for any field that would make its claims on behalf of folk psychologies, autonomic responses, or the universals of human perceptive faculties—and this is, in fact, why we need to understand and interrogate modes of individual evaluation in the arts. In *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, for instance, Smith repeatedly backs away from the evaluative use of any evidence in media psychology, arguing that naturalized aesthetics be used as supplementary to other modes of analysis, but that incorporating the general terms of science, while it can help us understand art, “won’t, generally speaking, make us better artists or appreciators or interpreters.”<sup>22</sup> In response to Smith’s cautious approach, Laura T. Di Summa-Knoop notes, “While not every creative effort depends on the kind of analysis that can be provided by a naturalist approach, the assessment of such efforts can at least begin at the descriptive level.”<sup>23</sup> I think this is a good working mechanism for reaching beyond aesthetic assessments to moral evaluation, too. We might begin from the descriptive level of a general knowledge of the science of likely media uses and effects, move outward to the specifics of particular works and their reception that could be accommodating, resistant, or ambivalent to those norms, and thereafter assess each work ethically on the basis of both these understandings.

Robert Stam notes that the cognitive perspective shares with its forebears an aversion to normative lines of questioning: “Both cognitivism and semiology downplay issues of evaluation and ranking, moreover, in favor of probing the ways texts are understood. Both movements refuse a normative, belletristic approach.”<sup>24</sup> The affective turn, especially since the publication of Smith’s *Engaging Characters*, has been synonymous with a turn to analyzing systems of morality, paving the way for more cognitivist-ethical engagements (with cinema in particular, but more recently other media). Yet it is true that these works are more

is much more to be said against film theory . . . but at least its users make evaluations.” Ian Jarvie, “Is Analytic Philosophy the Cure for Film Theory?” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 29, no. 3 (1999): 437.

<sup>21</sup> Murray Smith, “Feeling Prufish,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2010): 278–279.

<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Film, Art*, 55.

<sup>23</sup> Laura T. Di Summa-Knoop, “Naturalized Aesthetics and Criticism: On Value Judgments,” *Projections* 12, no. 2 (2017): 22.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 246.

concerned with how media is understood in moral terms than with how we might evaluate it in moral terms. Having said that, several scholars have advanced models for open ethical engagement with media texts, many of which use cognitive theory as a resource to back up prescriptive claims. For instance, Kozloff's frustration with what she sees as a lack of forthrightness regarding the ideologies film studies brings to bear in theoretical excursions leads her to concoct seven strategies of "engaged" political filmmaking.<sup>25</sup> These strategies are buttressed by an acknowledgment of the ways in which emotional engagement with cinema has been shown to promote behavioral change. In addition, Kozloff points to the "mean-spiritedness" of cinema used as vengeance against groups of people filmmakers see as inferior to themselves, and indicates just how prevalent such a convention is among the cherished works of the film theory canon; she suggests that such hauteur is protected when authors' standards of evaluation are obscured by their prose.<sup>26</sup> Mette Hjort, meanwhile, is assiduously concerned with the uses cinema can have in informing not just moral debates, but moral action; these uses are not inherent in spectatorship, but must be actively seized upon, and her writing is committed to enacting the kinds of normative evaluations of action in the world that screen media prompts.<sup>27</sup> Plantinga, who describes his past work as metaethical, has also made recent forays into more normative modes of analysis, in particular in his work on the "fascist affect" of *300* (Zach Snyder, 2007).<sup>28</sup> These three theorists move beyond the metaethics of cognitive media theory and attempt normative claims, although in this book I would like to explore how many more uses there might be for cognitive science in making such claims. Perhaps the tide is beginning to turn in cognitive media ethics to an exploration of how we might more actively apply the insights gained so far—a change I wholeheartedly welcome.

A brief diversion is worthwhile here to reiterate the centrality of film studies in past cognitive media theory and to foreshadow its uses in probing new narrative media with different modes of access and engagement. In the words of Greg M. Smith:

It is a good moment to consider how our joint assumptions have found a good fit in film, and how other media (including television and games) will present different challenges to our cognitive approach . . . Although many of us

<sup>25</sup> Kozloff, "Empathy," 18–25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Mette Hjort, "Guilt-Based Filmmaking: Moral Failings, Muddled Activism, and the 'Dogumentary' *Get a Life*," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 10, no. 2 (2018): 6–14; Mette Hjort, "Community Engagement and Film: Toward the Pursuit of Ethical Goals through Applied Research on Moving Images," in *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship*, ed. Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey (London: Routledge, 2014), 195–213.

<sup>28</sup> Carl Plantinga, "Fascist Affect in *300*," *Projections* 13, no. 2 (2019): 20–37.

maintain interests in other media, cinema is the common ground on which we stage our discussions.<sup>29</sup>

Smith understands this preference for cinema as at least partially the product of a humanistic tradition writers like Bordwell and Carroll emerged from, the values of which remain central to my own work.<sup>30</sup> As I have positioned the current volume as something of an intervention that I hope will demonstrate a way forward for cognitivist ethics, I spend considerable time with these previous analyses of film and also show how dialogues around contemporary media trends might be integrated; for example, as the proliferation of screens (and especially small screens) changes our relationship to the nature of images and the stories they tell, writers including Kata Szita and Francesco Casetti chart the ways in which film viewing becomes decentered as a discrete, bounded experience.<sup>31</sup> My own work follows a similar structure, working outward from historic debates in film, narrative, and literary studies to newer narrative media. Social media, story sharing, and the oft-unclear trade between fictive and nonfictive stories that occur in new media spaces are the focus of the final chapter, which extends cognitive media ethics into current digital trends.<sup>32</sup> “Media ethics” is an umbrella term that has united journalism studies with considerations of fictive media in the past (for example, debates around violence and censorship). Similarly, mass media ethics and global media ethics tend to be interested in the sale of dominant media forms across the world, an interest that informs my own consideration of the distance between commercial and ethical imperatives in globally distributed formats largely produced within the United States, from Hollywood to Facebook, and their place in our lives.<sup>33</sup> One of the goals of this book is to bring new cognitive evidence to bear on these discussions and to evaluate what types of evidence will serve us well in the ethical scrutiny of developments in film, television, and online media. Where I refer to media, screen media, narrative media, or screen stories in the following, I refer to the broader umbrella of this project, which is not simply about the use of audiovisual media to convey stories, or what a screen *is*, with all its fraught and changing optics ripe for many

<sup>29</sup> Greg M. Smith, “Coming Out of the Corner,” in *Cognitive Media Theory*, ed. Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham (New York: Routledge, 2014), 286.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>31</sup> Kata Szita, “New Perspectives on an Imperfect Cinema: Smartphones, Spectatorship, and Screen Culture 2.0” *NECSUS*, July 6, 2020, <https://necsus-ejms.org/new-perspectives-on-an-imperfect-cinema-smartphones-spectatorship-and-screen-culture-2-0/>; Francesco Casetti, “What Is a Screen Nowadays?” in *The Screen Media Reader: Culture, Theory, Practice*, ed. Stephen Monteiro (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 29–38.

<sup>32</sup> Others have, of course, published more sustained works dedicated wholly to information and computer ethics, such as Charles Ess, *Digital Media Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Lee Wilkins and Clifford G. Christians, eds. *The Handbook of Mass Media Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

other treatises, but also about how we ought to tell and use those stories. I would also note that “media ethics,” concerned with responsible journalism, the politics of media ownership, the potential effects of media use, experimental studies aimed at predicting postviewing behaviors, and so on, has been much more normatively focused than cognitive media theory’s descriptive interest in emotions, empathy, and engagement. This book surveys strategies for uniting their respective and varied interests.

The remainder of the present chapter considers many of the antecedent discussions in media, art, and ethics that cognitivist perspectives have drawn from, and in some cases deviated from. Rather than offer another complete history of ethical philosophies in past film and screen media studies, I will briefly introduce some of the major dialogues of that history and position the current book’s normative approach in relation to extant literature.<sup>34</sup> From this positioning emerges a rationale for what I call a “humanistic consequentialism” as applied to narrative media, which describes the normative principles that will be applied across case studies in the latter half of the book. The following short history begins with questions around the separability of ethics and aesthetics, a problematic any normative perspective in the narrative arts must seriously contend with.

### Between Ethics and Aesthetics

As Dudley Andrew notes, the impression that “in cinema, aesthetic issues lead immediately to moral ones” reaches back to film theory’s origins with André Bazin, and remains with us today.<sup>35</sup> In newer discourses on television, Vaage’s *Antihero* looks at the ways in which moral values are played against narrative pleasures, observing that the formal strategy of generating such conflicts between aesthetic and ethical appreciation has become a convention audiences expect in forms of American TV drama from the past two decades.<sup>36</sup> Vaage’s contribution marks an important point in the passage of cognitive media studies as they navigate a long history of thinking on the aesthetics-ethics nexus. Her work points up just how insistently the conventions of ethical “ambiguity” or “complexity” invite viewers to square aesthetic appreciation with their moral readings of each text.

<sup>34</sup> I would recommend Sinnerbrink’s *Cinematic Ethics* as perhaps the most lucid history of ethical approaches to film; *Cognitive Media Ethics*, however, is an altogether different book, one that aims at prescription more so than description, and as such the ensuing, potted history is more a means to its ends.

<sup>35</sup> Dudley Andrew, “Foreword to the 2004 Edition,” in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, André Bazin, ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), xxi.

<sup>36</sup> Vaage, *The Antihero*, passim.



This is why distinctions between aesthetic and ethical acts of evaluation are an important component of any cognitive media ethics.

There are three traditional accounts of the relation between ethics and art. The first is the autonomist view, or what I call the “autotelic” perspective in aesthetics, that beauty and appreciation exist for their own sake and thus ethics has no place in the evaluation of art, a view associated with thinkers from Immanuel Kant to Oscar Wilde, and later Clive Bell.<sup>37</sup> As Berys Gaut points out, to hold this view would be to ignore, however, the moral dimensions of a history of religious art with both explicit moral intent and moral effects.<sup>38</sup> More recently, some narrative theorists in psychology such as Keith Oatley have made similar cases, choosing to view the arts as “explorations” that do not “recruit people to believe or act or feel in a particular way,” although it is difficult to see how the fact of artistic exploration cannot intersect or coincide with attempts at persuasion.<sup>39</sup> Even in arts with no didactic purpose, the intent to explore a particular subject can have moral implications, and relies on enthymematic propositions (principles upon which the exploration rests) that cannot be withdrawn from comprehension of that exploration. The view of a “moderate autonomist,” on the other hand, admits that art indeed has an innately moral dimension, but argues that its morality should be treated separately from its aesthetic dimension. So in this view, a beautiful work might be deemed immoral, but such a judgment does not affect its beauty. Yet the moderate autonomist perspective seems to me to deny the phenomenal experience of art. Experiences associated with beauty appreciation—for instance, emotions of elevation elicited by a work—are seldom unchanged if we simultaneously see that work as ethically deficient in some way. Moral and artistic readings are not a binary either/or decision; they are a dialogue we hold with ourselves and sometimes others. A spectator negotiating both a moral and an aesthetic reading might find it difficult to truly divorce the emotions associated with each—they are entwined, and they mediate each other, producing different kinds of encounters. In this case, it makes little sense to argue that aesthetic appreciation and moral judgment are intrinsically separate, only that the appreciator *ought* to try to separate those experiences. But here, again, we run against the problem of normativity. In these debates, we might witness yet another conflation of ontology and ethics as theorists seem to dance between the naturalizing claim that ethics and aesthetics *are* separate and the more implicit notion that we *ought* to treat them as such. So while I am sympathetic to what Gaut positions as the ethicist perspective, which sees aesthetics and ethics as ontically inseparable (his arguments stem from the mutuality of moral and

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Clive Bell, *Art* (Urbana, IL: Project Gutenberg, [1914] 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 92–93.

<sup>39</sup> Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 174.



aesthetic language used by arts appreciators rather than their phenomenal experience), I would argue for a fourth perspective.<sup>40</sup> We might, perhaps, call this a hardline ethicist perspective: that the aesthetic dimension of a text *ought to be* subsumed in ethical readings, and that emotive appreciation *should* be altered in moral readings of a text, and that its opposite is also true—if we see a text as both beautiful and ethically insightful or astute, enjoyment can be multiplied and perhaps a different variety of emotions felt.

Let us take moral rereadings of a canon of works as an example, as rereadings point to a before and after of integrating morality into one's enjoyment of a text. A film enthusiast who appreciates the aesthetics of Quentin Tarantino, for instance, might read about his poor treatment of women on set in light of the #MeToo movement and, upon rewatching his films, begin to see indicators of a corrosive attitude toward women within the films themselves.<sup>41</sup> The enthusiast is now alert to moral readings they did not have before. My argument would not simply be that their experience of these films *is* changed in light of the moral dimension (as there may be some who find it is easier to ignore or subdue moral readings than others), but that their experience *should be* changed. In effect, if a spectator decides that the moral reading should modify their aesthetic appreciation, this indicates that principles of fairness and consequence and harm minimization are more important to the spectator than the spectator's own fleeting gratification. As these values are indeed important for our mutual and communal thriving, spectators may feel the pull of moral questioning in place of immersive appreciation when engaging with problematic texts; we should not try to deny these complexifying readings or their conflicting emotions. The fact that moral readings compel us to negotiate new responses and question past emotions and commitments is a helpful impulse.

Likewise, consider a case such as the television series *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), in which a narrative's moral ambiguity (largely wrought by focalization with transgressors) is played against its pleasures of action and adventure (what Vaage calls its “fictional relief” and Plantinga calls its “affective pleasure”).<sup>42</sup> Spectators allowing themselves a pleasure unaffected by the moral dimension of the series formed a substantial online community, famously siding with Walter White (Bryan Cranston) after an episode in which he rapes his wife Skyler (Anna Gunn) at knifepoint. Gunn has since reflected on the “hate boards” targeting both character and actor online.<sup>43</sup> Vaage in particular sees this problem

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> A description of one such viewer's experience can be found in Roy Chacko, “End of the Affair: Why It's Time to Cancel Quentin Tarantino,” *Guardian*, July 23, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jul/23/cancel-quentin-tarantino-once-upon-a-time-in-hollywood>.

<sup>42</sup> Vaage, *The Antihero*, passim; Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 171.

<sup>43</sup> Anna Gunn, “I Have a Character Issue,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/24/opinion/i-have-a-character-issue.html>.

as resulting from the ways in which Walter offers the viewer gratifications of fictional relief, while Skyler robs that appreciation from the viewer by offering some manner of moral “reality check.”<sup>44</sup> In my view, there are two conclusions to be drawn here. First, despite the best intentions of the showrunners, the correlation of women with morality and men with fun, transgressive action licenses male viewers predisposed toward an uncomplicated self-gratification in media to see through moral questions the show might raise in favor of their own appreciation of its aesthetic and narrative pleasures. This produces bad results; the Skyler-hating phenomenon and its attendant rape victim blaming present a strong argument against even a moderate version of aesthetic autonomy. Second, this instance of “bad fandom” reveals another very real problem. When we presume that value exists in moral ambiguity alone rather than in the object of moral ambiguity within a text—that is, what topic is made to be ambiguous—we are ignoring both the range of emotionally charged interpretations such narratives produce and the responsibility of storytellers to choose precisely what is to be made ambiguous in narrative emphasis.<sup>45</sup> As Stuart Joy sees it:

Similar depictions of abusive behaviour in other popular longform U.S. dramas such as the attempted rape of Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies) in *The Walking Dead* and the rape of Joan (Christina Hendricks) in *Mad Men* also deny survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence their full complexity as human beings and their experiences at the expense of an emphasis on male protagonists.<sup>46</sup>

Even if one were to take issue with Joy’s examples, we could surely list others from, for instance, HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) or *Westworld* (2016–).<sup>47</sup> These politics of narrative emphasis, whereby the consequences for survivors are of secondary interest to the narrative of the aggressor, are part of the mechanism that produces moral ambiguity in such series, as sexual assault is always depicted as morally bad, yet our primary interest in (and sometimes allegiance to) the perpetrator remains presumed and must be negotiated or justified if we are to keep enjoying the show. Awareness of the concessions we are making as spectators produces a moral conflict. But this conflict is ultimately about ourselves and our relation to art; as spousal abuse remains a problem of globally epidemic

<sup>44</sup> Vaage, *The Antihero*, 169.

<sup>45</sup> In fact, Emily Nussbaum coined the term “bad fans” partially in response to these issues in *Breaking Bad* fan culture. Emily Nussbaum, “The Great Divide: Norman Lear, Archie Bunker, and the Rise of the Bad Fan,” *New Yorker*, April 7, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/04/07/the-great-divide-emily-nussbaum>.

<sup>46</sup> Stuart Joy, “Sexual Violence in Serial Form: *Breaking Bad* Habits on TV,” *Feminist Media Studies* (2017), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14680777.2017.1396484>.

<sup>47</sup> Kim Wilkins, “These Violent Delights: Navigating *Westworld* as ‘Quality’ Television,” in *Reading “Westworld,”* ed. Alex Goody and Antonia Mackay (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 23–41.

proportions, we should be able to ask what problems are produced if not in the moral *prescription* of these shows, then in the narrative *emphases* they craft that provide a guide for later moralizing (which no narrative media can avoid).<sup>48</sup> Art that is enriching for its appreciator is not necessarily ethical: this is a founding principle of the present book, and the issue is explored further in my first case study (Chapter 4), which takes scenes of sexual abuse in David Lynch's films as a starting point, while medium-specific problems in television are explored further in Chapter 7, "TV as Bully."

### Ethics in Film Philosophy

The prevailing narrative of cognitive media theory is that it emerged in response to the lyrical excesses of prior philosophies of film, and in particular the unfalsifiable claims of psychoanalysis and poststructuralist perspectives on cinema.<sup>49</sup> Film philosophy had its own discourses on ethics that the cognitivists would later respond to; the history of screen media ethics, however, has thus far been closely aligned with the more entrenched lineage of film ontology, and at times the two have been taken to signify the same thing. Much of what has been termed "cine-ethics" in the past refers to the application of poststructural (and mostly French) authorial voices to screen studies, and many subsequent treatises on cinema ethics, taking their cues from film philosophy, drift seamlessly from metaethics into ontology, perhaps as these are the building blocks a history of ontically oriented philosophy has furnished us with.<sup>50</sup> For instance, the introduction to Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey's *Cine-Ethics*, surveying the contributions of major theorists Alain Badiou, Emmanuel Levinas, D. N. Rodowick, Vivian Sobchack, and others, almost entirely concerns two areas that have dominated film theory but that I consider spuriously ethical: ontology and the epistemics of perception.<sup>51</sup> They write that this tradition of "ethics" in film philosophy "reconfigures the traditional range of ethical issues by assuming the tasks that once belonged to ontology and epistemology."<sup>52</sup> Because human ethics arise from our beliefs, so runs the argument, addressing the nature of belief is at the same time attending to the concerns of ethics. Consider, for instance, Badiou's conviction that ethics "should concern the destiny of truths," that it is constituted by "truth-seeking" or

<sup>48</sup> "Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women," *UN Women*, August 2017, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>.

<sup>49</sup> In particular, Noël Carroll, *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

<sup>50</sup> See Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethics*; Asbjørn Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> Choi and Frey, *Cine-Ethics*, 1–14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

pursuit of the “ethics of a truth,” by which he means a faithful conceptualization of factually particularized situations rather than corrupting abstract thoughts—a distinction between perceptions that, it seems to me, could benefit from the rigors of cognitive intervention.<sup>53</sup> Consider, too, that which Sinnerbrink calls Gilles Deleuze’s “crises of belief,” perhaps the most epistemic of all film ethics, or even Emmanuel Levinas’s metaphysical “transcendence” of the individual through their social responsiveness to the other that sublimates the ethicopolitical potentials of other-directed thinking within metaphysical considerations of self-identity, “holiness,” “intelligibility” of a (noncinematic) *mise-en-scène* as “the reconstitution of any object or notion,” and esoteric concepts of *time*.<sup>54</sup> These are what Downing and Saxton call “the irreconcilable contradictions between [Levinas’s] other-oriented ethics and the reorientation towards the self”; that is, the *ought* questions of ethics ultimately take place within, and are sublimated by, the *is* definitions of selfhood.<sup>55</sup> Although I do see much to value in Levinas’s consideration of face-to-face encounters and other-directed thinking, the ethical substance of such metaphysics is far too often presumed.<sup>56</sup>

My purpose here, however, is not to offer a comprehensive history of these debates; many prior works on film ethics have already achieved as much.<sup>57</sup> It is simply to show how the cognitively aware, normative screen media ethics advocated in this volume diverges from the metaethical fixations of film philosophy. Foremost, I want to make the case that there is an important difference between assertions that belief and morality are mutually reliant (which, of course, they are) and the *de facto* treatment by some film theorists of philosophic questions in ontology, epistemology, and ethics as one and the same (they are not). We must not take the relation between a spectator’s concepts of *is* and *ought* to license our own conflation of *is* and *ought*. This distinction is an important one, as relinquishing the conflation of these philosophies with ethics may encourage theorists to address new lines of ethical questioning relevant to current media

<sup>53</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 3; Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, trans. Susan Spritzer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 54; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), *passim*; Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 181, 180; Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 158.

<sup>55</sup> Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethics*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> It was Levinas’s view that Western philosophy “has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same,” but in *Writing and Difference*, Derrida suggests that it is precisely this reduction of the other to a metaphysics of the self that Levinas’s own theoretical project achieves. Levinas, *Totality*, 43; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>57</sup> As well as Sinnerbrink, see Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethics*; Choi and Frey, *Cine-Ethics*; and Ward E. Jones, “Philosophy and the Ethical Significance of Spectatorship,” in *Ethics at the Cinema*, ed. Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

landscapes rather than to rehash old ontic debates.<sup>58</sup> It is why, in my view, many ethics of narrative and media have thus far simply not been ethical enough—they render ethics meaningless, rolled into other terms of older discussions, interested somewhat brutishly only in what *is* and not what *could be*, thereby licensing the philosopher to revisit familiar ground under the currency of the terms of ethical discourse.

For example, Rodowick writes that “judgments advanced—in history, criticism, or philosophy—in the absence of qualitative assessments of our epistemological commitments are ill-advised.”<sup>59</sup> For Rodowick, epistemology retains a primacy such that its queries must come first for proper ethical work to be done. Rodowick insists that because ethics is bound in epistemology and they can never truly be disengaged, the question “what is cinema?” remains central, one that must be answered before we ask who is affected by cinema, by what means, and how it might change.<sup>60</sup> But as cinema innovates and changes all the time, keeping ontic and epistemic lines of questioning healthy and alive, it is difficult to see how this dogma will ever permit a place where applied ethical work can be adequately performed; the primacy of epistemic questions is revealed as a smokescreen that constrains ethical questions by sublimating them within the terms of a debate film philosophers are more comfortable with, with its millennia’s worth of appeals to former authorities. The problem is not that Rodowick insists upon a dialectical “ancient concern for balancing epistemological inquiry with ethical evaluation”; it is that the place of epistemology is much more clearly articulated in his works, such that any possible ethical deliberation is overwhelmed by it.<sup>61</sup> Despite Rodowick’s view, “what is cinema?” is a markedly different question than “what should we do with cinema?” and while of course we need to begin our ethics from *some* understanding of the media we approach, we should not need to resolve inherently unresolvable epistemic questions in order to ask ethical ones.

It is also a mistake to assume that beliefs rehearsed in media (including reflexive thought about others) have intrinsic ethical value without expounding the felt effects of private belief upon others in the world (which is what would make that belief truly ethically dynamic); just as we can hold all manner of beliefs that are completely amoral, the many kinds of temporary “belief” spectators can apply to a fictive diegesis might have little to do with moral or political

<sup>58</sup> As Laurence Kent argues, metaphysical lines of inquiry drawn from a Deleuzian ethics tend to describe the world in more deterministic terms, forfeiting articulation of an agency that perhaps is more *fit for purpose* for today’s challenges of political responsibility. Laurence Kent, “Nihilism on the Metaphysical Screen: The Fate of Gilles Deleuze’s Cinematic Ethics,” *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* 11 (2019): 27–41.

<sup>59</sup> D. N. Rodowick, “An Elegy for Theory,” *October* 122 (2007): 92.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

convictions they hold outside of media engagement. As many have pointed out, relationships between belief and judgments made about a real world and belief and judgments made within a diegesis are complex; one does not uncomplicatedly signify the other, as we draw upon a different range of epistemic resources in each scenario.<sup>62</sup> For instance, audiences can have generous thoughts during engagement with fiction that they later fail to act upon, precisely because fiction calls for minimal resources and little sacrifice on behalf of participants.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, there is now ample evidence that generous thoughts *can* migrate between fictive and nonfictive worlds, so the challenge is to isolate the conditions under which that migration becomes more rather than less likely.<sup>64</sup> The articulation of moral consequences in worlds outside of cinema, which itself could be construed as a series of hypothetical thought experiments, is precisely what is missing from so many of the debates within cinema ethics; philosophers that roll ontics into ethics have simply failed to extend themselves to the properly ethical component of their inquiry, remaining at the foundations of thought experiment without exploring later, more evaluable, active consequences.<sup>65</sup> So the fact that narratives are, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, “never ethically neutral,” and every action taken has ethical dynamism, does not mean that whatever question we ask in media philosophy, we are always addressing ourselves to an ethical problem.<sup>66</sup> Hannah Meretoja perhaps puts it the most simply when she writes, “What we take to be ‘real’ affects our stance on the ethical value of storytelling,” and thus ontology and ethics can never be properly separated.<sup>67</sup> While this is true—again, belief and ethics are not divorceable, as what we believe affects how we behave—the concerns that any thinker can conduct their attention toward have real differences.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>62</sup> George Wilson, *Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

<sup>63</sup> Meretoja, *The Ethics*, 4; Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4; George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays, 1958–1966* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 15.

<sup>64</sup> John H. Lichter and David W. Johnson, “Changes in Attitudes Toward Negroes of White Elementary School Students After Use of Multiethnic Readers,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 60, no. 2 (1969): 148–152; Phyllis A. Katz and Sue R. Zalk, “Modification of Children’s Racial Attitudes,” *Developmental Psychology* 14, no. 5 (1978): 447–461.

<sup>65</sup> Choi and Frey also address cognitive media ethics, arguing that “cognitivist interests are narrower in that they have often focused on character engagement as inflected by narrative structure.” Here they recognize a cinematic formalism (presumably inherited from David Bordwell’s influential union of formalist and cognitivist approaches) that informs many cognitive accounts of moral engagement, although the field appears to me to be much richer and open to potential extensions than presented here. Choi and Frey, *Cine-Ethics*, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blarney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 140.

<sup>67</sup> Meretoja, *The Ethics*, 31.

<sup>68</sup> The relationship between belief and behavior is also indirect, so treating them as uncomplicatedly causal can be unhelpful. For instance, longitudinal media studies have found that belief and values drawn from media can conflict quite markedly with an individual’s behavior, as other factors, including social norms, are at times more influential than personal beliefs. Elizabeth Levy Paluck,

As we have seen, the road from *is* to *ought* is indirect; without a bridge between the two claims, we arrive at a naturalistic fallacy. Social Darwinism, for instance, is a morally impoverished conflation of *is* and *ought*: the stronger survive, ergo they should survive; and this conflation leads to other moral positions, including that we have an obligation to help the strong survive and not support the weak, as we are then on the side of nature's divine will. Just as this conflation is problematic in moral judgment, so too is it questionable in discussions of film and narrative media. To confuse epistemic or ontic questions with ethical ones permits philosophers the means to ignore implicit principles they hold that bridge the two; it is bad reasoning, as it keeps its normativity silent.

Perhaps, too, it is precisely this conflation of philosophic and spectatorial inquiries that compels a reliance on the redemptive qualities of "opening discourse" on the ethics of filmmakers and the genre languages they use, which again warrants an inwardly focused paradigm of moral evaluation. As such, in the remainder of the volume on *Cine-Ethics* (alongside, it must be said, many scintillating ethical conversations), *Borat* (Larry Charles, 2006) is presented as ethically dynamic because it calls into question our conceptions of documentary and mockumentary film practice and its social uses; extreme cinema is important because we question its categorizability and worth as art; and burgeoning self-reflexivity and intertextuality in Iranian cinema foregrounds questions of filmmaking practice in political contexts figured as "other."<sup>69</sup> But this is often circular logic, as the ethics apply only to the product, so if the product did not exist nor would our need for the ethics. It also values contributions films can make to scholarly discourse above those films' effects on others in the world, perhaps respondent to "the context of university environments where the emphasis increasingly is on providing evidence of the *value* of scholarly efforts to society, preferably through various forms of knowledge transfer."<sup>70</sup> Consequently, the insular ethics such cinema apparently directs us toward cannot be applied in the way Hjort calls for in her chapter on the potential to extend the moral language of cinema into social programs of mutual benefit, using a perceptive case study on filmic depictions of nature.<sup>71</sup> Cinema ethicists should be aware of exactly what subject their moral attention is being directed toward: the ethics of a filmmaker (and often, thereby, the filmmaker's celebrity status as provocateur) or the workings of a world we have some interactivity with. Filmic screen stories

"Reducing Intergroup Prejudice and Conflict Using the Media: A Field Experiment in Rwanda," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 3 (2009): 574–587.

<sup>69</sup> Choi and Frey, *Cine-Ethics*, 96–110, 143–192, 125–142; see also Maggie Hennefeld Baer, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen, eds., *Unwatchable* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

<sup>70</sup> Hjort, "Community Engagement," 195.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*



can point our moral thoughts inward to the film or outward to the world, and the ethics of film philosophy have long favored the former, under the assumption that rumination on the nature of belief in narrative media while a spectator engages with that media will make a more ethical person—which also, as it happens, is the very work of the philosopher.

Hjort's more normative work keenly points out the problems in a lack of goal-oriented prescriptive ethics in both filmmaking and scholarly work, whereby the persona and interests of the scholar or filmmaker supersede any attendance to the problems of the communities each represents. Citing documents from the human rights video training organization WITNESS, Hjort notes that "activism requires effective thinking about the desired effects of cinematic interventions and about how best to achieve them," and if this is a key lesson for activist filmmakers, it should be important, too, for writers who imagine their work as being in any way politically or ethically impactful.<sup>72</sup> Using as a point of analysis Michael Klint's 2004 semi-ethnographic documentary, *Get a Life*, and the academic response to that film, Hjort notes the narcissism of projects that appear activist but lack any prescriptive goal beyond feelings of guilt: "for what matters at the end of the day is the rule-governed cinematic experiment for its own sake and its vague connection to a putative virtue role for the filmmakers."<sup>73</sup> Likewise, the value of "opening discourse" as a moral end in itself can be a kind of hedging, an easier moral evaluation to make, as more conversation can never be strictly wrong in the same way actions or convictions can; however, moral openness is not necessarily more valuable in narrative than moral conclusions, and we still need ethical narratives of quotidian relevance that have the possibility of pragmatic application, so that we can discuss, critique, deny, or endorse courses of action.<sup>74</sup>

These, I believe, are the siloed results of a film philosophy protecting well-worn preoccupations that offer no real risk. But true normative ethics involves risk and vulnerability. I am not advocating polemic here, but in fact a further rigor, for fellow philosophers in the field of media studies to go one step further and draw conclusions from our findings, which are so often absent. At the same time, many of the philosophers so often cited in cinema ethics are laudably concerned with the rigors of self-examination; but that self-examination points to a self-contained system of fascination with one's own thoughts during media engagement, not how those thoughts connect to impacts on the world. Normative conclusions involve risk, as they make clear a philosopher's reasoned

<sup>72</sup> Hjort, "Guilt-Based Filmmaking," 11.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> We might note, too, that encouraging "more discussion" of the science of climate change has been one strategy by which coal lobbies could prolong global prevarication while avoiding ethical scrutiny; perhaps there are scenarios in which more discussion is unethical.



commitments, thereby making them more vulnerable to counterclaims. There is a useful vulnerability in laying down an argument in terrain that does not defer to spaces in which the logical argumentation and proofs-by-proxy humanities practitioners are trained in reveal their limits, in which an argument is unmoored from claims that an author can be right or wrong, that is not about verifying the facts of the world but about asking how to act upon that which the theorist would establish as factual. What we might recover from Levinas is his insistence on *prioritizing* the concerns of others whom we may not identify as akin to ourselves and, thus, in beginning from ethics of mutual care and working conversely outward to ontologies of identity; and from the Cavellian ethical mode, a faith in cinema and story as the grounds for “testing” moral ideals (and modifying our perfectionisms, the ethical future we are aiming toward).<sup>75</sup> These are two access points for a vulnerable, future-thinking ethics that posits likelihoods and solutions for better and more responsive living with others, but is willing to see those likelihoods and solutions debunked with relevant evidence and counterargument. Cine-ethics contains a range of observations extended from such formative positions that are at times sensitive and at others nonsensical; my purpose here is not to set up a monograph investigating such claims, but to show how my concerns depart markedly from the film philosophy tradition.

### Phenomenology and Cognition

Cognitive media studies, together with phenomenology and various strands of audience studies, moved the interests of film philosophy from ontology and belief to positions that sought to understand the spectator’s experience, rather than militating against certain types of response or ignoring phenomenal experience entirely. Affective engagements, embodied cognition, social distributions of memory and perception, autonomic responses, and related intuitionist approaches to moral reasoning brought back into focus the problem of moral autonomy, referring as they did to a reactivity that seemed intrinsic to spectatorship rather than agential choices made by an individual engaged with media. Although they share a focal area, however, the language of both phenomenology and cognitive science pointed to different commitments. In the past, cognitivism and phenomenology have been seen as incompatible, even antagonistic.<sup>76</sup> Phenomenology can be conceived as inherently subjectivist, often taking

<sup>75</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987); Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink, “Guest Editor’s Introduction: Phenomenology Encounters Cognitivism,” *Projections* 13, no. 2 (2019): 1–19.

people's expressions of their experiences to accurately reflect those experiences and acknowledging that entire worlds, although experienced as objective, change in infinite human variations of a sense of being; as Sobchack puts it, "The subjective lived body and the objective world do not oppose each other but, on the contrary, are passionately intertwined."<sup>77</sup> Cognitivism in contrast is thought to favor top-down stabilizing generalizations of experience in its emphasis on empiric investigation and scientifically informed methodologies. While these differences are crucial, in media theory the two paradigms share some commonalities as well: foremost, they both value explanations of spectatorial experience and are invested in language that may elaborate perceptual and sensorial media engagement. The cognitive vocabulary could be considered more computational, however, in obverse to the lyrical bent of phenomenologists like Sobchack, retaining a foot in the metaphysical camp of prior film philosophy. Sobchack blurs distinctions that, similarly to film philosophies before her, craft mixed metaphors from media engagement: the subject and object are "reversible"; the cinema screen and the body are similarly made of flesh, as everything in the world is flesh and thereby the cinema is a body; sense and perception and the external world are all, somehow, combined because they share grounding in material "existence" (most film phenomenologists would probably object to their convictions being labeled metaphors, although I cannot think of a better way to express the ontic game of blurred distinctions between abstract and material categories).<sup>78</sup> The ethics here is that mutuality entails responsibility, and screen media's inherent intersubjectivity has the capacity to bring our awareness to this fact. That is, if "the inseparability of perception from the perceiver, of object from subject" is the crucial intersubjectivity defining media engagement, then intersubjectivity is a kind of fusing where our interests might be aligned with those of another.<sup>79</sup>

For some phenomenologists the shared contemplations on sense and perception are enough to bridge methodological differences between their own expressive excursions and the cognitive pursuit of stable properties from which to build predictable "models" of human experience. Both Stadler and Sinnerbrink insist that this accord is not necessarily inherent in the two disciplines but that crafting an associative consensus is *work* to be performed by future theory.<sup>80</sup> To others,

<sup>77</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Stadler, *Pulling Focus*, 56.

<sup>80</sup> This work could be conceived as having begun in the 1940s with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's naturalized phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Milton Park: Routledge, [1945] 2014); cf. Jean Petitot, Francisco J. Varela, Bernard Pachoud, and Jean-Michel Roy, eds., *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

however, the methods and language of social science, which seeks stabilizing replicables if not universals of human experience as foundations from which to proceed, might diminish the myriad possibilities of that experience taken to be encapsulated within the poetic flights of fancy of much phenomenological discourse. While the language and, to a lesser extent, the methods of cognitive science and phenomenology pull them in different directions, I also believe that their founding propositions can be harmonious. We can accept that what one experiences and believes constitutes one's lifeworld and that this in turn obliges close study of how we sense and perceive through embodied experiences. At the same time we can concede that it is fruitful to this task of understanding phenomenal experience—what *precisely* is similar and dissimilar in the experiences of various humans feeling through the world—to study commonalities in senses and perceptions by observing what aspects of them can be replicated across multiple subjects in multiple contexts (the remit of social science).

Phenomenology's metaethical claim that cinema can be the grounds of inter-responsibility as it fuses object and subject, viewer and viewed is, as in other fields of film philosophy, much more clearly defined than some of its evaluative claims, which are made more implicitly.<sup>81</sup> If there is value to be found in the cinema, to a phenomenologist it may lie in "accurately describing the experience of perceiving" using cinematic means.<sup>82</sup> Much film phenomenology also shares with its antecedents the suspicion that classical narrative and realist formats covertly "cover the film's perceptual tracks" to make ideology invisible.<sup>83</sup> This entails an obverse possibility whereby, as Stadler puts it, "film has the advantage to show us *how* we see, whereas in life we are only able to see *what* we see."<sup>84</sup> Reflexivity still holds pride of place, but here it is enlisted to focus spectators inward to interrogate their own perceptual processes rather than, as with many former theorists, outward to politics in the world. On the whole, cognitive and phenomenological literatures both tend to reduce ethics to further articulation of human perceptive faculties and the modes of alignment and evaluation they might entail. As Choi and Frey write, "Perceptual and sensorial engagement with film is considered ethical in and of itself," and even where ethics are addressed, they remain at this descriptive level, offering rereadings of the metaethics of perceptual and sensorial engagement.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>81</sup> The central claim is similar, then, to other ontologies of film that point out that as we live the images we see, they are inseparable from life and ergo have the same ethical currency as any lived experience; see, for instance, Grønstad, *Film and the Ethical*.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>83</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Address of the Eye* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 227.

<sup>84</sup> Stadler, *Pulling Focus*, 6.

<sup>85</sup> Choi and Frey, *Cine-Ethics*, 1.

A “phenomenological approach to film [that] offers a way of describing the inherently selective, evaluative nature of perception” is still describing evaluative processes rather than performing them.<sup>86</sup> Metaethics of this kind are obviously vital groundwork to any prescriptive extensions, as any more prescriptive ethics must take into account a reasonable view of human moral tendencies and capabilities—but I still feel that this is the entrée to further work, work that asks what to then do with all of our information about perception and sensory experience. I think we can do more, and I think we in fact have a responsibility to more directly broach normative questions rather than simply explain, time and again, how people *perceive* film and other media, morally or otherwise. If we do not address these more applied questions, we sacrifice forms of prescriptive reasoning to the moral language of other discursively strident media: perhaps alt-right YouTube rants, social media trolls, or the powerful conglomerates that feed self-interested moral talking points into our everyday media.<sup>87</sup> And so far, this approach has not gone well. Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis write that these prescriptive narratives in everyday media

are difficult to defeat through rational argumentation. What is now sometimes characterized as the “post-truth” world is one in which narrative plays an ever-more important, ever-more conflicted role. All one can do, it seems, is tell a better story.<sup>88</sup>

If it is true that the logos of a rational argumentation traditionally thought of as the domain of the political is more impotent now than ever, Meretoja and Davis suggest here, then we can only use the same emotive resources that storytelling provides to proffer a restorative alternative, with a different, more positive impact. At the very least, I argue, as humanities scholars we should commit ourselves to the more evaluative objectives that our science and philosophy have prepared us for. We should not conceal this most important act of discerning “better stories” behind a veil of noncommittal, hedging professionalism, lingering on the safer ground of ontology and metaethics, or works of definition and description of perceptual processes that are much easier to be decisive about, that will fortify the image of the unimpeachable, individual expert against the untruths of the popular media world. There is simply too much at stake. After centuries of research making a strong case for the prevalent power abuses media and narration are capable of facilitating, we had better come up with an alternative.

<sup>86</sup> Stadler, *Pulling Focus*, 60.

<sup>87</sup> Research on these aspects of online media is reviewed in Chapter 8.

<sup>88</sup> Hanna Meretoja and Colin Davis, eds., *Storytelling and Ethics Literature, Visual Arts and the Power of Narrative* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 8.

## Ethics and the Narrative Turn

Despite the misapprehensions of Stam and others that cognitive media theory universalizes interpretive acts, and thereby offers no new resources for furthering individual readings of texts, hermeneutic tendencies have been a constant since its beginnings.<sup>89</sup> They can be traced back to Bordwell and Carroll's insistence on a bottom-up approach to reading film, treating each text as separate rather than shoehorning large oeuvres into a grand theory—to let the films do the talking.<sup>90</sup> We might presume, then, that if each text is specific, the potential effects of each text will be specific, and each text can be read and evaluated separately, too. As Plantinga puts it, in ethical analysis “the impact of screen stories must be determined on a case-by-case basis.”<sup>91</sup> This is where hermeneutics can assist to counter the problems of naturalistic overgeneralization. My own work, both in *Narrative Humanism* and in the ensuing chapters of the present book, owes much to both literary and narrative ethics, with a set of concerns that screen media ethics is in some ways continuous with and in other ways diverges from. One of the qualities I borrow from literary theory is the emphasis on hermeneutics as a means to uncover the specific moral resonances of each story. Works of sustained metaethics in cognitive and phenomenological media and cinema studies, such as those of Plantinga, Sinnerbrink, and Stadler, do indeed use textual readings to make their points, but as with the theories those readings are intended to illuminate, the analyses err toward explanatory work in offering examples of how spectators might respond to moral cues, and the readings are not, on the whole, so interested in moral appraisal. On occasion these analyses do have an implied evaluative discourse in their descriptions of the “use” of screen stories (for instance, if films help define moral language or inspire moral reflexivity, choosing one film as an example might imply that it is better at providing this service than other films), but they rarely set out to make normative or prescriptive arguments rather than describe how this process operates.

This book borrows from both literary hermeneutics and the narrative turn in literary theory that sought to demonstrate how storytelling undergirds human sense-making cognitions, and explore the ways in which fictions can fuse with the other internal narratives by which we live our lives. Theorists of the narrative turn, such as Wayne C. Booth and Kenneth Burke, often come under fire for a perceived overly affirmative outlook on the inherent benefits of storytelling.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Stam, *Film Theory*, 246.

<sup>90</sup> David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, eds., *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

<sup>91</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 95.

<sup>92</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

For critics like Galen Strawson, the narrative theorists are guilty of two mutually supportive suppositions: that a sense of self is always narratively grounded and that narrating is an inherent good.<sup>93</sup> The latter position in particular has inspired much critique, associated as it is with Martha Nussbaum's claim that fiction's call to perspective-taking inherently becomes generalizable to empathic care for others in the world.<sup>94</sup> Yet the reactions against a more humanistic narrativity, often hinging upon objections to Nussbaum's notion of a "narrative imagination," have provided us with another unworkable ethic.<sup>95</sup> When Strawson writes, "The more you recall, retell, narrate yourself, the further you risk moving away from accurate self-understanding, from the truth of your being," a truer, reachable externality beyond human memory is presumed.<sup>96</sup> But what is the alternative to accessing a "truth of our being" outside of self-narration, beyond the reformulations and retellings of autobiographical memory? As Meretoja points out, Strawson relies "on a hierarchical dichotomy between living and telling, based on the assumption that there is a pure or raw experience on which narrative retrospectively imposes order. Narrative then easily appears as a projection of false order, or as a distortion of the original experiences of events."<sup>97</sup> Theorists like Strawson, who is famously skeptical of all-encompassing narrative and identity theories, need to make certain they are not proffering an alternative that simply does not exist—not simply autobiographical memory without episodic recall, but a self- and social-knowledge that is "enhanced" by disengagement from episodic reminiscence—under a banner of opposition to the alleged reductive sentimentality of the narrative turn.<sup>98</sup> In neuropsychology, we might note that a loss of episodic memory is, in fact, one potential feature of Alzheimer's dementia.<sup>99</sup> A semantification of autobiography can sometimes lead to what researchers note as an out-of-date self-knowledge. Such changes in no way constitute a loss of self, so Strawson is correct in one respect that a *less* narrativized selfhood is possible, but certainly should not be considered a "truer" self; in fact, notions of a "truer" selfhood that is violated by changes in recall are precisely the problem much research into cognitive decline has sought to

<sup>93</sup> Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* 17, no. 4 (2004): 428–452.

<sup>94</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Strawson, "Against Narrativity," 447. This fundamental dualism, of ordered autobiography/disordered truth, informs Strawson's thesis and his examples—yet in Strawson's demonstrative attempts to unmoor his own sense of self from any manner of continuous narrative, the introspective example he includes could be construed as narratively grounded.

<sup>97</sup> Meretoja, *The Ethics*, 8.

<sup>98</sup> Brian Levine et al., "Aging and Autobiographical Memory: Dissociating Episodic from Semantic Retrieval," *Psychology and Aging* 17, no. 4 (2002): 677–689.

<sup>99</sup> Stanley B. Klein, Leda Cosmides, and Kristi A. Costabile, "Preserved Knowledge of Self in a Case of Alzheimer's Dementia," *Social Cognition* 21, no. 2 (2003): 157–165.

intervene against.<sup>100</sup> Many researchers now recognize the complex bidirectional and codependent relations between episodic and semantic memory that mediate trait self-knowledge and identity, and point to its uses in past, present, and future thinking.<sup>101</sup> Contrary to Strawson's claims, accurate trait self-knowledge with limited episodic recall restricts opportunities for subjective reflection on aspects of one's identity;<sup>102</sup> studies of acquired brain injury also suggest that dissociations between episodic and semantic memory impair the ability to anticipate and plan for future events (that is, auto-noetic consciousness supports future thinking).<sup>103</sup>

On the whole I agree with the narrative theorists that autobiographical memories are narratively grounded, and patterns of conscious reasoning about the world and how it works are narratively grounded, too, and indeed that this is all that is possible for us to do in reasoning through our experiences (rather than simply *knowing* them). This does not entail inherent misrepresentation of a nebulous external truth (which we will never have access to), nor an inherent moral character (or lack thereof) to self-narration in its recollective refractions, but it does mean we have a responsibility to think through the ways in which self-understanding compels us to act in the world, and how narrative media connects to autobiographical self-narratives to inform those behavioral scripts, what memory researchers call the "directive function" of autobiography.<sup>104</sup> The relations between media narratives and life narratives, and their directive implications for ethics, are fleshed out in Chapter 3.

The current trend in the face of hostility toward the narrative turn's optimism is to emphasize, as do theorists such as Meretoja, that storytelling behaviors and the narrative modes of thought they inspire can have both good and bad effects, that narration involves both risk and reward. Although these reminders are clearly respondent to the notion that fiction's intrinsic empathy-building and perspective-taking will inevitably generalize to marginalized others in the world, the point that there can be harmful as much as helpful stories still seems redundant to me. If we accept that narrative can help hone a mutual moral language, imagination, or perspective-awareness, it does not follow that there are, ergo, no

<sup>100</sup> Cherie Strikwerda-Brown et al., "All Is Not Lost: Rethinking the Nature of Memory and the Self in Dementia," *Ageing Research Reviews* 54 (2019): 1–11.

<sup>101</sup> Catherine Haslam et al., "I Remember Therefore I Am, and I Am Therefore I Remember: Exploring the Contributions of Episodic and Semantic Self-Knowledge to Strength of Identity," *British Journal of Psychology* 102, no. 2 (2011): 184–203; Mark A. Wheeler, Donald T. Stuss, and Endel Tulving, "Toward a Theory of Episodic Memory: The Frontal Lobes and Auto-noetic Consciousness," *Psychological Bulletin* 121, no. 3 (1997): 331.

<sup>102</sup> Stanley B. Klein, Renee L. Chan, and Judith Loftus, "Independence of Episodic and Semantic Self-Knowledge: The Case from Autism," *Social Cognition* 17, no. 4 (1999): 413–436.

<sup>103</sup> Stanley B. Klein, Judith Loftus, and John F. Kihlstrom, "Memory and Temporal Experience: The Effects of Episodic Memory Loss on an Amnesic Patient's Ability to Remember the Past and Imagine the Future," *Social Cognition* 20, no. 5 (2002): 353–379.

<sup>104</sup> Susan Bluck and Nicole Alea, "Crafting the TALE: Construction of a Measure to Assess the Functions of Autobiographical Remembering," *Memory* 19, no. 5 (2011): 470–486.



harmful narratives, and even so, why would we be drawn to delineate a narrative ethics if all stories were equally beneficial?<sup>105</sup> I sense a strawman in many of these debates in narratology. The choice to focus on the ethical benefits of narration rather than its shortcomings is simply one way to emphasize potentialities, to move beyond naturalizing claims of the way stories are, to project how they could be, and to put front and center the most important question: *how do we change?* In works like Nussbaum's *Not for Profit*, I read, in fact, Meretoja's cherished "sense of the possible," a suggestion for how we might harness narrative's power to embed itself in patterns of thought and improve our relations, not any suggestion that this occurs in a space belonging to all narrative rather than human agency.<sup>106</sup> When philosophers and social scientists make a few tentative steps toward articulating some of the many good things that story *can* do, there seem to be many waiting in the wings to point out that story does not always achieve as much: the imaginative, normative claim of what *could be* is once more seized by the more powerful, naturalized claim of what simply *is* (perhaps this suggests yet another competitive compulsion born of any milieu of professionalized intellectual labor).

It seems to me that surely some kinds of stories we tell ourselves can encourage us to act kindly toward others or to take responsibility for privileges. In fact, entire movements such as #Metoo and Black Lives Matter are founded on the notion that the narratives we tell ourselves about who we are, who matters, and what is acceptable can change our behavior for the better. If the personal stories told in these movements or the fictions inspired by them are not futile, as I believe they are not, then we should study what makes some more effective than others. So I want to move away from stale polarizations staking a claim on narrative activities as inherently good or bad, or even taking the middle road and stating the evident conclusion that narration involves both potential and risk (which I am sure most theorists fundamentally agree with anyway), and ask: how does this ethical substance of narrative actually work, and ergo, what narratives *ought* we tell? And if it is not our responsibility to make *ought* claims, then whom does it rest with? The following chapter outlines a consequentialist framework to ground an answer to these questions.

<sup>105</sup> See in particular Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 108–109.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*; Meretoja, *The Ethics*, 90.



## A Humanistic Consequentialism for Film and Media Studies

It seems incumbent upon any text declaring a foray into normative ethics to indicate, at the outset, a consistent ethical framework or set of values that will be carried through its argumentation. Before I articulate my own consequentialist framework, however, I would like to clarify one of the more metaethically descriptive positions of this book: that in both private moral sense-making and public discourse, people tend to draw upon various ethical frameworks as resources in moral reasoning, and these frameworks, when diversified, tend not to be consistent with one another.<sup>1</sup> In any moral argument, that is, one might make a case drawing upon utilitarian, virtue, deontological, or rights-based principles together, rather than choose one framework and follow it through.

Let us take, for example, some of the inconsistencies around recent media campaigns opposing marriage equality in Australia. As with all campaigns aimed at conserving historic discriminatory legal standards that bar queer-identifying people from freedoms enjoyed by the majority, virtue ethics is the bedrock on which other arguments are built: that homosexuality, or any so-called deviant sexuality, is a vice and that maintaining the relational standards of a presumed sexual normalcy is a virtue. This ethical presumption has underscored all past arguments against gay rights. As it points to immovable virtues rather than negotiable consequences, it is a kind of deontology, and as deontology tends to be grounded in person-centered emotional reasoning rather than inaugurating the possibility of a shared logical reasoning, it can be difficult to mount an argument against.<sup>2</sup> However, the position from queer sexualities as inherent vice has also become a more difficult argument to make as these phobic campaigns have faced a growing acceptance of diverse sexual identities in the populace they are intended to address—perhaps due to the growing presence of positive portrayals of diverse sexuality in media.<sup>3</sup> In Australia, substantial changes over time in

<sup>1</sup> This argument finds support in Luc Boltanski and Larent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Joshua D. Greene, “The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul,” in *Moral Psychology*, vol. 3, *The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain Disorders, and Development*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 35–80.

<sup>3</sup> For a good discussion of this phenomenon: Shankar Vedantam et al., “Radically Normal: How Gay Rights Activists Changed the Minds of Their Opponents,” *Hidden Brain*, April 8, 2019, <https://>

the majority sentiment have initiated a significant challenge to fundamental virtue ethics that in turn forced an equally significant diversification of moral arguments made by those opposed to gay freedoms. One of the key interjections that the Australian Christian Lobby introduced to replace its more foundational virtue ethics is an assertion of their “religious freedoms.”<sup>4</sup> Religious freedoms were intended to be pitted against the freedoms being claimed by those who were campaigning for same-sex marriage: that it is an infringement upon institutions and people of faith to legally oblige them to offer conjugal services (and for some, scholastic services) to those who are and should be excluded on the grounds of theistic tradition and belief. That is, the right to discriminate who one provides one’s services to is pitted against the right not to be discriminated against. This move was clearly a political co-opting of the same terminology of human rights inherited from the minority being persecuted, and it has gained perhaps the most significant traction; at the time of writing, “religious freedoms” continue to be used to justify moral positions in Australian parliamentary deliberation.<sup>5</sup>

But the campaign further diversified its argumentation from here, with another significant piece of moral reasoning reliant on arguments from the “slippery slope.” If same-sex couples can marry, so runs this particular contention, unrelated sexual acts—such as bestiality and child abuse—may also become legal or normalized as a result.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the probable outcomes of same-sex marriage listed by South Australian senator and Australian Conservatives party leader Cory Bernardi include “lowering the age at which people can marry, multiple-partner marriages and even advocacy for the legalisation of bestiality.”<sup>7</sup> The argument from the slippery slope refers to deferred consequences that will produce later harms. Any claim that the greater consequences of an action, in terms of proliferated suffering, outweigh its current benefits, in terms of overall human happiness, contains a utilitarian appeal. Similarly, the very nature of the appeal to “think of the children” who are exposed to deviant sexuality in media throughout these debates is a kind of utilitarianism, in that it makes a case for a present suffering in the community that might overwhelm any positive gains made by those who will be free to marry their loved one at a later date. So here we already see one campaign drawing on a diversity of ethical frameworks toward

[www.npr.org/2019/04/03/709567750/radically-normal-how-gay-rights-activists-changed-the-minds-of-their-opponents](http://www.npr.org/2019/04/03/709567750/radically-normal-how-gay-rights-activists-changed-the-minds-of-their-opponents).

<sup>4</sup> “Religious Freedom and Persecution,” *Australian Christian Lobby*, no date, <https://www.acl.org.au/freedoms>.

<sup>5</sup> For an intriguing account of the distance between the language of rights and its lived experience, see Michael D. Jackson, *Existential Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 159–180.

<sup>6</sup> Visualizations of the slippery slope abound in online media; for instance, see “Anti-Gay Marriage Ad That Prompted Backlash against Foxtel,” *Guardian*, August 10, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Staff writers, “Cory Bernardi Claims Marriage Equality Leads to Bestiality,” *Queer News*, issue 473, February 15, 2019.

a singular legislative end (the appeal against national legislation for marriage equality in Australia). And then, of course, there is the fundamental deontology of theistic moral reasoning: appeals to words in the Bible or the word of a god tend to supersede when these other arguments are not going so well, as do appeals to a historic social contract excluding gays that is a sacred norm not to be violated. Beyond all of this, too, is again an underlying virtue of sanctity that may be more felt than reasoned—but we will return to sociomoral intuitionism in a moment.

This Australian parable should point to two relevant conclusions. First, people do not tend to adhere to a single moral framework in their own reasoning or in public debate. Therefore, I argue in this book, like Plantinga, that moral reasoning is inherently rhetorical, that rhetoric can be aimed at persuading ourselves as much as others, and that the very rhetoric of ethical debate (that is, ethics as a means of persuasion as well as a claim about the moral fabrics of the world) is analyzable in all media narratives.<sup>8</sup> This is why rhetorical analysis recurs as another theme throughout the ensuing chapters.<sup>9</sup> What I have covered so far, however, is a descriptively ethical position: a perspective as to how people experience and justify their moral positions. Recognizing the rhetorical components of debate and conviction cannot tell us what to do ourselves. Of course, understanding how people maintain moral convictions, act or fail to act on convictions, and potentially even change their minds is important for any normative ethics—it puts pressure on normative claims to respect human capabilities rather than indulge an unquestioned moral perfectionism, to present not only an ideal moral scenario but the means by which the ideal might be achieved.

Second, there is thus some value in attempting to maintain consistency in our ethical arguments despite human tendencies to diversify foundational ethical positions when challenged. This is not to suggest that others should never draw from multiple ethical frameworks that make sense to them (which could be construed as an unrealistic demand, given that many of our moral thoughts can range across various principles and moral ends), simply that there is value in being aware of the ethical principles one appeals to in an attempt not to contradict oneself or to resolve moral dilemmas without a clear answer. Obviously one thing that scholarly ethics can do is to self-impose an ethical framework to avoid these kinds of contradictions in moral reasoning—and this is precisely the aim

<sup>8</sup> Plantinga advocates a rhetorical model in *Screen Stories*, recalling Bordwell's early union of neo-Aristotelian and cognitive approaches, but Plantinga's model errs toward analyzing the audience-centered appeal to pathos (as emotions can be located in the individual spectator), and his argument is that the emotional rationale of a narrative can also spur a reflective consideration of a screen story's logos (a persuasive argument within the text); he shows less concern for the author-centered appeal to ethos (credibility belonging to a notional communicator).

<sup>9</sup> Later I will argue that media narratives, even as they offer prompts for moral reasoning, can constitute a saying-is-believing effect.

of millennia of ethical debate among philosophers. To follow through a line of ethical reasoning is to guard against self-interested contradictions and falsities, such as those just listed. There is value in *attempting* to maintain consistency in applied moral reasoning, despite the unreliability of our evaluative faculties, despite the influences of environmental framing, and even if a Kantian ideal of perfectly rational consistency is not entirely reachable given the inconsistencies of human emotion, individual desire, and the vagaries of fortune; cognitive science can help reveal those inconsistencies in order to address them.<sup>10</sup>

Some moral thoughts, frameworks, theories, and doctrines may be contradictory while others are not. In this chapter, I probe a unity of virtue ethics and intuitionism that past cognitive film and media ethics have tended to assume. The latter half of the chapter proposes an alternative consequentialism that allows for human limitations, moral failures, unequal fortunes, and unequal responsibilities. The value in calling upon projected consequences to improve rather than perfect the moral results of one's behavior is what I call "humanistic consequentialism."

At its most basic, consequentialism holds that a moral act should be judged by its outcomes rather than by any inherent moral value encapsulated in the act itself. For instance, a virtue ethicist like Immanuel Kant might hold that lying is inherently wrong, where a consequentialist would hold that the results of a particular lie are how it should be judged. In a world of conflicting claims to rights (as in the rhetoric of religious freedoms set against sexual freedoms raised earlier), a consequentialist might resolve this dilemma by appealing to the results of a rule rather than a value intrinsic to the rule itself. Consequentialism is therefore teleological, emphasizing purposes, causes, and ends, rather than deontological, valuing fundamental rules. The rules of deontological ethics are not necessarily incompatible with consequentialism if upholding them produces good results; it is simply that those rules, as decided by humans with agency, ought to be a means to consequentially justified ends rather than ends in themselves.<sup>11</sup> In the most prevalent version of consequentialism, utilitarianism, those ends are maximum pleasure and happiness and minimized pain and suffering among all affected by an action. My own version of consequentialism is developed in this chapter, and I suggest how this perspective may be used to understand narrative media and enrich our moral discussions around that media.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, [1985] 2011), 194.

<sup>11</sup> I think such a synergy between ethical beliefs indicates that normative theories work best as tools for resolving differences of moral opinion or for clarifying one's own position, and so have pragmatic value rather than representing trivial differences between philosophers. For a contractualist perspective on the role consequences play in nonteleological accounts of moral wrongness, see T. M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 103–128.

## Virtue Ethics and Moral Intuitions

Literary scholarship and media studies have both exhibited a trend toward virtue ethics over recent decades, especially after Nussbaum drew from Bernard Williams's critiques of utilitarianism to ground her own work in the application of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics to literature.<sup>12</sup> Cine-ethicists such as Joseph H. Kupfer have extrapolated some of these positions to film in particular, in his case drawing from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.<sup>13</sup> But moreover, the relatively brief history of cognitive approaches to screen fictions seems to invite virtue ethics by its very focus on audience judgments of fictive characters. This focus is partially due to Murray Smith's spearheading work in *Engaging Characters*, which subsequent studies took as a primary reference. It is also due to the position cognitive studies assumed as a corrective to film theory's neglect of character and of spectator psychology; that is, emotionally charged moral judgments of character can be conceived as an intuitive virtue ethics. Much prior cognitive work presupposes spectatorial relations to character as constituting the moral relevance of film and screen media, and this work is indeed aligned with a virtue ethics perspective, often silently and without metaethical qualification. Yet this is one of the ethical foundations of prior cognitive literature I would like to move forward from. To assume that, because screen media tends to foreground the appraisal of virtue and vice, media scholars should take a virtue ethics position would be an unreasoned extrapolation from descriptive ethical *is* to prescriptive ethical *ought*. It is equally true that as narrative media prompts respondents to think in causal inferences, stories can support consequentialist reasoning as much as they can virtue-based judgments. While much screen media might be predicated upon guidance of audience judgments of character virtue and vice, storytellers can alternatively choose to guide narrative attention to the consequences of actions rather than character judgment, conflicted or otherwise. When stories displace the need for character judgment in favor of understanding systems of multicausal social consequence, media can expand beyond other-directed judgment to implicate the viewer and spur more deliberative rumination on better courses of action. This book proposes that a consequentialist normative framework might take analysts further than prior literature on spectatorial relations to character misdemeanor, but also that stories themselves can contain such prompts to consequential thinking.

<sup>12</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (1988): 32–53; Martha C. Nussbaum, "Bernard Williams: Tragedies, Hope, Justice," in *Reading Bernard Williams*, ed. Daniel Callcut (London: Routledge, 2008), 225–253.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph H. Kupfer, *Visions of Virtue in Popular Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, [1981] 2007).

Another moral psychological concept that has been adopted by de facto consensus in cognitive media theory is that of social intuitionism: Jonathan Haidt's observation that by default people tend to make emotionally charged moral judgments intuitively and then justify those judgments in post hoc rationalization, rather than reason their way toward an ethic.<sup>14</sup> Intuitionism is supported by a wealth of research into framing effects, or circumstances that should be ethically arbitrary yet dramatically affect subjects' moral judgments, such as the time of day or the aesthetics of their surroundings (and this includes important spaces of judicial deliberation, such as the courtroom).<sup>15</sup> Cognitive media theory, with its emphasis on a subject at the mercy of audiovisual appeals to pathos rather than conversant with their logics, chimes with the intuitionist approach. Intuitionism appears to contradict not only former rationalist models of moral judgment in psychology, but a history of ethical philosophy that assumes agentive subjects in command of their own reasoning, able to "choose" the right approach rather than retrospectively rationalize positions they were already inclined to take. The centuries-old assumption "that the human being operates from a conscious moral centre, an ethically capable ego," has come under critique from both cognitive science and poststructuralism together.<sup>16</sup> Yet it is one thing to note that people are not rational moral agents "deliberating out of a calculus of utility or duty . . . as an often disembodied and decontextualized ideal decision-maker, unburdened by the non-ideal constraints of luck (moral and otherwise), circumstance, or capability," and an entirely different extrapolation from *is* to *ought* to suggest that because people tend to moral intuitions, traditional theories presuming an agent in charge of their ethics therefore have no use.<sup>17</sup> We cannot request "reflexive" moral stances from viewers while at the same time insinuating that they have no control over their responses. We know that people are able to change their minds in the face of new reasoning, new evidence, and new stories, even if reflection requires a greater cognitive load that many tend to avoid, so any moral determinism derived from intuitionist foundations ends its inquiry prematurely, perhaps preventing us from learning more about the impetus for those reflections and reasonings that *do* influence intuitive moral positions or change minds. Humans are also able to metacognitively reflect upon their intuitions, and given this capacity, it

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment," *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001): 814–834.

<sup>15</sup> Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice," *Science* 211, no. 4481 (1981): 453–458; Cass R. Sunstein, "Moral Heuristics," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28, no. 4 (2005): 531–542; Shai Danziger, Jonathan Levav, and Liora Avnaim-Pesso, "Extraneous Factors in Judicial Decisions," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 17 (2011): 6889–6892.

<sup>16</sup> Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethics*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Gotlib, "Feminist Ethics and Narrative Ethics," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/fem-e-n>.

is reasonable for consequentialist and utilitarian frameworks to put pressure on others to embrace more reflective moral deliberations rather than accept intuitive responses as conclusive.<sup>18</sup> For instance, it is one thing to know that everybody (including oneself) has implicit racial biases and quite another to make a conscious effort to *challenge* one's biases. In this case, ethicists across the history of philosophy have simply emphasized the value of conscious-controlled rather than automatic-emotional processing of moral decisions. Here we find another key difference between the descriptive ethics of past cognitive media theories and my own normative approach: that intuitions are not the whole story—stories don't *happen* to us—and that we can integrate more deliberative ethics into accounts of moral responses to screen stories.

These human potentials for both intuitive judgment and moral reflection are recognized in various dual process models, which tend to present intuitions and abstract reasoning as competing cognitions. Joshua Greene's model equates utilitarian judgments with conscious-controlled reasoning and various deontologies with intuitive judgment.<sup>19</sup> Greene favors utilitarian ethics and feels that when we are able to elevate the cognitive strains of our conscious-controlled reasoning over the more direct and easily accomplished emotional intuition, we get better outcomes.<sup>20</sup> One reason for this is that utilitarianism is results-focused rather than interested in a stable correct action in any given circumstance, regardless of its results. This focus on results is, I believe, another kind of rigor that admits variation and circumstance and is willing to encounter the granular experiences of life. In this case, I am arguing that earnest normative discourse, cognitive science, and various forms of consequentialism all entail a complementary rigor.

This book takes a similar approach to that of Greene; its approach could be more aptly described as broadly consequentialist rather than retributivist, in that my ethics insists on the consequences rather than moral symbolism of judgments and actions, and suggests future courses of action based not upon doling out punishment and reward for their own sake, or deeming actions right or wrong, but on assessing the morality of acts and judgments only insofar as they achieve greater fairness and harm minimization in the populace.<sup>21</sup> This is

<sup>18</sup> Augusto Blasi, "The Moral Functioning of Mature Adults and the Possibility of Fair Moral Reasoning," in *Personality, Identity, and Character: Explorations in Moral Psychology*, ed. Darcia Narvaez and Daniel K. Lapsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 423.

<sup>19</sup> Joshua Greene, "Beyond Point-and-Shoot Morality: Why Cognitive (Neuro)Science Matters for Ethics," *Ethics* 124, no. 4 (2014): 695–726.

<sup>20</sup> Greene, "The Secret Joke."

<sup>21</sup> Justice can reduce harm visited upon victims of crime without unnecessarily adding suffering to perpetrators unless it is matched by a further harm minimization for others. One could imagine a scenario whereby a judicial decision introduces further suffering to the world when punishing the perpetrator of a crime, but this decision should have the aim of reducing other harms: the real psychological trauma experienced by victims in regard to court procedures and outcomes must be a factor, as should deterrence, prevention of recidivism, and other socially distributed potentials



why, semantically, I prefer the umbrella term “consequentialism” to the colder appeal to sensory ends as “utility”: it emphasizes attempts at (multi)causal precision and the opposite of the more symbolic goals of retributivist ethics. There are also moral ends that are not particularly hedonic entailed by an interest in fairness and equal access to life’s privileges (even if the corollary of equality remains a pleasure maximization), so I prefer the more pluralistic term “consequentialism” so as not to invite debates regarding the narrow focus of hedonic utility.

### A Humanistic Consequentialism for Film and Media Studies

There are many debates on the merits or otherwise of consequentialism and utilitarianism that could take a whole separate book to completely appraise, but it is my aim here simply to articulate the perspective being carried forward over the ensuing essays. Likewise, I will not be making prolonged arguments contrasting consequentialisms to elevate one model above another, although the many identified pitfalls of a strong consequentialist or utilitarian position call for some manner of resolution. Perhaps the most recurrent objection raised against utilitarianism concerns its apparent diminishing of human worth and the sanctity of all life in reducing people and animals to their sensory utility. Attendant to this are a number of other objections centered on the individual: that consequentialist demands cannot account for various human motivations, self-interests, desires, relational partialities, and attachments that are inconsistent and complicate the standards we hold them to; that it can require the agent to violate intuitive moral codes to produce its maximizing results (such as killing one person to save two); and that its reduction of all life to an equal status neglects the influence of individual luck, its potentially unequal distribution of ethical responsibility, its inauguration of a need for justice, and its unfairness in bestowing the load of guilt and blame upon the involuntary inheritors of poor circumstances or of results constitutively unequal to their own actions.<sup>22</sup> The other type of consequentialism, the one that comes from jurisprudence and is opposed to retributivist justice, is similarly challenged by histories of power imbalance that bestow fortune or

for harm. Justice is not divine or natural; if it is presumed to be, then we wander closer to a crude retributivism that chooses to add more suffering to the world in the name of justice. Binaries between distributive justice and harm minimization are likewise a conservative strawman; it is possible to find means for redistribution of wealth that may be slow, but respect the utilitarian impact on all involved. Equality and fairness support harm minimization, and where they do not, they may not truly be fair.

<sup>22</sup> The classic example of moral luck compares a responsible driver who nonetheless kills an errant pedestrian in a car accident with a reckless driver who by luck hits no pedestrian. Samuel Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Kurt Baier, “Maximization and Fairness,” *Ethics* 96, no. 1 (1985): 119–129; Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24–38.

otherwise on individual actors and may call for different standards to be applied to different people. Williams again is a good guide to this latter objection, especially in his considerations of moral luck.<sup>23</sup> I believe all of this can be accommodated by a humanistic consequentialism.

A founding principle of this book is its unity of consequentialist and humanist ethics, and I will call this a *humanistic consequentialism*; this is a position that registers the socially distributed value of life by integrating the benefits of partial caring for others in its maximizing calculus (especially as concerns human connection across differences) and recognizes a relativity of circumstance by which a utilitarian sense of duty and accountability might also shift with inherited fortunes and the luck of circumstance. But most important, it recognizes in human psychological complexity the failure to live up to ideals.<sup>24</sup> In humanistic consequentialism, utility is a guide that permits failures to meet the ideal of maximization but still stresses the value of that ideal in putting the pressures of fairness and harm minimization on individuals concerned with their effects on the world (and we have to accept that this is not everyone, “free-riders” in the literature).<sup>25</sup> It may also be true that although people are not ontically the sum of their utility, thinking heuristically in terms of the utility of our effects on others might be useful to produce mutually satisfactory results.

James Phelan suggests that “humanist ethics acknowledges [poststructural notions of] otherness as important for ethical engagements with narrative, but it emphasizes the benefits of connecting across difference.”<sup>26</sup> For others, that connection has been rendered impossible by centuries of power abuse, and to connect across differences would be to forsake the victims of colonial and postcolonial crimes—and herein lies the political challenge of retributivism. Yet connecting across differences is, I believe, despite its imperfections, the only means we have for developing a world of greater equality and less violence. At the same time, I am carrying forward from *Narrative Humanism* the idea that

humanism always fails . . . This resignation to constant failure and refinement, the relinquishing of ideals in favour of the utility of the attempt, is another source of vulnerability and humility in humanism—it is a narrativial kindness.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>24</sup> Or “impossible moral requirements,” cf. Lisa Tessman, *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Baier, “Maximization.”

<sup>26</sup> James Phelan, “Narrative Ethics,” in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014), last modified December 9, 2014, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-ethics>.

<sup>27</sup> Moss-Wellington, *Narrative Humanism*, 22.

Moral prescriptions are ideals to aim for, to attempt, to refine, but rarely to complete. If enough of us agree to do this work, change occurs, and so there is value in spreading moral ideals even when we know that they cannot be performed alone and that not all people will be able to contribute—some will simply not care or will never be convinced by a particular moral argument, and some will not be in a position to offer support. Cases for ethical consumption, for example, cannot be leveled at the starving, although ethical consumption is still an ideal worth upholding for those who can contribute.<sup>28</sup> A humanistic consequentialism that integrates such capabilities does not universalize the individual's agency or luck, and admits context into its calculations of mutual benefit, as the distribution of the benefits of moral actions are shaped by where we are and what we have.<sup>29</sup> Consequentialism and utilitarianism also admit to the fallibility of current information, where forms of deontology assume that we always have all relevant information to judge moral acts. Deontologies must remain immovable to protect their founding principles, where consequentialisms might shift with new evidence and attention to specific or individual circumstances to recommend a different approach. The same is true of “partial understandings” and “non-subsumptive” storytelling: these are ways that both stories and their audiences can acknowledge and stimulate the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of diverse and complex other lives, without presuming that this project can ever be complete.<sup>30</sup> Stereotypes, for example, present knowledge of the other as complete, where humanistic narratives, I argue, pull us in the other direction: they attempt to gain insight into particular characters' social selves while simultaneously destabilizing the notion that the insights represent a complete understanding.<sup>31</sup> Acknowledging the realities of partial understanding, particularly in multicausal modeling of the consequences of future actions, unites humanistic and empirical reasoning and can inform any consequentialist position.

Many objections to utilitarianism in particular come down to the fact that it puts us in a position where we can never be properly moral actors, as treating all living things as entirely equal is not possible.<sup>32</sup> This is its strength, however, not its weakness, as surely this position is more reflective of a life in which the active responsibilities we can interpret are boundless. I feel this objection again betrays

<sup>28</sup> Cf. versions of the “capability approach,” in Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> This emphasis on agentive relativity differs from Peter Singer's utilitarian requirement, although I concede that there may still be a motivating utility in expressing moral responsibilities as requirements. Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–243.

<sup>30</sup> Meretoja, *The Ethics*, passim.

<sup>31</sup> Moss-Wellington, *Narrative Humanism*, 23–26.

<sup>32</sup> See essays in Timothy Chappell, ed., *The Problem of Moral Demandingness: New Philosophical Essays* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

a history of philosophy, and more recently a competitive intellectual workforce, of men looking to “win” at ethics, to find a reliable answer that is more steeped in stable moral knowledge than the lack thereof. But really, in ethics, there are simply degrees of failure—of not sacrificing all of one’s wealth to the neediest, for instance, of not donating every unessential organ in one’s body, or of looking after oneself before others for whom the act of care would be more meaningful.<sup>33</sup> Acting in accordance with a set of virtues, for example, may alleviate the stresses of myriad competing responsibilities, but it will not make these problems go away. Forms of consequentialism do not in themselves offer this untenable position, life itself does, and consequentialism can be a way not only to recognize that untenable position but to navigate it. I feel that it is possible to both put pressure on one another to behave more generously toward others using the principles of consequentialism and, with knowledge of such a limitless ethical failure, to forgive one another those failures at the same time.

An important point for this volume is that narrative media can register and explore moral failure as well. *The Good Place* (NBC, 2016–2020), for instance, is a screen narrative with a premise built on acknowledgment of infinite moral failure and the impossibility of successfully “managing” limitless moral demands. A humanistic ethical generosity balanced with consequentialist moral probing that such stories exhibit is the subject of many of the case studies in the second part of this book. This fruitful recognition of failure as part of the fabric of our moral lives applies to ethical criticism, and the discussions that develop around stories, as much as it does to the stories themselves. So, too, can scholarly readings of stories and their moral significance accommodate these limitations. Wayne C. Booth argues for such a humility in *The Company We Keep*, and humility and receptivity to storied perspectives on moral life traverse this book as elaborative hermeneutic strategies, extending each narrative act to further musings about our place in the world and how to navigate our moral lives.<sup>34</sup>

To summarize, the consequentialism I argue for integrates both the hedonic principle of harm minimization (and its corollary pleasure maximization) of utilitarian ethics and a humanistic principle of fairness and equality (a universal or cosmopolitanist consequentialism) that is interested in the work people do toward these ends rather than their perfect completion. It is interested in retributively correcting past wrongs only insofar as the act would create a better future for those who have suffered injustices. It encompasses the way we value other

<sup>33</sup> This view can also admit the worth of behaviors that contribute in a more distributed sense to human flourishing and well-being, but without direct “maximizing” impact, and this is especially true of the acts of artistic creation at the center of this book. Cf. Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): 419–439.

<sup>34</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

lives and *feel* their “sanctity,” as valuing others—from a romantic partner to a friend’s pet that we rub behind the ear whenever we visit them—brings pleasurable meaning to our lives. In the tradition of other attempts to demonstrate unities between ethical positions so often seen as binary, I believe we can have all of these things together.<sup>35</sup> This is not a foolproof resolution for all moral conflicts, as we always have imperfect information to work with in our projective causal future thinking, so I instead characterize consequentialism as a moral guide rather than a set of rules. And so my humanistic consequentialism is likewise interested in gathering evidence to improve our multicausal projections of consequence, including evidence of the impact of diverse cultural practices of story-based moral argumentation, comprising self- and other-directed moral rhetoric drawn from both prior intuitions and socially distributed narratives. In this case, humanistic consequentialism is not interested in drawing a crude line between instances of media and their immediate “effects,” which will differ as much as their audiences differ, but aims its predictive work at the powerfully cumulative yet dispersed meanings and behavioral scripts we might draw from recurrent narratives distributed through story media over time, as well as the social distributions that might follow from narrative media’s prompts to various kinds of cognition. It acknowledges that moral agents are constrained by the “framing” of their circumstances and emotive intuitions but that the majority are still able to, at the very least, reflect upon both intuitions and framing, and change their mind about worldly matters—which means that making consequentialist moral cases to others is not futile, but paramount. It is both a responsibility and an imperative, then, to look at all manner of evidence to improve consequentialist moral and political arguments with a view to improving the lives of all.

### On Stories and Thought Experiments

Of course, the moral dilemmas we confront in our lives rarely look like the sorts of contrived scenarios ethicists excogitate in order to support a favored position among various schools of ethical arbitration. With the exception of a limited number of highly particular professions, for instance (and without diminishing the moral labor called for in some medical occupations), most of us will rarely be presented with the opportunity to take one life to save five, with or without a trolley approaching at lethal speeds. These settings could also be accused of

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Samuel Scheffler’s “agent-centred prerogative,” in which individual agents are not always *required* to do that which will produce an absolute maximization of utility; instead of a right-wrong distinction in moral acts, Scheffler proposes a moral pressure to act generatively that accommodates individual and self-interested motivations. Scheffler, *The Rejection*; see also Martha C. Nussbaum, “Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?,” *Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999): 163–201.

mischaracterizing the moral life as a series of active decisions, where the vast majority of our more quotidian moral impact comes down to inaction and decisions never consciously made: not giving blood every day, not donating to the needy, not reaching out to those around us who need help, or not even thinking of these things.<sup>36</sup> While the trolley problem includes a provision for inaction, this answer is really a conscious inaction with visible consequences, quite unlike the inaction that comprises everyday moral neglect. The contrived scenarios of ethical philosophy, a kind of narrative thought experiment like much of the fictive media discussed in this volume, mostly serve the aim of revealing the inconsistencies and conflicting values of an ethical position, or an underlying moral feeling, but they can also have the effect of making the differences between ethical positions and their alleged conclusions seem more substantial than they are. Various branches of practical ethics, notably forms of particularism and naturalism, have attempted to bridge this divide by removing the need for coherent moral principles or working to render ethics an objective science that moves beyond hypothetical thought experiments. I have described the ways in which we tend to resolve our personal moral dilemmas using inconsistent justificatory resources (a descriptive position of this book), but nor does a media ethics of the telling or a media ethics of the told necessarily defer to these kinds of problems: media addresses itself to all sorts of quotidian and extraordinary moral issues that cannot be so distilled, and its culturally influential qualities cannot necessarily be reduced to the kinds of multiple-choice scenarios that ethicists favor as explanatory measures.

One might note across the following chapters that the book does not necessarily endorse one manner of argumentation or textual reading. It experiments by drawing from different cognitive resources, exploring different kinds of consequences, and making quite a variety of ethical cases. In particular, in its hermeneutic passages, it treats fictive media as a series of thought experiments that are in some ways similar to those described earlier; in Noël Carroll's view, philosophic thought experiments and fictions can both clarify our thinking on moral matters.<sup>37</sup> But stories do more than this. Philosophic thought experiments and literary or other fictions untethered from an argued thesis have something in common: they both harness the emotive elaborations of situated detail, using the connotative resources of their medium to reveal complications not readily available without imagining specific circumstances with complex backgrounding that puts pressure on our ideals. Carroll's account makes the case for thought experiments offering "the conceptual reorganization of antecedent knowledge,"

<sup>36</sup> Or even the unknown consequences of the choices we do make, such as the goods we consume, or failing to be informed of their consequences.

<sup>37</sup> Noël Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 201–234.

but I think new evidence can be revealed in each narrative's request to shift the locus of attention to the things our bodies *do* with information that is more situated and that calls on participants for deliberation, reply, or response.<sup>38</sup> Our bodies simply respond differently to situated fictional scenarios and abstracted argumentation; if we lose sight of the situations to which abstracted knowledge applies, their complicating sensations that perhaps lead us to behave in ways we had not planned, then our moral knowledge does not mean too much at all, and the conclusions we draw thereafter risk becoming less reliable with less evidence of the emotive complexities narrative attention explores. So the further we wander from speculating on lived experience, the less likely our postulations will take its pressures into account, and the easier it will be to decide on knowledge or facts or concoct scripts for behavior that are desensitized to those pressures. Another conviction of this book is that the ethics of the told have consequences for the ethics of the telling: that is, the substance of ethical presumption and proposition addressed *within* a narrative diegesis is fundamental to how we evaluate the narrative's impact. The ways in which ethical lives are presented in screen stories, a story's loci of moral interrogation or its nonattendance to its possible ethics, are evaluable in terms of their potential consequences and ergo their responsibilities. I am interested both in what stories have to say about our moral lives and in the potential effects of the ways we are asked to think about those lives. So practically, this book will address the *content* of stories and how they ask us (not compel us, simply ask us) to think about our own effects on the world.

The field of cognitive media studies has been more willing than philosophic forebears to be specific about the procedures that move people between thinking through media and acting in the world, and more willing to provide hard evidence for their causal claims (like the best human sciences, the best cognitive science offers no proofs or mechanical inevitabilities but simply observes likelihoods and proceeds accordingly). These values similarly underpin the consequentialist normative ethics applied across the essays in this book: a rigor of precision in causal modeling that still respects complex multicausality and anomalous examples, and the importance of drawing upon empirical evidence from a range of social sciences to support consequentialist claims. This, I suggest, is the best we have for acting well in the world: no consequentialist certainty or definitive obligation of the variety invoked by its critics, just flawed old evidenced prediction of consequence and the pressure it puts on us to encounter our own flawed attempts to navigate the various impacts we can have on others.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 210.



## Problems in Cognitive Media Ethics

Fictive texts are, in a way, thought experiments. Through stories, we are able to project and follow the consequences of imagined actions without having to take any actions ourselves. Because of this imaginary nature of fiction, moral policing of any storytelling is always fraught. If we license one another to imaginatively probe all sorts of unacceptable behaviors, and acknowledge the value in doing so, what parts of fictional works are then ethically evaluable? The problem with media ethics and cine-ethics is that film and other screen media offer vehicles for thought and simulated action, and so we can be distracted into the moral judgment of thoughts rather than our behavior in the world. Any cine-ethics, for instance, that connects a spectatorial thinking-through of cinema's simulated actions to later consequential actions taken as a result of that spectatorship must be very carefully drawn. Cognitive media ethics, with its emphasis on the empirical study of relations between cognition and embodiment, is potentially well placed to make these kinds of judgments. Yet the insights of cognitive media theory are seldom used to make more evaluative cases or provide more explicit guidance as to how we should behave in the world—as storytellers or story audiences, or as narratively driven beings whose lives are intimately informed by stories distributed in media.

The kinds of thoughts that stories incite are also heavily abstracted, making them difficult to take ethical aim at: more complex social structures developed over millennia introduce greater need for abstract pattern recognition across networks, analysis of truth-claims about extended cause-effect relational matrices, and deliberation regarding one's moving place within those socially causal matrices. Fictive narration displaces truth-claims and makes them intangible, and in that displacement, we might glimpse other, more diffuse and distributed truths that go beyond the local environment. In a way, fiction is itself an irony, if irony is some manner of counterintuitive or indirect relationship between what is denotatively said (conveying events bracketed within a fictive diegesis or fabula) and what is meant (inferred and diffuse connotative meanings about our nonfictive world). Ultimately, ironic displacement reveals all sorts of abstract ways of seeing the world that are not so easy to distill to a simple or direct cause-effect statement.<sup>1</sup> Again, this puts practical

<sup>1</sup> For further investigations into ironic narrative devices, see Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, [1994] 2003); Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

ethics applied to narrative in a difficult predictive position. These problems also draw attention to the different moral standards we apply to narrative and non-narrative activities: one ordinarily might evaluate others' morality by the actions they take rather than the thoughts and feelings that led to those actions, as thoughts and feelings can still be contravened (for instance, by not acting on an impulse to yell at or behave aggressively toward someone we are angry at). While thoughts and feelings ought to be investigated for how they contribute to moral behavior, it is acting in the world that should count toward moral evaluation. But this is also what makes narrative media so fascinating, so ripe for ethical deliberation: it puts on display some of the indicators of our more complex causal cognitions and modelings of the world, the provisions of which we may later act upon.

It also seems clear that narrative media can have an impact on ethics, identity, and ideology, perhaps not so individually but over long periods of absorption, in a kind of lifelong "saying is believing" effect or rehearsal of stories that inform our relations with one another, both private and public.<sup>2</sup> For instance, films that make light of rape surely contribute to an overall sensibility that justifies male sexual dominance and abuse; the relegation of ethnic identities to inconsequential stereotypes at the fringes of narrative agency contributes to the maintenance of a historic narrative of acceptable white privilege; the conflation of queer sexuality with unrelated criminal acts and personality traits in cinema compounds fears that all kinds of human sexual otherness are generally not to be trusted. Fictional narratives contribute to social norms, and social norms are powerful drivers of behavior that are not so easy to isolate as media "effects," or direct causal relations between a media narrative and an individual subject.<sup>3</sup> These are just three examples, but many more are explored in this book. Because narrative meanings and consequences are dispersed rather than direct, it is difficult to evaluate the moral impact of narrative practices. The possibilities for some manner of "cultivation" in narrative comprise a background to our moral selves that must be studied and rigorously understood (the importance of autobiographical memory in personalizing this background is described later in the chapter), but only the actions one takes *given* that cultural background (which can still be contravened) should be the subject of normatively critical work.

<sup>2</sup> E. Tory Higgins and William S. Rholes, "'Saying Is Believing': Effects of Message Modification on Memory and Liking for the Person Described," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 14, no. 4 (1978): 363–378.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, see evidence for the importance of prescriptive norms as a predictor of personal action on climate change: Belinda Xie et al., "Predicting Climate Change Risk Perception and Willingness to Act," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 65 (2019): 1–11.

A clear distinction might be made here between the ethics of writing/producing and the ethics of reading/reception.<sup>4</sup> The intersubjective nature of communication similarly keeps meaning decentered, so no one party, the storyteller or the respondent audience who can accept or reject the story's moral foundations, ever has final and discrete accountability. Although the "ethical consequences of narrating story and fictionalizing person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process,"<sup>5</sup> are codependent, it would still be helpful to demarcate some clearer responsibilities that belong, separately, to the writer/producer and reader/receiver rather than conclude with the truism that intersubjectivity entails inter-responsibility or that the distributed cognition of story, with its meanings that can exist only in people's interactions rather than independently, entails distributed responsibility. Much film and narrative theory in the past has taken moral positions on behalf of a universal audience member's (or "subject's") emotional or intuitive positions while spectating, a sustaining site of critique extended from Bertolt Brecht's notion of a default, empathic spectating position in theater that is fundamentally uncritical and in need of rupture to see beyond the personal to the political;<sup>6</sup> the ways in which Brecht's theories have been imported into film theory are critiqued toward the end of this chapter.<sup>7</sup> While readers/receivers and their intuitive, affective responses have become the locus of critique in neo-Brechtianism, perhaps these particular appraisals should be leveled at those who have taken an action that attempts to shape those thoughts in the first place—the author of the story being told—and secondarily address conscious meaning-making on behalf of the spectator that is then distributed to others.

Most screen media ethicists have an awareness that, due to the continuity of stories we engage with and our ideologies or sense of self-history, fiction in some way affects belief and behavior. Yet this is such a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, involving so many interactions between different personalities and other culturally distributed narratives perhaps contradicting the ethical impressions of any particular story, that it can be difficult to know where to take aim when making a moral objection. If we would like to take aim only at actions and behavior (which seems reasonable to me), then we might say that

<sup>4</sup> James Phelan, "Narrative Ethics," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014), last modified December 9, 2014, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-ethics>.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>6</sup> While Brecht's theories were developed in thinking specifically through the medium of epic theater, Plantinga notes that his perspectives color "much of contemporary film theory and criticism." Carl Plantinga, "Notes on Spectator Emotion and Ideological Film Criticism," in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 375.

<sup>7</sup> For a history, see Angelos Koutsourakis, *Rethinking Brechtian Film Theory and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

concocting and distributing a story are actions with effects upon others, and therefore ethically evaluable. Selecting media is an action, and therefore ethically evaluable. Telling others your judgment of that media is an action, and therefore ethically evaluable. But what any such evaluations rely upon is a prediction of *later* consequences, *later* actions taken by a hypothetical audience member based upon the thoughts the narrative led them through. For this reason, the present volume takes particular interest in post hoc reasoning, the ways in which stories settle into grander narratives in our lives, and the ways they might be carried forward and inform future behaviors.

These premises have a number of other implications for the ensuing chapters. One is that what creators say about their works is equally fair game for analysis. The second is that if we are interested in components of autobiographies that are largely internal and untold, or what Mark Freeman calls the “narrative unconscious,” we can morally evaluate what people say about themselves in relation to the media texts they consume.<sup>8</sup> Finally, and of greatest significance, although emotions, internal narratives, attitudes, and intuitive responses to media are important and ought to be seriously addressed, any normative or prescriptive critique must extend itself to also address their enactive consequences, what people might *do* with media and stories. This can entail addressing how a sense of moral selfhood rehearsed in media contributes to notions of acceptable behavior.

We have already seen how both Carroll’s and Plantinga’s models of film ethics put emphasis on implicit moral values and judgments effectively floated alongside adjacent, narratively foregrounded values that are easier to commit to, perhaps because of their broad appeal (as in heroic traits, such as self-sacrificing bravery) or ease of cognitive processing (as in the moral values embedded within familiar genre conventions). A moral conclusion that we might instinctively agree with is made contingent upon one we might not, and so stories can put their audiences in a position whereby they must accept a more contentious principle (in rhetorical terms, an enthymematic premise) in order to maintain a stronger belief. The relevance of this insight in analyzing online promotional cultures will be explored in the final chapter of this book. In the present chapter, I will address some of the more pertinent problems facing any media ethicist: the moral critique of thought rather than action and the distributed sense of agency confronted when we admit variations in personality, culture, and politics. First, however, I will explain two relevant principles that will be carried throughout the remainder of this volume, one an audience-centered and the other a text-centered premise: the importance of autobiography in explaining moral responsiveness to texts and the application of hermeneutics in not only speaking back

<sup>8</sup> Mark Freeman, *Hindsight: The Promise and Peril of Looking Backward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

to those texts, but coming to learn what they have to say about our moral world as well—which is useful whether or not we agree with the perspectives on offer.

### Autobiography, Hermeneutics, and Evaluations

The first principle I begin from is that stories are continuous with autobiographical narratives, and in particular the narrational elements of episodic memory. Autobiographical narratives draw upon both episodic details, or recollected events from the past, and semantic memory, which “pertains to general knowledge about the world and ourselves and does not entail reexperiencing past events,” and this can include our beliefs, values, and autobiographical facts (such as our name or where we live).<sup>9</sup> Both before and after we engage with a media text, we roll the story into our sense of self and self-belief: beforehand, we might draw on semantic self-knowledge to explain to ourselves why we are engaging with the text and how we expect it to affect us. Afterward, we might explain to ourselves what the story meant to us—whether we liked it, how we were moved or not moved, who we were when we watched it, whether we changed after watching it, and what that says about ourselves, our beliefs, and our experiences in the world. In this way, episodic memory comes to include our response to the fiction and to potentially reinforce or modify semantic self-knowledge, and together these correlations of episodic revisiting and their connection to traits and facts about ourselves become constitutive of identity.<sup>10</sup> Our autobiography then profoundly shapes encounters with others, and so this process, I suggest, is where we should look to find narrative’s salient moral qualities: not just the moment of engagement with narrative, but recall-driven sense-making practices around a narrative, and perhaps in particular dialogues we have with others about a given narrative’s meaning.

If sense-making entails translating mediated experiences into autobiographical narratives that may then reaffirm a semantic sense of working selfhood, then the centrality of autobiographical processes could explain the load that literary and media scholars put on descriptions of a narrative’s “meaning.” When we speak of a spectator “drawing meaning” from a text, we invoke a process of correlating these episodic memories of the story experience with semantic self-knowledge or values drawn from the experience. As Martin A. Conway explains about conceptual self-knowledge:

<sup>9</sup> Brian Levine et al., “Aging and Autobiographical Memory: Dissociating Episodic from Semantic Retrieval,” *Psychology and Aging* 17, no. 4 (2002): 677–689.

<sup>10</sup> Haslam et al., “I Remember Therefore I Am,” 184–203; Mark A. Wheeler, Donald T. Stuss, and Endel Tulving, “Toward a Theory of Episodic Memory: The Frontal Lobes and Autonoetic Consciousness,” *Psychological Bulletin* 121, no. 3 (1997): 331.

In a sense it “sits” on top of episodic memory and provides an access route that locates memories and sets of memories in meaningful ways for the self. It is a system in which coherence is the dominant force and it is specialized to support long-term goals.<sup>11</sup>

I suggest that this post hoc ordering of memory into a value-laden autobiography is the most important part of any evaluative process, as inscribing the meanings of fictive narrative onto our self-narrative is the moment at which fiction becomes real to us. The fiction itself may not be real, but what it *meant* to us when we engaged with it is written into memory as its salient features that *are* real to us, that constitute how we assign significance and implication to our experiences in communication with others; the way we describe the story’s place in our lives references a real self, and it is this “real” component of the unreal that we will carry forward. This process of “meaning-making,” whether diachronically reflective in its active autobiographical reasoning of a before and after the narrative experience or synchronically prereflective in maintaining a stable sense of identity while reminiscing about that experience, is ethically dynamic.<sup>12</sup> Both the ways in which creators attempt to guide this meaning-making process through their stories and the ways in which audiences distribute attempts (from conversations to online message boards) to influence one another’s meaning-making processes around stories (for instance, telling others what is good and bad about a narrative) are ethically evaluable—perhaps in a way that more autonomic processes, such as affective responses that have been the subject of past screen media ethics, are not.

In Plantinga’s words, “Social science research finds that media ‘messages’ are more likely to be persuasive to readers and viewers if they adhere to a *narrative format*.”<sup>13</sup> Plantinga’s point is that narrative comprehension both nurtures and activates schemas that make the plausibility of a story’s moral content more readily admitted, simply because they are at hand; schemas are, in a sense, smaller, distilled stories and beliefs that a larger story is built upon, rehearsed such that they have minimal cognitive load.<sup>14</sup> This is true, too, of autobiographical narratives—those semantic details of the self, including ethical commitments

<sup>11</sup> Martin A. Conway, “Memory and the Self,” *Journal of Memory and Language* 53, no. 4 (2005): 622.

<sup>12</sup> Tilmann Habermas and Christin Köber, “Autobiographical Reasoning in Life Narratives Buffers the Effect of Biographical Disruptions on the Sense of Self-Continuity,” *Memory* 23, no. 5 (2015): 664–674; see also Michael D. Slater, David R. Ewoldsen, and Kelsey W. Woods, “Extending Conceptualization and Measurement of Narrative Engagement After-the-Fact,” *Media Psychology* 21, no. 3 (2018): 329–351.

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 56–57.

<sup>14</sup> In one sense this echoes and brings moral point to Bordwell’s initial claims regarding the place of interpretive schemas in narrative intelligibility in David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

that we revisit to reaffirm, that are prepared and repeated inside and outside of fictive worlds in grander episodic detail. But the point, too, is not that fictions are continuous with autobiography merely by their mimicking of the same patterns of thought we use for reasoning through our own experiences—although this is an important point many cognitivists may begin from.<sup>15</sup> It is that autobiographical sense-making is more real than the story we respond to, and so a worthy site of ethical analysis: through stories, “we both create and reveal who we think we are as moral agents and as persons.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, to take a soft subjectivist position, self-belief is the closest we have to any manner of real. Marya Schechtman takes the stronger position that, ergo, only in self-narration do we become real people,<sup>17</sup> or in Jerome Bruner’s terms:

Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very “events” of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we “tell about” our lives.<sup>18</sup>

This version of Charles Taylor’s thesis that we are self-interpreting animals is also a social-centered model; that is, it looks at how socially oriented communications modify a sense of individual selfhood, conviction, and belief, rather than presuming these things to be the product of individual psychology alone.<sup>19</sup> In any case an autobiography is, to every individual, the closest we may come to a nonfictive account, an attempted approximation of our being using the flawed and ever-reconstituted retellings of memory, and it can subsume fictive narratives in a variety of complex ways.<sup>20</sup> These translations of the unreal thought

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the Darwinian underpinnings of a work such as Joseph D. Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Anna Gotlib, “Feminist Ethics and Narrative Ethics,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/fem-e-n>.

<sup>17</sup> Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Jerome Bruner, “Life as Narrative,” *Social Research* 71, no. 3 (2004): 694.

<sup>19</sup> We need not take Taylor’s strong, metaphysical position that we *are* our narratives in order to accept that the self is narratively constructed. Charles Taylor, “Self-Interpreting Animals,” in *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1:45–76; see also Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 54.

<sup>20</sup> As the cognitivists have been at pains to point out, emotions play a role here as well. Apropos Murray Smith’s article “Feeling Prufish,” a pithy catalog of problems in rendering complex emotional states in language or narrative, filmgoers may retrospectively distill the complex, blended, ineffable, indistinguishable emotions prompted in audiovisual media, our more or less instinctual affect-about-affect (feelings about the way we felt), or our analytically metacognitive reflection on those feelings, and marshal those feelings into a description that allows us to move forward with a perspective regarding how we responded to media’s provocations and what it meant. This personalizing contraction of media response, which is recollective and autobiographical in nature, is, I believe, the most important part of the process for the moral self, and ergo how theorists might locate media’s



experiment of fictive media into the real self—and especially the values and ideologies the foregrounding of particular experiences modifies or justifies—can be a primary object of normative study.

Memory researchers break the uses of autobiography into three functions: retaining a sense of continuous selfhood, social bonding, and a directive function, or planning for future behaviors. This last function, which “involves using the past to guide present and future thought and behavior,” also points to the relevance of memory research in ethics.<sup>21</sup> While it may be clear that causal narratives of our personal development have an impact on future actions, the place of media within narrating past experiences and ergo a directive sense of self appears to me hugely important for screen ethics. Tom Tomlinson, however, makes the important point that coherent self-narratives are not inherently, of themselves, normative. We still apply what he calls “extranarrative ideals” to explain the moral qualities of self-narration and to elevate some details over others—that is, to translate particular components of episodic memories into directive scripts.<sup>22</sup> And again, the relations between autobiographical knowledge and a goal-driven working selfhood are bidirectional, in that who you think you are affects memory retrieval, just as recollected events modify identity.<sup>23</sup> Yet this is all part of the process I would like to scrutinize: squaring old ideals with new information, deciding what to foreground as salient facets of the fictive experience, and binding those media experiences into a coherence. That coherence, I believe, *contains* ethical principles within its very process of distilling memories of our engagement to prominent details and the values we believe those details reinforce. At the same time, stories have the power to shape the recall of individual experiences into the more uniform coherence of collective memories, which tend to shed individual variations with distance from an event.<sup>24</sup> The dynamic interplay between individual and shared recollective accounts over narrative media puts at stake the responsibilities inherent in distributing causal ways of thinking (the ethics of the

relation to the moral self, as such a process condenses multifarious emotive evidence into a coherence that can inform future notions of selfhood, belief, and action. Murray Smith, “Feeling Prufish,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2010): 261–279.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Bluck, Nicole Alea, Tilmann Habermas, and David C. Rubin, “A TALE of Three Functions: The Self-Reported Uses of Autobiographical Memory,” *Social Cognition* 23, no. 1 (2005): 93. See also Susan Bluck and Nicole Alea, “Crafting the TALE: Construction of a Measure to Assess the Functions of Autobiographical Remembering,” *Memory* 19, no. 5 (2011): 470–486.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Tomlinson, “Perplexed About Narrative Ethics,” in *Stories and Their Limits: Narrative Approaches to Bioethics*, ed. Hilde Lindemann Nelson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 123–133.

<sup>23</sup> Conway, “Memory and the Self.”

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Gagnepain et al., “Collective Memory Shapes the Organization of Individual Memories in the Medial Prefrontal Cortex,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 4, no. 2 (2020): 189–200. Due to the social nature of recall, individuals’ memories become more similar over time with repeated interaction and shared reminiscence, and this will include conversations one has after media engagement or after reading online discussions of a narrative’s meanings.

writer/producer), and the personalization of memory into a directive function on receiving those prompts to the collective causal thought of shared attention in media (the ethics of reading/reception). When we retell our experiences, our accounts are again correlated with others': in sharing memories of stories, we retell those stories to craft new coherence and salience that again realize the stories' potential for ethical impact.

To summarize, any screen ethics that is focused upon the ways in which media might moderate users' identities or sense of selfhood to ethical or political ends ought to be focused on that moment where the real self-narrative intervenes upon the distant media narrative. That point is the stabilizing of one's thoughts and emotions into autobiographical memory, with its relevant directive function of planning for future behaviors, perhaps including debates with others about how we ought to behave, whereupon we tend to draw on evidence from past experiences to make our cases. Those communicative indicators of others' autobiographies that incorporate media responses are part of ethical dialogue, and we can evaluate their moral assets as such. Although here I am offering only an entrée to the many possible applications of memory research in film and media studies in relation not only to moving image comprehension but to personalized, moral meaning-making as well. For my own work in this book, perspectives on the moral relevance of autobiographical memory have the practical impact of moving the locus of ethical engagement forward in time to retrospective sense-making that orders intuitive or reactive responses in the moment (a focus that informs all of my case studies). This move represents another deviation from the at-times overly computational and intuitionist perspectives in past cognitive media studies; an emphasis on post hoc reasoning departs from previous cognitive ethics that have tended to address how spectators respond to characters during their initial engagement with a narrative. The shift is also important for normative ethics, specifically: as we move the locus of study forward in time, we might create distance between autonomic or intuitive responses and move closer to a potential agency in how we process media and select future courses of action.

This leads to a second principle I begin from: that stories offer invitations for thinking through the world in moral terms and that readers and analysts of media have some responsibility to explore the moral terms on offer and discover where they lead before making their own moral judgments about particular texts. In the words of Ward E. Jones, "Discovering the ethical import of narratives requires digging into the fine points of those narratives."<sup>25</sup> The temptation as a media critic is to presume the moral high ground and to pass judgments on the moral qualities of each text, a unidirectional rather than a dialectically normative

<sup>25</sup> Ward E. Jones, "Introduction," in *Ethics at the Cinema*, ed. Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

practice of criticism. This book is equally concerned with listening to what moral insights those texts can contribute and how they might help us answer questions regarding how we ought to live in the world—and, at times, raising objections to their suggestive moral prompts. As Anna Gotlib writes:

A narrative approach to doing ethics takes its cues from the stories themselves, as they are told, heard, and (mis)understood, and although there are a number of approaches and methodologies, they tend to center around questions of who the teller is, what the teller might mean, who the intended (and unintended) audience might be, what is the effect of the story, and (perhaps less frequently) what constitutes a good story.<sup>26</sup>

In the spirit of a Felskian postcritique, I am interested in the kinds of transformational experiences we can have when we are receptively open to a text and what it might *do with us*, as well as what we (as critics and analysts) might do with it; if we do not like what it has done with us, we have ample time after a story's close to apply a counter-moral reading.<sup>27</sup> I wholeheartedly agree with Sinnerbrink's claim that "the cognitivist temptation towards reductionism or inadequate accounts of aesthetic experience can be avoided by way of 'thick' phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation."<sup>28</sup> I also agree with Murray Smith that these thick descriptions are compatible with an underlying "thick explanation," so that we may have an explanation in general, naturalized terms, a description in text-particular or respondent-specific terms, and thereafter, in my view, an evaluation of the potential uses and potential effects of a particular artwork that together constitute a moral argument—one that points to a likelihood of its ethical contribution to a culture, not to its definitive effects on a definitive type of spectator.<sup>29</sup> We need predictions, likelihoods, and understandings of general trends in belief and behavior as much as we need thick descriptions of the particular; we need an understanding of relations to media texts that may be popular among audiences from various backgrounds as much as we need readings that

<sup>26</sup> Gotlib, "Feminist Ethics."

<sup>27</sup> The idea that most critical work overlooks important "surface" readings has a long history, and while I am sympathetic to the arguments of postcritique, I do still see the value in both being open to a text and locating its more implicit claims and values—especially in the final chapter of this book, which looks at enthymematic arguments in cultures of promotion in news media and social media. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); see also Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation" and *Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961); David Bordwell, "Why Not to Read a Film," in *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 249–276; Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [1970] 2008), 32.

<sup>28</sup> Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Film, Art*, 12, 15.

acknowledge the particularized nature of interpretation and rejoice in strange and resistant acts of textual engagement, use, and judgment. Stressing multifarious interpretations and phenomenological differences points to what we *could be* and *could do* rather than what we are and what we do—it has, in short, ethical potential—while at the same time, if we refuse to account for empirical research into the ways in which people currently respond to media, we risk misconstruing change as a simple act of individual will and ignore the biological and cultural constraints that we all operate within.

In *Narrative Humanism*, I described a method for humanist hermeneutics that respects the utility of generous listening to communicators, including fictive storytellers. In this book, I retain that method, but the focus here is on later moral conversations and judgments made after the process of generous listening. In the chapters that follow, I study the point at which we might move beyond generous listening to decide upon our own responsive narrative and our own morals extended from that narrative. This book blends moral evaluation with a hermeneutics that is interested in what others have to say—and in the space between these two analytical acts, I would also offer a passionate defense of the apparently out-moded notion of “reading for the moral message,” often dismissed as “extracting a neatly packaged lesson from the ethics of the told (e.g. *Macbeth* teaches us about the evils of ambition).”<sup>30</sup> Surely we may have readings that listen to the moral viewpoint of the text as “told” without those ethics needing to be so neatly packaged or so passively received. This is another way of dismissing what others have to say about the world in favor of exploring ethics we feel we already know, and this self-regarding certitude produces what I feel is a currently impoverished ethic of reading, one that preemptively constrains any moral insight of the text in favor of one’s own preconceptions. We do not learn from or understand others in this way, and perhaps our solutions to ethical and political impasses become similarly polarized and impossible the less we are curious about others’ moral points of view. One can “acknowledge” in Cavell’s parlance, or “face” in Levinas’s, the context, the being, the moral world, and moral convictions of another, *in order to respond* to them.<sup>31</sup> It is this responsiveness to other moral lives that I feel lacking in much film and media theory. Most of all, the movies and other narrative media discussed in this volume offer invitations to think through the moral anchors that tie them to the world we mutually inhabit. This book meets each text on that offer.

In performing this hermeneutic generous listening, the ensuing chapters also pay close attention to the ways in which people model a sense of the text’s author

<sup>30</sup> Phelan, “Narrative Ethics.”

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987); Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

and decide whether they identify not just with fictive characters, but with their presumed creators, too.<sup>32</sup> Often when theorists speak of perspective-taking in fiction, they refer us to aligning, differentiating, or comparing perspectives with characters in a diegesis, although my model of perspective-taking includes the ways in which we agree to “listen to” authors and creators by adopting their perspective for a time and thinking through their thoughts.<sup>33</sup> Meretoja summarizes the popular idea that perspective-taking can cultivate perspective-awareness:

It involves putting one’s own values and commitments at play and at stake, letting them be tested and questioned but also allowing the encounter to clarify what it is in them that is worth holding onto . . . to understand the other’s actions without accepting them can also be ethically valuable. The imaginative act of perspective-taking can help us understand divergent kinds of otherness that require different ethical responses.<sup>34</sup>

This, I believe, is equally true of the process we go through when imagining creators behind a text and negotiating how we feel about their communiqué, having agreed to follow their perspective for a time. After all, one thing that much of the literature on fictive perspective-taking misses is the extent to which processes of identification and moral alignment might equally rely upon the feeling that one’s sense of reason matches another’s. That is, we can identify with someone else’s presumed line of causal or rational thought; if convinced by their reasoning, we might think of them as “reasonable,” *like me*. When we feel close to others in our friendship circle, for instance, the impetus for pursuing closeness can often be a sense that their thinking is like our own. We often choose allegiances by judging who appears most rational to us, whose sense of reason “chimes” with our own, and that can be quite a particular thing. It is signified in questions such as “does that person *get* me; do I *get* them?” It is also the process of imagining authorship behind a text rather than simply identifying with the characters inhabiting its world and judging the text accordingly. Contrariwise to a history of media critique that presents spectators as inevitably duped by fictive worlds that appear either ontically or emotionally real, I would submit that most audiences are aware of the communicative nature of the fictive worlds they choose to engage in and are consistently judging the communicator through their communication. They model authors in their head and measure their

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *The Life of the Author* (Montreal: Caboose, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Media ethics in journalism studies has similar conversations on the ethical value of dialogic and democratic “listening” across differences, as well as strategies for openly encountering others’ perspectives. Stephen J. A. Ward and Herman Wasserman, “Open Ethics: Towards a Global Media Ethics of Listening,” *Journalism Studies* 16, no. 6 (2015): 834–849.

<sup>34</sup> Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, 132.

alignment or otherwise with those authors subsequently, but not secondarily, to their alignment with characters: a sense of reasoning-with-author as primary alignment, the foundational Theory of Mind on which our functional communication with others depends. In this way, hermeneutics can help us evaluate the ethics of the told, and autobiographical memory and its translation into directive communications can help us isolate the ethically evaluable components of spectator response.

### **Problems of Selfhood and Agency: The Personality Puzzle and the Culture Conundrum**

Throughout the past century of ethical film theory, an occasionally implicit and occasionally explicit moral case has been made that avant-garde forms or those that oppose dominant cinema are ethically laudable, while the conventions of mainstream cinema are morally corrupting. If only more people exhibited preferences for the kinds of obliquely presentational rather than earnestly representational cinema that intellectuals tend to enjoy, so runs the argument, perhaps we would have a more politically aware and morally attuned—perhaps even a “revolutionary”—populace. Of course, the theorist who posits such an ethic surely knows that, while mainstream arts might periodically absorb the techniques of countercinema and co-opt them to apolitical purposes,<sup>35</sup> this kind of toppling of a dominant cinema will not happen: in that case, there would be no counterculture left by which to identify an impoverished mainstream, and no art of distinction left for the intellectual or scholar to hang their moral hat upon. The elevation of abstruse filmmaking technique elevates the custodians of such a technique in kind, which is why William Guynn lambastes the *Cahiers* critics for “a thoroughly undialectical and unmarxist conception of form in art, which asserted that *technique* in and of itself is political.”<sup>36</sup> This position in film theory has antecedents and correlates in other literary and screen media studies.<sup>37</sup> If only, so runs the enthymematic premise upon which the argument rests, more people exhibited *my* media preferences and were *like me*, the world would be a better place—but of course, this would also eliminate enemies that provide grand theory its work. The conclusion we are forced to draw from much of the history of film and media theory is that only those intelligent enough to comprehend

<sup>35</sup> David Boyle, *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life* (London: Flamingo, 2003), 122.

<sup>36</sup> William Guynn, “The Political Program of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1969–1977,” *Jump Cut* 17 (1978): 32–35, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC17folder/CahiersGuynn.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Plantinga calls this tradition “ideological formalism.” Plantinga, “Notes,” 376–377.

countercinema can be properly ethical.<sup>38</sup> As Bourdieu might point out, taste and morality cannot be so readily conflated; while they are both types of judgment, we can confuse these categories of judgment in a way that is more likely to support a sense of our own moral selfhood than it is to provide strong claims of moral consequence.<sup>39</sup>

Cognitive theories have not been immune to these sorts of claims either. An ethos in some corners of cognitive media studies advocates on behalf of the inherent benefit of screen fictions that simply require a lot of effort to comprehend. Mental effort of itself is seen as a boon, perhaps training smart viewers for more attuned or aware or intelligent thinking extending outside of the cinema—the Sudoku of film art. Trends of complex narrativity are sometimes said to be “designing a cultural form explicitly to train the cognitive muscles of the brain.”<sup>40</sup> Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen, for example, favor the “impossible puzzle film” for its suspension of the viewer in what they see as a permanent state of cognitive dissonance, in narrative fabula neither resolvable nor resolved. They aim to “investigate the *cognitive-psychological impact* of formally complex narratives” and explain associated “positive mental responses.”<sup>41</sup> Citing more than one David Lynch film (which I address in depth in the following chapter), Kiss and Willemsen maintain that such narrative strategies seize dissonance resolution, and because of this “cognitive load,” the films themselves make for a more “empowered” viewer.<sup>42</sup> Narratives with conclusive causalities, meanwhile, indulge a “*naïve and informed passivity*,” or “the traditional passive role of viewers-as-spectators” of “easy-to-access, linear and transparent experiences of the classical mode of film narration”; this is a distinction categorically sustained in their film readings throughout the book.<sup>43</sup> Although they make no claims to evaluation and actively excise moral dissonance from their account of narrative dissonance, the value terms they use point to an ethic of “better” film narration and viewership.<sup>44</sup>

While I am sympathetic to the project of understanding how narrative complexity may be construed in some way as beneficial, if normative discernment is

<sup>38</sup> See also Sarah Kozloff, “Empathy and the Cinema of Engagement: Reevaluating the Politics of Film,” *Projections* 7, no. 2 (2013): 1–40. She takes issue with Peter Wollen, “Godard and Counter Cinema: Vent d’Est,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 7th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, [1972] 2009), 418–426.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1979] 1984).

<sup>40</sup> Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You* (London: Penguin, 2006), 56; qtd. in Miklós Kiss and Steven Willemsen, *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 14.

<sup>41</sup> Kiss and Willemsen, *Impossible*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 16, 25.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* 13, 16, 14.

<sup>44</sup> The rationale for this excision is relegated to a footnote, *ibid.*, 49n.



buried unquestioned in the language cognitivists use and obscured beneath the rhetoric of disimpassioned scientific inquiry, then we never get to ask the important questions: to whom are these stories beneficial, and how? In one sense, the ontic twist of the assertion that complex forms offer “an engaging narrative art experience that is ultimately about experiencing *complexity* itself” blends mediated and direct interactions with the world to make an implicit, familiar cognitivist case: that because we bring the same sense-making faculties to media that we employ in life, the reverse is necessarily also true, and the cognitions we employ in cinema will be applied outside of it.<sup>45</sup> That is, activities performed inside and outside of media spectatorship are one and the same because the cognitive apparatus is the same. When we migrate experiences in cinema to activities outside of it (so it is the same empathy, the same mode of engagement with others, the same folk understanding of spatiality and physics), we can operate under the presumption not just that an infinite trade exists between mediated and direct interactions with the world, but also that audiences are therefore unburdened by cognitions that simultaneously distinguish between the different activities they can be engaged with, and act accordingly.

Similar arguments have been brought to bear on television studies, and as Stuart Bell notes in a review of Jason Mittell’s *Complex TV*, the evaluative strand is contained within the language of complexity itself:

Despite his objections, by choosing a word as loaded as “complex” to describe this mode of television, Mittell is drawing on connotations of quality. In describing certain programmes as complex, the implication is that other programmes, or indeed whole other forms of television, are comparatively *less* complex, and thus subject to an implicit value judgement . . . While Mittell acknowledges the complex narrative structures of US soaps, he ultimately treats them as primitive precursors to the more sophisticated complexity of his subject, a decision that unfortunately falls into old traps of high/low cultural evaluation.<sup>46</sup>

Attendant language in work on characterology in television studies, such as the cognitive value of “rich inferences” of character motivation and relationships over elongated serial narratives, performs similar work.<sup>47</sup> Again, I am sympathetic to arguments that there is something valuable in complex thought—even morally valuable, where that complex thought is other-directed rather than just pertaining to narrative intelligibility—but I think those arguments need more

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Stuart Bell, “Review of Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling*,” *Screen* 58, no. 3 (2017): 383.

<sup>47</sup> Jason Gendler, “The Rich Inferential World of *Mad Men*: Serialized Television and Character Interiority,” *Projections* 10, issue 1 (2016): 39–62.

rigor that the honesty of encountering one's own normativity might provide. It is difficult not to read the deployment of the above terms as an implicit assertion that those exhibiting a great need for cognition are superior because of the puzzle-based or otherwise formally experimental entertainment such viewers (and I would include myself among them) tend to enjoy. But of course, intelligent people can be cruel and immoral as well. If it were possible to train one's intellect through screen media as suggested, then such a training would provide no socially distributed value unless that media were also able to usher a newly developed intellect toward mutually beneficial ends. As an applied, evaluative mode of analysis, these claims need revision.<sup>48</sup>

To this end, an honest engagement with personality variation would also be helpful. Personality variation within a population is another complication that film theory has thus far been unwilling to directly encounter, with both its grandly theoretical universalizations in reference to a hypothetically unified subject and its divisions of viewers into discrete and separable cultures that explain their spectatorial responses, as they are grounded in "received" ideology; at least some of these attitudes have been transplanted into recent work in cognitive theory and complex narrativity.<sup>49</sup> While sources of differing selfhood such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age have all been addressed in various studies, cognitive scholars have been less willing to face their dynamic relations in personality research. Yet human personality variation is substantial; not only do we see significant diversity in attitudes and personality traits within any community (even within one family), the manner in which those variations are expressed changes with the nature of its social structuring (rural or urban, transient or fixed, and so on).<sup>50</sup> There will always be personality variations, and in heavily mediated societies, personality variations introduce the need for different media forms speaking to different proclivities.

Need for cognition (NFC) is a personality trait that describes one's appetite for effortful mental work.<sup>51</sup> It is associated with pleasure taken in the reflective structuring of aspects of one's experience into communicable ideas and the

<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, there are many cognitive theorists, from David Bordwell to Todd Berliner, who argue that comprehending stories produces pleasure, but they are less interested in making evaluative claims based upon their own quest for such a pleasure than they are in understanding how that pleasure works. David Bordwell, *Narration*; Todd Berliner, *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>49</sup> For example, distinctions between "eastern" and "western" viewers: Daniel Barratt, "The Geography of Film Viewing: What Are the Implications of Cultural-Cognitive Differences for Cognitive Film Theory?," in *Cognitive Media Theory*, ed. Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham (London: Routledge, 2014), 62–82.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Gurven et al., "How Universal Is the Big Five? Testing the Five-Factor Model of Personality Variation among Forager-Farmers in the Bolivian Amazon," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 104, no. 2 (2013): 354.

<sup>51</sup> John T. Cacioppo et al., "Dispositional Differences in Cognitive Motivation: The Life and Times of Individuals Varying in Need for Cognition," *Psychological Bulletin* 119, no. 2 (1996): 197–253.

inclination to elaborate on those ideas. Arguments surveyed so far in favor of narrational complexity and formally disruptive screen media could be said to elevate this mental work as an inherent good, and thereby the moral status of those with the motivation and capacity to engage in media that requires puzzling through. NFC is indeed related to performance in unraveling some of the coercive aspects of media, and consciously thinking past stereotypes, for instance, benefits from a kind of effortful cognition.<sup>52</sup> High-NFC individuals, however, are not necessarily more rational, unbiased, or less likely to defer to their intuitions in matters of judgment; in fact, they may just think more about those intuitions in order to justify them.<sup>53</sup> The problem here lies not in assuming that these effortful cognitions could productively inform moral thinking in media—which they can—or even in using cognitive humanities to determine various capacities for moral labor. It lies in assuming that the same prescription for a particular type of moral thinking will apply equally to all, and the subsequent prescription of the same forms of media engagement to all as proper ethical practice. An attendant fallacy exists in mistaking one's own enjoyment of a cognitive task, which is personality-specific, for that task's utility or moral worth. Audiences with relatively lower NFC might find that a different media inspires their moral thinking, their will to political action, their generous thinking about others, and so on, rather than their being incapable of these things. That is, cognitive puzzling in narrative might not be the mechanism that inspires everyone's ethical thought or behavior. Most of all, research in NFC and media use suggests that while effortful thinking predisposes one toward critical elaborations, those elaborations can be susceptible to different kinds of biases. For instance, high-NFC individuals may be *more* susceptible to the assimilation of stereotypes in social judgment when primed with subtle or subliminal typification, as their ability to elaborate is dependent upon awareness of primed schemas and, ergo, the blatancy of activated stereotypes.<sup>54</sup> One could postulate that this finding implicates complex narratives featuring antiheroes embodying contradictory morality, with their ability to conceal schemas and stereotypes on which characterization might rest within a loading of peripheral character information. Screen media offers sensory puzzles, too, and so sensation-seeking traits might also predict one's appetite

<sup>52</sup> Douglas Q. Kaufman, Mark F. Stasson, and Jason W. Hart, "Are the Tabloids Always Wrong or Is That Just What We Think? Need for Cognition and Perceptions of Articles in Print Media," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 29, no. 9 (1999): 1984–2000; Matthew T. Crawford and John J. Skowronski, "When Motivated Thought Leads to Heightened Bias: High Need for Cognition Can Enhance the Impact of Stereotypes on Memory," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24, no. 10 (1998): 1075–1088. Arthur H. Perlini and Samantha D. Hansen, "Moderating Effects of Need for Cognition on Attractiveness Stereotyping," *Social Behavior and Personality* 29, no. 4 (2001): 313–321.

<sup>53</sup> Richard E. Petty et al., "The Need for Cognition," in *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior*, ed. Mark R. Leary and Rick H. Hoyle (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 318–329.

<sup>54</sup> Richard E. Petty et al., "Need for Cognition Can Magnify or Attenuate Priming Effects in Social Judgment," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34, no. 7 (2008): 900–912.

for effortful cognitions coupled with audiovisual stimuli. Dynamic relations between NFC and sensation-seeking in media selection and response problematize various disciplinary blends of aesthetic critique and moral judgment covered in previous chapters—one can be interested in elaborative moral thoughts but not in their simulation using novel sights and sounds, and one can enjoy passionate moral debate without experiencing the intense emotions of high-arousal screen genres.<sup>55</sup> Different levels of emotional arousal in media have genuinely different impacts on individuals varying in sensation-seeking tendencies.<sup>56</sup> More troubling for my own research, with its favoring of simulative social complexity over narrative complexity, is the comprehension that this problem should extend to other traits, too, that are drivers of media selection and response: in particular, interpersonal reactivity, which might predict consumption of various forms of human drama, or the need to belong, which might influence one's appetite for spending sustained time in the company of fictive others.<sup>57</sup>

I am, somewhat, playing devil's advocate here, as I do not think that recognition of personality variation undoes any imperative to make moral claims about media—only that we need closer scrutiny of instances of media to temper naturalizing claims, which can be provided by hermeneutics and traditional humanistic inquiry. But more than this, it would make sense to forfeit normatively moral arguments only if people did not change their personal proclivities or how they are expressed within their lifetimes. Personality refers to tendencies of thought, feeling, and behavior, not determinant facts—a usually honest person may sometimes be dishonest, or a sociable person may go through a period of needing to be alone. The personality problem remains a problem only if we assume personality and its expression as static and not dynamically related to other facets of the self. But some aspects of our personalities can and do change across a lifetime, as “personality exhibits moderate degrees of continuity over time, yet can change in systematic ways,”<sup>58</sup> and there are periods in life in which we might change markedly.<sup>59</sup> Even if there are facets of our personalities that *are* somewhat fixed, we

<sup>55</sup> Mary Beth Oliver and Meghan Sanders, “The Appeal of Horror and Suspense,” in *The Horror Film*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 242–259. Ashton D. Trice, “Sensation-Seeking and Video Choice in Second Grade Children,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 49, no. 8 (2010): 1007–1010.

<sup>56</sup> Marvin Zuckerman, “Behavior and Biology: Research on Sensation Seeking and Reactions to the Media,” in *Communication, Social Cognition, and Affect*, ed. Lewis Donohew, Howard E. Sypher, and E. Tory Higgins (London: Psychology Press, 2015), 189–210.

<sup>57</sup> Kohei Nomura and Seiki Akai, “Empathy with Fictional Stories: Reconsideration of the Fantasy Scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index,” *Psychological Reports* 110, no. 1 (2012): 304–314. Dara N. Greenwood and Christopher R. Long, “Psychological Predictors of Media Involvement: Solitude Experiences and the Need to Belong,” *Communication Research* 36, no. 5 (2009): 637–654.

<sup>58</sup> Richard W. Robins et al., “A Longitudinal Study of Personality Change in Young Adulthood,” *Journal of Personality* 69, no. 4 (2001): 617–640.

<sup>59</sup> Todd F. Heatherton and Joel Lee Weinberger, eds., *Can Personality Change?* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1994).

know that attitudes and behaviors can change over time (sometimes profoundly, as in religious conversions), and so we try to influence one another with stories and debate.<sup>60</sup> Personality does not dictate a response; it merely indicates various kinds of priming that stories and debate work within the confines of. Stories can be pitched at different audiences with diverse appetites and, with those audience members in mind, try to influence people with particular characteristics. Ethically normative reasoning, by articulating a way forward, can make attempts at isolating those agents of change—and again, it is at its best when considering sociobiological constraints upon the changes it proposes for the world, honestly encountering any evidence at hand that may offer indicators of human potentials for behavioral and attitudinal shifts. If we want to make a case about the superiority of narrative complexity, we still need the rigor of demonstrating its consequential effects outside the throes of narrative engagement, how others in the world may be impacted, and return to evaluative claims thereafter; excising the moral dimension of spectatorship permits us to elevate media we enjoy simply because it is difficult to enjoy, but the impact of that media becomes secondary. In the case of the film subjectivists, the link between engaging with countercultural forms and acting well in the world must be more properly made. Personality research might help us make these kinds of cases, as will considering the audience such media actually reaches, taking into account the existing morals and politics of people who are likely to engage with it.

While there is plenty of work on personality in media psychology, it is interesting to note that this work has been largely circumnavigated in the field of cognitive media studies (despite the fact that personality trait scales are foundational to many other areas of psychology research, which report predictive findings against the results of personality tests).<sup>61</sup> This may be partially due to a generalized skepticism leveled at personality research, and in particular personality “type” measures that bundle together traits into interrelated categories of personhood, as in tests developed for corporate or military fitness purposes and popularized as diagnostics (Myers-Briggs), with a secondary skepticism in the heuristic measures of more impartially developed personality taxonomies (the Big Five or HEXACO). Yet much of the research in personality trait variables or dimensions makes no typifying claims, but rather locates methods for studying a phenomenon that is eminently observable in the world: humans exhibit differing needs, preferences, and tendencies of thought, feeling, and behavior, and any observable natural phenomena should not be disqualified from scientific inquiry

<sup>60</sup> Raymond F. Paloutzian, James T. Richardson, and Lewis R. Rambo, “Religious Conversion and Personality Change,” *Journal of Personality* 67, no. 6 (1999): 1047–1079.

<sup>61</sup> Leatta M. Hough, “The ‘Big Five’ Personality Variables—Construct Confusion: Description versus Prediction,” *Human Performance*, 5, no. 1–2 (1992): 139–155.

for being too complex.<sup>62</sup> To disregard personality variation is to deny another facet of human diversity and, in so doing, indulge the presumption of cultural determinism, which explains little about how such a range of personhood can develop and coexist within shared cultures. Despite the view among some humanities researchers that theories of personality are universalizing, they actually work inversely: in a field so concerned with scientifically explaining a universal subject's response to screen media, incorporating personality research would admit a diversity of responses and offer another way in which we might understand interpretive heterogeneity.

One of the primary criticisms of cognitivism is that it indulges “a naturalistic theory of mind that pays scant attention to the role of social or cultural-historical contexts in our engagement with the world.”<sup>63</sup> Yet this common misapprehension presupposes a cognitivism without the interventions of distributed cognition, 4EA, extended theories of the mind, or other examinations of the codependencies of culture and biology. It also presumes cognitive science and psychology to be the same thing. The cognitive theories I draw from in this book include those dedicated to the study of human cultures—and in particular, anthropology. A productive union of knowledge developed in psychology and anthropology (as well as many other disciplines and methods for studying human culture and mind) can tell us more than adherence to biologized or cultural constructivist perspectives alone. A synthesis of methods can help counterbalance the limitations of evidence in psychology often gathered from a narrow cultural band (for instance, undergraduate psychology students at Western universities, so-named “WEIRD” subjects), as well as the limitations of selective attention, representative sampling, and confirmation bias in cultural critique. Such interdisciplinary methods might be easier to advocate than to perform, however. The chapters in the second part of this book present a number of attempts to bring these disciplines productively together over ethical questions pertaining to screen media.

A twin concern is that if cognitive theory favors biologized argumentation over cultural analysis, it similarly forfeits its own capacity and responsibility to unpack cultural regimes of power. Robert Stam argued at the turn of the millennium:

Cognitive theory allows little room for the politics of location, or for the socially shaped investments, ideologies, narcissisms, and desires of the spectator, all of which seem too irrational and messy for the theory to deal with . . . There

<sup>62</sup> Jens B. Asendorpf and Jaap J. A. Denissen, “Predictive Validity of Personality Types versus Personality Dimensions from Early Childhood to Adulthood: Implications for the Distinction between Core and Surface Traits,” *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (2006): 486–513.

<sup>63</sup> Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics*, 85.

is little room in cognitive theory for the potential homophobic reaction of the spectator of *Cruising*, or the potential anti-Arab/Muslim reaction of the spectator of *The Siege*, or the potential misogynistic reaction of the spectator of *Fatal Attraction*.<sup>64</sup>

Over the years, this has become less and less true, and Stam's impulse to call for an end to the project rather than to ask how it will address the challenges of diverse and socialized responses to media appears dated. Dan Flory's work on "racialized disgust," for instance, demonstrates just how cognitive theories can actively help us understand not only the ways in which asymmetrical systems of power might be perpetuated in the reception of filmed narratives, but also, crucially, how they might be addressed in the future with respect to audience reactivity.<sup>65</sup> Embodied and autonomic responses to media stimuli might be thought of as a biological explanation that moves moral agency away from a conscious, autonomous self, but these stimuli typically have both cultural and biological antecedents, and the complexity of interaction between self and culture produces equally complex and at times contradictory responses to screen media. Flory uses racialized disgust in cinema as an example:

Many viewers have embodied affective predispositions that profoundly dictate their responses to the perceived race of narrative figures in film, which can also be in conflict with those viewers' own consciously embraced positions on equality and justice . . . some viewers simultaneously embrace anti-racist beliefs and react in racist ways to character depictions in film.<sup>66</sup>

We are all a complex mix of biology responding to culture, in turn reshaping both our own bodies and the world around us; our responses to all media are thus problematic. Not only does the biocultural approach to screen media uncover ethical dilemmas that exist at the intersection of biology, culture, and human agency, by revealing some of the internal contradictions we all live with, it also allows some purchase on our capacity to change ourselves through our communications. And what could be of more use to unpacking regimes of power than this pursuit of the conditions of and need for change? Cognitivism, at its best, represents a unity of expertise in the study of both human biology and culture, and I submit that this approach is best suited to the practical tasks of a normative ethics focused upon political change, rather than fulfilling the (equally important) initial task of describing and explaining histories of power and abuse.

<sup>64</sup> Stam, *Film Theory*, 241.

<sup>65</sup> Dan Flory, "Racialized Disgust and Embodied Cognition in Film," *Projections* 10, no. 2 (2016): 1–24.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



To conclude this section, we must finally address the specter of determinism that lies behind all of these debates: the problems of both personality and culture are similar in that if we see either as behavioral determinants, we then generate the ethical imperative to locate a stable selfhood external to these determinants on which agency can be pinned. For example, in judicial cases, if a person's biology or circumstance is deemed aberrant, the crimes can become not really their own to answer to. In media studies, this can be true, too, of media selection and media responses where they are seen as either biologically or culturally explainable. One part of the self can be considered autonomous at the same time that another part of the self—a gene or a diagnosed pathology or a neural disease that affects behavior—is deemed atypical and therefore robs some “essential” self of its autonomy.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, a cultural narrative or a governing force or a received ideology can be totalized as one's inescapable “position.” The problem of how we can own actions given types of evidence that are taken as sociocultural or sociobiological determinants reaches the deeper problem, with its extended philosophical history, of defining this essential self. Yet a stable and collective definition of that which can only be a subjective construct—the self—truly matters in *ethical* discourse only if our primary aim is to isolate culpability and mete out punishment to individuals rather than to select courses of action (which may involve punishment and reward, but do not demand it) that we predict will have superior consequences.

We can also ask, when we speak of culture, which culture we are referring to. It can seem, at times, that we must “pick a side” concerning which culture we learn our values and behavior from: media, the home, or other cultures with which we interact. While bell hooks claims that “my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all the theoretical literature I was urging them to read,” Dirk Eitzen, for instance, surveying the empirical evidence in an article on the effects of filmed violence, determines that “we do not learn how to behave from movies. We learn how to behave from parents, friends, and other people with whom we come into contact,” and ergo what matters the most is how that media is then used by an audience that brings its own codes for behavior to each text.<sup>68</sup> But this does not mean the media we encounter is without effects, devoid of consequence for the mere fact of interpretation and cultural “use.” I would, in fact, make the case for a more cumulative effect to the moral ideas presented in media. A single text that presents sexual violence as inconsequential might not change an individual's point of view, but many of them together will create

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Nina Strohminger and Shaun Nichols, “The Essential Moral Self,” *Cognition* 131, no. 1 (2014): 159–171.

<sup>68</sup> bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, [1996] 2009), 3; Dirk Eitzen, “Cultural Effects of Cinematic Violence: *Private Ryan* and *The Dark Knight*,” *Projections* 7, no. 1 (2013): 20.

a background in which it is simply easier to devalue the effects of abuse. Media provides scenarios and notions of causality that shape what is easier for us to imagine: it informs our schemas, and the force of many such texts will reach individuals primed, in both personal inclination and cultural influence, to receive their suggestions, or what Plantinga might call their “enticements” to the emotive rewards of cooperation with a screen story.<sup>69</sup> Those suggestions might inform a range of their actions, from their conduct at a nightclub to that at the family dinner table, from their behavior on social media to that in a polling booth, feeding back into other cultures of learning. The media we engage with on a daily basis is just one facet of culture among many that we are steeped in, and surely all have some mutually composed impact. To put it another way, media is part of our culture; we cannot study these things in isolation, or we will get poor results.

To play devil’s advocate again, biology and culture may exert inseparable influences on our behavior, but these dilemmas are not resolved by the platitude that the spectator “both is constructed and him- or herself constructs, within a kind of constrained or situated freedom,” as this tells us little about the operation of those constraints and what elements provide its purported freedoms.<sup>70</sup> Plantinga writes:

We can justifiably reject the claim that screen stories *determine* spectator response, but we should not characterize screen stories as “empty receptacles” into which spectators pour only their personal interests. Spectator response is not determined solely by contextual and individual factors . . . it should not be a matter of determining whether the cues of a particular screen story or the context in which it is seen is most important, as though it were a contest in which one or the other should reign supreme. Audience response lies at the intersection of viewer characteristics, specific context, and the particular experience offered by the structure and context of the screen story.<sup>71</sup>

That is, the intersections within a biocultural approach again present a challenge to determinism, which tends to arise only when we adhere to either a singular culturalist or a naturalist explanation for human behavior.

When we document competing cultural and biological influences, we also mount competing explanations for our conduct. But these explanations need not be in competition, as humans have many motivations and influences, and indeed many intersecting cultures to which they belong, no singular one of which

<sup>69</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 71.

<sup>70</sup> Stam, *Film Theory*, 244.

<sup>71</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 87–78.

can satisfyingly explain any individual action. Paying attention to a diversity of cultural cues, including those in media, keeps us from presuming determinant knowledge that we do not have. It is not instrumental to ethics whether or not our behavior or fate is metaphysically determined, as this is something we cannot know, and we must resolve ethical dilemmas without such pure knowledge or guidance. We can acknowledge, however, that we never have access to determinant facts; we can only observe a matrix of cultural and biological influences that are always incomplete, and present at best probabilities for predicting an individual's behavior. As Malcolm Turvey is at pains to point out, human science is always provisional, not an authority.<sup>72</sup> It is probabilities and not determining facts upon which a cognitive consequentialist ethics ought to be premised.

### On Ethics and Politics—and, Of Course, Emotion

Given that it has informed one of the most central debates in the history of political film theory, it would help to confront head on the issue of two competing ideals: emotional proximity as ethics and rational distancing as politics. Cognitive film theory's emphasis on emotional engagement as key to understanding the morality of spectatorship in the past seemed to collide with a dominant model founded on the political value of distancing effects drawn from Brecht's writings on the theater. Torben Grodal, for instance, objected to an assumption that still lingered in cognitive theory after Bordwell and that appeared to be inherited from its predecessors: that emotions are the opposite of rational thought processes and that emotional response and narrative comprehension were in that case separable.<sup>73</sup> Not only were emotion and reason unhelpfully dichotomized in the legacy of these film theories, nebulous notions of ethics and politics appeared tethered to these two poles as well: morality as unreasoned or intuitive emotion, and politics as considered, rational thought during spectatorship when one is able to put those emotions aside.

This book addresses politics as well as ethics, which may lead the reader to wonder where one begins and the other ends. Of course, ethically prescriptive claims can be located *within* branches of media theory more often conveyed as "political": feminist, queer, and postcolonial media studies, for instance, all tend to move their writing outward from a remedial or morally curative rationale.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Malcolm Turvey, "Can the Science of Mirror Neurons Explain the Power of Camera Movement?," *Observations on Film Art*, May 3, 2020, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2020/05/03/can-the-science-of-mirror-neurons-explain-the-power-of-camera-movement-a-guest-post-by-malcolm-turvey>.

<sup>73</sup> Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 40.

<sup>74</sup> Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethics*, 11.

Plantinga has written eloquently on this matter: “To separate morality from politics and ideology, such that only political conservatives or quietists take an interest in morality, and progressives in politics and ideology, ignores both the pervasive diversity and influence of moral systems and their relation to broader ideological concerns.”<sup>75</sup> I proceed from the working assumption that political considerations are always ethical, in that they are deliberative and concern what we ought to do collectively. The ethical, however, is not necessarily always political, as its concerns can be localized to limited effects of actions between fewer subjects. The personal and private spheres may be political in that they are affected by and in turn affect processes of public deliberation and legislation, and they are subject to widely distributed cultural norms of a political nature, yet we still need the political to have its own meaning, or else, as Angelo Cioffi points out, a term like “political cinema” refers to all cinema and becomes redundant.<sup>76</sup> Attendance to political considerations is contained within the bounds of ethical deliberation and moral reasoning—and so, I believe, it would be remiss to excise political theories from any book addressing media ethics. While most chapters in this book address the political resonances of media texts, I have also included a chapter that addresses political thinking more specifically—and in a cluster of texts where one may not expect to find much in the way of politics, the romantic comedy film.

In complicating this position we might note again that normativity’s etymology brings to mind social “norms” of precisely the kind cultural scholars have worked so hard to dismantle, and the word “ethics,” harking back to the birth of Western philosophy, has about it the ring of the Old World and its corrupt, enduring, colonial “civilizing” missions. It is little wonder that many who write earnest treatises in the field of normative ethics would instead prefer to consider their work that of “politics,” with its connotations of disruption rather than adjudicative imperialism. Yet consider for a moment a politics without ethics, and one might conjure a roomful of parliamentarians disinterested in the effects of their actions on others. Consider even the language around a figure like Greta Thunberg: when journalists write “she talks ethics to politics without flinching,” a dichotomy is set up between an impoverished political process disinterested in its own consequences and another possible politics that invites the rigors of ethical modes of arbitration.<sup>77</sup> Politics has more than one meaning; it can refer to the process of politics or its concerns, and ethical concern is the component of politics that radical humanities scholars most treasure. Politics (as process) without

<sup>75</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 155.

<sup>76</sup> Angelo Cioffi, “Towards a Theory of Political Cinema,” Paper presented at SCSMI, University of Hamburg, June 14, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Ali Smith, “Greta Thunberg: ‘They See Us as a Threat Because We’re Having an Impact,’” *Guardian*, July 21, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jul/21/great-thunberg-you-ask-the-questions-see-us-as-a-threat>.

ethics (as future-thinking concern) is perhaps the furthest from the world that we want. I therefore write about ethics and politics together.

There is still this tricky problem, however, of what manner of engagement with media might occasion a spectator's critical thought to be conducted toward systemic rather than private concerns. Throughout this book I make the case that narrative reflexivity and audience reflexivity are not one and the same and that we cannot assume that stories signaling their own constructedness (what Meretoja calls *self-reflexive narratives*) inspire more critical thought in their participants than narratives that request diegetic immersion (Meretoja's "*naturalizing narratives*, which hide their own mediating and interpreting role").<sup>78</sup> I fundamentally disagree with the apparatus theory's implication that works of cinema, realist or otherwise, that call for immersion constitute a kind of truth-claim that halts critical inquiry on the basis of a self-naturalizing impulse, or that typical reader/viewers are naively unaware of a fictive world's subjective constructedness until it is pointed out to them within a narrative. Instead, I prefer Plantinga's "engagement theory" and Kozloff's "cinema of engagement," which posit that narrative immersion is equally capable of inspiring critical thought—even if that thought often occurs post hoc, which is the case made in this book.<sup>79</sup> Kozloff, in fact, surveys a breadth of research demonstrating that immersive and emotionally engaged entertainment, rather than emotionally distancing entertainment, tends to produce not only more changes in belief, but changes in behavior as well.<sup>80</sup> The question is: by what mechanisms is such a change inspired, and how might we isolate those mechanisms for analysis?

To begin to answer this question, let us turn to a specific example. Writing on *BlacKkKlansman* (Spike Lee, 2018), Plantinga notes the possibility of hybrid cinema that offers the viewer the pleasures of emotional affiliation with characters (presumed to be an "orthodox" level of engagement), but also ruptures the identificatory experience with overtly political dialogue and montage sequences, as well as periodic complication of the protagonists' motivations.<sup>81</sup> *BlacKkKlansman* is a particularly useful film for talking through the inseparability of filmic modes presumed, by some theorists, to be binary: mainstream, institutional, or "Hollywood classical" storytelling techniques and revolutionary or "countercinema."<sup>82</sup> Plantinga reminds us that Brecht, in his later writings, did

<sup>78</sup> Meretoja, *The Ethics*, 12.

<sup>79</sup> Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 101; Kozloff, "Empathy," 2.

<sup>80</sup> Kozloff, "Empathy," 15–16.

<sup>81</sup> Carl Plantinga, "Brecht, Emotion, and the Reflective Spectator: The Case of *BlacKkKlansman*," *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 8, no. 1 (2019), <https://necsus-ejms.org/brecht-emotion-and-the-reflective-spectator-the-case-of-blacckklansman>. The idea that the appeal to pathos leads audiences astray and that it is opposed to reason (or logos) is as old as Plato's *Ion*, in which a similar fear is discussed: that emotive poetry might lead us to unreasoned notions of "goodness."

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Wollen, "Godard."

not denounce immersive or empathic engagement with character per se, but the deployment of such engagement without any narrative rupture that might compel spectators to reflect on the implications of the story for their own lives as political subjects or their subsequent responsibilities. Plantinga's reading of *BlackKlansman*, however, still connotes some emotional separability in the two modes, in that he presents a film that moves back and forth between a conventional narration that includes conflicts in character alignment and allegiance, and more overt and expository moments of disruption.<sup>83</sup> He astutely indicates the ways in which the emotions marking the apparently conventional half of the film elicit a "mixed sympathy" toward protagonists whose multiple roles—for instance, Ron (John David Washington) as both cop and activist—render assessments of their moral character conflicted, and ergo constitute part of the film's prompt to political reflexivity.<sup>84</sup>

While I agree that the majority of the film that viewers might recognize as more conventional contains many of its key disruptions intended to produce critical thought, I would like to call into question how very different the emotions are that undergird each part of the film. The film's ending, with its move from fictionalized biopic to documentary footage, is indeed very Brechtian in that it overtly connects the narrative to politics that are both current and relevant to the viewer—and the conclusion of *BlackKlansman* has already become a touchstone for dialogues in political cinema, much like the impactful climax of *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989) three decades earlier.<sup>85</sup> As such, *BlackKlansman*'s conclusion is a good place to look when placing some of these Brechtian arguments under the microscope. I would argue that this, the most overtly political moment of the film, is also the moment that elicits (in an audience sympathetically aligned with the film's condemnations of white supremacy) the most intense feelings of emotional identification, empathy, and perhaps even sentimentality. The difference is that we are no longer aligning with actors portraying the victims and investigators of racially motivated crime, but with the victims themselves. This feeling of proximity (no longer at a fictive remove) to the felt

<sup>83</sup> Similarly, one of the central tenets of Flory's book *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* is that Black filmmaking often turns to ethically disruptive narrative resources (some inherited from noir filmmaking), such as mixed sympathies, moral ambivalence, and fixation on antiheroic crimes and transgressions, precisely because these techniques are apt to situate a viewer affectively within the problems of race and agency that privileged audiences might otherwise see through. Black filmmaking, as defined by Flory, offers "ways of persuading audiences to willingly see protagonists cross lines of bourgeois acceptability, transgress established laws, and infringe on underlying moral codes," revealing the institutional and sociopolitical pressures that limit autonomy and problematize the imposition of a removed rather than a situated ethical framework. Dan Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 24.

<sup>84</sup> Plantinga, "Brecht."

<sup>85</sup> Bernard Beck, "The Next Voice You Hear: *BlackKlansman*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*," *Multicultural Perspectives* 21, no. 1 (2019): 19–22.

consequences of violent hate crime is the film's most emotional moment, and its emotional reasoning (borne by music, sound design, and editing that prescribe sentiment, horror, and emotional identification with subjects in equal measure) is precisely what makes the film's politics resonate so strongly. Although viewers are alienated from the narrative, it does not follow that they are alienated from the "conventions" or "orthodoxy" of emotional engagement.

In this powerful sequence, it is not emotional alienation that compels the viewer to address political reasoning or feelings of personal responsibility; it is still an appeal to pathos, a more direct unity of emotion and consequential action. Emotion, by providing a reason for action, still has primacy in reflexive viewership, and this includes any self-conscious rerouting of the viewer's attention to the politics of race. We may be alienated from the fictional narrative and fictional characters, but not from its emotions, rallied as they are to a political cause. Removal from a narrative is not a removal from the emotions associated with that narrative or its emotively causal logic, a truism that cognitivists, with their reliance on strategies of emotional "transference" in media, should be familiar with.<sup>86</sup> I would also argue that at this moment, viewer identification moves from what Brecht might call an "incomplete" empathy for actors to a more "complete" empathy for real-life counterparts; so producing an empathy or allegiance that is "incomplete" makes little sense as a political motivator, either. It is with this more "complete" rather than restrained affective empathy in mind that we are asked to go back and reflect on the current political resonances of the film we have just witnessed. But we are not given the time to do this until after the picture has concluded. In fact, *BlacKkKlansman's* ending provides so much to take in, perhaps also overwhelming us with emotions that are difficult to process, that the film practically begs its own "reflective afterlife" (to borrow Peter Kivy's phrase), and so we must hold off on much of our critical thought until we have left the film experience behind.<sup>87</sup>

And so the story does not end here. I might even suggest that this montage sequence is still not the most emotional experience of the film—it was certainly not my own. In fact, I would say in my own case that it was hours after the film ended, when I was making sense of its emotional prompts, tentatively discussing it with fellow viewers, and unpacking those overwhelmed feelings in my own time, that I felt the most pleasure, painful displeasure, and will to action in equal measure.

<sup>86</sup> In fact, Lee is using the emotions incited in fiction as a resource that is then transferred into, and changes our relationship with, images of racialized violence from recent events that his audience will be familiar with and presumably already invested in. Dolf Zillmann, "Excitation Transfer in Communication-Mediated Aggressive Behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 7, no. 4 (1971): 419–434.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Kivy, "The Laboratory of Fictional Truth," in *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 122–123.



The problem with so much conventional theory is that it is peculiarly focused on the moment of engagement with narrative media rather than with how it affects our later reasoning and the reasoning that we might carry through our lives.

As Greg M. Smith points out, a narrow focus on the moment of engagement also restrains the applicability of cognitive studies to more longform media that may have differing structures of prior investment and knowledge, such as television (not to mention videogaming, the discussions of which extend beyond the reach of this book).<sup>88</sup> If we are to accept the theses of distributed cognition—that memory, emotion, and other mental processes exist between rather than within people and that all media facilitates extension of the mind into shared spaces that create new socially borne possibilities not accessible in isolation from others—then we should be looking not simply at what is happening in the mind during film viewing, but at what happens before and after. We should examine what we bring to a movie, including social and moral investments, and the conversations it informs afterward, and of course the ways in which it settles into a part of our self-histories, what we thought of the movie and what it meant to us, and how it can be squared with everything else we believe to be true about the world.

Cognitive scholars have been, perhaps reasonably, fixated upon the processes of spectatorship; the biology of audiovisual perception, for instance, or neural activity during rather than after viewing media. This preoccupation has come at the expense of examining cognitions that occur postengagement. It is, in fact, precisely the obsession with the moment of engagement that has been central to the long-standing scholarly admonishment of emotions in narrative and the enduring presupposition, drawn from Brecht, that audiences cannot be “reflexive” if they permit themselves to be affected by a narrative’s emotional manipulations. But even if emotions did hinder reflexivity during a narrative, why should this prevent a spectator’s reflexivity after the narrative has concluded? Can we not delay or withhold judgment until we reach the other end of a story’s affective manipulations? In fact, is this not the best practice when dealing with emotionally charged situations in the world, to wait until after, for instance, our anger at a loved one has abated to then reengage? And is this not also a default position many of us take anyway, to see how we feel when the story settles, to then determine how to write its effects into our own personal narrative? The most interesting cognition, both individually and dialogically, may happen in the space of reasoning long after a story’s conclusion and after we have left behind the affective space of the setting in which we encountered the narrative (from the cinema to a phone screen in bed at night) and entered a new affective space. We need to allow everyone this post hoc reasoning. How many of us can truly say that we

<sup>88</sup> Greg M. Smith, “Coming Out of the Corner,” in *Cognitive Media Theory*, ed. Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham (New York: Routledge, 2014), 290–291.

have ordered all of our important thoughts on a story while we were engaged with it? Certainly not those of us in the humanities, who spend years writing about stories in order to think them through. We should allow this space of complex reflection to all spectators, too, instead of indulging a third-person effect in which we attribute reflective capabilities only to ourselves. The readings that follow in this book address the kind of thinking-through of affective responses that screen narratives can elicit *during* the emotive cadences of engagement, while allowing as well that audiences might also spend time making moral sense of those same emotions in postviewing cognitions and social encounters. In this book, “post hoc” does not necessarily always mean “postviewing,” but it does entail the kinds of thoughts and feelings that occur in the wake of “hot” emotional states in a narrative; reflections may still occur during engagement, but the key is that I am interested in morally charged thoughts that follow the emotive experience of media narratives.

So this very issue of the separability of emotionally informed ethics and politically informed reason goes back to the centrality of retrospection, memory, and autobiography. At the same time, it should be clear how hermeneutic attention in the *BlackKklansman* case study draws on the resources of fiction, the emotional and political complexities it invites to illuminate the myriad situated and embodied pressures that intervene against otherwise staid descriptions of political phenomena and ethical lines of questioning. Summa-Knoop asks, “Is a naturalized understanding of film able to address a different moment of aesthetic experience, namely the aesthetic experience that begins not during but after the movie? Or is this where criticism and naturalized aesthetics must part ways?”<sup>89</sup> Perhaps instead of parting ways, this is where the universalizing language of naturalism in media and the arts might pick up on the challenge of more recent cognitive theories that actively map the vagaries of social experience and cognition, those dynamic aspects of spectatorship that elude descriptions of the individual spectator’s brain.

It is possible, as well, to reflect during cinema and then not act on that reflection, or for its influence to fade. Consider the case of the so-called *Babe* effect, named after the (ephemeral) pork industry lull brought about by the film *Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995); emotional allegiance to anthropomorphized animals indeed provoked active consumer decisions, but they lasted only as long as the affective memory of that identificatory experience persisted.<sup>90</sup> So film theory’s obsession over reflexive viewing may tell us little about our behavior in the world, especially where changes in emotion affect reasoning and behavior

<sup>89</sup> Laura T. Di Summa-Knoop, “Naturalized Aesthetics and Criticism: On Value Judgments,” *Projections* 12, no. 2 (2017): 26.

<sup>90</sup> Nathan Nobis, “The *Babe* Vegetarians,” in *Bioethics at the Movies*, ed. Sandra Shapshay (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 56–70.

over time. Evidence from the hot-cold empathy gap (a kind of egocentric bias) also indicates that people tend to underestimate not only the role emotions play in behavior, but differences in behavior dependent on one's state of emotional arousal.<sup>91</sup> While disengagement theorists might see "hot" emotions during spectatorship as muddying a more political rationality that could take the place of affective engagement, this would mischaracterize emotional responses as an imposition on human ethics rather than as a means of guiding them.

So what are the drivers of explicitly political action in the world, and what are the emotive qualities of narrative that may thereby encourage lasting participation in political movements? As James M. Jasper notes, all political work must offer social satisfactions and interim goals on the way to an envisioned endgame that can be remote; thus emotions, which can offer short-term inducements to particular social behaviors, play a large part in maintaining the motivation to pursue longer-term political goals.<sup>92</sup> The conversational, contagious, and social nature of these emotions is clearly fortified in narrative distribution. That is, narrative media can also offer short-term feelings of, for example, solidarity or articulation of a moral principle that help to establish a framework of political identity and its open possibilities that will inform our attempts to alter the world along with others. Negative affect and emotions such as anger are drivers of change as well, but negative affect ought to be matched by the hopeful conviction that change is possible and by the perception that one is not alone in one's actions, and so those actions will cumulatively matter.<sup>93</sup> It is a fine line for any narrative to walk, but this is because inducements to political action are difficult to achieve. Narratives must balance inciting emotion with meanings drawn from that emotion that sustain motivation after the affective response has subsided: we are spurred by a sense of being together in that emotion with others who can similarly make change, perhaps even a mix of foundational negative affect—anger and sadness as the impetus—with sentimentally relational conclusions, providing us the reason to go on. This, I feel, is what a film like *BlackKkklansman* achieves.

Disengagement theorists are correct to draw attention to many of the appalling politics that have been embedded in Hollywood's narratives for so long, but their proposed alternatives seem equally brutish and unlikely to move a proletariat to radical action, assuming as they do a populace that would do better without motivating guidance from their emotional states. As with the many binary oppositions that structure grand debates in arts and media scholarship—biology

<sup>91</sup> George Loewenstein, "Out of Control: Visceral Influences on Behavior," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 65, no. 3 (1996): 272–292.

<sup>92</sup> James M. Jasper, "Emotions and Social Movements: Twenty Years of Theory and Research," *Annual Review of Sociology* 37, no. 37 (2011): 285–303.

<sup>93</sup> Xie et al. "Predicting."

versus culture, narrative versus non-narrative coherence, thick description versus distanced data collation, and so on—it appears a hybrid model will take us further into new territory and new understanding. Perhaps moments of removal and reflection that do not deny the rhetorical power of pathos and proximity can be politically valuable in a way that we might call “thoughtfully rousing” rather than just thoughtful or rousing. But most of all, we cannot deny the different spaces people move through before and after media engagement, their connected social exchanges and patterns of feeling and thought, as those before-and-after spaces are potentially even more important for a sense of selfhood, behavior, and its justification than the experience of the story itself.

## 4

# Moral and Cognitive Dissonance in Cinema

Both Warren Buckland, in the introduction to *Puzzle Films*, and Gerwin van der Pol, in an analysis of *Amator* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1979), note that film theorists write around the topic of cognitive dissonance but never quite name it as such.<sup>1</sup> Van der Pol lists writers who “regard film viewing as a process where, minute by minute, the spectator redefines the information provided. The film cognitivists fail to mention cognitive dissonance, despite it apparently being on the tip of their tongues.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Buckland and his contributors emphasize the teleological uncertainty of complex puzzle narratives and their ability to inspire ontological skepticism in the viewer. Although it should be fine to discuss cognitive dissonance without naming it, using other terms to describe its experiential qualities, it is fruitful, too, to look closer at some of our assumptions regarding the implications of narrative dissonance. The curious pleasure of dissonance in particular invites scrutiny: if dissonant experiences produce negatively valenced affect that we find aversive and seek to shift, how do we come to find narrative simulations of such a process pleasurable? We may need to feel some exertion in resolving a cognitive contraposition (two or more conflicting thoughts, conceptions, or values) but also comfort in possessing the appropriate tools of narrative comprehension to reorder information and resolve mental stress; this is known as dissonance reduction or resolution. We can ask what strategies for dissonance reduction are employed by film spectators and analysts, and at what point we need to emerge from the stress associated with cognitive dissonance into a more comforting affective coherence in order to explain the experience to ourselves as profound.

In *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Léon Festinger suggested that we are motivated to reduce the discomfort produced when we perceive contradictions in our understanding of the nature of the world and its causal structures.<sup>3</sup> Discordance between one’s own actions and self-concept (counterattitudinal

<sup>1</sup> Warren Buckland, ed., *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 7; Gerwin van der Pol, “Cognitive Dissonance as an Effect of Watching *Amator*,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 11, no. 3 (2013): 354–373.

<sup>2</sup> Van der Pol, “Cognitive Dissonance,” 360.

<sup>3</sup> Léon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

behavior) and conflict between two beliefs revealed as contradictory (such as the accommodation of new information that invalidates past commitments) might both cause dissonance. There is, thus, a distinction we can draw between dissonance in one's self-identity and in one's apprehension of an external world, although the two are closely related, especially as we often gravitate toward beliefs about the world that advantage the self. We can then adjust attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors "by removing dissonant cognitions, adding new consonant cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, or increasing the importance of consonant cognitions."<sup>4</sup> The ways in which we settle dissonant experiences in narratives hold implications for the moral perspectives we draw from them.

Although much experimental work throughout the ensuing decades focused on dissonance in self-concept and ego maintenance, some controversy remains around the role of the self in dissonance reduction: whether one is motivated primarily to protect one's ego or to maintain consistency between cognitions.<sup>5</sup> Both seem plausible, and even harmonious. Since this first wave of dissonance studies, new models have suggested that we are motivated to align attributions of the consequences of our behavior with social norms of responsibility<sup>6</sup> or that we are motivated to preserve moral and adaptive self-integrity.<sup>7</sup> Others have attempted more unifying theories<sup>8</sup> and advocated a return to and refinement of the original theory.<sup>9</sup> My own account assumes that all such motivational models may be accurate under various circumstances and with personality variation, and so addresses attempts to both maintain consistency and protect one's ego following dissonance arousal, as well as acknowledging the pressure of social norms. The point is not to present an argument either way but rather to analyze how film scholars have placed value on versions of cognitive dissonance in their work, asking how we might achieve greater specificity in our descriptions of the uses of filmed narrative if we are more precise regarding the nature of the cognitive processes involved.

Some more recent works in cognitive film theory have done just that: the foundational oversight noted by Buckland, neglect of cognitive dissonance,

<sup>4</sup> Judson Mills and Eddie Harmon-Jones, eds., *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1999), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony G. Greenwald and David L. Ronis, "Twenty Years of Cognitive Dissonance: Case Study of the Evolution of a Theory," *Psychological Review* 85, no. 1 (1978): 53–57.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Cooper and Russell H. Fazio, "A New Look at Dissonance Theory," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 17 (1984): 229–266.

<sup>7</sup> Claude M. Steele, "The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 21 (1988): 261–302.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Stone and Joel Cooper, "A Self-Standards Model of Cognitive Dissonance," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 37, no. 3 (2001): 228–243.

<sup>9</sup> Eddie Harmon-Jones, "A Cognitive Dissonance Theory Perspective on Persuasion," in *The Persuasion Handbook: Developments in Theory and Practice*, ed. James Price Dillard and Michael Pfau (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 99–116.

was somewhat remedied by the approach taken in Miklóss Kiss and Steven Willemsen's *Impossible Puzzle Films*, a book that explicitly explores the role of dissonance in the puzzle film genre.<sup>10</sup> My perspective here, though, diverges significantly from theirs, in that they declare at the outset a sequestering of its sociomoral constituents, and this elevation of the merit of dissonances in narrative comprehension over moral dissonance is an important part of the story this chapter sets out to tell.<sup>11</sup> Cognitive documentary theorists Catalin Brylla and John Corner have also recently turned their attention to dissonance in documentary films, and their developing project is, at the very least, more interested in the moral elements of activist filmmaking.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this work calls back to mind some of those earlier writers who used a different set of terms to describe narrative rupture and spectator conflict that invited perhaps less interrogation from studies in cognition. James Harold, for instance, was interested in the moral value of "conflicted emotions."<sup>13</sup> He considers in his analysis of *M* (Fritz Lang, 1931) that "conflicted feelings can be unpleasant, and can cause worry. We can, then, work to resolve the conflict because we wish to avoid the attendant discomfort," a fair description of the motivating negative affect of cognitive dissonance.<sup>14</sup> Later he muses that "conflicted emotions in response to art are valuable, I think, because they remind us of our epistemic limitations and of the messiness of moral and social life," a perspective that points to a mutual contingency between doubting one's knowledge and doubting one's extrapolation of that knowledge into an ethic, and defers once more to the merits of doubt and skepticism in one's convictions that informs so much moral and political film critique.<sup>15</sup> His work draws from Jenefer Robinson's claim that the experience of art can draw attention to our own emotions during engagement, and when we deeply contemplate those emotions, we ignite something of an executive function to change the way we think about the world we feel through.<sup>16</sup>

Yet does our skepticism always achieve as much, or can skeptical attention be directed in such a way that it either skirts moral thinking or, worse, promotes views of the world that are ethically problematic—for instance, bigoted views? Harold also writes that "practical reason normally does not give us a very strong reason to resolve our conflicted feelings about films," which already points to a

<sup>10</sup> Miklóss Kiss and Steven Willemsen, *Impossible Puzzle Films: A Cognitive Approach to Contemporary Complex Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 68–70.

<sup>12</sup> Catalin Brylla and John Corner, "Cognitive Dissonance and Documentary Spectatorship," SCSMI Virtual Conference, June 19, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> James Harold, "Mixed Feelings: Conflicts in Emotional Responses to Film," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34, no. 1 (2010): 280–294.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>16</sup> Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 154–194.



problem: can we be *compelled* to resolve important contradictions in our moral beliefs through film spectatorship, or is this not always necessary?<sup>17</sup> What makes it more likely? In this chapter, I am interested in the ways in which cognitive dissonance can be used to set an agenda, direct attention, and distract from ethical issues that matter. Later, I posit more positive examples that elaborate how the alleged skepticisms prompted by dissonance in film might operate and how they might be ethically valuable. I argue that it is not dissonance itself that matters ethically, but what is done with that dissonance.

### Cognitive Dissonance and the Language of Profundity

Much of the literature on the films I discuss points to their peculiar construction of physics and their disruption of implicit attempts to piece together a logically consistent world in our mind as we watch a film. Film scholars have tended to emphasize the fact that disbelief requires more cognitive effort than belief<sup>18</sup> and have thus reified the effort of sense-making in confounding cinema to explain why we find these works pleasurable; however, it is worth asking how radical these ambiguities really are. I turn to David Lynch as my primary case study, partially due to the extraordinary language used to describe his work. In surveying the literature on Lynch's filmmaking, I found abundant references to the profundity of his artistry. However, I was also interested in looking deeper as, despite the well-documented conservative values evident across his oeuvre (for a look at his Zoroastrian moral dualism, see Jeff Johnson's *Pervert in the Pulpit*)<sup>19</sup> and in interviews (for discussions of his Reaganite economic liberalism, see interviews with David Breskin and John Powers),<sup>20</sup> Lynch remains something of a sacred cow to many of my peers, and I wanted to challenge some key assumptions we have made about the effects of his films on hypothetical spectators.

Perhaps one of the most widely referenced profound experiences Lynch is capable of provoking has to do with temporal and spatial disjuncts, upsetting our intrinsic reliance on their representational consistency. Anne Jerslev observes, "Many of David Lynch's films open by establishing a certain mode

<sup>17</sup> Harold, "Mixed Feelings," 290.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel T. Gilbert, Douglas S. Krull, and Patrick S. Malone, "Unbelieving the Unbelievable: Some Problems in the Rejection of False Information," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, no. 4 (1990): 601–613.

<sup>19</sup> Jeff Johnson, *Pervert in the Pulpit: Morality in the Works of David Lynch* (London: McFarland, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> David Lynch, "Interview with David Breskin," in *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation* (New York: Da Capo, 1997), 92; David Lynch, "Getting Lost Is Beautiful," Interview with John Powers in *David Lynch: Interviews*, ed. Richard A. Barney (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 227.

of spatial impossibility . . . Space in Lynch's films is fluctuating and profoundly ambiguous."<sup>21</sup> She goes on to say of his road movies that "time becomes spatial or space turns into time spans."<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Jeremy Powell aligns Lynch's and Gilles Deleuze's profundity, as both stage "properly philosophical" interventions against a dominant concept of time.<sup>23</sup> The introduction of the Mystery Man (Robert Blake) in *Lost Highway* (1997) provides a good example: the Mystery Man's disembodied voice over the cellphone cannot be coming from the party and the house of Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) at the same time. This contradiction is represented in the soundtrack by a kind of aural phasing, the jarring effect of multiple amplifications of the same sound emanating from different sources played very close together (in this case, mouth and phone speaker), a visceral and direct aural dissonance, in both the musical and the cognitive meaning of the word. Michel Chion believes Lynch developed this technique when working on his short film *The Grandmother* (1970): "Having learned that to join, to build, one must first separate, Lynch began, with ever-increasing clarity, to construct continuities by means of discontinuities, to join by separating. Like many directors, he does this through the image but also, and with far greater originality, through sound."<sup>24</sup> In his breathlessly sycophantic description of the "Lynchian problematic," Chion also asserts that a short film like *The Alphabet* (1986) "works according to no logic we have ever encountered" as he "imbues each image with a host of contradictory meanings."<sup>25</sup>

Introducing his book on *Lost Highway*, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, Slavoj Žižek instructs us that we are to take Lynch's work "thoroughly seriously" and refers us to his own attempts to unravel Lynch's enigmatic "coincidence of opposites" by way of example.<sup>26</sup> But we could equally ask what writers like Žižek find so pleasurable about these opposites, why we feel seriously productive in consideration of them, and why we might work so hard to nominate these "enigmatic opposites" as cinematic sublime. The oppositions in question produce cognitive dissonance by colliding ideas and worlds that the viewer has invested in but seemingly cannot coexist. This in turn inspires the need for resolution, and thus mental effort is required to find a way to reconcile conceptual conflict and make sense of the narrative. Although he points to a number of these oppositions, his

<sup>21</sup> Anne Jerslev, "Beyond Boundaries: David Lynch's *Lost Highway*," in *The Cinema of David Lynch: American Dreams, Nightmare Visions*, ed. Erica Sheen and Annette Davison (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 151.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Powell, "David Lynch, Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze: The Cinematic Diagram and the Hall of Time," *Discourse* 36, no. 3 (2014): 310.

<sup>24</sup> Michel Chion, *David Lynch*, trans. Robert Julian (London: BFI, 1995), 44.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's "Lost Highway"* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 8.

primary point is “the opposition of two horrors: the phantasmatic horror of the nightmarish noir universe of perverse sex, betrayal, and murder, and the (perhaps much more unsettling) despair of our drab, ‘alienated’ daily life of impotence and distrust.”<sup>27</sup> But is this technique really so seriously sublime, to tell a majority of people that their lives are drab, alienated, and impotent, to lampoon the everyday of an imagined class of unenlightened “suburban-megalopolis” constituents by making them inextricable from a cooler underworld of noir cliché depravity and pop-referential aesthetics?

Other patterns in location of the profound are observable across Lynch readings. Martha P. Nochimson in particular has referenced as profound the confusions between two or more character identities,<sup>28</sup> as well as dissonance in narrative comprehension and dramatic irony: “[*Eraserhead*] challenges the spectators to deal with profound narrative issues as they view the story. The narrative depends on the conflict between the audience’s perception of the barely formed matter . . . and the characters’ beliefs that they are dealing with a baby.”<sup>29</sup> Thematic binaries and the lack of subject resolution, unity, and even coherence in Lynch’s cinema generate “profound tensions”:

He thrives on the tension between two major incompatibilities in his work: nature, with its unseen balances and its mysterious, nonconscious economies; and conscious culture marked by the reductive linearities of language, with its fierce logical coherence . . . he embraces the profound tensions between them, tensions that remain part of the life of the work *because* they are never fully resolved.<sup>30</sup>

Nochimson also refers to dissonance in meanings attributed to popular culture; as she says of *Blue Velvet* (1986), “The performance of popular music will take on a more profound and complex meaning as it evokes not only surfaces but depths as well.”<sup>31</sup> All of these conceptions of the profound in Lynch’s work come back to a central value: the metaphysical upset triggered by spectatorial cognitive dissonance.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Martha P. Nochimson, “*Inland Empire*,” *Film Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2007): 13; see also Simon Riches, “Intuition and Investigation into Another Place: The Epistemological Role of Dreaming in *Twin Peaks* and Beyond,” in *The Philosophy of David Lynch*, ed. William J. Devlin and Shai Biderman (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 27.

<sup>29</sup> Martha P. Nochimson, *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, [1997] 2003), 152; see also Kelly Bulkeley, “Dreaming and the Cinema of David Lynch,” *Dreaming* 13, no. 1 (2003): 50–51.

<sup>30</sup> Nochimson, *The Passion*, 201.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 105; see also John Alexander, *The Films of David Lynch* (London: Charles Letts, 1993), 29.

<sup>32</sup> For further examples, see Odell, Le Blanc, and Rombes on good and evil in Lynch or McGowan’s nonsensical “profound commitment to fantasy in its real dimension.” Colin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc, *David Lynch* (Harpending: Kamera Books, 2010); Nicholas Rombes, “*Blue Velvet*

If a story fundamentally attributes some kind of causality to events, then a function of narratives that stress these metaphysical dissonances is to offer an antidote to telic certitude, presumed to be at the heart of dominant storytelling modes.<sup>33</sup> In lieu of coherent models for understanding cause-effect relationships on a particular subject, temporal and spatial disjuncts in narrative remind us of both our limited knowledge and our limited capacity for knowledge. This seems like a reasonable narrative function, promoting some manner of epistemic humility. According to Torben Grodal, it might also explain why superstition and supernature are integral concepts in art cinema; he names Bergman, Tarkovsky, Wenders, Kieslowski, Lynch, and Trier as examples.<sup>34</sup> Yet if we are to politicize this narrative experience, the magnitude and generalizability of dissonance become critical. In Festinger's initial theory, the pressure we feel to change attitudes or behavior reflects both the personal value of the ideas at stake and the ratio of dissonant to consonant elements. It is possible that, once we know how to read Lynch, there is little left at stake for us. We have already engaged dissonance resolution in learning the language necessary to be conversant with his cinema, and thereafter we encounter neither significant threats to the commitments we have developed nor enough dissonant elements to challenge the consonance we have advanced in explaining his art to ourselves. Familiarity with a certain narrativized dissonance device is clearly going to ease the sensation of dissonance, as we are prepared with the tools to resolve a problem, making it no longer a problem. That is, ambiguity in a narrative may still cause cognitive dissonance, but the period of mental stress induced might be curtailed, as we have rehearsed resolutions to similar narrative problems. This brings attention to our aptitude as a film reader, which may then be a source of personal gratification. As Brylla and Corner point out, the potential for dissonant pleasure as opposed to discomfort emerges at least partially from spectators' motivations in engaging with cinema and the kind of mental work they expect to perform.<sup>35</sup> Puzzle narratives involve the expectation of solution-seeking goals that cast dissonance resolution not only as play, but as a serious play that speaks to intellectual aptitudes we may feel we ought to be rewarded for—hence the many scholarly attempts to advocate the benefits of mental work demanded by formally complex narrative structures,

Underground: David Lynch's Post-Punk Poetics," in *The Cinema of David Lynch: American Dreams, Nightmare Visions*, ed. Erica Sheen and Annette Davison (New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 69; Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 112. Even where one could construe such language as meaning "large" or "significant," that loaded narrative significance is still taken as evidence of depth and complexity on behalf of an auteur.

<sup>33</sup> Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Torben Grodal, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 106.

<sup>35</sup> Brylla and Corner, "Cognitive Dissonance."

without extrapolation of the consequences of that work reaching beyond the individual mind.

In 1987, Festinger reviewed some avenues of exploration in dissonance theory that had eluded the contemporary research, and pointed to examples of dissonance that were much more prevalent and mundane, yet nonetheless important for comprehending our cognitive construction of the world around us and behavioral change:

If somebody is in a room, wants to leave the room, and just walks straight into a wall where there is no door, I would think there was considerable dissonance. And the usual way in which that dissonance is reduced is the person looks around and says, O my God, the door is there, and he walks out the door.<sup>36</sup>

The experience of watching a film may differ from our apprehension of the world, although it has been a guiding principle of cognitive theory that spectator responses rely on perceptual faculties that predate audiovisual media, and ergo its dissonances can be equally mundane.<sup>37</sup> We continually reassess past information as new information is presented to us, yet if the information is substantial enough, it may give us cognitive pause. In this case, we still may not need to become aware of our resolution process or active in our decision to resolve a dissonance that the film resolves for us. I am concerned less with that which gives us cognitive pause than with those narrative dissonances that are prominent enough, and important enough for ascertainment of an unfolding narrative's meaning, for us to become aware of the effort required while we reach a resolution. Our cognizance of such dissonances produces an attentional politics: the focus or subject of dissonance makes a claim about what should concern us, and in Lynch's work, metaphysical upset becomes more important than rape and trauma.

### ***Blue Velvet and the Attentional Politics of Dissonance***

So if Lynch's diminutions of the domestic quotidian permit philosophers like Žižek to express their disdain for majority-unenlightened lifestyles, what else do they permit? A number of films, unpleasantly asserting their misogyny as existential comedy, also reveal an impulse to blame, punish, or deride women (at

<sup>36</sup> Léon Festinger, "Reflections on Cognitive Dissonance: 30 Years Later," in *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology*, ed. Judson Mills and Eddie Harmon-Jones (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, [1987] 1999), 384.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph D. Anderson, *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996).

worst offering their simulated abuse as nihilistic catharsis) for a perceived awfulness seething behind (or in the case of *Blue Velvet*, directly underneath) our white picket fences. *Blue Velvet* in particular invites us to laugh during a violent rape scene—a prejudicial embodiment of esoteric “darkness” lurking behind the mimicry of suburban domestic life. Scholars have continued to assert this hubris as subversion, but perhaps journalist Janet Maslin put it best when she decried *Blue Velvet* in a 1998 *New York Times* article:

Less closely examined was the lingering effect of a film in which Isabella Rossellini performed much of her role stark naked, and was violently abused again and again by Dennis Hopper’s character, a man so bizarre that his behavior could not possibly raise any rational objections. As a result of this, kinkiness in the art film had a new lease on life, and sexism in a serious context was respectable all over again.<sup>38</sup>

The pertinent detail here is that Hopper’s performance as the abusive Frank is so bizarre that it cannot provoke rational objection, the ironist leaving the objector open to the charge of prudishness; it is also what makes the sexual abuse comedic. Lynch himself acknowledged that he found the scene “hysterically funny” and could not stop laughing while filming it.<sup>39</sup>

*Blue Velvet*’s bug motif labors the film’s pivotal conceit: that contemporary America ignores or willfully sanitizes the darker aspects of life, and thus mimicry of a more sordid “real” is taking place, which the film sets out to indict and expose, per the creepy-crawlies from underground and mechanized birds that feast on them. In “Masculine Cities and Feminine Suburbs,” Susan Saegert critiqued the sustaining misconception of the suburban, private, and parochial as feminine and the urban, public, and productive as masculine,<sup>40</sup> and *Blue Velvet* is not exempt from this criticism: “The classical dichotomy of the patriarchy is reaffirmed through Lynch’s mixture of misogyny from both the classical realist text and modernist one: Men deal with the important issues of reason (deduction), and action, and the potential for death; whereas women are passive as sites of trivial emotion.”<sup>41</sup> Lynch’s suburban works fit into a formula identifying the suburban malaise as a female problem, the regressive mores and routines particular to women’s domesticity, and so women become deserving of the most scorn and degradation for alleged suburban crimes against aesthetics, taste and decency:

<sup>38</sup> Janet Maslin, “Sexism on Film: The Sequel,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1988.

<sup>39</sup> Lynch, “Interview with David Breskin,” 65.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Saegert, “Masculine Cities and Feminine Suburbs: Polarized Ideas, Contradictory Realities,” *Signs* 5, no. 3 (1980): 96–111.

<sup>41</sup> Jane M. Shattuc, “Postmodern Misogyny in *Blue Velvet*,” *Genders* 13 (1992): 83–84.

Is the feeling of its fifties furniture the postmodern pathos of political transgression bowdlerized as merely outré decor? Or does its design artifice provide the cold gloss of indifference, hiding a more profound anger toward the feminine and its schlocky ornamentation? . . . *Blue Velvet* is a powerful work of art because it raises these questions without ever finally answering them and because it produces such strong feelings from such kitschy material.<sup>42</sup>

Nieland not only confirms the assumption that the feminine and the suburban are united in their mundanity, but excuses Lynch for belittling women because the audience is invited to *feel* so much. This truly is, then, affected profundity. The depth of feeling is produced by purportedly unresolved dissonance between the feminine connotations of kitsch art direction and Lynch's transgressive postmodern stylism. They are hard to reconcile, and so their juxtaposition yields profundity.<sup>43</sup> Again, affect derived from the film and one's cognitive stimulation are the most important filmic values. When Lynch is able to "stimulate emotions of profound intensity," yet somewhere else other audiences are identified as having lesser emotions, we have a problem.<sup>44</sup> We might call this problem a hierarchy of acceptable affect. Registering the advised dissonance in these scenes also requires a viewer to be enthralled with the artist status of the filmmaker, as one of the key principles in conflict is Lynch's persona as a "deep" director. But why should issues of misogyny remain unresolved, and why should our fascination with the authority of the filmmaker—or our own emotional response—supplant analysis of his images of rage against women? According to Greg Olson, "Lynch the artist knows that our alert senses can transport us into experiences of profound discovery."<sup>45</sup> These hedonic concepts of emotion and sensory stimuli read like statements of fact, but they lack the rigor to state what is being discovered when we experience emotive extremes.

It gets worse. When confronted about his choice to have Dorothy (Isabella Rossellini) ask Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) to beat her, Lynch defended himself by reference to reality, upending claims made by Laura Mulvey among others that his aestheticized violence is a mere metaphor,<sup>46</sup> elevated by references to the oedipal yet safely unimpeachable behind the bars of symbolic merit and refraction. "There are countless examples like that in real life," he says, "so why do they get so upset when you put something like this in a film? . . . People get into all sorts of

<sup>42</sup> Justus Nieland, *David Lynch* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 46.

<sup>43</sup> It is interesting to note, too, that the inherent women's dissonance of these pictures ("wanting" rape) is not to be resolved within the film but accepted as a natural, menacing consequence of women's suburban being; there is a politics of who is allowed access to resolution here.

<sup>44</sup> Bulkeley, "Dreaming" 59.

<sup>45</sup> Greg Olson, *David Lynch: Beautiful Dark* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 223.

<sup>46</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Netherworlds and the Unconscious: Oedipus and *Blue Velvet*," in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington, IN: BFI, 1996), 57–79.



strange situations, and you can't believe they're enjoying it, but they are. And they could get out of it, but they don't."<sup>47</sup> Lynch profoundly misunderstands the psychology of domestic abuse in assuming that women both enjoy it and could "get out of it" if they really wanted to,<sup>48</sup> and then goes on to reassert male privilege by making it all about the male antagonist: "Frank is totally in love. He just doesn't know how to show it," he says of the abuser.<sup>49</sup> Lynch is not, it should be noted, filming a mere episode of consensual sadomasochism, but the sustained abuse of a dependent woman who does not have the option of safe escape, employment, or agency and whose son is held captive by Frank for the duration of the film.

Finally, Lynch has justified Frank's violence thusly: "There are some women that you want to hit because you're getting a feeling from them that they want it, or they upset you in a certain way."<sup>50</sup> Yet *Blue Velvet* scholarship since Barbara Creed's influential "A Journey through 'Blue Velvet'" and Lynne Layton's "*Blue Velvet*: A Parable of Male Development" has often treated the film as an oedipal puzzle with real answers of lasting importance to be unraveled; this points to the worldly problems we can prolong by continuing to read film with the tools of psychoanalysis that Lynch's filmmaking rather facetiously throws at our feet, when we do have at our disposal social sciences that are more precise, internally consistent, and evidenced.<sup>51</sup> Why not turn to research on domestic and sexual abuse? Why not use social sciences to explain Lynch's flagrant rape victim blaming instead of vitalizing the puzzles of his mind? According to Jane M. Shattuc, one of *Blue Velvet*'s few scholarly critics, "Feminist criticism such as Bundtzen's and Biga's can no longer rely on the universality of psychic response as posited by Freud and Lacan when discussing postmodern film."<sup>52</sup> She goes on to explain, "Any attempt at a serious psychoanalytic study of a film so ironic in its use of sexual excess falls into a classic postmodern trap. A major strategy of the postmodern is to render political or moral positions impossible."<sup>53</sup> Although I use misogyny as a primary example, it should be noted that others have pointed out how Lynch's oedipal enthrallment glosses racial violence, too.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>47</sup> David Lynch, "Interview with Jeffrey Ferry," in *David Lynch: Interviews*, ed. Richard A. Barney (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2009), 43.

<sup>48</sup> See Evan Stark, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Lynch, "Interview with Jeffrey Ferry," 43.

<sup>50</sup> David Lynch, "Interview with Lizzie Borden," *Village Voice*, September 23, 1986.

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Creed, "A Journey through 'Blue Velvet': Film, Fantasy and the Female Spectator," *New Formations* 6 (1988): 97–117; Lynne Layton, "*Blue Velvet*: A Parable of Male Development," *Screen* 35, no. 4 (1994): 374–393.

<sup>52</sup> Shattuc, "Postmodern Misogyny," 79; Lynda Bundtzen, "'Don't Look at Me!' Woman's Body, Woman's Voice in *Blue Velvet*," *Western Humanities Review* 42, no. 3 (1988): 187–203; Tracy Biga, "*Blue Velvet*," *Film Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1987): 44–49.

<sup>53</sup> Shattuc, "Postmodern Misogyny," 82.

<sup>54</sup> Sharon Willis, "Special Effects: Sexual and Social Difference in *Wild at Heart*," *Camera Obscura* 25–26 (1991): 274–295.

In Lynch scholarship “public outrage and moral confusion” are referenced,<sup>55</sup> along with a feminist backlash,<sup>56</sup> as responses to *Blue Velvet*’s release, yet rarely do we hear those voices, and even more rarely do theorists respond to their arguments, which appear confined to reviewers like Maslin and Roger Ebert.<sup>57</sup> As Norman K. Denzin points out, “With few exceptions (McGuigan and Huck, 1986), the dominant cultural readings did not dwell on the violent treatment of women in the film’s text.”<sup>58</sup> Shattuc is one of the few writers to name Lynch’s work as a forerunner in “the postmodern commercial patriarchy,” yet contemporaries have seldom referenced her article.<sup>59</sup> In fact, Sara Ahmed is perhaps the only writer to revisit Shattuc’s assessment in the face of *Blue Velvet*’s continuing canonization.<sup>60</sup> C. Kenneth Pellow appeared to provide the perfect fodder for Shattuc’s position two years earlier when he declared that the film’s aesthetic design and narrative logic crimes were worse, and therefore more worthy of detailed reflection, than its moral or gendered crimes.<sup>61</sup> To argue, as many now have, that attendance to portrayals of gendered violence in *Blue Velvet* reduces the multifarious meanings of the text is pure sublimation.<sup>62</sup>

However, scholars such as Sharon Willis were less enchanted when Lynch took the joke a step further for his next film, *Wild at Heart* (1990), a fantasy in which women are completely subject to male hypersexual brutishness and the mother’s oedipal guilt is reified, and which begins with “a white man’s unaccountably vicious murder of a black man . . . all the more chilling for the utter silence of the narrative with regard to its cross-racial nature.”<sup>63</sup> Here, Lynch truly literalizes his misogyny during a scene in which Bobby (Willem Dafoe) successfully arouses Lulu (Laura Dern) with sexual violence and begins to rape her, until she appears to “want it” and asks him to “fuck me,” after which he—as in Hopper’s *Blue Velvet* performance, with comically bizarre overacting—refuses her. Lynch’s earlier breakthrough *Eraserhead* (1977), too, was a feature-length essay on the fear of women’s fertility, childbirth, and infancy, combining images of menstruating poultry and the brutalization of swaddled and spermlike alien infants, albeit presenting as confessional more so than his later works.

<sup>55</sup> Chris Rodley and David Lynch, *Lynch on Lynch* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1997), 126.

<sup>56</sup> Layton, “*Blue Velvet*,” 379.

<sup>57</sup> Roger Ebert, “*Blue Velvet*,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 19, 1986.

<sup>58</sup> Norman K. Denzin, *Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema* (London: Sage, 1991), 75; Cathleen McGuigan and Janet Huck, “Black and Blue Is Beautiful?,” *Newsweek*, October 27, 1986.

<sup>59</sup> Shattuc, “Postmodern Misogyny,” 75.

<sup>60</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 174–182.

<sup>61</sup> C. Kenneth Pellow, “*Blue Velvet* Once More,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1990): 173–178.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Brunette and David Wills, “Black and Blue,” in *Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 139–171.

<sup>63</sup> Willis, “Special Effects,” 275.

In *Lost Highway*, Lynch revised his earlier images of sublimely compromised womanhood in the only way he knew how—by staging yet another contraposition that was reconcilable only if the director could have it both ways: “The dreamer resolves a contradiction by staging two exclusive situations one after the other; in the same way, in *Lost Highway*, the woman (the brunette [Patricia] Arquette) is destroyed/killed/punished, and the same woman (the blond Arquette) eludes the male grasp and triumphantly disappears.”<sup>64</sup> I like to think of this as dissonance insurance: it is harder to take aim at poor morals when we are clouded by a proximate, sometimes unrelated dissonance, the resolution of which must take precedence. We cannot approach Lynch’s views on rape until we resolve the dissonances of his moral universe.

The dissonance of proximate inseparability and difficulty of clarity itself may be what Lynch enthusiasts read as profound—again constituting a claim that the inherent work of mental stress is somehow beneficial—but is there some utility to moral specificity, if not seriatim, that is being missed? Considering a lack of scholarly repulsion toward Lynch’s victim blaming, I think so. One moral dissonance that comes up in descriptions of Lynch’s work—including Jeff Johnson’s account of his early viewings of and beguilement by *Blue Velvet* and Carl Plantinga’s discussion of physical and sociomoral disgust in cinema—is the difficulty in reconciling feelings of repulsion and fascination.<sup>65</sup> To preserve a concept of ourselves as basically good people, we have to explain our fascination with antisocial acts, and in the case of Lynch fandom, we can resolve this dissonance by downgrading our disgust response, authenticating the work we have done by reference to the mental effort required. However, to have merely felt these things and moved on is not enough. We can still spend mental effort toward unenlightening ends: the repulsion we feel might be reasonable, as in the case of sexual abuse, and overemphasizing the value of this affective contradiction in and of itself may lead us to trivialize or otherwise devalue the utility of repulsion.

The point I would like to make here is that these films and the scholars brandishing them as philosophy all make a primary claim about what is worthy of our attention. At worst, such dissonances are positioned as a paradoxically more “realistic” alternative to the impoverished coherence of an imagined mainstream. But most of the time, the claim is merely that having our attention turned in on internal metaphysical conundrums transcends other attentional cues in narrative, which may direct us to diegetic immersion, uncorrupted emotional identification with character, moral problem-solving, or any number of other apparently uncritical thought processes we may pass through in consideration of a

<sup>64</sup> Žižek, *The Art*, 38.

<sup>65</sup> Johnson, *Pervert*, 6; Carl R. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 211–212.

narrative film. The horror in Lynch's films is that we are moved swiftly on from rape and trauma without their being flagged as important to understand separately from his metaphysical clues. Domestic and sexual abuses are sublimated, becoming mere ciphers for the mind of the author, and these themes come to be about the author rather than the people involved in such situations. Johnson's assessment of Kenneth C. Kaleta's famed 1995 work on the director concludes, "Kaleta finds art in Lynch's metaphysics. He refers to the moral frame as if it were incidental, subordinated into the creative process."<sup>66</sup> This is no mere horror of amorality; this is the horror of the privileged bully, able to tell victims that their suffering is not as important as the bully's own loftier interests.

Recognizing this may lead us to critical reflection on some of the claims made in much film and narrative theory: that dissonance introduced into a narrative is necessarily political or that being disrupted or having expectations subverted as an audience member necessarily requires of the audience some manner of generalizable critical thinking. This is a scholarly third-person effect, reaching back to Brecht's theories covered in the preceding chapter. We assume that a hypothetically conjured general spectator is miraculously unaware of audiovisual diegetic constructedness and therefore uncritical of its manipulations. The theory holds scant evidence from any real audience studies. Its illogic is also exposed when Lynch is simultaneously asserted to be an auteur who "shows without editorializing, prioritizing, or moralizing" and who "never comments—he presents," ignoring the storyteller's attentional cues that are in themselves a commentary on what is important for an audience to consider or to know.<sup>67</sup> In this way, Lynch is described as a hands-off conduit for thematic truths, the cinematic equivalent of an automatic writer, merely receptive to grand themes passing through his camera. Chion insists that in *The Elephant Man* (1980) Lynch is "making himself passively receptive to his theme so that the film may transcend him"; and of Lynch's work on the television series *Twin Peaks*, Chion writes, "As a whole, the series transcends its authors, including Lynch."<sup>68</sup> Clearly these are all more or less statements of faith, arguments assuming an externality we can see and hear through Lynch's work. The conflation of narrative solution with real-world productivity confers on the auteur a prophetic status, a direct link to higher, realer truths, which may appear antithetical to the key proposition that metaphysical dissonance opens us up to the ineffable and the unknowable. We can ask, in this case, what it means when Nochimson counsels us to accept the mystery of the world.<sup>69</sup> If acceptance involves some manner of dissonance reduction, how has the reduction occurred?

<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *Perverst*, 30; Kenneth C. Kaleta, *David Lynch* (New York: Twayne, 1995).

<sup>67</sup> Kaleta, *David Lynch*, 15, 91.

<sup>68</sup> Chion, *David Lynch*, 61, 112.

<sup>69</sup> Nochimson, *The Passion*, 207.

I contend, with reference to Festinger's methods for resolving dissonance, that we might achieve reduction using two primary means. We can change the conflicting cognition (the puzzle cannot be articulated, but my engagement in the puzzle itself is worthwhile), and we can add new cognitions to justify our initial position (instead of worrying about my engagement with misogynistic works, I will be productive in psychoanalysis).

Yet problems remain: one has to do with the theory of effort justification. Once we have spent some time attempting to resolve a filmic puzzle, we will be more likely to exaggerate the value of our goal to reduce the dissonance's lack of utility in our lives. As Elliott Aronson and Judson Mills's seminal research "The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group" begins: "It is a frequent observation that persons who go through a great deal of trouble or pain to attain something tend to value it more highly than persons who attain the same thing with a minimum of effort."<sup>70</sup> This is writ on a large scale if we spend an exceptional amount of time in written analysis of a film puzzle.<sup>71</sup> Many of the theories of dissonance in spectatorship surveyed above also rely on a presumption that dissonance reduction or resolution will be a consciously rational or metacognitive process rather than an instinctive, reactionary, or emotional one. However, we cannot assume this, as fMRI studies have indicated that post hoc rationalization of decisions we have made can often occur quickly and without extended deliberation, and Linda Simon and colleagues found under multiple conditions that trivialization was a much more prevalent method of dissonance reduction than attitude change.<sup>72</sup> We cannot forget, too, that film is marked as entertainment, and we will thus approach it differently than we would an unfolding event in a context involving other, nonfictive, thinking and feeling agents. We cannot extrapolate so directly to real life. In one study, music was found to reduce the cognitive stress of dissonance, and as much film is full of music, we need to take into account what other factors specific to entertainment media might be working

<sup>70</sup> Elliott Aronson and Judson Mills, "The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59, no. 2 (1956): 177.

<sup>71</sup> However, if a film contains traumatic images and scenes of horror, perhaps the attachment is again intensified, as with hazing rituals. Aronson and Mills found that in order to resolve cognitive dissonance between the severity of initiation practices and group attachment, subjects were likely to retrospectively explain their participation by rating group membership and fealty as more valuable. This may be the case with devotees of the figures of extreme cinema. Many of Lynch's supporters speak of the profundity of his horror, and the coexistence of fascination and repulsion, in the same way. Bret Wood, for example, says that Lynch's "collision of idyllic love and the horrors of war, technology and medicine, provide a profound synthesis. Wood qtd. in David Hughes, *The Complete Lynch* (London: Virgin Books, 2001), 103.

<sup>72</sup> Johanna M. Jarcho, Elliot T. Berkman, and Matthew D. Lieberman, "The Neural Basis of Rationalization: Cognitive Dissonance Reduction During Decision-Making," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 6, no. 4 (2010): 460–467; Linda Simon et al., "Trivialization: The Forgotten Mode of Dissonance Reduction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68, no. 2 (1995): 247–260.

alongside any metacognition to resolve dissonant responses.<sup>73</sup> Again, we can experience cognitive dissonance pertaining to apprehension of the world around us and dissonance of self-identity. Lynch scholars cross freely between the two as if one always prompted the other. This is, of course, incredibly convenient, and dissonance becomes unhelpfully generalized—an example of how we might presume benefits inherent to metacognition instead of looking at the type of metacognitive process being performed.

I have set up Lynch's gender politics as a particular example of how our unthinking equation of opaque mental work and productivity is revealed as flawed in order to demonstrate that this is no petty distinction; there is much at stake here. We need closer analysis of the type of mental work employed and, even more important, the object of the mental work: what it causes us to ponder and compels us to conclude. That is, I want to emphasize that the *object* of dissonance and upset is of equal importance and can be centered on human rather than metaphysical problems. For example, other applications of an onscreen cognitive dissonance theory might include problematizing character engagement,<sup>74</sup> pedagogical uses of cinema, and exploration of the ethics of dissonance. Instead of generalizing the politics of dissonance reduction, we might look at specific instances of dissonance and their relative ability to inspire attitudinal or behavioral change: what filmic encounters might promote an "ethical afterlife,"<sup>75</sup> changing the way we act in the world, and is the severity of dissonance during engagement important in evaluating film's disruptive capacities?

### Moral Dissonances in Cinema

It would not be fair to suggest that a brief analysis of Lynch's cinema presents any comprehensive sum of dissonant devices available to filmmakers. To bring ethical point to a discussion of Lynch and dissonance, the remainder of this chapter investigates alternative uses of narrative dissonance in the work of a range of filmmakers and considers the moral implications of each; these comparisons also fill out an understanding of the key role cognitive dissonance plays in narrative comprehension. Let us turn, then, to what is perhaps the most obvious counterpoint: a social realist diegesis, in which the construction of the world itself

<sup>73</sup> Nobuo Masataka and Leonid Perlovsky, "Music Can Reduce Cognitive Dissonance," *Nature* 244 (2012): 9–14.

<sup>74</sup> As in Van der Pol, "Cognitive Dissonance."

<sup>75</sup> Jane Stadler, *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008).

does not work to inspire cognitive dissonance in spectators but can focus them on the problems faced by a particular character within that world.

In Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995), David (Ian Hart) experiences dissonances between narratives of resistance after Franco's successful wedge politics divide the socialist movement; in *Carla's Song* (1996), George (Robert Carlisle) experiences dissonance in his concept of romantic unity with partner Carla (Oyanka Cabezas) on following her to Nicaragua, as he faces a gulf in transnational relative poverty and existential disparity in the two worlds they come from; and in *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004), lovers Roisin (Eva Birthistle) and Casim (Atta Yaqub) experience a dissonance of fraught cross-cultural hybridity between religious, familial, and workplace expectations they have absorbed in contemporary Glasgow. All of these character dilemmas are pegged to a concurrent dissonance in their moral self-concept. We observe the characters' attempts to resolve these dissonances with varying success, but it is significant that viewers are asked to experience the dissonance along with the characters, and in so doing to ask themselves difficult questions about the values their own politics are predicated upon. Cognitive dissonance is revealed as a compelling model for narrative comprehension, meaning-making, and pleasure, not just of the avant film but of realism, too.

I have made the case that the object of dissonance matters more than the stimulation of dissonance itself, and cinema may force reevaluation of unstable presuppositions we bring to contextualized moral issues, yet responsibility in filmmaking and film viewing might not be as simple as merely foregrounding ethics. Consider another counterexample: the vigilante film. Vigilante and social cleansing cinema deemphasizes metaphysical upset in favor of a simple moral dilemma. I am thinking less of unambiguously pro-vengeance movies like *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) than I am social cleansing thrillers like *The Boondock Saints* (Troy Duffy, 1999), comedies like *God Bless America* (Bobcat Goldthwait, 2011), revisionist superhero films like *Super* (James Gunn, 2010) and *Kick-Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010), horror crossovers, including the rape-and-revenge films that Lynch's cinema at times recalls, or horrors that turn their extremism into grotesque comedy, from the overstatement of recent American grindhouse parodies to the understatement of British productions like *Sightseers* (Ben Wheatley, 2012). These cases all present a relatively simple moral dissonance: the graphic nature of retribution tests the limits of our punitive impulse, usually playing our desire for vengeance against a fractured sense of fairness and law abidance, or the coolness of violently dispatching inferior citizens against our squeamishness, to reveal a contradiction between two spectatorial desires. The spectator's discomfort becomes the drama of the film. The ambiguity that can be produced by this type of narrative famously led to the television broadcast of a qualification during *Taxi Driver's* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) end credits:



To our Television Audience: In the aftermath of violence, the distinction between hero and villain is sometimes a matter of interpretation or misinterpretation of facts. “Taxi Driver” suggests that tragic errors can be made. The Filmmakers.<sup>76</sup>

However, rarely do social cleansing films present earnest attempts to understand a context in which vigilantism fuses with the public imaginary, like the post-Vietnam America of *Taxi Driver*. More often they are focused on the virtue or otherwise of the maverick vigilante, asking the viewer to determine the vigilante’s moral standing rather than question the initial classist presumption that some lives are worth less than others. These films are presented as fantasies and rarely ask us to seriously consider righteous murder, but a condition of engagement is to indulge one’s superiority, which is magnified if one asserts the context as in some way real, as did British politicians,<sup>77</sup> actor Michael Caine,<sup>78</sup> and director Daniel Barber following the release of the social cleansing film *Harry Brown* (2009),<sup>79</sup> motivating a social realist aesthetic to nourish the most dehumanizing presumptions of “Broken Britain” social conservatism. Again, this is attentional politics: we are focused on a moral dissonance that precludes attendance to the inherent classism of the diegesis (and these unstated and presupposed premises, which the film asks its audience to provide, could be characterized as a kind of “enthymeme,” the operation of which is elaborated in the final chapter of this book).<sup>80</sup> Many of the films are also fame narratives in which the vigilante’s violence inspires others to “fight back,” reducing mass violence by means of mass violence. The reward the vigilante receives comes in the form of local notoriety and kudos, tapping into the unfortunate narcissistic psychopathology of many of those who actually commit large-scale planned homicides.<sup>81</sup> In the words of *Kick-Ass*’s protagonist: “In the world I lived in, heroes only existed in comic

<sup>76</sup> Plantinga reserves the most normatively probing section of his own book for a list of his misgivings about revenge scenarios in cinema. Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 231–248.

<sup>77</sup> David Cox, “Starring in *Harry Brown* Doesn’t Make Michael Caine a Social Scientist,” *Guardian*, November 16, 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/nov/16/michael-caine-ukcrime>.

<sup>78</sup> BBC Staff, “Caine Calls for National Service,” *BBC*, November 11, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/8354093.stm>.

<sup>79</sup> Daniel Barber, “Interview with Rob Carnevale,” *IndieLondon*, 2009, <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/harry-brown-daniel-barber-interview>.

<sup>80</sup> Similar observations have been made of the attentional politics in nonfictive formats. As Bernard Cohen famously put it, the agenda-setting nature of the attention economy may not be successful in telling people what to think, but it is “stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.” Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Institute of Governmental Studies, 1963), 13.

<sup>81</sup> Louis B. Schlesinger, “Pathological Narcissism and Serial Homicide: Review and Case Study,” *Current Psychology* 17, no. 2 (1998): 212–221.

books. I guess that would have been OK, if bad guys were make-believe too. But they're not."

Foregrounding moral dissonance alone is not enough to generate a film's worth or utility in ethical debate (just as metaphysical dissonance alone does not generate unassailable artistic virtue); we should look at the substance of the moral dissonance. In the case of the social cleansing film, cinema can focus us on moral problems that start from immoral presumptions. Nor can an aesthetic, like social realism, be the genesis of cinema's political value (Loach himself flirted with righteous vigilantism in 2009's *Looking for Eric*). Again, a question we could ask is whether the moral dissonance is easy to resolve. After we have focused on a moral issue and faced a contradiction in our moral conclusions, have we truly applied some kind of effort to reconcile the contradiction: has edification taken place, and have we complexified and subsequently clarified our thoughts on moral matters?

There are also examples of symbolic devices employed within otherwise realist contexts that may inspire moral dissonance. John Sayles's ensemble drama *Lone Star* (1996) uses a fictional murder mystery to trace histories of racial and familial tensions in a Texan border town, but also features characters talking openly to one another about those tensions and how they should be managed. Sayles employs one of his most famous camera tricks in *Lone Star* to "emphasize his central theme: history is merely a collection of highly subjective appraisals . . . In several scenes, Sayles gracefully glides his camera from a flashback to a contemporary scene, allowing past and present to exist simultaneously in the same tracking shot."<sup>82</sup> The camera movement visualizes the fortifying partialities of historical storytelling and autobiographical reminiscence, wherein the past is so loaded with instructive meaning for an individual that their conviction renders it indistinguishable from the present. Characters then use this certainty—and the evocations of vivid storytelling—to convince one another of their versions of historic events. Retellings reinforce the public imaginary. This technique also represents Sayles's intervention against cinema conventions clearly delineating past and present, one of the many borders the film sets out to challenge: "It's almost not like a memory—you don't hear the harp playing. It's *there*," he explained in an interview.<sup>83</sup> This calls our attention to "the problematic seamlessness of any narrative sequence," and the necessary temporal border construction of storytelling becomes another site of politically charged dissonance.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Joe Leydon, "Sayles' 'Star' Is Rising," *Variety*, March 18–24, 1996.

<sup>83</sup> Diane Carson and John Sayles, *John Sayles: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 204.

<sup>84</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, "Frontiers and Border-Crossing: Incest, History, and Cinematic Structure in John Sayles's *Lone Star*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 44, no. 1 (2016): 30.

*Lone Star* depicts dissent among the Black, white, Latin, and indigenous communities, who are all attached to different yet simplified versions of events: early on in the film, we witness a group of concerned parents bullying a couple of schoolteachers about their history curriculum, but what the dissenters care most about is the teaching of distant military history. Exasperated teacher Pilar Cruz (Elizabeth Peña) tells a roomful of parents, “I’ve only been trying to get across part of the complexity of our situation down here: cultures coming together in both negative and positive ways.” A colleague goes on to defend her: “We’re just trying to present a more complete picture.” This scene sets up *Lone Star*’s pivotal dilemma: how retellings of past conflicts keep them alive, reinscribing divisions between people, yet at the same time, how acknowledging the lasting influence of a violent history remains necessary. The remainder of the film maps these conflicts onto parent-child legacies across three generations. Throughout the narrative, county sheriff Sam Deeds (Chris Cooper) and Pilar come to represent the problem a hybrid America faces. Once teenaged lovers whose parents kept them apart, apparently for reasons of racial purism, as adults they learn that they are in fact half-siblings, their parents’ affair being a town secret—an even more potent mystery behind the murder mystery. They initially appeared to symbolize North and South, but now their symbolism incorporates the realization of historical causality and personhood as equally incestuous, problematizing national and hereditary borders between people, and this is combined into a personal moral dissonance of acceptable loving—a dramatization of the political in the personal, as Sayles was by now known for.<sup>85</sup> Although they become the personal embodiment of this humanistic problem, Sam and Pilar are not merely symbols. They are at the same time complex individuals we have come to care about, and the moral dissonance is dimensional, difficult to resolve, because of the mediating factors of multifaceted character detail. Pilar’s response is: “Forget the Alamo.” Her answer invokes the political resonance of their personal problem. We need to remember and reiterate past conflicts to avoid them, to show how a postcolonial context implicates various peoples, and to reflect on the politics of assimilation (as in the famous rallying call “Remember the Alamo”); but at the same time, we need to stop reiterating these stories to allow one another the space to move on and forge new connections not bound to historic conflicts or identities (the reformulation “Forget the Alamo”).

<sup>85</sup> Martin F. Norden, “The Theo-Political Landscape of *Matewan*,” in *Sayles Talk: New Perspectives on Independent Filmmaker John Sayles*, ed. Diane Carson and Heidi Kenaga (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 103–116.

## Conclusions

Moral cases are notoriously tricky to make in arts evaluation, and description is always a simpler task than prescription. Partially, this book aims to address a moral nonattendance that writers like Thomas de Zengotita perceive in philosophy's adoption of cognitive and evolutionary sciences.<sup>86</sup> But I also wonder what use our analytical information is unless we ask what we ought to do with the information; as philosophers, we should be equipped to ask these questions. This first case study establishes the grounding premise that filmmakers and film audiences have discernible responsibilities that can be located in analyzing the substance of the films themselves—and if we are to explore such responsibilities, perhaps the way a film asks us to experience and resolve cognitive dissonance is a good place to start looking.

The point is not that there is a “good” cognitive dissonance as such. Dissonance is simply part of human cognition, without inherent moral value. But films can collaborate with the attention-mediating aspects of dissonances, their reduction and resolution, to achieve varying moral outcomes that *are* evaluable. A recalibration toward moral responsibility in film theory need not entail advocacy of any formal policing of morality in cinema, but rather a self-regulation. Selective moral disengagement is apparent in Lynch scholarship: Albert Bandura's moral justifications, sanitizing language, and exonerating comparisons are employed on behalf of the filmmaker.<sup>87</sup> We need to pose the question: in the resolution of cognitive dissonance, what work are we doing, and what work do we think we are doing? The very nature of dissonance, in that it challenges past commitments, entails opportunities for change, if not accommodation of new information into one's preexisting schema or self-identity. But this does not mean that merely feeling dissonance will invariably prompt reflexivity. When affirming as profound the experience of dissonance alone, we ignore the fact that we can resolve disconfirming information by further investing in preexisting beliefs, a kind of feedback loop of confirmation bias explored by Festinger and colleagues in an earlier work, *When Prophecy Fails*.<sup>88</sup> A circular logic is produced when we ignore and discard evidence that incites dissonance and reattach ourselves to our initial conviction. One explanation is that “measures of dissonance reduction may actually arouse more dissonance by reminding participants of their dissonant cognitions,”<sup>89</sup> so avoidance remains the most attractive

<sup>86</sup> Thomas De Zengotita, “Ethics and the Limits of Evolutionary Psychology,” *Hedgehog Review* 15, no. 1 (2013): 34–45.

<sup>87</sup> Albert Bandura, “Selective Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency,” *Journal of Moral Education* 31, no. 2 (2002): 101–119.

<sup>88</sup> Léon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

<sup>89</sup> Simon et al., “Trivialization,” 259.

option.<sup>90</sup> We have to look harder for the conditions of attitudinal change. Merely provoking a dissonance in narrative is not enough.

Lynch scholars have asserted their own experience of a comforting and spuriously politicized resolution of cognitive dissonance as more important and profound than the values these films peripheralize, and refuting this can lead to claims that we are not spiritually open to the unknown. Lynch's critics, however, are not refuting cognitive limitations or the limits of human knowledge, but the notion that this filmmaker in particular has special access to these things, making the unknown somehow known, visible, listenable, apprehensible. In a maddening paradox, that very thing we claim as a reminder of our cognitive limitations makes its own claim to surmount them.

<sup>90</sup> Roger A. Elkin and Michael R. Leippe, "Physiological Arousal, Dissonance, and Attitude Change: Evidence for a Dissonance-Arousal Link and a 'Don't Remind Me' Effect," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 51, no. 1 (1986): 55–65.

## Benign Violations in the Suburban Ensemble Drame

Participation and detachment, sympathy and ridicule, sociability and isolation, are inseparable in the complex we call comedy, a complex that is begotten by the paradox of life itself, in which to exist is both to be a part of something else and yet never to be a part of it, and in which all freedom and joy are inseparably a belonging and an escape.<sup>1</sup>

In his musings on Shakespeare's comedies Northrop Frye notes some of the dissonant emotional responses at the heart of the comic mode, dissonances that pave no clear response on behalf of an audience. This "affective incoherence" is common across a variety of comic forms of address in performed storytelling.<sup>2</sup> A similar matrix of ostensibly conflicting emotions is integral to understanding the affective formula, and sociopolitical unrest, of the dramedy film. The best comedy, perhaps, is inextricable from the very real social threats underpinning its relevance to an audience. Working from the benign violation model (BVT) in humor studies advanced by Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, we can view comedy as an exploration of circumstances, people, and things that may or may not pose a threat—a process by which we implicitly identify potential violations to the self that might cause harm, or that threaten one's moral principles, and are simultaneously afforded the opportunity to intercede our perception of such threats by acknowledging our relative circumstantial safety or the acceptability of the violation.<sup>3</sup> BVT argues that humor is produced when three conditions are met: we perceive a situation as potentially violating, we perceive it also as benign, and the two perceptions occur simultaneously. McGraw provides an example:

<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 104.

<sup>2</sup> David B. Centerbar et al., "Affective Incoherence: When Affective Concepts and Embodied Reactions Clash," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 94, no. 4 (2008): 560–578.

<sup>3</sup> Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, "Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 8 (2010): 1141–1149.

[P]lay fighting and tickling, which produce laughter in humans (and other primates), are benign violations because they are physically threatening but harmless attacks . . . play fighting and tickling cease to elicit laughter either when the attack stops (strictly benign) or becomes too aggressive (malign violation). Jokes similarly fail to be funny when either they are too tame or too risqué.<sup>4</sup>

Threats to physical well-being are expanded to other subjectively experienced social and moral threats in human cultures with a high degree of relational complexity and interdependence. In this chapter I explore the BVT model as a means to explain comedy in film and as a hermeneutic tool revealing both the sources of comedy in narrative media and the uses of humor in fictive storytelling—that is, the ways in which spectators are encouraged to draw meaning, and especially ethical meaning, from comic modes.

I begin from the premise that humor is inherently a mixed emotion: it is the concurrence of registering events at once as a threat and as trivial, producing an affective incoherence that laughter relieves, in effect “downgrading” its status to benign.<sup>5</sup> Although BVT holds that “these two appraisals must occur simultaneously,”<sup>6</sup> there is evidence to suggest that there are at least two stages in the neural processing of humor,<sup>7</sup> the latter of which may be experienced as a pleasurable “cognitive shift” that resolves the two conflicting appraisals by minimizing any initial perception of a substantive violation.<sup>8</sup> In this case, the relief described by benign violations is that of cognitive dissonance resolution, as potentially conscious and discomfortingly irreconcilable apprehensions are resolved in dissonance reduction.<sup>9</sup> In the preceding chapter I covered Mills and Harmon-Jones’s strategies for dissonance resolution, including “removing dissonant cognitions, adding new consonant cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, or increasing the importance of consonant cognitions.”<sup>10</sup> In humor, the dissonance is often resolved by diminishing the importance of an initial threat appraisal, and thus any negative affect associated with that appraisal. This means that the sources of pleasure in humor could be twofold: the relief of

<sup>4</sup> Peter McGraw, “Benign Violation Theory,” *Humor Research Lab*, November 25, 2014 [http://leeds-faculty.colorado.edu/mcgrawp/Benign\\_Violation\\_Theory.html](http://leeds-faculty.colorado.edu/mcgrawp/Benign_Violation_Theory.html).

<sup>5</sup> Where affective incoherence refers to a discrepancy between positive and negative valence that occurs when our concept of the goodness or badness of things is contradicted by our embodied experience of them, mixed emotion can refer to any mix of so-called primary emotions, regardless of valence.

<sup>6</sup> McGraw and Warren, “Benign Violations,” 1142.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Wild et al., “Neural Correlates of Laughter and Humour,” *Brain* 126, no. 10 (2003): 2131.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Robert L. Latta, *The Basic Humor Process: A Cognitive-Shift Theory and the Case against Incongruity* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Festinger, *Cognitive Dissonance*.

<sup>10</sup> Mills and Harmon-Jones, eds., *Cognitive Dissonance*, 4.



dissonance reduction and relief from the inherent stress of potential violations.<sup>11</sup> I would add that BVT describes both an incongruity and its relief, the agents of which need not dwell repressed in the subconscious, per Freud's account of tendency wit.<sup>12</sup> Rather, to provide an emotional and hedonic stake in maintaining world consistency, we find the resolution of dissonance pleasurable whether or not we are cognizant of or reflecting upon our responses to a potential violation.

Such an emotive dissonance renders the affective particularities of drama-comedy, or "dramedy," genres unique. This chapter asks how benign violations might operate in narrative works that attempt to create spaces in which comedic and dramatic modes become proximate and indistinguishable, and we are asked to read these affective positions comparatively. I turn to a primary case study to anatomize the comic elements of contemporary American dramedy cinema: the suburban ensemble film, a filmmaking mode that emerged at the turn of the millennium, featuring

multiple protagonists, usually half sentimental and half satirical, set in different iterations of the American suburbs . . . popular titles include *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999), *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006) and *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010).<sup>13</sup>

As the suburbs have been so relentlessly politicized in both screen media and media critique, yet at the same time represent something of what so many of its audience might call "home," the domestic setting begins as a site of benign violations at its conception.<sup>14</sup> The politically symbolic nature of such comic frictions is then leveraged by domestic dramedies as an emotive point to think through suburban lifeworlds and quotidian routines that are normalized but could be construed as problematic (for instance, when the protagonists of *The Kids Are All Right* vilify a Mexican gardener). This chapter charts the ways in which various comedic devices inform the emotional palette of the suburban ensemble dramedy and addresses the ethics spectators might be encouraged to draw from its tragicomic domestic politics. It provides an extended example of how the cognitivist BVT model of humor might aid ethical analysis, revealing

<sup>11</sup> In the past I have explored how BVT, rather than contradicting or rivaling the three pillars of humor theory (superiority, relief, and incongruity theories), instead renders them more specific. Wyatt Moss-Wellington, *Narrative Humanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 107.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916).

<sup>13</sup> Wyatt Moss-Wellington, "Abject Humanism in Tom Perrotta Adaptations: *Election* and *Little Children*," *Sydney Studies in English* 43 (2018): 88.

<sup>14</sup> See David R. Coon, *Look Closer: Suburban Narratives and American Values in Film and Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

some of the intricacies of moral threat appraisal that occur in the spaces between drama and comedy.

After developing an emotional map of the domestic dramedies, I compare them with other domestic satirical works, in particular television's *Family Guy* (Fox, 1999–), the films of director Judd Apatow, and American “shock” comedies, to consider some of the politics inherent in their satirical strategies. Using humor to evaluate threats as less serious, or more benign, can allow us to make way for other concerns; or as Sergei Eisenstein wrote in “Bolsheviks Do Laugh,” humor can reinforce and remind us of political threats to be overcome.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, humor has political resonance as a negotiator between the interpersonal behaviors, attitudes, and events we should and should not assume as a threat or problems that should captivate our serious attention. Levity and its absence can make a claim as to the level of violation entailed in certain situations, as well as their social or political contexts. It can also encourage us to think further to investigate a violation or, in the narrative arts, to keep that violation alive in order to maintain its drama. It is this prompt to further sociopolitical interrogation that can reignite a sense of threat evaluation that must be balanced against its own benign comic “undoing” in dramedy cinema.

### Dialogue and Repartee

Humor arises from multiple sources in the suburban ensemble dramedy, but chief among these would appear to be witty dialogue, character eccentricity or quirk, and the surprisingly frank renegotiation of social mores. Although the films employ techniques familiar across cinematic comedy genres—for instance, visual humor, or sight and sound gags<sup>16</sup>—these three are the comedic and satiric elements we might most readily associate with the suburban ensemble dramedy. Instead of cataloging every instance of screen humor therein, I will focus more broadly on those elements that seem integral to the form.

What we read as wit in these dialogue-heavy films can be broken down into three concomitant categories: cynical haughtiness, epigrammatic insight, and inventive lingual play. These attributes make up the comedy of repartee.<sup>17</sup> Cynical haughtiness refers to spoken barbs traded between characters, often the primary dialogic comedy device employed toward the beginning of a domestic

<sup>15</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Sergei Eisenstein Selected Works*, vol. 3, *Writings, 1934–1947* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 68–72.

<sup>16</sup> Consider the honking, spluttering vehicle of *Little Miss Sunshine* or editing that compounds the slapstick of its screen presence.

<sup>17</sup> Succinctly historicized in M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 11th ed. (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2009), 417–419.

dramedy film, yet waning in the latter half of the picture—a trajectory perhaps inspired by the comic heritage of family sitcoms from *Roseanne* to *The Simpsons* that balance caustic dialogue with later acts of familial care. The place of cynical haughtiness must be read with regard to the structural arc of such works. After critical jibes, insults, and unkind riposte are offered, the scorn is regularly revealed to be self-defensive play. *The Upside of Anger* (2005) may be the poster film for this manner of cruel comic address, with character narration telling us, “People don’t know how to love. They bite rather than kiss. They slap rather than stroke.” Denny Davies (Kevin Costner) reiterates in multiple monologues that the verbal displays of anger making up a substantial part of the film are “real life.” He insists that the family tensions within his neighbor’s house, where Terry Wolfmeyer (Joan Allen) lives with her four daughters, inspires his affection for them. The title of the film refers to the person we become *through* the liminal space of anger; anger and humor are liminally aligned. There are other models, however, including *American Beauty*, that employ this convention to different ends. In *American Beauty*, the cynical haughtiness is corrosive and does not, at first, appear to offer any relief. The sentimentality of the conclusion is detached from the characters’ wordplay; the film implies that another, more spiritual force is at work in bringing compassion to its subjects.

George Eman Vaillant recognized humor as a defensive mechanism, and here we find a clear example as distressing thoughts are vocalized, dealt with, and made smaller, thus displaced from their violating position.<sup>18</sup> Humor can be an effective familial coping mechanism, and one that may implicitly request flexibility in family roles and expectations.<sup>19</sup> Even this oft-cruel humor retains something of Henri Bergson’s corrective function: we see the characters *move through* their cynical haughtiness (which has some revelatory power in both its candor and acknowledgment of interpersonal hardship) and then go on to reveal their communal care in various ways.<sup>20</sup> We find a new morality by deigning to laugh about, and thus bring into the open, our ire at one another. That is, the very recognition of ire at one’s family and peers can, when paired with coincident or subsequent acts of care, demonstrate its triviality or commonness via a humorous or witty construction and signal a willingness to work with rather than internalize anger. By bringing it into the open, acrimony resolution becomes a shared workspace rather than individually owned; a study by Elisa Everts suggests that such barbs and aggressive humor styles may even promote relational harmony

<sup>18</sup> George E. Vaillant, *Ego Mechanisms of Defense: A Guide for Clinicians and Researchers* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Nancy A. Brooks, Diana W. Guthrie, and Curtis G. Gaylord, “Therapeutic Humor in the Family: An Exploratory Study,” *Humor* 12, no. 2 (2009): 151–160.

<sup>20</sup> Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: MacMillan, [2003] 1914).

by their very inclusive nature.<sup>21</sup> This humor recognizes cynicism about others as another component of the affective spectrum we cover when living through a social problem: it explores the space between harmless wit (without tendentious content) and tendency wit (externalizing repressed hostility or obscenity), and collapses Freud's distinction into a more subtle human interaction. Between the binary is a space of potential discovery.<sup>22</sup> No one is at fault for expressing harsh feelings to others—we move transitionally through them—and these attitudes and behaviors can offer revelation, then are often mitigated or dissolved upon exposition of superordinate goals: the need to work together or remain miserable.

Abrams and Harpham interpret the surprise element of epigrammatic wit as “usually the result of a connection or distinction between words or concepts which frustrates the listener's expectation, only to satisfy it in an unexpected way.”<sup>23</sup> Thus insight can also be offered through repartee and satirical dialogue, occasionally in tandem with scornful retort and banter: a character may voice an imaginative perspective on the events of the narrative, causing us to laugh simultaneously at the sudden shift in our diegetic conception to accommodate a surprising new perspective, the ingenuity of the screenwriter's observation and expression (the cleverness of the epigram), the cleverness of the hypothetical character and the character's associated performer in representing this wit, and our own cleverness for recognizing the wit. At this point we may also be surprised that scorn is capable of revelation (something of a satire-by-surprise). Once again, all parts of the affective spectrum we move through may have revelatory value, and a validation of the breadth of emotional experience—including those emotions that seem to contradict each other—remains central to a realistically complex view of domestic life.<sup>24</sup> This unwillingness to directly politicize the potentially sentimental emotions associated with home life (rather than the way emotions consistently and inscrutably change, as they do in cinema) demonstrates how a balance of both comedic and sentimental modes in the suburban ensemble dramedy puts the lie to pejorative and belittling assessments of family studies across the history of film, such as Paul Loukides's writing on what he calls the “celebration of family movie”:

<sup>21</sup> Elisa Everts, “Identifying a Particular Family Humor Style: A Sociolinguistic Discourse Analysis,” *Humor* 16, no. 4 (2006): 369–412.

<sup>22</sup> Freud, *Wit*.

<sup>23</sup> Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary*, 417.

<sup>24</sup> This tension has occasionally been addressed as the “melancomic” across a different set of contemporary films, as in, for example, Deborah J. Thomas's work on Wes Anderson, yet the term tends to refer to another mode of ironic address that focuses us upon the filmmaker's artifice: a gentle distancing effect that is offset by sympathy for character. Deborah J. Thomas, “Framing the ‘Melancomic’: Character, Aesthetics and Affect in Wes Anderson's *Rushmore*,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012): 97–117.

The celebration of family movie is, in a sense, a therapeutic dream of the family in which the very real tensions and traumas of ordinary family life are always resolved by love and good intentions. In not a single celebration film is any member of the family permanently injured by another member of the clan; in the celebration of family film parents do not traumatize their children, nor children betray their parents' dreams.<sup>25</sup>

In fact, these domestic dramedies both admit the identified familial ills and still celebrate family in its diverse affective structures—a complexity and specificity this binaristically constricting and discriminatory discourse cannot reach. See in particular the latently injurious teachings of certain uncontrollable, internal family relations explored in *Little Miss Sunshine*, which still treats problematic characters such as the grandfather, Alan Arkin's Edwin Hoover, with due consideration and care, despite his clearly harmful pedagogy; harming and helping can coexist in families. Where happy endings occur, they tend to emphasize the possibility of progress toward prosociality within families rather than obliteration of all of the family's woes.

### From Lingual Jokes to Character Eccentricity

Lingual jokes, such as puns and sarcasm, offer violations derived from confusion in the perception of intent, communication breakdown or invalidation, as well as disobedience of grammatical and other rules of communication we rely on for perception of another's intent (syntactic and semantic violations); however, the lingual-intent chaos is resolvable and resolved, thus benign. This suggests puns may be funnier to one who conceives of rules such as grammar as particularly important; otherwise there is insufficient perceived violation for the joke to appeal.<sup>26</sup> Of course, as Sarah Kozloff reminds us, repartee, reaching back through Wilde, Congreve, and Shakespeare, requires performative skill to be comedically effective, and often the source of our laughter is as much an imaginative, off-center, or startlingly counterintuitive performance as it is the cleverly penned words.<sup>27</sup> At this point, it is worth asking why some audiences might take humorous delight in eccentric performance gags and characterizations readable as "quirky." Working from BVT, it is easy to see how we may receive abnormal

<sup>25</sup> Paul Loukides, "The Celebration of Family Plot: Episodes and Affirmations," in *Beyond the Stars: Plot Conventions in American Popular Film*, ed. Paul Loukides and Linda K. Fuller (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991), 98.

<sup>26</sup> Peter McGraw and Joel Warner, *The Humor Code* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 174–177.

social behaviors as a potential threat, and also how our knowledge of healthy diversity mitigates this response and places social abnormalities in the zone of tension between safe and threatening. The surprising rejection of social norms that we apprehend as quirky may, then, encourage us to accept human difference by pointing to ingrained reactions to otherness, and potentially comprise a claim that such social behaviors—where they harm no others—should not matter so much.<sup>28</sup> Bergson explored our location of and reinforced adherence to “moral” behaviors through humorous discussion of the eccentric or ludicrous in *Laughter*.<sup>29</sup> In convergence with BVT, laughing at character quirks may be a way to defuse our prejudicial impulses and disconnect personality features from falsely associated moral behaviors—that is, we recognize that one can be socially different without being unempathetic, cruel, or otherwise threatening. This also specifies the source and the reason for ironic distancing that James McDowell, updating Jeffrey Sconce’s work on irony, locates as part of quirky “tone,” connecting the linguistic and performative features of quirkiness to its broader generic characteristics.<sup>30</sup>

There remains the problem, however, that the quirky seems to represent “slight shifts from the norm” rather than radical difference or even pathology<sup>31</sup>—the “odd, but not *too* odd” principle.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps our recognition of the harmlessness of quirk is merely placatory and comes at the expense of those who exhibit real departures from social norms that we must work harder to accept.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, it is also possible that quirk offers safe opportunities to exercise our empathic reach and thus incrementally countervail perceived threats of otherness, drawing a wider circle of compassion through systematic conditioning and narrativized rehearsal of friendly responses to human difference. It is also true

<sup>28</sup> This might also help explain the rising appeal of the much-discussed comedy of “awkwardness.” Pansy Duncan writes that associated “cringe comedy” requires a mental labor that contradicts presumptions of comic media as pure autotelic relief or play, in “Joke Work: Comic Labor and the Aesthetics of the Awkward,” *Comedy Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 36–56.

<sup>29</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*.

<sup>30</sup> James McDowell, “Notes on Quirky,” *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* 1 (2010): 1–16, [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/notes\\_on\\_quirky.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/notes_on_quirky.pdf); Jeffrey Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘Smart’ Film,” *Screen* 43, no. 4 (2002): 349–369.

<sup>31</sup> Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 27.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Hirschorn, “Quirked Around: The Unbearable Lightness of Ira Glass, Wes Anderson, and Other Paragons of Indie Sensibility,” *Atlantic*, September 2007, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/09/quirked-around/306119>.

<sup>33</sup> Quirk signifies a kind of hedging. As James McDowell points out, “For marketing purposes ‘quirky’ suggests a film to be a unique, and therefore desirable, product—though simultaneously not *so* unique as to discourage those who might be repelled.” McDowell identifies the quirky as a spectrum of stylistic sensibilities engaging some manner of spectatorial ironic distance from onscreen eccentricity—and this includes a dramatic irony whereby audiences have a comprehension of diegetic eccentricity not acknowledged by the players themselves (Wes Anderson’s films are a good example of this). McDowell, “Notes,” 1.

that the quirky describes a substantial range of performance practices and film conventions—not all of them are so “safe.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, the quirky must retain an element of danger—the potential violation—to remain funny.

Again, there is a dark and conflicted notion of accountability present in *Little Miss Sunshine*. The quirk of many characters is all but benign in the narratives they trade about family, gender, and political identity as they both harm and help one another. When Edwin teaches his granddaughter Olive (Abigail Breslin) hypersexualized concepts of womanhood or when Frank (Steve Carell) trades in suicidal nihilism with the impressionably dark teen Dwayne (Paul Dano), the harmlessness of character quirk is a veneer. There must be an ongoing genuine social threat for this manner of comedy to sustain, or else there is nothing to laugh at—quirky comedy thrives on this sense of possible threat. When it is gone, quirk becomes too conventional and ergo comedically stale, drained of threat and ripe for criticism for its self-defeating hypocrisy. *Little Miss Sunshine* rises above such a critique as it retains this sense of threat across its ensemble, allowing the film to consider circumstances in which our behavior can have positive and negative effects on loved ones at the same time. Later suburban ensembles experiment with methods to excise the distancing effect from quirk and permit a fuller empathy and identification with idiosyncratic characters, perhaps influenced by the likes of *Juno* (2007) and its shifting emotional arc, moving from apparently benign quiriness-as-play to consequential decision-making that dramatically affects each characters’ lives.<sup>35</sup>

The “quirky” label, now overused by film publicity departments, has suffered considerable backlash. Where once it referenced alternatives to homogenizing character construction, it now seems to embody an essence of character homogeneity, as certain performance or aesthetic choices presented as idiosyncratic become cinematic norms. Geoff King warns against binaristic thinking regarding the construction of the quirky, as it would be a misrepresentation of conceptual heredity in cultural production to draw a line between authentic and fabricated quirk.<sup>36</sup> However, there is still a very real difference in the level of innovation a film can present, and as the descriptors “quirky,” “offbeat,” and “idiosyncratic” invite us to read a film’s attempts at originality, we should feel free to

<sup>34</sup> King, *Indie 2.0*, 27.

<sup>35</sup> The kind of quirky performance value we find here has more unfamiliarity and revelatory uplift than can be reduced to Sianne Ngai’s famous aesthetic categories: it does not match squarely with the commoditized, fetishized powerlessness of the cute or the hyperactive productivity of the zany, nor does it focus on production in lieu of substance when we demote an artistic statement to the “merely interesting” or just a cut above boredom, sameness. There is more going on here. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> King, *Indie 2.0*, 25. This is, in fact, a primary example of the *Indie 2.0* thesis: that narratives of authenticity circulating indie cinema movements describe the investments made by patrons of the indie discourse more than they describe independent filmmaking practice.



assess such works on the grounds of their uniqueness in manipulating existing film conventions to draw new human insights and present new pictures of diverse humanity, not to assess their uninfluenced authenticity. Ultimately, the generic convention of the quirkiness is insufficient; rather the moral insight made available via quirkiness is both aesthetically and generically crucial.

### Candor as Humor, Candor as Politics

Comical reassessments of potentially threatening social behaviors are intrinsically connected to the humor of surprising candor, whereupon the arbitration of social norms, etiquettes, and traditional identities that we still struggle with in political discourse are treated as comedy (for example, the sexualized dance routine in *Little Miss Sunshine* or secondary characters' reactions to adultery and sexual relations in *The Oranges* [Julian Farino, 2011] or *The Kids Are All Right*). This works as humor because we recognize the solemnity around a public discourse, but we see characters experiencing the identity conflict in a way that fails to match the gravitas we expect (thus, a benign violation). The technique is similar to "shock" humor: the mocking of concerns a majority might accept as serious. The guiding light of the contemporary American shock genre may be television's *Family Guy*. Although the shock value of humor has been a staple in concurrent American comedy films (many of them suburban studies also, such as the works of Judd Apatow), the difference is a subtle one. The source of humor may be the same—surprise at the flippancy with which a serious subject is treated, destabilizing our conception of broader public threats by exploring the border of what we are permitted to consider benign—but what is subsequently achieved with the humor, or what work it is put to, varies substantially.

Studying dissimilarities between shock humor and frank social renegotiation humor not only explains the difference in perspective offered in these films, but again specifies the claims embedded in their gags about the social issues that are worthy of our attention and concern. The key to explaining such a difference is the mock value within the shock value: once destabilized, in American satirical shock humor the potential social threat often remains unexplored as we move swiftly onto the next shock, a version of "manic-satire" leaving us with the impression that we may have been impractically engaged with a triviality.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, one of the interventions such works stage against the history of shocking satire, from Jonathan Swift onward, is to extract "the unitary function of satire" so that

<sup>37</sup> Matthew W. Hughey and Sahara Muradi, "Laughing Matters: Economies of Hyper-Irony and Manic-Satire in *South Park* & *Family Guy*," *Humanity & Society* 33, no. 3 (2009): 206–237.

only its rhetoric remains.<sup>38</sup> The means without the associated ends of political insight or social commentary satirizes the purpose of satire itself, undermining the subsequent possibility (and perceived authority) of any earnest moralizing or moral questioning, a distinction that might be referred to as a cynical rather than a “kynical” satire.<sup>39</sup> As Michael Billig puts it, “Not only can bigots laugh, but they can also position their laughter as rebellious, mocking the seriousness of tolerance and reason.”<sup>40</sup> This is the work of *Family Guy* and much of the Rob Schneider or Todd Phillips variety of American gross-out or “raunch” cinema, especially when it self-consciously moves from toilets to identity politics. Hence, the point is merely to somewhat let us off the hook, as the joker has already accomplished by example, achieving a superior indifference by alleviating social concern (an affectively powerful position to be in). Once the deflation of our anxieties is realized (often around a matter of political correctness), we no longer need to evaluate their source, or whether there is currency to any related concerns, as true questioning would miss the point that subversive frivolity is superior to anxiety, perhaps producing a one-upmanship of callousness.

Matthew W. Hughey and Sahara Muradi find, for example, that the hyperirony of such texts simultaneously critiques and reinscribes racial stereotypes, and LaChrystal D. Ricke quantifies the use of derogatory speech in *Family Guy* specifically, although she remains ambivalent about the satirical use such speech is put to, or any generalizability to derogatory perspectives in its audience (perhaps because ambivalence is precisely the response these texts invite and the only response possible when narrative prompts for moral assessment are structurally excised).<sup>41</sup> Rarely does this humor close with a sense of dismissive finality, however, as the confusion between benign and real violation keeps the humor alive—the reason we are attracted primarily to its provocations. Consider, for instance, the feverish pace of *Family Guy* skits, often lasting seconds at a time before rolling onto the next stereotype in the next vignette. Part of the appeal is the lack of any sense of finality or any emergence into a notion of what the satire attempts to achieve or tell us about the stereotypes it employs; it thwarts opportunities for moral reflection in order to keep its violation alive, and its humor in a state of permanent suspension. Being kept in this space of generality, we cannot move to locate a more specific set of problems, and instead we remain at a level of appeals to a common social consensus on the threatening nature of broadly

<sup>38</sup> Jack DeRochi, “‘What Have You Learned?’ Considering a New Hermeneutic of Satire in ‘Family Guy,’” *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 17 (2008): 45.

<sup>39</sup> Rebecca Higgie, “Kynical Dogs and Cynical Masters: Contemporary Satire, Politics and Truth-Telling,” *Humor* 27, no. 2 (2014): 183–201.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage, 2005), 210.

<sup>41</sup> Hughey and Muradi, “Laughing Matters”; LaChrystal D. Ricke, “Funny or Harmful? Derogatory Speech on Fox’s *Family Guy*,” *Communication Studies* 63, no. 2 (2012): 119–135.

defined social issues (again, nervousness around political correctness stands as a primary example).

To clarify an alternative, we should return to the tension between Vaillant's conception of humor as defensive mechanism, making the unpleasant, terrifying, or distressing overt but still cognitively displacing it,<sup>42</sup> and Bergson's moral function of humor.<sup>43</sup> Clearly both functions of humor can coexist—cognitively displacing perceived threats and considering the moral responsibilities inaugurated by a potential violation—but if we are concerned with reaching the moral potential of politicized shock humor, then what matters most is what *follows* the shock of deflated sociopolitical anxieties. In contrast to the politically disengaged or superior “mocking shock,” which undermines interrogation of the threat's source, throughout suburban ensemble dramedies we see the shock followed by an extrapolation: the use of jest to deflate generalist hysteria about a social problem, proceeded by location of specific related ethical values for consideration.

*Little Children* (Todd Field, 2006) is a case in point. Various sexual indiscretions and predicaments (from the concealment of pornography addiction from one's spouse, to adultery, to struggles with pedophilic desire) are raised frankly, producing uncomfortable humor, but the film's very structure homes in on the source of our discomfort: the film continues to present more information about the context of each indiscretion, in effect asking us to maintain attentiveness and analyze specific aspects of that threat. The procedural conditions of realist narrative become a kind of pragmatism that can then provide a less hysterical set of practical matters as we follow the characters' attempts to resolve their interpersonal dilemmas; but crucially, in a film like *Little Children*, we still do not know how to respond. The information provided in each scenario might cause us to laugh again, to consider the morality of the situation, or to simply recoil, and all responses seem reasonable. The film presents a tentative response to its own questions in concluding with several characters' equally tentative attempts at mutual care. Again, after the humor we see a move back to sentimentality, and with this a reassertion of the centrality of social ethics. Yet nothing is ever resolved completely with the mere addition of sentiment, so the potential for humor remains alive, only changed. In essence, this change marks its difference from pure shock humor. It is not that frank social renegotiation neuters comedy but that it shifts the goal posts to admit rumination. It is no longer the mere mention of shocking concepts that produces benign violations; it is our problematized ability to find shared solutions to shared woes that makes us laugh, a recognition of our own fallibility as mutual problem-solvers.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Vaillant, *Ego Mechanisms*.

<sup>43</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*.

<sup>44</sup> Of course, some films, such as the Judd Apatow dramedies, feature both hyperactive shock humor and frank social renegotiation humor, and so it is possible to achieve both modes within one

## Humor and the Ethics of Storytelling

The emotional states brought about by a perceived threat are relatively easy to identify. Threats produce fear, anxiety, and perhaps also excitement and adrenaline: the stuff of drama. It is harder to pinpoint any particular emotions that are conjured when one identifies events as benign—perhaps boredom followed by disinterest, or comfort followed by well-being (in this case, the affective underpinnings of the benign cannot be reliably called positively or negatively valenced). Indeed, the conditions under which we designate events as “benign” might seem like the end of drama. If we are bored, we might tune out or switch off; if we are comforted and emerge with feelings of well-being, we may have reached the conclusion of a particular kind of narrative. So comedy must rely somewhat upon the maintenance of threat to keep a narrative alive for its duration, but that threat must maintain a sense of balance in always undoing itself and demonstrating that our concern is not needed. This “strain of upkeep” in comedy constructs scenarios to always walk an affective line, blending the two states and asking for the same affective incoherence to be kept alive in the viewer, dismantled into benign laughter, and then reconstructed again when the threat is reignited.

If comedy is a blended affect that intrinsically *contains* emotive drama in its antagonizing dissonance, how is the dramedy, then, dissimilar to other kinds of “pure” comedy genres? The first and most obvious answer is that the dramedy at times permits its violating circumstances to remain open to emotional interpretation without signaling their status as benign, and at other times signals a more definitive affect to be derived from a scene. That is, some scenarios do not produce humor because the filmmakers attribute negative valence to narrative events and do not admit possibilities for other affective readings; music or editing or other markers of tone signal that the film’s convolutions *should* remain serious (and if we do not agree with the narrative’s emotional map—that is, if the makers are straining too hard to tell us that their narrative is serious—it might produce unintended laughter). At other times, however, dramedy overlaps further mixed emotions such as bittersweetness with the intrinsic, self-contradictory affective incoherence of comedy.<sup>45</sup> One of the qualities we might note in dramedy cinema is that its two nominal emotional modes (drama and comedy) are not so clearly separated.<sup>46</sup> But this does not tell the whole story. We might recognize

production. The suburban ensemble dramedy, however, works almost exclusively within the satirical conventions of the latter.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ed S. H. Tan and Nico H. Frijda, “Sentiment in Film Viewing,” in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl R. Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 48–64.

<sup>46</sup> Moss-Wellington, “Abject Humanism,” 90.

certain sequences as either comedic or dramatic in their presentation, but the satisfying moments that define the genre will blend the two, so that we do not know whether to laugh or cry, to be amused, or to connect its events to serious concerns worthy of deliberation. This introduces another layer on top of the existing benign violations. When something *is* funny, it is both benign and violating at the same time; but what about when something *could be* funny but could equally produce another response? Is this simply a moment that hovers more toward the violating end of the BVT spectrum; is it adding another emotion into the mix; or is it instead adding another kind of cognition? Perhaps these moments produce that which we have come to call “reflexivity” in the viewer. But unlike a Brechtian model in which viewers separate themselves from an emotional engagement with the narrative in order to rationally consider its politics, here we are suspended in the emotion *while* we ponder it, and that emotion is at once a condoned part of drawing political meanings from the narrative and an impetus for serious thought about how we designate our emotional investments to problems in the world. That is, comedy has both political and ethical value in designating what we should invest our concern in, and narrative prompts to question whether an ambiguously represented situation is serious or comedic allow that spectators become aware of and question those investments.

There is a difference between having our attention diverted in comedy to that which we should not find funny and should take seriously, and that which we don't know how to respond to. For instance, if someone tells a joke like “The Aristocrats” using themes of incest and abuse (as do many comedians in the film *The Aristocrats* [Penn Jillette and Paul Provenza, 2005]) and we are unsure whether to laugh, we are probably not exploring anything so political—we know the events described are unambiguously an infringement, but as they are safely contained within the fantasy world of a joke, they might appear benign. In one respect if we consider jokes, like fictive storytelling, as a kind of thought experiment, then stories and jokes are both inherently “hypothetical and thus psychologically distant.”<sup>47</sup> For many, however, even the mention of such themes disqualifies them as benign. So our attention is diverted to what is sayable rather than what is doable—ethical or political actions taken in the world—and we ponder the status of the joker instead of ourselves. On the other hand, the suburban ensemble film describes situations (usually in the home) that could be conceived as either violating infringement or benign domestic conflict. Our apprehension of these morally dynamic, imagined scenarios can connect meaningfully to the way we see the world ideologically and how this ideology drives behavior toward other people, including the hypothetical others we must have in mind when we make political decisions or take action in the world.

<sup>47</sup> McGraw and Warren, “Benign Violations,” 1142.

So finally, how might we draw an ethics of humanistic consequence from these observations on BVT and from comparative readings that expose affective differences in the comedic strategies between texts? Humor can be used to differing ends: to encourage viewers to shut down their concern, a “momentary anaesthesia of the heart” or an indifference that Bergson positioned as the “natural environment” of laughter, or to reflect back on those moments of mirth, to call for an interrogation of how our reasoned concern is allocated in the cognitions around an instance of mirth.<sup>48</sup> The former, without elaboration, sells a version of its heroic rebelliousness against the socially negotiated constrictions of moral concern, sometimes to veil the power differentials between the humorists and their targets. Yet threat appraisal is unreliable, which is why we have humor and social signals like laughter to mediate and resolve dissonances in those appraisals. Satirical humor, then, can also use these naturally revisionary spaces of dissonance to reroute concern to targets it positions as more reasonable: this kind of humor is more interested in how concern is built back up, potentially to address social or political affairs. It calls for an awareness and exploration of the consequences of humor, laughter, and play, and the kinds of morally pointed thoughts they can lead us through. Both comedic narratives and readings of those narratives can either mask or promote ethical interrogation of consequences, and BVT can help uncover the subtleties and clarify the ambiguities on which satirical forms of humor thrive.

<sup>48</sup> Bergson, *Laughter*, 12–14.

## 6

# The Emotional Politics of Limerence in Romantic Comedy Films

When we discuss falling in love, we tend to use terms that point to a division in thinking and feeling. Consider, for instance, the phrase “My head wants one thing, but my heart wants another.” The experience of falling in love does not simply entail a change in our thoughts about another; it is a marked biological shift, one that is felt. In the literature on the psychophysiology of pair-forming and attachment, the distinctive intensity of those changes is referred to as “limerence.” Dorothy Tennov coined the term in *Love and Limerence*, referencing a pattern in subjects’ self-reported descriptions of falling in love: a state of intrusive, obsessive thinking and intensity of passionate feelings toward a limerent object (a partner or love interest), typically lasting anywhere from a couple of weeks to several years.<sup>1</sup> The romantic experience of “being in love” is distinguished from love as a long-term, pair-maintaining care for another’s welfare.<sup>2</sup> Because limerence is a space of intensified emotion more so than logical deliberation, it appears ripe for narrative representation, as storytelling modes introduce resources for representing phenomenal experience that argumentation might describe, yet not truly reflect the dynamic feeling of. But crucially, screen fiction also offers viewers a simulative space for attaching meaning to emotional responses and then querying their relation to emotions we might experience in the world—again, a post hoc autobiographical recollection and sense-making that is core to the cinema experience.

This chapter addresses some of the cinematic resources for representing limerent emotions and the different ways in which audiences might be encouraged to draw meaning from those emotions, especially meanings that relate to a sense of political selfhood. In particular, I look at the presentation of limerence in *Two Weeks Notice* (Marc Lawrence, 2002), *The Girl in the Café* (David Yates, 2005), *Outsourced* (John Jeffcoat, 2006), and *Waitress* (Adrienne Shelly, 2007), among other “political romcom” films (that is, romantic comedies with substantive political subtext or prominently featuring characters whose occupation is political

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Tennov, *Love and Limerence: The Experience of Being in Love* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.



in nature). This work diverges from previous chapters in two important respects. First, it engages more closely with politics as well as ethics, in particular the nexus between moral and political readings of character, and their inseparability. In this focus on character engagement it offers a less dramatic departure from the concerns of prior cognitive media ethics, albeit integrating more perspectives on emotion and screen media from phenomenology and anthropology. Second, I am concerned here with the ethical potential in feelings of consonance rather than cognitive dissonance (while still drawing on concepts introduced earlier, such as benign violations).<sup>3</sup> This chapter offers a treatment of the relation between spectator political self-identities and moral judgments of character that can fuse in strange ways over the pleasure of watching two screen actors feign the process of falling in love.

I have narrowed the field of study to films released in the first decade of the 2000s,<sup>4</sup> as this decade in particular appeared to spur some search for political meaning in popular English-language cinema.<sup>5</sup> Prior scholars have achieved convincing renderings of the history and development of romcom genre tropes, their boundaries and limitations,<sup>6</sup> while others have documented how principles that attach to notions of passion, coupling, and matrimony change across time and cultures.<sup>7</sup> In this study, however, I would like to draw a clearer line between representations of loving emotions on screen and their social and cognitive referents.<sup>8</sup> In life, one might similarly fantasize about the object of one's desire, and romance genres at their best can facilitate a thinking-through of the cultural and biological causes of romantic feelings and the flights of fancy they incite, rather than merely propagating, uncritically, chimeric ideals of love.

Criticisms of the genre's most apparent fantasies of (primarily heterosexual) union might focus on oversimplification of complex emotions or simply a

<sup>3</sup> McGraw and Warren, "Benign Violations."

<sup>4</sup> Nor will I address predecessors such as *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940), the screwball comedies, or other films considered by Stanley Cavell in *Pursuits of Happiness*, influential as they may be in Hollywood's history of "marrying" politics and romance, or similarly the pre-1992 transgressive film romances analyzed in Thomas E. Wartenberg's *Unlikely Couples*; in this chapter, I isolate the politics of millennial romcoms rather than attempt a large-scale survey across many decades of changing political concerns. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Claire Perkins, *American Smart Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Leger Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History and Controversies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London: Wallflower, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); David Shumway, *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> This emphasis on psychology presents something of a departure from the more constructivist views in affect theory after Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

suspicion of its inherent wish fulfillment.<sup>9</sup> This wish fulfillment is, of course, the province of the romantic comedy—but the formula is not necessarily the point. Reviewer Rich Cline wrote of *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2002), “When we catch ourselves sighing at the end, we get mad that we’ve fallen for this same old formula all over again. But mad in a nice way.”<sup>10</sup> Feelings of co-romance are self-reflexive; as we trace the emotional path of limerence and respond empathically in kind, perhaps adopting for a short time the desires and goals of protagonists, we can be aware of the formula and negotiate our relation to it (and nor does our pleasure entail credulity). Critiques of the romantic comedy often chart its fantasies as if the audience were unaware of them, absorbed them without reflection, and as if the most obvious fantasies—of everlasting love brought about by sheer force of passion, persistence, or destiny—were the most important elements to point out.<sup>11</sup> In this chapter, I am interested in what is inferred about limerence using those fantasies as a template, assuming in viewers some distance by which they are able to make sense of rather than passively adopt these simulated limerent emotions and their attendant fantasies. Romantic fictions can be a way not only to mutually agree that limerent emotions are important, but also to probe an emotional state that feels, to those in its throes, so magical, wild, and uncontrollable. The emotions of limerence are intense because the primary interest they are directed toward—a romantic union—has the power to echo throughout our lives, and so high emotion matches high stakes. These emotions reinforce convictions and decisions that can profoundly shape the direction of one’s life to come. Many will experience this process more than once. It is little wonder, then, that romantic comedy audiences would be interested in such representation.

Tennov’s limerence is not necessarily marked by a limited taxonomy of discrete emotions, however, but rather is an amplification of mixed “stronger affective states,” both positive and negative; the possibilities for an emotional “high” may be matched by equivalent, devastating “lows,” and those emotions can be difficult to extricate.<sup>12</sup> Neuroscientists have emphasized that

love is more than a basic emotion. Love is also a complex function including appraisals, goal-directed motivation, reward, self-representation, and body-image.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See in particular Illouz, *Consuming*, suggesting that these contemporary notions of romantic love are deeply entrenched in capitalist consumerism.

<sup>10</sup> Rich Cline, “Maid in Manhattan,” *Film Threat*, January 5, 2003, <http://www.shadowsonthewall.co.uk/swmmain.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> For a look at some of the genre’s reflexivity, see McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah E. Reynolds, “Limerence: A New Word and Concept,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 20, no. 1 (1983): 108.

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie Ortigue et al., “Neuroimaging of Love,” *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 7, no. 11 (2010): 3544.

This heady mix of thoughts and feelings may be diffuse in their directedness and difficult to pick apart; romantic comedy films tend to dramatize the work protagonists do in thinking through various life motivations and autobiographical narratives before settling on a new self that (usually) accommodates a romantic partner. It is also important to note that the intensity of what is sometimes called limerent “passion” is not common to everyone when forming attachments, but it is clearly the model of romantic pair-forming that is under scrutiny in much screen fiction. In the romantic comedy film, limerence is most often taken to be a reliable precursor to genuine commitment or long-term attachment, although disappointment and failure might loom during an extended period of doubt mid-narrative.<sup>14</sup>

The political romcom analogizes the inherent schism of limerence with changes in political ideologies and self-narratives. The present corpus reveals a unique range of concerns, discussed here in detail: liminal self-redefinitions that are applicable equally to romantic and political risk-taking, personality politics that work to separate morality and social competence indicators, and the underlying darker emotions admitted in comic benign violations. In the political romantic comedy film, the positive end point of limerence is not necessarily a shift in one’s identity to accommodate a new partner; this is merely a foil to look at emotions that may instigate the accommodation of a new ethicopolitical identity.

### Liminal Disruptions and the Appeal to Pathos

While falling in love is not necessarily a rite of passage, romance films often universalize limerence as a common experience akin to a rite of passage, and limerence is definitely a space of ambiguous identity and redefinition of the self perhaps not that far from Arnold van Gennep’s early descriptions of the liminal.<sup>15</sup> Scholarly applications of liminality have much expanded since their early use in articulating the communally deconstructive space between a forfeiting of stable identity and rebuilding of a new self during ritual practices; now, the term is popularly employed in reference to any space of transition.<sup>16</sup> In any case, the romantic comedy presents a period of limerence as a time in which the self is similarly redefined following a period of schism and redress. Most films do

<sup>14</sup> In fact, some anthropologists have emphasized that limerence is “a ‘cultural model’ that North Americans take for granted when becoming romantically involved,” and this is distributed in cultural narratives of love, like film. David Lipset, “On the Bridge: Class and the Chronotope of Modern Romance in an American Love Story,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2015): 165.

<sup>15</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Rites de passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1909] 1960).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Bjørn Thomassen, “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” *International Political Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (2009): 5–27.

not simply portray a protagonist questioning a romantic versus a single personhood; they correlate the schism in identity with other personal qualities and convictions that must be reassessed: the relation of self to career, to family, to social class, or to gender, for instance. These points of stable identification that have been developed in isolation from a limerent object now become uncertain and must be rebuilt to accommodate what one has learned in the emotionally open space of new love.<sup>17</sup>

The physical sites of romantic comedies have been explored for their liminal poetics, such as the transient symbol of the beach, a “liminal space which liberates characters to freely speak of love and sex,”<sup>18</sup> and those physical sites become a “magic space of transformation” for the lovers.<sup>19</sup> Deleyto conceives of this magic as “a fictional space which represents the social space of fictional discourses on love, sexuality and intimacy.”<sup>20</sup> Romcoms are fictions, of course, thus liminoid or narrative approximations of the liminal,<sup>21</sup> but in Deleyto’s formulation that “magical” space can only point back to fiction itself rather than outward to the world. The spaces of limerence and liminality both indeed feel magical to us, and we might strive to represent those magical feelings in romance genres or in liminoid storytelling acts, but they are not simply fictions—the transitions under scrutiny are made up of emotions, behaviors, and bodily changes that are real, that are more than the sum of our fantasies. As such, the following readings begin instead from what Joseph Carroll calls “three core ideas in traditional humanism: individual identity, authorial intentions, and reference to a real world.”<sup>22</sup>

*The Girl in the Café* examines precisely this liminal process against the background of a political event that promises schism, striving, and change but delivers none of it: a G8 summit in which political conventions are ritualized to the point of removal from the challenges they are intended to address. In the film, British civil servant Lawrence (Bill Nighy), an employee in the office of the chancellor of the exchequer (Ken Stott), invites Gina (Kelly Macdonald), a Scottish student he met only days earlier in a café near his workplace, to the 2005 summit in Reykjavik. Their intense emotional space eventually bleeds into the proceedings

<sup>17</sup> Tennov’s “limerent object” might imply a somewhat dry process of objectification; however, it does also point to the ways in which an “object” of affection becomes imaginatively removed from its living counterpart in one’s private fantasies.

<sup>18</sup> Deborah Jermyn and Janet McCabe, “Sea of Love: Place, Desire and the Beaches of Romantic Comedy,” *Continuum* 27, no. 5 (2013): 612.

<sup>19</sup> Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 31.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Carroll, *Reading Human Nature: Literary Darwinism in Theory and Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), x.

of the summit, and Gina speaks up about issues of poverty Lawrence's colleagues are failing to adequately address. Margaret Stout writes that "by giving her access to the political leaders, [Lawrence] opens the gate to many uncomfortable exchanges."<sup>23</sup> The movie makes the case that the romantic space of discomfiting vulnerability, self-questioning, and risk-taking in the face of rejection consists in emotionally charged dispositions that are transferrable to the political workplace. The liminality that is opened when we permit these disruptive emotions can cut through a formerly stable political self, fed by the emotional avoidances of habit; in this disruption, ritualized inertia allegedly transforms into action.

G20 historian Peter I. Hajnal describes this filmic depiction of the 2005 summit as "enlivened by depictions of NGO advocacy and love interest," and it is this "enlivening" that is key.<sup>24</sup> As Stout observes, "Lawrence has become so accustomed to this lifestyle and mode of interaction that he finds it difficult to assert himself even with coworkers and in his private life," and he "simply does not have the style or force to counter challenges" to argue in favor of a proposed "dramatic and daring package of measures."<sup>25</sup> In order to make changes in both his private and his work life, Lawrence needs to break habits that are an accepted path of least resistance, and in order to break those habits, he needs a liminal space through which he might redefine himself. This redefinition of the self is symbolized by small movements and decisions: for instance, Lawrence goes to do up the top button of his pajamas, but decides this gesture would not chime with the bold self he wants to exhibit, and undoes the button again. The camera lingers on his emotional turmoil in making such decisions, the hard work of resisting compulsions and reformulating identity. The mixed emotions of hope and fear that coexist, entwined, as Lawrence makes these decisions (connected as they are to his desire for a limerent object) are a vulnerability that becomes dispositional, permitting a similar self-questioning to feed into other parts of his life. Nighy makes these mixed emotions visible, and witnessing such an inner conflict externalized is key to a performance without which the emotional stakes would not be as high and not as well known to the viewer. When they are transferred to the political arena, then, the underpinnings of affective struggle against visions of failure—common to both Lawrence's personal and political undertakings—are clear.

And when they take risks, both Gina and Lawrence suffer genuine rejections: Gina is thrown out of the conference and Lawrence is excluded from his colleagues' deliberation at the crucial moment of decision-making. But of

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Stout, *Logics of Legitimacy: Three Traditions of Public Administration Praxis* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2012), 138.

<sup>24</sup> Peter I. Hajnal, *The G20: Evolution, Interrelationships, Documentation* (Farnham-Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 201.

<sup>25</sup> Stout, *Logics*, 80, 138.

course, although their influence is disavowed and Gina is dismissed for making the case “rather too emotionally,” their intervention is infectious. Following these extemporized appeals to pathos, the G8 summit determines to move the elimination of poverty to the top of the agenda. In rhetorical terms, it is clear that the appeal to pathos had been excised from the summit’s rituals in favor of a logos (disimpassioned reasoning) and especially ethos (the appeal to existing authorities rather than their revision); this is because of the power that emotion has to move us not to conviction, but to action, by providing a felt stake to our reasoned agenda. This action is terrifying for the same reason approaching a love interest is terrifying—the consequences of rejection, including social ostracism, are equally emotionally aversive. The film is not really suggesting that the G8 will change the world only when a passionate outsider intervenes. Rather, it is making a point about the kind of emotional reinforcements that prime openness to positive change in one’s life, and perhaps, too, a change in behaviors and beliefs beyond the safe space of the cinema: the conditions of vulnerability and openness that are important in pursuing new love are similar to those we require in reassessing the relation of our ideologies (rehearsed in narratives both interior, like self-narratives, and shared, like cinema) to our effects on the world.

While the equivocal conclusion of *The Girl in the Café* decenters the importance of any potentially lasting union between its romantic leads, *Outsourced* offers an interesting comparison between limerence and arranged marriage—but also situations in which we expect our “effects on the world” to be greater than they are. When male lead Todd (Josh Hamilton) learns that female lead Asha (Ayesha Dharker) has been engaged to a family friend since she was a child, he tells her that the flouting of her “right” to choose her own partner is crazy. She retorts, “Some people would say that America’s 50% divorce rate is crazy.” Asha describes the experiences of female friends who have had love affairs prior to their own arranged marriages and reminds him that their period of limerence together is still important to her, even if not in the way he expected. At this, he has to reimagine his centrality and relation to her romantic life—another redefinition of the self. Similarly, during the film’s climax, Todd learns that he is not so central to the livelihood of the Gharapuri call center staff members under his management; they are unfazed when their employer moves order fulfillment operations from India to China, as they are professionalized to the point where they do not rely on his stewardship. *Outsourced* uses a cross-cultural romance to destabilize presumptions of American unidirectional influence and an associated ethnocentricity that must be revised throughout the picture.<sup>26</sup> Both as a man and as an American, Todd is forced to forfeit his solipsism.

<sup>26</sup> Carol Briam, “*Outsourced*: Using a Comedy Film to Teach Intercultural Communication,” *Business Communication Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (2010): 383–398.

The transitional spaces of the film, which all entail opportunities for liminal schism in self-identity, are fourfold: a global labor market in transition, the individual's career in transition, a tandem personal cultural transition that requires an openness to the new, and again, the vulnerable space of limerence.<sup>27</sup> *Outsourced* presents a different view of the limits of limerence. Here limerence does not exist merely to draw people together to conjugal ends, but to offer spaces of attraction across divergent lifeworlds. In that vulnerable receptivity to intersubjective learning that is at the foundation of a truly, equitably transactive romance, cultural centrism is no longer feasible. Sensitivity to another's cultural context and emotional space begets accommodation of the needs and desires of others; this is equally true of the mutual care that is involved in loving a partner, as we come to intimately learn of their subjective experiences, and we learn to display a deference to their emotional vicissitudes, allowing for a bidirectional emotional contagion.<sup>28</sup> Even the scene of the first kiss in *Outsourced* represents a model of transaction, as the pair pull apart, wordlessly check in with one another, noting that the other is experiencing pleasure rather than regret, and embrace again.

What both films speak to is the generalizability of emotional states across parts of our lives: not only are emotions contagious between individuals, and both romantic transactions and performed fictions subsist on their contagion, but the emotions we feel in one part of our lives might inform our responses to challenges elsewhere.<sup>29</sup> It is not that political deliberations *need* more emotional appeal; it is that behaviors that match conviction to striving are inherently emotional, as is any adherence to a cosmopolitanist, transnational, or generative caring about the well-being of strangers, in which responsibility is not targeted to loved ones but liberalized across borders.<sup>30</sup> Limerence is not in itself liberalized care—indeed, it can be a time of self-absorptive thinking—but it *can* pave changes regarding who our caring attention is directed toward. It is this disturbance in the locus of our care to accommodate others, and potentially also new goals and responsibilities, that the political romcom is interested in analogizing;

<sup>27</sup> The film also selectively frames Hindu gods as liminal symbols of destruction and renewal, as Asha introduces Kali and Shiva as arbiters of profound global and personal change.

<sup>28</sup> Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard L. Rapson, "Emotional Contagion," *Current Directions in Psychological Sciences* 2, no. 3 (1993): 96–99; Wyatt Moss-Wellington, "Emotional Contagion and Co-Authored Family Narratives in *Parenthood*," *Style* 52, no. 3 (2018): 302–320.

<sup>29</sup> Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, "Emotional Contagion."

<sup>30</sup> Nigel Rapport writes of "love as a humanitarian ethos of cosmopolitan engagement," making love an ethical impulse, and the history and philosophy of love reveal that the word signifies many things to many people (see Ronald de Sousa's *Love: A Very Short Introduction*), but these films, I suggest, explore the possibility that romantic love and humanitarian love could be fueled by the same mechanisms, the same basal caring impulses. Nigel Rapport, *Cosmopolitan Love and Individuality* (London: Lexington, 2018), 10; Ronald de Sousa, *Love: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).



audiences are ultimately invited to question how strikingly uncontrollable emotions drive controllable changes in who it is we care for.

These two films present two transnational fantasies and two spaces of global transition. Both films incorporate scenarios permitting their characters to stand against economic narratives offered by American figureheads: in *The Girl in the Café*, those of American growth being the world's growth, of reducing poverty as an impossible ideal, and of other global problems (in particular "security") as more important than the preventable casualties of poverty. A background of friction between nations is presented (through which the UK emerges, unlikely though it may seem, as heroic battler for the world's downtrodden). *Outsourced* is ultimately about the fact that "culture" is neither containable nor contained—and neither are desire, love, or self-narratives that are founded on any of these transient qualities.

### **Attachment, Ideological Conviction, and Personality Politics**

Romantic comedies tend to end in the reestablishment of a stable identity, usually (but not always) in partnership with a limerent object. *Outsourced* is interesting because achieving this involves a shift in thinking about one's place in the world rather than one's place with a partner, and the space of limerence is used to demonstrate openness to ideological shift. The question here becomes: after a period of identity schism, how do we then reattach to new convictions and once again stabilize our political identities? *Two Weeks Notice* draws an equivalence between two types of "attachment": devotion to a partner and commitment to a political ideology.

While the two films explored so far are interested in transnational politics, this focus is relegated to the background of *Two Weeks Notice*, whereby we might infer commentary on a transatlantic partnership in the accents of its leads.<sup>31</sup> Its politics are mostly localized around New York City development deals. *Two Weeks Notice* inverts the rags-to-riches archetype at its conclusion, which sees celebrity property developer George Wade (Hugh Grant) giving up his riches to be with the proudly moralistic activist lawyer Lucy Kelson (Sandra Bullock). *Two Weeks Notice* is interesting as it reformulates some of the messages of compromise that engender many political comedies; it is ultimately George who must change. The key political tension of *Two Weeks Notice*, on the surface and within

<sup>31</sup> Similarly, a power dynamic is discernible between Macdonald's Scottish accent and Nighy's English accent in *The Girl in the Café*, and the film invites us to read a background of divergent experiences that attach to their elocution.

expository dialogue, entails the responsible use of money and power, but its subtext entails a personality politics.

The visual humor of *Two Weeks Notice* sets up a character point that will become integral to this personality politics. The opening scene emphasizes the hard work of a minority of activists in long shots that present the figure of Lucy not in the midst of a larger protest, but on her own in the middle of a construction site, corralling two friends to follow her lead. In a later scene, we see an entire baseball stadium pointing and booing at her. She is clearly constructed (comedically) as a loner, and George continues to articulate her social isolation as a character flaw, culminating in a demonstration of the very resentment she most struggles with in her life as a moralist: “You’re too perfect! You’re too wonderful; none of us can keep up with you . . . no one wants to be preached to. No one wants to live with a saint, saints are boring.” The film argues that resistance is fatiguing and alienating work. Lucy will later admit that she finds these things true of herself and at the same time wonder if anyone truly has the capacity to change. Of course, the film will show us that people can change their political identities—but the open question concerns what emotional drivers attract one to what Lucy calls “the voice in my head, pushing me to do better” and lead one to form an “attachment” to that political conscience. Again, audiences are invited to question the emotions that drive attachment both to other people and to the ideas they represent.

So here I want to look at the way personality traits come to carry moral and political weight in the romantic comedy. The evolutionary psychologists’ take on romance cinema has appealed to “preferred psychological and physical traits in the mating game,” in many cases assuming some manner of “core of female mating psychology.”<sup>32</sup> Leaving aside the evidence for diversity in mate selection among people of differing gender and sexual identities, notions of an “average” gendered spectator enacting pancultural, panhistorical fantasies through film trivialize the importance both of niche constructions in which diverse social behaviors can become attractive and of the fact that resistances to norms can be a kind of signaling of relevance to mate selection.<sup>33</sup> The evidence is not borne out in the films themselves, in which moral traits tend to become attractive and overwhelm charismatic personality traits positioned as more conventionally appealing. Social psychologist Bogdan Wojciszke finds that “when forming global evaluations of others, the perceiver is more interested in their moral than

<sup>32</sup> Mette Kramer, “The Mating Game in Hollywood Cinema,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004): 153, 138.

<sup>33</sup> For an example of this evolutionary psychology applied to cinema, see Torben Grodal, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56–78. For further explanation of the niche construction perspective, see Rachel L. Day, Kevin N. Laland, and John Odling-Smee, “Rethinking Adaptation: The Niche-Construction Perspective,” *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 46, no. 1 (2003): 80–95.

competence qualities, construes their behaviour in moral terms, and his or her impressions and emotional responses are more strongly based on morality than competence considerations.”<sup>34</sup> The romantic comedy villain, or the “other choice” partner in a film like *Crossing Delancey* (Joan Micklin Silver, 1988), will often show signs of great social expertise in their charm and aplomb, but this is eventually overturned by their lack of more important capacities, like generosity, which have more moral substance.

The works of James L. Brooks, which tend to follow the classic formula of a protagonist stuck between two competing love interests, intervene against the conflation of morality and social competence. *How Do You Know* (2010), for example, opens with a young girl outperforming her aggravated male counterpart on a baseball pitch. The child is revealed to be a younger version of female lead Lisa Jorgenson (Reese Witherspoon), now a professional softball player, and although the scene is never referred to again explicitly within the narrative, we are encouraged to read the rest of the film with its resonance in mind: the characters have absorbed gender roles earlier in their lives, in which men should be competent and adulated sportspeople and will be upset if they are overshadowed, while women have become so used to being overshadowed that it is part of the fabric of their lives. In *How Do You Know*, Brooks characteristically gives Lisa the choice between two men: star pitcher Matty Reynolds (Owen Wilson) and financial executive George Madison (Paul Rudd). Matty is at the top of his career, a sweet but self-obsessed celebrity, while George is about to go to prison for the corporate crimes of his father (Jack Nicholson). Ultimately, she finds herself attracted to the man who might ordinarily be considered the inferior proposition: George, whose morality outweighs markers of his competence (he is financially ruined and has no job). George is likewise attracted to Lisa because of her competencies that are not traditionally feminine (including her sporting prowess). Thus, *How Do You Know* works to subvert our associations of gender identity with competencies, morality, and their rewards.

### Complicating Comedy, Complicating Emotions

Deborah Jermyn and Janet McCabe find that critics of the romcom often neglect the genre’s potential for

<sup>34</sup> Bogdan Wojciszke, “Morality and Competence in Person- and Self-Perception,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 16, no. 1 (2005): 155. This is backed by later research suggesting moral traits are more foundational to folk notions of selfhood than other mental faculties, as in Nina Strohminger and Shaun Nichols, “The Essential Moral Self,” *Cognition* 131, no. 1 (2014): 159–171.

a messy take on love. In among the genre's most cherished romantic exchanges and couples are countless moments of awkwardness, shame and grief . . . For a genre so frequently critically dismissed as simplifying, commercializing and propagating conservative romantic ideology, the romantic comedy spends a remarkable amount of time demonstrating how painful and damaging its processes are.<sup>35</sup>

One reason the romantic comedy retains its lowbrow status might be a presumption that its comedy is light, that it does not match the gravitas of real-world limerent emotions—and perhaps, therefore, cannot be properly political.<sup>36</sup> Of course, scholars have noted, too, that the comic component of romantic comedies is rather less discussed and harder to come to terms with.<sup>37</sup> I argue, however, that the comic mode is where we might locate those places where romcoms admit complication; humiliation and the potential for failure are focal points of humorous events and performances, and comedy both admits these threats and subdues them at the same time. These emergences of humor are readily identified as benign violations, as they produce laughter by exploring potentially violating circumstances and emotions but present them in such a way that their threat is deflated.

Much of the humor in *The Girl in the Café* arises from a recognizable hesitancy represented by the actors' performances: the difficulty the pair experience in pushing through embarrassment and social awkwardness is part of the appeal. The audience must have those potentials for failure—and their felt meaning—in mind for the humor to work, as well as feelings of affectionate support for the bravery of risk-taking, which is ultimately connected to the risk-taking required in progressive politics. The pair make jokes that fall flat, followed by unexpected silences; as in the aesthetics of much socially awkward comedy, this might make viewership feel like “hard work.”<sup>38</sup> Given the foregrounding of deliberation regarding the self we want to be in the world, existential feelings are always lurking within the romantic comedy. Hope for a fulfilling partnership is often presented as fragile, and imagined consequences of romantic failure undercut a positive self-image, a common feature of limerent negative affect.<sup>39</sup> Existential feelings tend to be discussed as the domain of the art film rather than genre cinema,<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Jermyn and McCabe, “Sea of Love,” 614.

<sup>36</sup> For an elaboration of this argument (which remains complicated by comic modes such as the satiric), see Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 78.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Pansy Duncan, “Joke Work: Comic Labor and the Aesthetics of the Awkward,” *Comedy Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017): 36–56.

<sup>39</sup> John C. Leggett and Suzanne Malm, *The Eighteen Stages of Love* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 60.

<sup>40</sup> Jens Eder, “Films and Existential Feelings,” *Projections* 10, no. 2 (2016): 75–103.

yet rejection, for instance, might connect with feelings of mortality and the end of the self, and entail the very opposite of those feelings positioned as desirable. That is, in the romcom, we are always aware of the potential for a “loss of hedonic pleasure and of connection with others,” even after a limerent period.<sup>41</sup> As Gina says toward the end of *The Girl in the Café*, “The nice bit’s over—the rest is just disappointment and my past catching up with me again.”

*Waitress* is an interesting example of a romantic comedy that admits depressive existential feelings into its deliberative dialogue. *Waitress* begins looking like a romantic comedy, but features some shocking depictions of spousal abuse that truly puncture the comic mode. The representations of infidelity begin as humorous, but gradually give way to confessional monologues about the depression underscoring it. During the climax, protagonist Jenna Hunterson (Keri Russell) gives birth to a baby girl and feels an instant deep affection she was not expecting, but the emotion also provides the impetus for her to express deep loathing for her abusive husband, Earl (Jeremy Sisto). Soothing, inspirational music plays as she gazes on her newborn, while doctors restrain a husband brimming with violence in the background. Here, love is proximate to its opposite, and positive affect and negative affect not only coexist but have a strangely causal relationship. The love between mother and child effectively resolves what Leger Grindon calls a “women’s ambivalence” toward romantic love that forms the film’s dramatic arc.<sup>42</sup> Not only does the propinquity of the benign and violating register as humor, the audience must also work to reconcile such negative affect alongside the sentimental mode, through which we appreciate Jenna’s new identity with her child and without the need for a male partner’s validation—a political commentary drawn from the emotional conflict.<sup>43</sup>

Drawing meaning from such a blended affect can provide the romcom its emotive weight: positive and negative valences experienced so close that they are hard to tell apart, and in turn blended with the mixed emotions of an uncontrollable limerent fixation.<sup>44</sup> The viewer might also experience some dissonance between an appreciation of the risks the characters take in sparking romance, often involving humiliation, awkwardness, or existential fear of rejection, and the flow of the actors in representing the mixed emotions of romance so assuredly.

This account contravenes notions of romantic comedies as light or emotionally insubstantial entertainment. Even their more absurd and fantastic situations,

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>42</sup> Grindon, *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, 181.

<sup>43</sup> For more on the gender politics of narrative sentimentality, see June Howard, “What Is Sentimentality?” *American Literary History* 11, no. 1 (1999): 63–81.

<sup>44</sup> For further discussions of mixed emotion and film, see Jeff T. Larsen and Peter McGraw, “Further Evidence for Mixed Emotions,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 6 (2011): 1095–1110.

such as the trope in which a couple-to-be while striving to overlook their mutual attraction somehow encounter one another undressed, have violating subtext. In *The Proposal* (Anne Fletcher, 2009), for instance, the naked encounter signifies all of the private shames the lead characters are keeping secret from one another. But what is truly interesting about these absurd situations is that they point to one of the most important conflicts we navigate in romcom spectatorship: that *believable* romance is to be balanced with the confected strains of performance gags. In comedy that is centered on portrayals of romance, we appreciate the skill of emotional lifelikeness and of comic artifice at the same time; comedy effectively highlights the space between an emotional verisimilitude we expect from romance and its fabrication. The first encounter of *Two Weeks Notice*, for example, is satisfying as its humor and romantic potential arrive together. We witness evidence of an initial accord between the characters that takes both by surprise and a comedy of dashed expectations in their gradual realization that they may have mutual interests, where they were expecting conflict; we might appreciate Bullock and Grant's comic timing, which can cause us in turn to reflect on their fabrication of that something more that is romantic feeling. In its best moments, we are able to apprehend calculated comedy and lifelike accord at the same time; they are indivisible. As Adam Phillips puts it, "Lovers, of course, are notoriously frantic epistemologists, second only to paranoiacs (and analysts) as readers of signs and wonders";<sup>45</sup> the romantic comedy puts us in the critical shoes of the lover, searching for signifying details that may connect our imaginative passions with the possibility of a lived counterpart.

## Conclusions

My partner is seldom impressed by romantic comedies, and I tend to watch them alone. She stresses—and I have to agree—that given all of the complications in the relationships explored in these films, with their precarity, irrational escalation of conflicts, and flaunted neuroses, it looks unlikely that they will last. That is, the notion that depth of feeling at the beginning of a relationship (limerence) is a good indicator of suitability for long-term attachment appears questionable. And it is true, too, that Hollywood gets it wrong with many of the romantic conventions it relies on: opposites, for example, do not necessarily attract. We are more likely to choose a partner on the basis of matching ideologies.<sup>46</sup> But are those limerent emotions valuable for other reasons? We should recall that not

<sup>45</sup> Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 41.

<sup>46</sup> Peter M. Buston and Stephen T. Emlen, "Cognitive Processes Underlying Human Mate Choice," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 100, no. 15 (2003): 8805–8810.

all films end in a long-term union, even if they do end happily;<sup>47</sup> consider the conclusion of *Outsourced* or *Waitress*. At times, the experience of limerence that opens up potentials for political awakening is taken to be a happy occurrence of itself, an autotelic intimacy for its own sake or what David Shumway terms a “pure relationship,” perhaps one that is presented as positive because its intimacy feels alive.<sup>48</sup> The conditions of a lasting union become less important than the conditions of becoming a better person—and in the examples under scrutiny, this usually means a person more alive to their political effects on the world.

Love is mysterious because its agents are so often invisible: they are pheromones and genetic diversification, personal affinities and inexplicable intrigues that draw us to another, as well as cultural narratives we have absorbed about what is attractive in a potential mate. These invisible factors are buttressed in emotion that drives us to form partnerships, and that emotion comes bubbling to the surface and is fleetingly visible; its vagaries make it a challenge to portray. That challenge is unique, and recognizing the skill with which filmmakers and performers meet such a challenge is part of the pleasure of romantic comedy spectatorship. We recognize the difficulty of portraying the emotive surfaces of a process so submersed (and yet so personally meaningful) at the same time that we might appreciate the particular challenges of comedy, which admit potential emotional violations into the film world—the erosion of self-image, the fear of rejection, the social disgraces, the existential ruminations failure might entail. Loving feelings are mixed with darker emotions that seem to contradict the positivity of romance. Their threatening nature is acknowledged and then made benign in filmic humor, and these benign violations are then balanced with the forward-looking, risk-taking vulnerability of putting oneself on the line for the hope of love, a prizing of interpersonal connection that some scholars have characterized as a point of potential resistance rather than adherence to the depersonalization of market logics.<sup>49</sup> Both hope and courage can equally be applied to the political self, and it is equally difficult to portray the kinds of emotions that might truly disrupt a stable political self-identification or call us to act on our principles.

We denigrate the romantic comedy on behalf of its fantasies; its fantasies are ever-present and often acknowledged both within the films themselves and by their devoted audiences.<sup>50</sup> But love is not just a fantasy, it is also a real thing in the world, and romantic comedies can show us representations of our fantastical desires, in which a limerent object becomes larger than life in our heads or associated with other qualities both desirable and unattainable, and those parts of desire that are true: when our

<sup>47</sup> Deleyto, *The Secret Life*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Shumway, *Modern Love*, 79, 139.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 232, in somewhat contradistinction to Illouz, *Consuming*.

<sup>50</sup> McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 94–95.



inner fantasies connect in wondrous ways, so often summarized by that connotation of scientific credibility, “chemistry.” The word “chemistry” strangely tells us that we recognize biology at work between performers; they have found some approximation of limerence, and we are already primed with critical work in keen awareness of the connections between its fabrication and its embodiment. In the romcom, limerent emotions arrive at us already metonymical and ready to be extended to other conceptual spaces, but our interrogation of equivalences between emotional states—of the actor, of the lover, of the moral actor, of the loving moralizer—is alive to an affective morphology, the way our emotions do not remain contained in one lived context, cannot be called real or unreal, and in multiple, complex, multicausal ways inform how we behave among others.

Finally, the political romcom attaches value to these ineffable emotional states by elaborating on some of their positive consequences: a vulnerability through which we are open to the new, attachment to hopeful ideas (the idea of a partner or the idea of goodness in the world), risk-taking behavior that strives to translate those hopes and desires into reality, the courage to follow through in acting on those things we care about, and a sensitivity to others in the world that is required to build any human system that lasts. These values are easy to belittle as elements in a common fantasy, but they are indeed virtues of great importance to our own thriving and communal thriving in situations that require coordination of the goals and desires of many. The political romcom wonders at the mystery of the elusive connections between how we feel and how we act; it looks at the way love and political generosity both require selflessness and thinks through the emotional qualities that underscore selfless behaviors. These are qualities that are worth celebrating—they are not just fantasies; they are emotions, traits, and behaviors that exist in the world.

## TV as Bully

All narrative art involves some manner of willing emotional manipulation on behalf of the spectator. We attend a narrative to feel a kind of emotional push and pull, which we retrospectively renarrativize for ourselves, crafting a more personal meaning from stories targeted at larger groups. The motivation to seek out the negative affect elicited by narrative entertainment has fascinated media scholars, psychologists, and philosophers alike. In excitation transfer theory, our pursuit of (usually aversive) negative affect in fiction is explainable as it offsets later positive emotions, imbuing them with greater meaning and intensity.<sup>1</sup> One might consider, too, the gratification of having negative affect that is familiar from our lives represented in story media; recognition of a common, undesirable emotional experience has the potential to help us feel less alone.<sup>2</sup> What is occasionally missing from this debate, however, is some sense of the length of time in which we can be involved in these emotional manipulations. Clearly, the ongoing relationship with a story and its characters that we develop while viewing a serialized television show spanning many seasons is emotionally different to our response to the open-and-closed narrative of a nonserialized film. The duration of our enthrallment differs considerably, and that should matter in our evaluation of the potential effects of various screen media formats.

The affective manipulations of all entertainment media, concocting emotionally involving dramas, can be thought of as a power relationship that we seek out for enjoyment, often employing an addictive composite of adrenaline, release, payoff, the withholding of information, and pleasurable cognitive dissonance resolution. We give ourselves over to and trust in the narrators to lead us through their story, and this is a powerful position for narrators to be in. The commercial imperatives of serialized television, however, take this process to its limit through a structure of cliffhangers, suspension of key narrative detail, and emotional manipulation that is not clearly marshaled toward narratively conclusive ends. The first question I want to ask, then, is whether this

<sup>1</sup> Dolf Zillmann, "Excitation Transfer in Communication-Mediated Aggressive Behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 7 (1971): 419–434.

<sup>2</sup> This is somewhat dependent on personality factors in the viewer, per Dara N. Greenwood and Christopher R. Long, "Psychological Predictors of Media Involvement: Solitude Experiences and the Need to Belong," *Communication Research* 36, no. 5 (2009): 637–654.

enthrallment might prime the viewer to be a willing participant in an affective relationship that is a lot like bullying. This chapter addresses three primary areas of bullying and TV: the formal structure of serialized television, narrative content that addresses bullying, and entertainment workplaces in which bullying is positioned as intrinsic to the entertainment product, in particular reality television. It historicizes the normalization of bullying in reality television, from *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004–2017) to abusive cooking programs, charting the transition of the “hardline” male bully as an entertainment trope to its eventual realization as a viable political figure, the Donald Trump–era presidential bully. The gender politics of the popular TV antihero are addressed, as are current issues of gender, bullying, and sexual abuse in the American entertainment industry. Although there are ongoing changes in television digitalization and new debates emerging in the ever-growing discipline of TV studies, in this chapter I am primarily interested in two key formats that have spurred much discussion in the past two decades: millennial “complex” or “quality” television and reality television.

Bullying can be thought of as a superordinate categorization under which fall many different harmful acts, iterated in many different contexts.<sup>3</sup> For example, incivility and social undermining may be quite different to sexual harassment and public aggression, but they are all behaviors associated with bullying.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I am interested in intermediate rather than direct or higher-level forms of bullying. Obviously, television does not physically victimize anyone, and its tools are psychological. The point is not to pathologize the watching or making of television, so much as it is to interrogate some more recent assumptions scholars have made concerning the value and merit of TV engagement. Given the nature of this book, I engage more thoroughly with cognitive perspectives in television studies. In this chapter, I first address arguments that the longform design of serial television has merit due to its cumulative “complexity” and then examine the idea that through its exploration of antiheroic characters, this complexity becomes a virtuous moral ambiguity on behalf of its makers.<sup>5</sup> I then consider the political resonances of American television’s obsession with the male bully and the elite bully in reality TV, speculate on the evidence for culturally distributed attitudes toward bullying behavior, and finally, offer some alternative perspectives and conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Claire P. Monks and Iain Coyne, eds., *Bullying in Different Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Definitional work on bullying remains challenging. Paula Saunders, Amy Huynh, and Jane Goodman-Delahunty, “Defining Workplace Bullying Behaviour: Professional Lay Definitions of Workplace Bullying,” *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 30, no. 4 (2007): 340–354.

<sup>5</sup> In particular, Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

## Serialized Structures, Entrancement, and Self-Doubt

Throughout this book so far, I have returned to the many ways in which audiences derive enjoyment from entertainment media as a gratifying puzzle. A good puzzle can satisfy those with a great need for cognition, be it social or metaphysical, and it makes sense that if puzzling is pleasurable, then we might want to prolong that pleasure.<sup>6</sup> Entertainment media can provide a visualization of puzzles and problem-solving that speaks agreeably to our aptitudes, and so in reading fictional puzzles we might experience flow.<sup>7</sup> Some television shows, like *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010), have become infamous for encouraging their audience to puzzle for many years over a solution that was never part of the project's conception, and perhaps disaffected audience members are right to feel hurt or a breach of trust if such a solution was central to their prolonged engagement. The tension that comes up here is key to my central question regarding the distance between story's *revelatory* capacity and its *immersive* capacity, which can be taken to be one and the same.

This distance presents a problem for cognitive media theory. Effectively, the more cognitive theorists focus analytical efforts upon personal gratification, affective engagement, and in-the-moment pleasure, the more these qualities appear to be the sole value of narrative art; yet intrinsically, we might feel they are not. I suspect much of the resistance to cognitive interventions in the humanities has been due to this very problem: how we might use cognitive studies to articulate what Mary Beth Oliver and Arthur A. Raney call eudaimonic meaning, a fulfillment or truth-seeking goal rather than a hedonic pleasure, and how we might explain revelations or insights in narrative engagement that meaningfully affect our lives.<sup>8</sup> If the puzzle itself offers pleasure and pleasure is the reason for media engagement, then why should it matter if the solution is absent? But the hedonic approach to media evaluation ignores the many other social functions that storytelling can serve, including the potential to induce the audience to take some manner of action, to enrich later conversations, or to elicit the potential satisfaction we feel when a narrative elaborates in causal terms something we have struggled to explain to ourselves or put into words.<sup>9</sup> These potentialities

<sup>6</sup> Savia Coutinho et al., "Metacognition, Need for Cognition and Use of Explanations During Ongoing Learning and Problem Solving," *Learning and Individual Differences* 15, no. 4 (2005): 321–337; K. Unnikrishnan Nair and Subramaniam Ramnarayan, "Individual Differences in Need for Cognition and Complex Problem Solving," *Journal of Research in Personality* 34, no. 3 (2000): 305–328.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Arp, *Scenario Visualization: An Evolutionary Account of Creative Problem Solving* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Beth Oliver and Arthur A. Raney, "Entertainment as Pleasurable and Meaningful: Identifying Hedonic and Eudaimonic Motivations for Entertainment Consumption," *Journal of Communication* 61, no. 5 (2011): 984–1004.

<sup>9</sup> These distinctions between subjective hedonism and notions of human potential also appear in the literature on well-being: Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "On Happiness and Human

are key to a sense of productivity we might feel in narrative engagement, and as we experience these qualities more rarely, we could thereby consider them more valuable.

The problem with serialized television is that it produces an enthrallment that may feel gratifying or productive, but its productive capacities (if not its capacity for genuine emotional gratification) should be brought into question. This is where bullying comes back in. One key technique in indirect or psychological bullying is the production of enthrallment. When an aggressor is cruel one day and nice the next, the target can become enthralled and self-doubting. Serial television maintains enthrallment through its very structural capacity to hold the spectator aloft from a grander truth; at the end of a film or shorter narrative, one has all of the tools at one's disposal to unpack meaning, even where that meaning is elusive or oblique, but in television a commercial imperative limits the provision of these tools, and guessing what tools for comprehension may be provided to us in the future is part of the fun. Growing investment as information is accrued becomes a kind of complexity that may feel valuable.<sup>10</sup> Because our relationship with characters and stories gathers history that becomes affectively loaded in personal memory, that relationship cannot help but become more complex; self and other become increasingly united as alignment grows potentially into attachment, and we subsume evaluations of fictional characters into a grander autobiographical narrative.<sup>11</sup> That is, rather than merely "identifying" with favored characters, how you felt about any character tells you something about your own selfhood and values. It has been a principle of this book that audiences self-narrativize from fictions in their own meaning-making capacity as a story unfolds, but also that sense-making assessment (what the story means to us) becomes increasingly indivisible from the object of engagement. In other words, we cannot separate *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011–2019) characters from how we have subjectively felt about them throughout our history of observing them—perhaps allegiances that have been broken and rebuilt—and so emotion and memory have an increasingly complex relationship the longer we spend immersed.

Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-being," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52, no. 1 (2001): 141–166.

<sup>10</sup> Yet as Michael Z. Newman observes, "A narrative that starts out in confusion is most likely to become clearer, less problematic. But a narrative that starts out simple has the opportunity of developing in the direction of intensified interest, of accumulating sophistication," in "Character and Complexity in American Independent Cinema: 21 Grams and Passion Fish," *Film Criticism* 31, no. 1–2 (2006): 104.

<sup>11</sup> Qi Wang and Jens Brockmeier, "Autobiographical Remembering as Cultural Practice: Understanding the Interplay between Memory, Self and Culture," *Culture & Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2008): 45–64; Katherine Nelson, "Self and Social Functions: Individual Autobiographical Memory and Collective Narrative," *Memory* 11, no. 2 (2003): 125–136.

This is the source of television's complexity. One may readily describe how an audience *uses* these narratives, but it does not necessarily follow that this particular complexity is always a good thing. The names given to the phenomenon have all come loaded with inbuilt positive evaluations: "complex television," "quality television," and "high-end television" contain indicators of intrinsic merit, audience benefit, and good taste.<sup>12</sup> Despite the best protestations of writers, including Robert Thompson, who insist that "quality" or "high-end" denotes genre more than judgment, it is not just in such nominal designations that these evaluations arise; they are embedded in the adulation with which many authors write of such series, too.<sup>13</sup> This adulation has been thoroughly deconstructed by Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, who highlight the class-bound, othering connotations of sophisticating and taste-making discourses around quality television, and discourses that seek to create distance from their maligned, feminized roots in daytime soaps.<sup>14</sup> Newman and Levine also point out that attempts at legitimating television are hardly new and come in cycles;<sup>15</sup> likewise, objections to designations of "quality" are recurrent, taking aim at different TV forms.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, I agree with Sarah Cardwell that it should be fine to make these value judgments of television rather than disguise them behind a veneer of aloof prose and "timid inverted commas."<sup>17</sup> Value judgments are important indicators of what we want the world to look like and what kinds of thoughts and ideas we care about. Yet work on the television renaissance has also suggested a kind of cognitive benefit to prolonged engagement in "quality" and "complex" TV narratives (and the move to "peak television," connoting quantity more than quality, still retains the ring of prognosticatory presumption).<sup>18</sup>

While scholars disagree on the parameters of quality, complex, high-end, peak, or pedigree television, their histories of serialization, semi-serialization, and changing genres and forms, these are not debates I will resolve here.<sup>19</sup> Nor am I terribly interested in the languages of high or low art and its aesthetics, except insofar as a moral rider might accompany such assessments that a taste for television, where it is aesthetically associated with established media forms,

<sup>12</sup> Mittell, *Complex TV*; Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, eds., *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Robin Nelson, *State of Play: Contemporary "High-End" TV Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012), *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Charlotte Brunson, "Problems with Quality," *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990): 67–90.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?," in *Quality TV*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 34.

<sup>18</sup> In particular, Mittell, *Complex TV*, and articles such as Jason Gendler, "The Rich Inferential World of *Mad Men*: Serialized Television and Character Interiority," *Projections* 10, issue 1 (2016): 39–62.

<sup>19</sup> See debates in Glen Creeber, ed., *The Television Genre Book* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

improves the viewer in some way.<sup>20</sup> In the current meditation on ethics, underlying notions of cognitive benefits to the individual (rather than culturally borne consequences, which I will make a case for) are of most interest. It is clear, however, that there is an emergent corpus of a so-named television renaissance of the TV III era, two key tropes of which—complex narrative structures and morally complex antiheroes—generate considerable writing and contemplation in cognitive television studies and comprise my primary object of study.<sup>21</sup>

Other types of media work with the cycles of enthrallment under question, too: the appeal of many videogames, for instance, is premised upon systems of punishment (inhibiting progress) and reward (access to more of the game). Perhaps a more commonplace analogy, however, is the alleged “literariness” of longform television formats and their lineage in serialized literature of the nineteenth century or within the pages of twentieth-century pulp magazines.<sup>22</sup> The structure of serialized television has sometimes been called “novelistic”; however, the many years—sometimes decades—of releases in television series still make it somewhat exceptional.<sup>23</sup> I would suggest that these equivalents in the history of serial literature are probably more akin to television miniseries, with their pressure to work somewhat more directly toward a prepared conclusion, than a dispersed narrative for which the creators must continue to find reasons to prolong investment in a conflict.<sup>24</sup> Television drama’s melodramatic mode, Lynne Joyrich points out, forces protagonists to revisit their trials each week, in a state of “perpetual suffering.”<sup>25</sup> Even in those longform series with carefully constructed endings, such as *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), the fact that there are many hours to fill with drama can lead to creative workers searching for conflicts to embellish in order to make up time. Some find that this environment of abundant yet ephemeral texts drives producers to “increasingly turn to shock tactics to keep the attention of their audiences . . . with potentially negative consequences for the human experience of narrative and argument.”<sup>26</sup> No matter what one thinks of the one-upmanship of shocking

<sup>20</sup> For questions on televisual art and aesthetics, see Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Some works are more explicitly oriented toward canonization than others. See, in particular, Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution Was Televised* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), and the more effusive Dean J. DeFino, *The HBO Effect* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> This is a discourse that reaches back to the 1990s with Charles McGrath, “The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel,” *New York Times Magazine* 22 (1995): 52–59; see also Thomas Doherty, “Storied TV: Cable Is the New Novel,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 17, 2012, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Cable-Is-the-New-Novel/134420>.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Sheehan and Lauren Alice, “Labyrinths of Uncertainty: *True Detective* and the Metaphysics of Investigation,” *Clues* 35, no. 2 (2017): 29.

<sup>24</sup> There has been a substantial boom in experimental and overtly activist miniseries on the tail of the “quality” TV era: think of Netflix’s *When They See Us* and *Unbelievable* in 2019, for instance.

<sup>25</sup> Lynne Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 48.

<sup>26</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (London: Sage, 2013), 393.



content, it remains clear that the format lends itself to providing viewers a stake in prolonged conflicts and, as writers like Kim Wilkins contend about the HBO model, a perhaps misanthropic disposition in their naturalized lack of resolution to human suffering; but at the same time, the format must flatter a disposition that has invested heavily in its conflicts.<sup>27</sup> Wilkins writes that HBO's *Westworld* (2016–) “ultimately posits that suffering is the primary, if not only, means through which cognitive evolution takes place. As the Man in Black explains, ‘when you’re suffering, that’s when you’re most real’ (‘Chestnut’, Season 1, Episode 2). But, in *Westworld* to be ‘real’, that is, human, is to be violent, misogynist, and vengeful.”<sup>28</sup>

But this is flattery mixed with other affects. In hazing rituals, real trauma can create a strong sense of attachment and fealty, as subjects must be able to explain the dysphoric experience to themselves with equal opposite gains, or the ritual does not make sense.<sup>29</sup> This is how we resolve its affective incoherence, with group attachment or identification, and a stronger sense of the value of that attachment, retrospectively imbuing trauma with meaning. The relationship in narrative is similar: we attach ourselves to a kind of emotional debt, hoping for a payoff that will explain our involvement and resolve our dissonance. In this case, the enthrallment comes to matter more to us over time with greater emotional investment, and thus feels more complex.<sup>30</sup> But it strikes me, too, that this relationship works on the same mechanisms as many forms of bullying. Serialized television creates a similar sense of enthrallment to that of the “Machiavellian” bully, or someone with “high affective perspective-taking ability” using indirect forms of psychological threat rather than follow-through to maintain dominance.<sup>31</sup> If television elevates the meaning of its information through these emotional manipulations but at the same time inhibits our ability to assess the information by withholding it, it is able to sustain and build its internal sense of consequence, but to what ends beyond the commercial imperative to prolong engagement and maintain audience share?

To return momentarily to excitation transfer theory, we could see this process as a cumulative “excitational residue” on an extended timeline, and potentially our awareness of this emotional engagement could come at the expense of

<sup>27</sup> Kim Wilkins, “These Violent Delights: Navigating *Westworld* as ‘Quality’ Television,” in *Reading “Westworld,”* ed. Alex Goody and Antonia Mackay (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 23–41.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Elliott Aronson and Judson Mills, “The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 59, no. 2 (1956): 177–181.

<sup>30</sup> In disconfirmed expectancy, too, in order to alleviate the discomfort of any proof that disconfirms strongly held beliefs, we reattach ourselves to initial positions. Léon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

<sup>31</sup> Jon Sutton, Peter K. Smith, and John Swettenham, “Social Cognition and Bullying: Social Inadequacy or Skilled Manipulation?” *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 17 (1999): 435–450.

other meaning-making attributions.<sup>32</sup> This means that television, for commercial reasons, tends to become more histrionic and cultivates the elevation of our *investment in* conflicts rather than pondering how they are relieved when we *withdraw investment* in them. Extended excitation transfer indeed makes our emotional response more complex, but to what end?<sup>33</sup> We have established that narratives can create intrigue through the incremental provision of information. The more that diegetic information is withheld, and the more that prior information is contradicted to craft ambiguities and mysteries, the more viewers are invited to question their beliefs about the narrative at hand (and the longer that they spend immersed, the more extensively this translates to a self-exploration, as excess content renders narrative meanings more open and diffuse and therefore meaning must be personalized). This produces a kind of self-doubt that is central both to the fun of serialized storytelling and to the storyteller-spectator relationship under scrutiny. Doubt, in turn, can produce either avoidance or enthrallment, and the producers of television shows are clearly aiming at the latter. Enthrallment is often what we pursue in longform narrative like television (although not always; sometimes we like to intellectually skim the surface or not be too moved by a program).<sup>34</sup> The production of self-doubt is also central to both reflexivity, which can be personally or politically motivated, and to a method of bullying that has come to be more colloquially known as “gaslighting,” in which misdirection, contradiction, and sometimes more elaborate stagings of contrary evidence (the bread and butter of puzzle narratives, one might note) are motivated to instill a personal doubt in self-narratives or diegetic appraisals.<sup>35</sup> Thence its dynamic nature: self-doubt can have positive or negative results depending on the subject to which it is directed. It can be used to make a political point as much as it can be used to cover up a crime. Sometimes our memories, beliefs, and responses to all manner of situations are in need of questioning; sometimes they are not.

By now, I have also documented the ways in which humanities of the past century have at times uncritically cast self-doubt and reflexivity as political boons, elevating our fascination with narrative arts to radically disruptive political work where a story calls attention to its diegetic construction.<sup>36</sup> In television studies,

<sup>32</sup> Zillmann, “Excitation Transfer,” 422.

<sup>33</sup> Many fans experience loss and disappointment at the end of a favored TV series. This may be due to a “passive spillover effect,” per Robert McIlwraith et al., “Television Addiction: Theories and Data Behind the Ubiquitous Metaphor,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 35, issue 2 (1991): 104–121.

<sup>34</sup> As Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it, “We gaze at television to forestall boredom and television generates more of it,” in *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 249.

<sup>35</sup> See Theodore L. Dorpat, *Gaslighting, the Double Whammy, Interrogation, and Other Methods of Covert Control in Psychotherapy and Analysis* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1996); Kate Abramson, “Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 28, no. 1 (2014): 1–30.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Noël Burch, “Narrative/Diegesis—Thresholds, Limits,” *Screen* 23, no. 2 (1982): 16–33.

concepts like Jason Mittell's "operational aesthetic," a kind of contract for awareness of diegetic construction and spectatorial behaviors between TV producers and audiences, perform similar work, only the presumed benefit is internal and cognitive rather than social or political.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes this may be the case. It is evident that we can be politically inspired in rousing and disruptive narratives; however, I want to ask if self-doubt and reflexivity are always valuable, both politically and personally, and when they might not be valuable. We are driven to resolve conflicts in our comprehension of ourselves and the world, and so what should matter is not reflexivity or self-doubt itself, but the point at which dissonance is resolved and we settle on a causal account or narrativize our own experience. This resolution, where we stop rationalizing and settle on an explanation, is what we will carry forward in our lives.

Again, I do not mean to pathologize the wide experience of TV spectatorship or suggest that all TV mandates negative consequences—I have enjoyed many of the innovative, politically astute TV dramas produced in the past two decades, and the more experimental sitcom, dramedy, and miniseries forms that have proliferated in their wake. I am, however, beginning with a problem: if television formally lends itself to prolonging the spectator's investment in conflicts more so than investigating the conditions of their resolution, how can it have the benefits or use that some scholars have presumed? And does television's cumulative complexity, which is one of increasingly loaded and so necessarily more personalized meaning, encourage us to look inward rather than outward to others in the world?

Having addressed the narratival form of serial television, I will look more closely in the following section at some of the content of recent, acclaimed television serials. Throughout this book, I have made the claim that it matters what we are enthralled by and reflexive about, and what tools we have for resolving the problems each narrative raises. In finding our own resolution to a scintillating question raised in narrative, we reach past immersive gratification and into another space of meaning-making, one that may have its own pleasures attached, but those pleasures are corollary to the power of story-guided problem-solving to provide direction in our lives. We might still progressively make meaning from installments of a favored television show, but I am arguing that the meaning is distorted by our awareness of absent information and by our enthrallment. We are held aloft and kept in doubt, and our meaning-making comes to matter less than the hedonic value of the show's affective structuring; and often, as we will see, the cruelty it displays toward the spectator binds its audience to the pursuit of its withheld knowledge. Television's hedonism often comes with a kind of agony of manufactured unknowing and of attachments manipulated and severed.

<sup>37</sup> Mittell, *Complex TV*, 42.

## The Male Antihero and Individualist Virtue Ethics

The first example I turn to is perhaps the most debated trope in the post-HBO model of high-production-value television and one that many scholars have described as “complex”: the antihero. Some writers have registered the gender politics of the TV antihero in particular; many of the frequently discussed programs of “complex television” are about complex men, or what Amanda D. Lotz describes as the “male-centered serial.”<sup>38</sup> Lotz’s *Cable Guys* describes how recent television navigates a crisis of moral identity that corresponds to contemporaneous changes in gender role expectations. As she sees it, these shows complicate prior narratives of certain and centered hegemonic masculinity (and sometimes reinscribe those conceptions), and at the same time afford their male characters more complex interiority and narrative arcs than supporting women. In fact, high-profile television dramas so often promote enthrallment with the male bully—or simply badly behaved men—as their primary conflict that it has become a defining feature of the complex serial. That is, the antihero’s gender is both key to their abusive practices and becomes central to the drama.<sup>39</sup> The list of male antiheroes is extensive: audiences are encouraged to obsessively ask what makes Donald Draper the womanizer he is in *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015), Dexter a violent murderer in *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006–2013), or Walter White so anaesthetized to the terrible consequences of his actions in *Breaking Bad*. We are ushered into these fictional psyches searching for clues as to what made these men the way they are and what their redemption might be. We are effectively asked to be enthralled by, and to recurrently evaluate our sympathetic relation to, male bad behavior. Cognitive media studies have not been immune to the canonization of and infatuation with the white male bully; see, for instance, Smith’s and Carroll’s writings on Tony Soprano, which are largely devoted to translating the character’s exploits into descriptive passages.<sup>40</sup>

This is in no way to suggest that women-centered serials do not exist, but it does seem that they are generally the least discussed and therefore least

<sup>38</sup> Amanda D. Lotz, *“Cable Guys”: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Margrethe B. Vaage, “The Antihero’s Wife: On Hating Skyler White, and on the Rare Female Antihero,” in *The Antihero in American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 150–181.

<sup>39</sup> Lotz, “Cable Guys,” passim.

<sup>40</sup> Murray Smith, “Just What Is It That Makes Tony Soprano Such an Appealing, Attractive Murderer?” in *Ethics at the Cinema*, ed. Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 66–90; Noël Carroll, “Sympathy for the Devil,” in *The Sopranos and Philosophy*, ed. Vincent Pastore (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 121–136. Note that while Smith and Carroll take evaluative stances on the merits of *The Sopranos* and morally ambiguous television, of which they take antiheroic tropes to be emblematic, Vaage has been more interested in describing how the TV antihero operates as entertainment.

canonized texts of the television renaissance.<sup>41</sup> As Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda, and Diane Negra point out, quality television after the global financial crisis saw a number of female-centered serials, such as *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–2016) and *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–2020), reflecting middle-class precarity and the financialization of private lives, although not all their leads could be described as similarly antiheroic.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the structures of moral feeling attached to these female protagonists are far less predicated on a cycle of distanced or mystified fascination and repulsion toward their deeds, even where morally ambivalent, as their compromised and compromising behavior tends to be more intelligible given the political structures, neither “fair or functional,” that they must work within.<sup>43</sup> Lotz goes so far as to wonder whether potential female antiheroes could be seen as “individuals and not as indictments of feminism,” but of course a shift that negotiates this very question has already begun in the video-on-demand, or VOD, era.<sup>44</sup> What springs to mind are series like *The Morning Show* (Apple TV, 2019) that present complex leading women and men who are together navigating the effects of media workplace abuses, with a difficult mix of enabling complicity and routine victimization displacing the epideictic rhetoric of antihero judgment in favor of a more outcomes-focused narrative: what is the right thing to do given these moral distributions that should belong to abusers but become owned by so many they have abused? This question is the subject of open interrogation instead of being buried beneath mystifying character elaborations that may keep viewer attention tied up in confusion regarding the moral fiber of antiheroes.<sup>45</sup> Again, these are not the kinds of series that have traditionally received the most attention.<sup>46</sup>

Broader cognitive work on transgressive protagonists in cinema has tended to assess the viewer’s experience of either bracketing moral responses to enjoy a film against some manner of temporary rationalization (as in affective disposition theory) or the viewer’s potential for adapting moral schemata in response to a film’s convolutions; yet these perspectives on filmed narrative also defer to “the

<sup>41</sup> Such a canonization often draws from the masculinist terms of auteurism. For further evidence see Brett Martin, *Difficult Men* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda, and Diane Negra, “Female-Centered TV in an Age of Precarity,” *Genders* 1, no. 2 (2016), <https://www.colorado.edu/genders/2016/05/19/female-centered-tv-age-precariety>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. See also Rebecca Wanzo, “Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics,” *Camera Obscura* 31, no. 2 (2016): 27–59.

<sup>44</sup> Lotz, “Cable Guys,” 192.

<sup>45</sup> There are shows that similarly craft internal mysteries from the bad behavior of female protagonists, such as *Unreal* (Lifetime, 2015–2018). Again, these programs receive less attention, and we should still question the ways in which they request of viewers a suspended obsession with the perpetrators of abuse.

<sup>46</sup> In a way, too, an older association of women with TV spectatorship and men with TV production makes increasingly little sense given the seismic shifts and reevaluations of work–life binaries and gender roles that are still changing the media landscape today.

considerable authority of the viewer to judge film characters and interpret events as needed to get past it, to move on, and perhaps even to resume the enjoyment of a film.<sup>47</sup> These resources for remoralization, wherein closure is part of sense-making, are limited in any serialized narrative. Sense-making requires continual effort in longer formats, and this effortfulness might feel uniquely complex or productive. But this process likewise limits our attempts at moral evaluation, suspended as we are in a bracketed world of internal moral relevance, so we may settle instead for updating our sense of approval and disapproval.<sup>48</sup> Thus, some television shows, like *Breaking Bad*, play the length of time we have spent with a villainous main character against increasingly bad behavior to produce an ongoing cognitive dissonance, by which we are then enthralled. The bad behavior must be introduced gradually to be offset by the amount of time we have invested in comprehending the character's interiority, motivations, and behavior; otherwise there would be no dissonance to return to. I propose that this extended, recurring cognitive dissonance is key to a feeling of "depth" audiences derive from a prolonged relationship with antiheroic characters, and it is what makes that relationship feel complex or profound.

But we could equally look at this as gaslighting on a grand scale, across many years and seasons of television. Our relationship with aggressors is always complex, but the mere presence of complexity is not inherently beneficial. First of all, our complex cognition could be redirected by narrative fictions into concerns other than an obsession with a central male bully. Second, all abusive relationships are complex and can involve conflicting emotions; for example, we can deeply love those who abuse us, producing dissonance that is toxic, not revelatory.<sup>49</sup> More complexity, conflicts, or friction in any relationship should not be equated with more value, and I think this should be true of relational feelings we have toward fictive characters, too.<sup>50</sup> When we are so consistently asked to be suspended in enthrallment of male abusers on television, however, and this is positioned as a paramount "complex" spectatorial experience, the pinnacle of what TV art can offer, a sublimation takes place. These shows all produce some kind of horror at aggressive behaviors, but any subsequent reflexive elaboration of the victims' experience is leveraged for deeper interrogation of the central

<sup>47</sup> Philip J. Hohle, "How Viewers Respond to Transgressive Protagonist-Heroes in Film," *Projections* 10, issue 2 (2016): 53.

<sup>48</sup> This distinction is described in Carl Plantinga, "I Followed the Rules, and They All Loved You More: Moral Judgment and Attitudes toward Fictional Characters in Film," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 34, issue 1 (2010): 46.

<sup>49</sup> Heather Fraser, *In the Name of Love: Women's Narratives of Love and Abuse* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> This becomes especially important if we accept that our relationship with fictive characters not only is akin to but *is* a kind of relationship with friends. See arguments in Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage, "Don, Peggy, and Other Fictional Friends? Engaging with Characters in Television Series," *Projections* 6, no. 2 (2012): 18–41.

male figure, as that character's interiority is the central puzzle that keeps many viewers enthralled between episodes, just as many paratextual online message boards and discussions fill up with analyses of the psyche and moral standing of each central character.<sup>51</sup> Such dissonances are the source of praise for many flagship shows of the television renaissance: that is, their vaunted ethical ambiguity.<sup>52</sup> As Janet McCabe and Kim Akass explain about HBO's *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), "Some of the most shocking violence committed by Tony may ambiguously weave unremorseful brutality with a strict moral code, but it is the role of the interpretative community to take charge of that meaning and make it acceptable that intrigues."<sup>53</sup> We might also say that while these shows invite moral deliberation, potentially among friends or online communities between episodes, deliberation is not a necessary condition of enjoyment.

The nature of this relationship strikes me as similar to that of psychological bullying and gaslighting: it produces obsession with the identity behind bad behaviors, as well as uncertainty regarding the target's place in or responsibility for those behaviors. An audience's interest in bullying behaviors and abuse should not be thought of as problematic on its own; rather, as with McCabe and Akass's critique, it is our reflexive relationship to those behaviors that is of interest. One of the hallmarks of the kind of moral dissonance inaugurated by the antihero is a conflicting sense of fascination and repulsion.<sup>54</sup> But this dissonance centers awareness on the individual and thereby becomes an individualist virtue politics. That is, male antiheroes present a puzzle around the character's virtue or otherwise, and the fascination-repulsion dissonance fixates audiences upon the judgment of moral character (assessments of the individual's virtue are paramount) rather than moral results (a socially distributed consequentialism may be important, but only to support a grander question of the individual's virtue or vice). Some scholars have emphasized television's invitations to *like* or *not like* a flawed protagonist such as Walter White; it is a central question, for example, in Margrethe B. Vaage's *The Antihero in American Television*.<sup>55</sup> These resolutions

<sup>51</sup> As Mittell suggests throughout *Complex TV*, for instance, this conversation includes the many paratexts audiences are engaged with online. It should also be noted that these discussions around entertainment media online can give rise to another bullying phenomenon: online trolling.

<sup>52</sup> Yi-Ping Ong, "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: *Mad Men* and Moral Ambiguity," *MLN* 127, no. 5 (2012): 1013–1039; see also earlier, prototypical discussions such as Beth Braun, "The X-Files and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: The Ambiguity of Evil in Supernatural Representations," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 28, no. 2 (2000): 88–94.

<sup>53</sup> Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV," in *Quality TV*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 72; see also Dara Greenwood, Angeliqe Ribieras, and Allan Clifton, "The Dark Side of Antiheroes: Antisocial Tendencies and Affinity for Morally Ambiguous Characters," *Psychology of Popular Media*, December 2020, advance online publication, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000334>.

<sup>54</sup> Again, see Smith, "Just What Is It," and Carroll, "Sympathy."

<sup>55</sup> Vaage, *The Antihero*, xv.



remain peripheral, however, to mechanisms that keep the spectator both obsessed with and yet unable to answer the question of the individual's virtue or otherwise. Our awareness of consequence is effectively *folded into* an imperative to assess the moral standing of an individual, and this narrative goal ultimately takes precedence. To "stare hard in the face of the complexity, and even inconsistency, of certain aspects of human behavior," as Smith instructs us to do in the case of *Soprano*, is not enough, as it simply prescribes the same enthrallment with bullies that can be part of a feedback loop abuse inspires (the cultural dimensions of which are explored at the end of this chapter).<sup>56</sup>

So although complexity and moral ambiguity are indeed qualities that we should request of narrative, they are not specific enough. The object of complexity and what we choose to make ambiguous still matter, and analyses that presume an inherent value in narrative complexity and moral ambiguity only do half of the work—they neglect to elaborate on what is gained by such cognitive elaborations, and so where the value is actually produced. The following section looks at millennial television's other significant phenomenon, reality television, and argues that the concrete abuses visited upon reality contestants are simultaneously concealed as entertainment and normalized as viable behaviors. I then discuss the way contemporary serials and reality programs craft similar causal meaning from aggressive relationality.

### Reality TV and the Entertainment Workplace

In practice, the entertainment industry seems to inhabit a different ethical world than most other workplaces. The arbitration-based reality court show, such as *Judge Judy* (CBS, 1996–), presents a small-claims court operating effectively outside of and parallel to conventional legal processes, and the kinds of abusive humiliation we witness on a show like *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* (Channel 4, 2004–2014) would be unacceptable in any other workplace.<sup>57</sup> Much reality television crafts a fictional working environment in which ordinary legal and professional standards do not apply (often representations of service and entertainment industries, perhaps because both have overt customer gratification written into their processes, which can translate more directly to viewer gratification).<sup>58</sup> Reality television tends to make the psychological vulnerability of contestants the crux of narrative interest, a process that has resulted in

<sup>56</sup> Smith, "Just What Is It," 80.

<sup>57</sup> Erika Lane, "The Reality of Courtroom Television Shows: Should the Model Code of Judicial Conduct Apply to T.V. Judges?" *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics* 20, no. 3 (2007): 779–791.

<sup>58</sup> Nick Couldry, "Reality TV, or the Secret Theater of Neoliberalism," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (2008): 9.

many former reality television contestants seeking therapy, and in some cases attempting or committing suicide.<sup>59</sup> Narrative content in TV fiction similarly reflects this interest in and lenience toward powerful and often abusive figures. We have seen this process at work already in the antiheroic tropes of some serial television shows, yet we witness in Hollywood, too, a strange bleeding of the complex ethics of narrative content into an accepted amorality in the entertainment workplace.

From the normalized abuses of reality television to Judy Sheindlin's morally certain yet alegal arbitrations, we permit the entertainment industry these small pockets of ethical self-determination, and perhaps with good reason: we do not want to deny artists the right to talk about anything, no matter how irksome. Narrative arts are a place we can go not just to discuss the irksome, but to play out detrimental consequences, ostensibly within the safe bounds of the imagination. Yet for this reason, there can be a confusion between the ethics of entertainment content and those of the entertainment workplace and its established practices. Especially in reality television production, the two bleed into each other, as a semifabricated or "embellished" workplace (for example, a competitive kitchen) *becomes* the narrative content. Thereafter, it is challenging to distinguish the actuality of a real entertainment workplace, with camerapersons and producers and a host of other staffers, from the unreality of the fabricated kitchen or courtroom or other workspace; likewise it becomes nearly impossible to pry apart the actuality of abuses and their simulation. As Nick Couldry writes, "Reality television's theater is secret only in the sense that its *playful inversions obscure their links* to the labor conditions normalized under neoliberalism."<sup>60</sup> Part of the game of reality television has been to excuse its near universally sadistic visions of labor across various industries as harmless entertainment and yet somehow still a window into some manner of "reality."<sup>61</sup>

Precisely because of the reasonable affordances we make to artists and entertainers to broach any topic, it behooves the entertainment company, profiting from the representation of abuse, to create a sense of the entertainment workplace and the represented workplace as the same thing—the abuses are then concealed behind the entertainment industry's putative moral exceptionalism. Similarly, mainstream news media organizations present the case for press freedom when faced with issues of problematic conduct in the workplace

<sup>59</sup> Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 28–29.

<sup>60</sup> Couldry, "Reality TV," 3. Emphasis added.

<sup>61</sup> This dynamic union of sinister deception and self-referentially cajoling notions of the "real" is perhaps most evident in the hoax reality show, per Alison Hearn, "Hoaxing the Real: On the Metanarrative of Reality Television," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 165–178.

and within their business models. This was the case when the *News of the World* scandal broke, for instance. As Wendy McElroy puts it, “Hacking into private phone messages is not an act of journalism; it is the commission of a crime,” and yet a faux link between freedom of the press and criminal acts simultaneously provided both a defense for the Murdoch press’s reprehensible behavior and an impetus for authorities to expand regulation of the media in the name of freedom.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, industry heavyweights in countries of high media concentration, including Italy and Australia, have launched multiple lobbying campaigns to relax transmedia ownership laws, again associating the freedom of business ownership with a notion of “press freedom” (which usually refers not to expansionist business models but to the ability of employed journalists to write what they see fit without governmental restriction or fear of prosecution).<sup>63</sup> In both cases, distinctions between content or output and business practice are intentionally fudged to disguise unethical or self-interested behavior on behalf of media industry stakeholders. Whenever freedom is used as a campaign tool in this manner, it is worth asking: whose freedom? In this case, we are primarily discussing managerial freedom, which is riding off the virtue of informational freedoms.

Television producers have relied on similar blurred boundaries to normalize bullying and abuses in the entertainment workplace. Their freedom to discuss any subject comes to infer their freedom to discuss or expose that subject *by any means*. This premise becomes an amorality not just in the normalized abuse we witness on reality TV, which should not be acceptable in any workplace, but in the lenience it inculcates toward known abusers. Figures including Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey have used this space to their advantage. Although their abuse was widely known by many—even the topic of industry in-jokes—it was dismissed for decades as part of the natural workings of an industry that has its own codes of conduct.<sup>64</sup> Even after #Metoo, actors on the set of pedigree serials such as *Big Little Lies* emerged bruised after filming scenes of abuse alleged as necessary to achieve the show’s “stark realism”;<sup>65</sup> Nicole Kidman described

<sup>62</sup> Wendy McElroy, “Rupert Murdoch and the Freedom of the Press,” The Future of Freedom Foundation, July 21, 2011, <https://www.fff.org/explore-freedom/article/rupert-murdoch-freedom-press>.

<sup>63</sup> Larissa Di Mauro and Grace Li, “Regulating Cross-Media Ownership: A Comparative Study between Australia and Italy,” *Media and Arts Law Review*, June 18, 2009, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1421795](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1421795).

<sup>64</sup> Emily Yahr, “Harvey Weinstein’s Behavior Was a Dark Inside Joke on Shows Like ‘Entourage’ and ‘30 Rock,’” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/10/10/harvey-weinsteins-behavior-was-a-dark-inside-joke-on-shows-like-entourage-and-30-rock>.

<sup>65</sup> Ellie Wiseman, “Nicole Kidman on Filming Domestic Violence Scenes in *Big Little Lies*: ‘I Felt Devastated and Angry,’” *Grazia*, August 6, 2017, <https://graziadaily.co.uk/celebrity/news/big-little-lies-nicole-kidman-domestic-abuse>.

feeling “completely humiliated and devastated” after performing sexual arousal during scenes of intimate partner violence (recalling myths explored in earlier chapters of this book on Lynch’s filmmaking).<sup>66</sup> In no work environment should this be morally justified. Filmmaking is the putative art of illusion in which there are many means to simulate visualizations of abuse that do not end in bruises and humiliation.

Entertainment industry exceptionalism is readily identifiable in reality television. This exceptionalism makes any abuse appear not only reasonable but productive: *The Biggest Loser* (NBC, 2004–2016), for example, assumes the role of yelling people into fitness. Other series uphold presumptions that social class positively correlates with intrinsic personality features—in the case of the *Real Housewives* series, it seems, mostly a partiality to shouting and an inability to resolve personal dilemmas without recourse to bullying. Other programs put working-class participants in situations “in which they can only be out of control, making them appear as completely incapable and inadequate,” and in these situations, Helen Wood and Bev Skeggs find that the load of moral responsibility “converts each mistake into a fault.”<sup>67</sup> Many iterations of *Big Brother* have become infamous for a variety of abuses that contestants have delivered unto one another under the nominal watch of a nation of spectators. At times this has seemed like a colossal bystander effect as the aggressive behavior that millions have been watching is legitimated, and at times it has been the result of production staff cover-ups, such as footage Channel 4 kept secret following the racism controversies of the British *Celebrity Big Brother* (2007).<sup>68</sup> No matter what mental health services TV networks or production companies might offer after the fact (in the minority of cases where they do offer assistance), it remains that such shows, by their very structure, need to find people who will perform extreme, in some cases pathologically harmful, acts on camera. Any workplace environment with this kind of impact on the vulnerable should be brought into question, and the expansion of abusive behaviors in reality television reveals the extent of the affordances and different moral standards we apply to the arts and entertainment industries. In these cases, bullying—no matter its performance or actuality, or whether these things can be clearly separated—is inherent to the product. Given

<sup>66</sup> Note a systematic review finding that “[a]ll studies that explored IPV [intimate partner violence] and sexual pleasure found that victims were significantly more likely to report a lack of sexual desire or pleasure in their intimate relationships.” Ann L. Coker, “Does Physical Intimate Partner Violence Affect Sexual Health?,” *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 8, no. 2 (2007): 170.

<sup>67</sup> Helen Wood and Bev Skeggs, “Spectacular Morality,” in *The Media and Social Theory*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 190.

<sup>68</sup> In some cases these racial conflicts are manufactured for publicity purposes, yet the costs are always borne by nonwhite contestants—yet another kind of increasingly normalized bullying. Stewart Maclean, “Exclusive: The Big Brother Cover-Up,” *Mirror*, March 10, 2007, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/exclusive-the-big-brother-cover-up-457282>.

this vast normalization of different levels of abuse, the extent of exploitative labor practices that researchers such as Tanner Mirrlees have uncovered in reality television production (suffered in unequal measure by unpaid interns) is perhaps unsurprising.<sup>69</sup>

Finally, reality television makes the consistent, implicit claim that bullying is acceptable if the aggressor is thought to have moral standing, which is bestowed by talent (Gordon Ramsay), expertise (Simon Cowell, Judy Sheindlin, or Phil McGraw), or simply social class (Donald Trump). In Trump's performance on *The Apprentice*, however, we see how these attributes are combined into an individualist whole: his social class is equated with both his business expertise and his intrinsic managerial talent. The figure of the morally certain expert—from Dr. Phil to Judge Judy to Donald Trump—positions reality television as a specifically individualist fantasy of ethical clarity, and these class issues are prevalent in all of the examples provided. As Laurie Ouellette points out, for instance, *Judge Judy* simultaneously privatizes justice and stigmatizes dependency: the program's insistence upon the individual's ultimate responsibility—as judged by private interests—is a perfect storm of both American individualism and neoliberal training.<sup>70</sup> Couldry writes that “gamedoc reality TV such as *Big Brother* is a space governed by an external authority whose validity or rationality can never be questioned.”<sup>71</sup> Competitive reality shows like *The X Factor* (ITV, 2004–) have traditionally featured a panel of men—ordinarily with one white woman in the role of reluctant enabler of the male bully—judging the work of lower-status hopefuls while elevated on podia in branded suits. Such symbols are proxies for elite standards and taste, as the expert throws out food that is too salty or jeers at a vocalist whose ambitions exceed their laryngeal command.<sup>72</sup> These performances, of course, introduce additional moral dilemmas—for example, the elevation of the elite individual's gratification (in self-flattering appreciation of nuance that the devotion of multiple service professionals is required to provide) above the socially borne costs of food wastage.

With the election of Trump as president, the American individualist fantasies of heroic moral standing and their attendant economic savior narratives were reified: these were not merely fantasies for a large portion of the population, but scripts for positive action. Given Trump's electoral triumph on the back of a campaign that emphasized the performative aspects of bullying (of female

<sup>69</sup> Tanner Mirrlees, “Reality TV's Embrace of the Intern,” *tripleC* 13, no. 2 (2015): 404–422.

<sup>70</sup> Laurie Ouellette, “‘Take Responsibility for Yourself’: *Judge Judy* and the Neoliberal Citizen,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 232.

<sup>71</sup> Couldry, “Reality TV,” 10.

<sup>72</sup> Taste in the Pierre Bourdieu sense becomes literalized. See Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

colleagues, of Mexican migrants, of whoever was in his vicinity and of low status) rather than any credible policy invention, I think we can only conclude that these narratives have primed some portion of the American population to revere the socially elevated, white male bully and proclaim his inherent worth—and this kind of populist leadership now has correlates around the globe. I think, too, that these fantasies of the archetypal male not simply as liberating aggressor, but as key agent of paradigmatic sociopolitical change, chime with those we have explored in the pedigree HBO-model serial. (Brenda R. Weber’s description of reality television as “a site of such affective exuberance that it gives rise to equal parts disgust and delight” recalls the experience produced by the antiheroes of quality serials.)<sup>73</sup> What this tells us is simply that we should be taking the ethically pedagogic aspects of television much more seriously; these lessons in status-sanctioned cruelty appear to have normalized multiple versions of bullying.<sup>74</sup> To writers such as Couldry, this instructive pedagogy is equally a training in “the dynamics of the neoliberal workplace”; it satirizes those dynamics at the same time that it backhandedly crafts them.<sup>75</sup>

Television fashions narrative sense from bullying, conducted as it is into powerfully causal scenarios. In reality television in particular, the audience is called upon to witness, procedurally, how the social benefits of status-bound bullying should occur *and* been sold this process as “reality.” Perhaps it makes sense, then, that the same ethos should be applied to the highest of governmental offices and as a grim program for punitive political change.

### Conclusion: TV’s Uses and Abuses

The purpose of this chapter has not been to make a case that all television is corrupt pleasure. Rather, I have highlighted some of the presumptions that have accompanied the television renaissance: presumptions of artistic merit, the viewer’s productivity (and at times superiority) in recognizing and engaging in TV’s puzzles, the value of a kind of hedonic suspension that is intrinsically part of the TV spectatorial relationship, and perhaps subtextually, the way we have come to protect the interests of the companies selling these products by elevating their meaning. I have also discerned a confused relationship to bullying behaviors that has been culturally disseminated through narrative media like television in the past two decades, the presumptions of which consequentially

<sup>73</sup> Brenda R. Weber, ed., *Reality Gendervision* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 29.

<sup>74</sup> Some have noted that online, too, individuals engaged in trolling might be labeled “cyberbullies,” while the same practices are an accepted part of the business structure of many media organizations. Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 88–89.

<sup>75</sup> Couldry, “Reality TV,” 11–12.

buttress the increasingly normalized logics of aggressive, populist leadership outside of fictive spaces. These cultural phenomena have, of course, arrived together. Bullying on TV is not a smoking-gun root cause of populist leadership, or vice versa. But they are not separable either. For Donald Trump, the narrative logics of the television that sustained his public career and of the rhetoric and operation of politics as publicity are fused. The rhetoric of bullying on TV, of punitive politics, of obsessing over imagined transgressions of distant others prompts cognitions that implicate the way we imagine other people in the world and that, with more reinforcement from more commercially aggressive media in our lives, implicate dispositions as well.

The imperative to justify extensive television use as a profound experience is readily explainable: as our lives came to include more and more time in which we were engaged with media in the digital age, we had greater need for longer stories, and stories that acknowledged our investment in media itself. This has as much to do with changing needs as it does with changing broadcast technologies after the digital revolution.<sup>76</sup> Television simply became a more dominant and important part of our lives; in order to match the investment we had all made by accepting the conditions of round-the-clock media access in our hip pockets, it had to explain itself back to us. Television is where discussion of media codes and practices could not only occur (often referred to as “irony”), but also comfort us by continual reinforcement of the belief that these codes and practices are important.<sup>77</sup> And they are. If mediated (as opposed to face-to-face) communication is going to be such a substantial part of our lives, we need to reflect upon these changes; TV shows can be used to demonstrate how adept we are at analyzing screen images, which is indeed a useful skill in a mediated age.<sup>78</sup> One thing stories can do is introduce resources for discussion, and I think this is especially pertinent to the issue of television series, which have the ability to connect people through common points of interest, presenting as they do realized scenarios rather than abstract concepts over which we can concretize more theoretical or esoteric discussions with people we might not even know.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps, too, these resources for discussion are more important in serialized narratives,

<sup>76</sup> See John Weispenning, “Cultural Functions of Reruns: Time, Memory and Television,” *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 1 (2003): 172; Max Gluckman, “Papers in Honor of Melville J. Herskovits: Gossip and Scandal,” *Current Anthropology* 4, issue 3 (1963): 307–316.

<sup>77</sup> Alison Hearn explains how, for this very reason, hoax reality shows have become more self-flattering and self-referential: “By drawing our attention to the television studio as the current site of cultural competence and success, these shows clearly express the metanarrative of all reality programs: television’s modes of production and promotional values constitute the only ‘reality’ that matters.” Hearn, “Hoaxing the Real,” 177.

<sup>78</sup> Mark Andrejevic, “Visceral Literacy: Reality TV, Savvy Viewers, and Auto-Spies,” in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 322.

<sup>79</sup> Weispenning, “Cultural Functions,” 172.



as they allow so much space for audience conversation between installments—and indeed, common conversational ground among disparate communities is one important function of television.<sup>80</sup> As Max Gluckman points out, television can provide “a basis on which people transitorily associated can find something personal to talk about.”<sup>81</sup> I want to emphasize that as our need for longform narrative has grown, we have likewise had to become more serious about it. Yet we cannot let the need for serious scrutiny cloud our judgment of some of the inherent, commercially motivated aggression of TV formats. It is incumbent upon scholars to take these culturally distributed consequences as seriously as the narrative content.

Enthrallment and negative affect are not problematic in themselves. It is the subjects they are directed to and the relations they encourage us to have with those subjects that are to be brought into question. While I am sympathetic to the alleged social benefits of narrative complexity, moral ambiguity, and their associated cognitions, they do need to be much more carefully articulated. I have shown that two of the forms most commonly associated with millennial television—the post-HBO pedigree serial and reality shows—have increasingly positioned viewers to accept an aggressive relationality, crafting causal sense from cruel behaviors and exploring ways to maintain investment in the conflicts they incite, and in many cases, to naturalize the benefits of witnessing and accepting cruelty. And of course, this aggressive relationality is complex. It inspires doubt and reflexivity, and it can be political, but we cannot presume that prosocial value or artistic merit lurks within these assets. Too much scholarship ends with documentation of these qualities as virtue. The relationship of bullies to their targets is also complex, as it can inspire doubt and reflexivity, and it can be politically motivated. Television proffers its own celebrity bullies, and the characters and mechanisms that support their abusive work; any cultural inculcation in this complex, gaslighting, politically dynamic relationship is a phenomenon worthy of our attention. In a world that appears to promote ever more conflict through ever proliferating media channels, I am increasingly skeptical of the benefits of media forms that generate and promote attachment to those conflicts. The next, final chapter explores online conflicts in further detail.

<sup>80</sup> David Boyle sees this capacity as diminished with the proliferation of television channels, programs, and choice as they extend across national boundaries. Boyle, *Authenticity*, 125.

<sup>81</sup> Gluckman, “Papers,” 315.

## Enthymemes Online

### Media Pedagogy in an Age of Promotions

Machine-mediated interactions are taking up more time in our lives than ever before, as devices proliferate in our homes, in our jeans pockets, on our bedside tables, and anywhere we might look in an urban environment. While some theorists characterize this as a posthuman age, pointing to blurred category distinctions between human and machine agency (as in various cyborg and nonhuman actor network theories), I think of this as a promotional age, emphasizing instead the commercial interests that are programmed into the machines we use each day.<sup>1</sup> In some ways, current artificial intelligence inaugurates not so much a posthuman or transhuman era as a hyper-human era: neural networks and machine-generated content, for instance, take the cultural produce of countless human cultures and “create” something that is the aggregate of extant human design. This does not move us somehow past human interests; it concentrates them.<sup>2</sup> Notions of the extended, technobiological new selfhood, which seek to expand a theoretical sense of self to include objects we use every day (much like the cinema apparatus merging with one’s soul or, before that, industrial machinery “becoming” the worker), displace scrutiny of those who program the machines we use or the promotional interests embedded within machinery that may then merge with one’s sense of self.<sup>3</sup> The devices we use each day are not alien interlopers arriving independent of human interests and thus

<sup>1</sup> Here I refer to posthumanism as a range of “analytic stances that grant agency to nonhuman entities and that downplay the differences between human and nonhuman agency,” some of which have come under fire for theoretically displacing critique from the very human agents wielding power across machine-mediated interactions, and the textbook commodity capitalism of fetishizing relationships with the devices we use. Andrew B. Kipnis, “Agency between Humanism and Posthumanism: Latour and His Opponents,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2015): 44.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, if a machine makes creative clothing designs based on the tastes of past cultures, it can only concentrate prior designs, which may indeed create something new but not a new product that is responsive to current environmental pressures to which humans must adapt.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Gregory, “On Religiosity and Commercial Life: Toward a Critique of Cultural Economy and Posthumanist Value Theory,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 3 (2014): 45–68. There is a difference between the extended self thesis, that we are one with the machine, and the more modest cognitive distributions of the extended mind thesis, that we are epistemically connected with others through machines that create different kinds of knowledge and encounters that cannot exist in the individual alone.

embodying a different category of life, communication, and agency. The unfortunate fact transhumanists must face after every major data market scandal is that, if we are merging with anything, it is not an independently agentive machine; it is the interests of those who devise and sell promotional space on those machines.

In this final chapter, I shift gears to think through the ethics of current media ecologies as a whole, including digital communications, news, and social media. I consider the ethical responsibilities of teaching media literacy in an environment where one must approach all communications, including those of our close family members and friends, not only with the knowledge of their inherent fragilities, but with equal knowledge of the encroachment of promotional spaces into our most private lives and intimate relations. I ultimately ask whose responsibility it is to locate solutions to the problems introduced by current trends in digital media. First, however, I survey a background of media fabulation and fakery that conceals promotional agendas online and creates a tandem ecology of mistrust, and develop a cognitive-rhetorical model that explains how current promotional media operates to influence the way we think. I then look at how these influences collide with our ultimately healthy drive to trust others through their communications.

Geoffrey Hosking writes of trust as an “attachment to a person, collective of persons or institution, based on the well-founded but not certain expectation that he/she/they will act for my good.”<sup>4</sup> While there are many dimensions of trust, I favor Hosking’s summary, as it points to trust as a disposition that we may begin from rather than a conclusion we arrive at—and a disposition that entails some level of psychological attachment. It is the converse of this disposition, this attachment, that is of interest as a cumulative effect of generalized media skepticism. Mistrust is attitudinal, and not the same as rejection—it is, rather, a skeptical disposition. It is not an action we choose to take, as Denise Rousseau et al. point out, but a foundational psychology: “Trust is not a behaviour (e.g. cooperation) or a choice (e.g. taking a risk), but an underlying psychological condition that can cause or result from such actions.”<sup>5</sup> Mistrust of targets that arouse a skeptical disposition could be considered a healthy readjustment to patterns of news production that are becoming increasingly unreliable; in this case, if there is a repercussive harm done in generalized skepticism of news, information, and stories distributed online, we cannot fault the readers of news, but the rather demanding situation they now find themselves in.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, *Trust: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Denise Rousseau et al., “Not So Different After All: A Cross-Discipline View of Trust,” *Academy of Management Review* 23, no. 3 (1998): 393–404.

## Digital Monopolies and Trust in Institutions

Successive reports have demonstrated a declining trust in most key institutions within liberal democracies throughout the world, with news media and government in particular suffering a sharp downturn in perceived trustworthiness.<sup>6</sup> Kees Brants writes, “If trust is the glue of social relations and the medicine for restoring or establishing cohesion in a society in a midlife crisis, then we are slightly in trouble. Trust is a necessity for the contribution of politics and media to a well-functioning and legitimate democracy.”<sup>7</sup> This has become something of a commonplace diagnosis implicating the future of journalism: when we lose trust in the fourth estate, we lose at the same time a faith in the need or sense of a people’s agency to enforce a separation of powers through democratic means. But at the same time, given the currently compromised and increasingly monopolized digital media landscape, that diminished trust may appear reasonable. There is another problem I see encapsulated in this observation, however: Brants notes that a more generalized mistrust of others we live alongside is floated through the institutional mistrust of the media stories we encounter.<sup>8</sup> Institutional mistrust and mistrust of other people in our communities arrive together, and this poses problems for teaching media criticism in the classroom.

Within our research and our classrooms, the fallback response is often to teach and distribute critical readings of media and its contemporary problems. Yet as I wrote in *Narrative Humanism*, “In emphasising the value of critical inquiry, perhaps scholars can overlook its complication—scepticism and scrutiny must be balanced with the human need for public trust . . . in journalism as in fiction.”<sup>9</sup> I surveyed some of the public health issues at stake in prescribing to the individual a responsibility to take up preemptive positions of skepticism generalized across all mediated communications:

We want to have trust in storytellers, our facilitators of social dialogue, with good reason: not only is higher social trust linked to health outcomes (Barefoot et al. 1998; Subramanian et al. 2002), as Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett point out, “Trust is of course an important ingredient in any society, but it

<sup>6</sup> Edelman Trust Management, “2019 Edelman Trust Barometer,” Edelman.com, March 5, 2019, [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019\\_Edelman\\_Trust\\_Barometer\\_Global\\_Report.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-02/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Kees Brants, “Trust, Cynicism, and Responsiveness: The Uneasy Situation of Journalism in Democracy,” in *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*, ed. Chris Peters and M. J. Broersma (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 26.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, some definitions of trust eliminate the boundaries between the institutional distribution of trust and its individual expression. Kenneth Arrow, for instance, expresses trust as an “invisible institution” in *The Limits of Organization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Wyatt Moss-Wellington, *Narrative Humanism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 92.

becomes essential in modern developed societies with a high degree of interdependence” (2010: 214) . . . Yet trust is not uncomplicated, either. Mistrust can be both a healthy and reasoned component in our interactions with the media, and those interests the media selectively represents (Schudson 2012). It is no coincidence that the erosion of perceived trustworthiness in authority figures and their channels of representation (Peters and Broersma 2012: *passim*) is correlated with an increase in elite wealth-concentration and inequality across the globe (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010: *passim*); as power is consolidated, we have good reason for a generalised media scepticism. But this does not mean that mistrust will always be directed toward the most harmful storytellers or institutions (the Trump phenomenon is a disastrous case in point).<sup>10</sup>

The key point here is that measures of public trust are intimately related to physical and mental health outcomes, and I want to explore that tension a little further in light of recent progressions in digital media. This tension becomes particularly problematic in an epoch marked by proliferating resources for fakery—fake news, the deepfake, and other media developments named for their capacity for fabrication—that deplete trust within the very communication channels we use to contact family and friends on a daily basis. At the same time, we must note the potency of an increasingly popular general advisory *not* to label information as fake, the reason being that the terminology of fakery can be misdirected and contributes to an unhelpful mistrust of journalism and democracy *per se*. As Joshua Habgood-Coote writes:

Not only do different people have opposing views about the meaning of “fake news”, in practice the term undermines the intellectual values of democracy—and there is a real possibility that it means nothing. We would be better off if we stopped using it . . . Perhaps we do need new terms, but we shouldn’t start by trying to repurpose the demagogue’s tools to defend democracy.<sup>11</sup>

These ideas have had traction: a UK parliamentary inquiry into the phenomenon prompted a governmental ban on the use of the term “fake news” in late 2018.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 91. John C. Barefoot et al., “Trust, Health, and Longevity,” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 21, no. 6 (1998): 517–526; S. V. Subramanian, Daniel J. Kim, and Ichiro Kawachi, “Social Trust and Self-Rated Health in US Communities: A Multilevel Analysis,” *Journal of Urban Health* 79, no. 4 (2002): 21–34; Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better for Everyone* (London: Penguin, 2010); Michael Schudson, “Would Journalism Please Hold Still!,” in *Rethinking Journalism: Trust and Participation in a Transformed News Landscape*, ed. Chris Peters and M. J. Broersma (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 191–199.

<sup>11</sup> Joshua Habgood-Coote, “The Term ‘Fake News’ Is Doing Great Harm,” *Conversation*, July 27, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/the-term-fake-news-is-doing-great-harm-100406>.

<sup>12</sup> Margi Murphy, “Government Bans Phrase ‘Fake News,’” *Telegraph*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2018/10/22/government-bans-phrase-fake-news>.

Unfortunately, of course, this now-familiar advice to drop the terms of fakery is problematic too. It is problematic because we know that some news stories are indeed entirely fabricated by, for example, Macedonian teenagers making a living simply by writing news stories that readers want to read, that gratify political biases but have no foundation in world events. It might seem that we need terminology that recognizes the compelling influence of these fabrications, but I wonder if the scholarly adoption of terms such as Claire Wardle's alternative "information pollution" really does much at all to confront the cognitive dilemmas news readers and social media users must manage every day.<sup>13</sup>

The problem we all have to contend with here is that the inherently refractive nature of digital communication renders it easy to conceal the origins of information, influence, and emphasis, and this means that politicized attention is both more purchasable and less clearly discernible than ever (as we learned during the Cambridge Analytica scandal). The new and proliferating resources for concealing the origins of information have produced an entirely reasonable crisis of public faith in the operations of media and politics, and that sense of crisis becomes a space in which well-funded opportunists can work to conduct a surplus of mistrust toward targets that may have traditionally provided checks and balances within a liberal democracy. The challenge for media studies, then, is to ask what balance between reasonable skepticism and reasonable trust we could hope for. How could cognitions associated with, on one hand, the comforts of belief and, on the other, the rigors of skepticism be directed reasonably toward those publicly distributed narratives we ought to spend our time interrogating, or else spend fewer cognitive resources on, and simply accept as a truth?<sup>14</sup>

But there is yet another reason *not* to trust the media that reaches us. It is not that information is privately owned, but the very means for its delivery, and so it is not simply news and information that are biased toward those with enough capital to manipulate content, but the platforms that determine what we will see. The back end of the internet, the programming infrastructure that makes websites work, is owned and run by companies such as Amazon Web Services and Microsoft, and platforms and content are increasingly delivered together by the same organizations. Kashmir Hill writes, for instance:

<sup>13</sup> Claire Wardle, "The Need for Smarter Definitions and Practical, Timely Empirical Research on Information Disorder," *Digital Journalism* 6, no. 8 (2018): 951–963.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel T. Gilbert, Douglas S. Krull, and Patrick S. Malone, "Unbelieving the Unbelievable: Some Problems in the Rejection of False Information," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, no. 4 (1990): 601–613.

Amazon is not just an online store . . . Its global empire also includes Amazon Web Services (AWS), the vast server network that provides the backbone for much of the internet . . . it's simply not an option to block Amazon permanently. It's technically impossible given the use of [content delivery networks], and even if we could come up with a perfect block, it would wall me off from too many crucial services and key websites that I can't function without for both personal and professional reasons.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the problem of antitrust such a dominance quite clearly induces, it stands to reason that, if we spend more of our time in digital cultures, we are granting more of our time to interests able to sell our attention, algorithmically or otherwise, to the highest bidder, and saturation is a powerful influencer no matter how outrageous or incoherent the content might be.<sup>16</sup> There is only one way this can go: greater disparity of means and of ownership.<sup>17</sup> The problem Nick Davies articulated in *Flat Earth News* is magnified in digital monopolization: "PR reinforces [the status quo], simply because it is expensive. Three burglars from Brixton are never going to be able to buy the kind of media influence that changed the way the whole world felt about the NatWest Three."<sup>18</sup> There is now precious little recourse for the less moneyed to spread messages of dissent against powerful interests without becoming overwhelmed by more prominent countermessages, and this is especially true during election times.<sup>19</sup> The problem is simply that the means for communication on the internet—the essential infrastructure that makes it run, not just the outlets themselves that are traditional focuses of critique, such as Rupert Murdoch's Fox broadcasters or News Limited publications—have become consolidated. And we are spending more of our time than ever in these worlds of hidden promotions.

<sup>15</sup> Kashmir Hill, "Goodbye Big Five: I Tried to Block Amazon from My Life: It Was Impossible," *Gizmodo*, January 22, 2019, <https://gizmodo.com/i-tried-to-block-amazon-from-my-life-it-was-impossible-1830565336?rev=1548175255498>.

<sup>16</sup> Lina M. Khan, "Amazon's Antitrust Paradox," *Yale Law Journal* 126, no. 3 (2017): 710–805.

<sup>17</sup> In my view, these predicaments challenge some of the more defensive arguments regarding "the voluntariness of participation" in online media, as when Alexis Elder dismisses promotional impingements in private spaces of "friendship" as a matter of the individual's responsibility to disengage. Alexis Elder, *Friendship, Robots, and Social Media* (London: Routledge, 2018), 148. See also Diane Jeske, *Friendship and Social Media* (London: Routledge, 2019); Berrin A. Beasley and Mitchell R. Haney, eds., *Social Media and Living Well* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News* (London: Vintage, 2009), 203.

<sup>19</sup> The 2019 Australian federal election provides a terrifying example. See Katharine Murphy, Christopher Knaus, and Nick Evershed, "It Felt Like a Big Tide: How the Death Tax Lie Infected Australia's Election Campaign," *Guardian*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jun/08/it-felt-like-a-big-tide-how-the-death-tax-lie-infected-australias-election-campaign>.



## The Online Enthymeme by Proxy: A Cognitive-Rhetorical Model

With this broader understanding of a contemporary media ecology, its infrastructural and economic problems that together privilege promotional communications, I would like to zoom in now to take a closer look at how this system operates to influence the individual, and how this influence might be processed by individuals. To this end, it is important to understand two concepts I have not yet explored in this book: proxies as refracted communications and enthymemes as tacit arguments. Past theories of media and communication have pointed in various ways to the refracted and symbolic nature of mediated discourse. Semioticians cast these refractions as a series of “signs” suggestive of possible “polysemic” meanings, and earlier theories characterized the space between communicators’ subjectivities as “noise” or “interference” during transmissions inherently shaped by the medium of interaction; of course, there is a lot of opportunity to conceal promotional agendas in those parts of communication that contort or otherwise obscure intentionality.<sup>20</sup> Because of the nature of this refraction, media effectively trains us to think in proxies, that is, in things that stand for other things—and that can stand for other *people*. For example, when we interact with strangers online, we might be less likely to think of them as living humans than as sets of attributes signifying a larger group: their nationality, their ethnicity, and so on. In this case a digital media literacy could be construed as the ability to identify when the proxies proposed to us are inaccurate or unhelpfully summarize complex relationships between privately owned media that talks in symbolic relations and the complex people it is intended to represent.

Digital communications have increased both the time we spend in media and its levels of symbolic refraction through an increase in platformization, a proliferation of stakeholders that converge over the sources of our online attention, and the need to bring together disparate popular narratives from across the planet to craft a sustained, global coherence—its proxies. To understand media, we need to be trained in thinking through symbolic relations. Yet two separate refracting processes have become increasingly indistinguishable: the industrial aspects of the mode of communication, as in the complex webs of ownership of devices and platforms used to access online communications, and the intentional communiqué of correspondents on those devices and platforms. The way media ushers us into thinking in refracting symbols is a communication

<sup>20</sup> Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *A Mathematical Model of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949); Stewart L. Tubbs and Syliva Moss, *A Model of Human Communication* (New York: Random House, 1983), 23–49; Daniel Chandler, “The Transmission Model of Communication,” University of Western Australia, 1994, <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/short/trans.html?LMCL=eUAZuj>.

by proxy, and the infrastructure itself that carries those symbols is another kind of proxy. Their systems of relation have become very hard to tell apart, offering a bounty of opportunities for advertisers, for instance, to place their influence alongside communication from “friends” on social media. This is why I use “proxies,” borrowing parlance that describes exactly this process in information technology—because the proxies of digital pathways and human communications are codependent, rendering agency and intention always unclear, and always calling for interrogation even when one is corresponding with loved ones. The word “proxy” also connotes a forfeiting of representative intent to others, whether they be the machines and the symbols they carry (from the grapheme to the emoji) that act as ambassadors for our subjectivity, or those we authorize to carry those symbols to a receiving party. It is increasingly difficult to tell what constitutes the intent of another agent with whom we choose to communicate across a platform apart from the agenda of the host or the interests the host has invited in order to monetize their platform; these levels of communication are combined into the same message. Infrastructural proxies and symbolic intentional proxies are experienced together, and so cannot be pulled apart. We can say that online media is a system of communicative proxies, and as the infrastructure that delivers that communication becomes ever more complex, the symbolic relations we must read in any message become too loaded for any one person to reasonably interrogate. Such a system makes fertile grounds for clandestine persuasion.

Some of the oldest recorded theories of communication—theories of rhetoric—also present useful tools for analyzing the ways in which persuasive argumentation can be concealed behind more prominent premises: in particular, enthymematic argumentation. In classical rhetoric, an enthymeme is an unstated premise on which a syllogistic argument might rest. The argument “bees are scary because they sting,” for instance, requires one to accept the supporting premise that all things that sting are scary in order for its stated proposition to make sense. Rhetoric is not only verbal argumentation, however; it is the means of persuasion characterizing all of our actions that influence others. We looked at another nonverbal enthymeme in Chapter 4, on cognitive dissonance in cinema: in order for the foundational moral dissonance of vigilante movies to make sense, one must accept the underlying premise of a social structure that contains generalized human ill in need of social cleansing. So the building blocks of the enthymeme are, simply put, “an argument that is stated incompletely, the unstated part of it being taken for granted.”<sup>21</sup> Because the premises of the argument are incomplete, they must be supplied by the audience, and due to the enthymeme’s silence,

<sup>21</sup> Irving Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), 688.

this can occur without an audience needing to reason through the enthymeme; the argument is potentially then supported by a tacit identificatory relationship between rhetor and audience across equally tacit premises.

This textbook explanation is known as the “procedural definition” of the enthymeme, and it has been both contradicted and expanded by later scholars revisiting Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.<sup>22</sup> Yet the procedural definition (the enthymeme as unstated premises upon which a persuasive argument depends) is actually a useful grounding for some of these elaborations, as summarized by Edward P. J. Corbett:

The Aristotelian enthymeme (1) often involved premises that were merely probable, thus leading to conclusions that were only generally or usually true; (2) allowed for the ethical and emotional dimensions of argument as well as for the logical; and (3) depended for its success in persuasion on the consensus that existed or was generated between the speaker and the audience.<sup>23</sup>

Here, the enthymeme’s reach is expanded beyond syllogistic argument to other nonverbal and less explicitly reasoned modes of influence. Mark A. E. Williams calls the enthymeme an “argument via style”; it obscures its key argumentation within the stylistic resources of its medium.<sup>24</sup> With respect to this notion of style as an unspoken argument, some have questioned whether visual rhetoric is inherently enthymematic.<sup>25</sup> I would go further than this. All manner of unspoken aspects in our communicative life—the gestural, the performative, the design of living spaces, monuments, multipronged public relations campaigns conveying but never directly stating predetermined “key messaging,” the framing devices of online media, the mechanisms that guide us toward content that pertains to paid perspectives but does not itself endorse those perspectives—can be breeding grounds for unacknowledged argumentation, influence, and persuasion, ushering inciting pathos toward collective ethos. These strategies of persuasion (and they are again proxies, or things that stand for other things) do not of themselves *comprise* enthymemes; they contain them where an intentional agent employs such spaces of argumentative refraction to consciously influence another. So proxies are the communicative system of indirect symbolic meanings supported and built upon by media’s accumulative infrastructural complexities,

<sup>22</sup> Carol Poster, “A Historicist Recontextualization of the Enthymeme,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1992): 1–24.

<sup>23</sup> Edward P. J. Corbett, “Introduction,” in *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. William Rhys Roberts and Ingram Bywater (New York: Random House, 1984), xviii–xix.

<sup>24</sup> Mark A. E. Williams, “Arguing with Style: How Persuasion and the Enthymeme Work Together in *On Invention* Book 3,” *Southern Communication Journal* 68, no. 2 (2003): 149.

<sup>25</sup> Valerie J. Smith, “Aristotle’s Classical Enthymeme and the Visual Argumentation of the Twenty-First Century,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 43, no. 3–4 (2007): 114–123.

and the enthymeme is the persuasive use of that system to bury unspoken arguments: arguments that may not be confirmed or denied as truth-claims but may attempt to guide behavior, that can be emotionally affecting rather than logical and so harder to take aim at, and that often operate by creating an ethos of group identity that may be equally tacit, simply by asking audience members to own the unstated premise by supplying it themselves.

Could there be a more apt concept, then, for analyzing this world of blossoming screen media use and equally blossoming opportunities for clandestine promotion? The promotional deployment of digital media depends upon enthymemes concealed in proxies. To take another example of enthymematic promotion by proxy from a more overt form of marketing, advertisements for toilet paper have been known to feature fluffy and cuddly puppies; while puppies have nothing to do with toilet paper, they connote softness, homeliness, harmlessness, and a host of other attributes. The enthymeme here is associative: it aims to persuade onlookers that toilet paper (with its host of ordinarily less pleasant connotations) can similarly possess these attributes without having to explicitly make an argument as such. The association is emotional, it cannot be confirmed or denied, it contains a consumerist *ought* suggestion without having to explicitly make that suggestion, and it hinges upon values that bind us: domesticity and the comfort of the home. But this is marketing, the less covert cousin to public relations, digital propaganda, and other hidden mechanics of paid media influence. Corporations embedding content alongside one's "friends" in a social media news feed is another associative enthymeme, or enthymeme by proxy—and there will be many more.

To understand media we need to think in its proxies, yet diversified proxies equate to more opportunities for fudging the origins of information, for summarizing complex relationships between people and their communications in order to reduce the number of proxies in a chain of individual comprehension, and for cross-media ownership in making indistinct the relations between digital infrastructure, the platforms delivered on that infrastructure, and the content developed and then delivered on those platforms by users. There are simply more invisible connections than ever before in a chain that determines what information reaches us; each of those connections can be owned, but they cannot all be interrogated by the individual.<sup>26</sup> The more indirect the informational channels, the more space there is to conceal paid influence within those proxies, in the form of enthymematic suggestion. Add to this potent mix an increasing awareness of online monopolization and it is easier to see why this epoch, this historic

<sup>26</sup> For instance, personal data markets create knowledge asymmetries between paid interests and the people who are their product, on the one hand, and ask their users to be responsible for decisions they make with imperfect knowledge, on the other. Wolfie Christl and Sarah Spiekermann, *Networks of Control: A Report on Corporate Surveillance, Digital Tracking, Big Data and Privacy* (Vienna: Facultas, 2016), 133.

precipice in the global media landscape, begets so much anger and mistrust to be shared around.

### From Mistrust of Institutions to Mistrust of Others

The good news is that there have been media monopolies before, and we have found a way out of them: the Hearst empire, for instance, is not the monopoly it once was. But here we are loading a lot of ethical imperatives upon young people, and in among rescuing their only home from climate change, reversing income inequality and all of its attendant ills, fighting for their right to simply be different from one another, and averting global armed conflicts, we are handing them another problem, too: all of their most cherished information, and all of their intimate, quotidian practices, are spaces of private ownership, a fact that buttresses all of the other problems to be urgently addressed. We should not envy the young, and when we teach the problems we know of in media studies without any hope for change, we walk a dangerous line. And, of course, living well and behaving well in a world of globally causal markets and relationships both depend upon reliable information about the world and about the lives of people we will never meet. As Stephen Coleman et al. write, “We need to be able to rely upon the reputation of the reporter without having to check and recheck every single account that is given to us.”<sup>27</sup> That is, breeding more critical thought, which might be seen as a key pedagogical goal within the humanities, individualizes the issue and does not solve the problem of our inherent need for information and stories to trust. Although media literacy training is increasingly taking up the mantle of identifying disinformation, or fake or fabricated news, this gets us only halfway.<sup>28</sup> As Ellen Middaugh puts it, “Concerns about misinformation are usually confined to analysis of youth involved in the explicit task of assessing credibility.”<sup>29</sup> What might students do once they have identified these “pollutants” and described their influence; is this enough?

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Coleman, Scott Anthony, and David E. Morrison, *Public Trust in the News: A Constructivist Study of the Social Life of the News* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2009), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Erin Murrock et al., “Winning the War on State-Sponsored Propaganda: Results from an Impact Study of a Ukrainian News Media and Information Literacy Program,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (2018): 53–85.

<sup>29</sup> Ellen Middaugh, “Civic Media Literacy in a Transmedia World: Balancing Personal Experience, Factual Accuracy and Emotional Appeal as Media Consumers and Circulators,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (2018): 49. See also Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer, “Educating for Democracy in a Partisan Age: Confronting the Challenges of Motivated Reasoning and Misinformation,” *American Education Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (2017): 3–34; Hans Martens and Renee Hobbs, “How Media Literacy Supports Civic Engagement in a Digital Age,” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 23, no. 2 (2015): 120–137.

So far in this chapter, I have moved back and forth between acknowledging the reasons for approaching media from a position of trust and the reasons for skepticism. Now I want to articulate clearly the foundational problems we are all dealing with: we need to mistrust the media we encounter at the same time that we need more trust in one another. There are two good reasons for mistrusting all media we use each day: the economics of global media ownership and the proliferation of resources for concealing the origins of information online. At the same time, there are two equally good reasons for engendering trust in media: trust in others, including the stories they tell through that media, has well documented public health benefits, and democracy is given a death sentence without trust in its balancing institutions. But there is one more contingent question here we have yet to ask: how exactly does mistrust of democratic institutions migrate to mistrust of the people they are intended to represent? Terry Flew finds not only that a majority of our mistrust is directed toward online rather than traditional forms of media, but also that much of this mistrust of online media is directed toward stories shared by our peers in social networks:

Countries where news audiences are more engaged in sharing activities have higher levels of mistrust in news. Sharing activities in each country had no significant relationship to trust but they were related to mistrust in news . . . In countries where there has been a growth of TV as the main source of news, there was a decline in perceptions of mistrust. In contrast, an increase in the use of social media as the main source of news had a high positive correlation with an increase in mistrust and a high negative correlation with trust.<sup>30</sup>

This looks to be a necessary readjustment of our faith in the power of institutionally owned social networks to convey reliable information, but in that process, we have come to doubt communications shared by our friends and family more than communications that are not shared. So other people in our social networks become the locus of mistrust, if not its targets.

This question of the migration of mistrust from institutions to peers and community members is particularly important in an era marked by intelligence agency trolling of entire populations during volatile political moments, such as the 2016 US election, whereby social media accounts created by, in this case, Russian state interests sought to exaggerate perceived human differences, sowing instability and promoting conflict on the basis of characteristics such as racial identity.<sup>31</sup> Even if one does not participate in the social media on which

<sup>30</sup> Terry Flew, "Faking It: Fake News, Trust and Distrust in News on Digital Platforms," Media and Fakery Symposium, University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China, October 25, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Jensen, "Russian Trolls and Fake News: Information or Identity Logics?" *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 115–124.

intelligence agencies, vested interest trolling accounts, and bots programmed to expand division all lurk, their content still translates effectively into other mainstream news channels in commentary and news stories, rendering its influence impossible to avoid.<sup>32</sup> Essentially, what this computational propaganda reveals is that a radicalization stemming from identity politics makes targets more manipulable. What the field of cultural and identity studies needs to account for, in this case, are the social costs of stressing divisions and differences, and calling for more conflict before cooperation. Ultimately, the message that human differences are, or should be, inherently divisive, or that accentuating identity frictions is productive political work, serves the already powerful, and particularly those with an appetite for controlling election outcomes and populations in the emotionally open space of manufactured conflict. Again, the origins of influence and emphasis are concealed within the anonymous and refracted proxies of online media, but in the case of social media, the fallible search for news and information about our world coexists with our more quotidian interactions with family and friends.<sup>33</sup> To acknowledge the frailty of these informational networks is to call all of our intimate relations into question, and it is a short distance from here to mistrust of others that we have no *direct* interactions with, no means for personal verification of goodwill.<sup>34</sup>

The mistrust of everyday communicative processes and that of political processes have arrived together, and with them, a mistrust of one another. So another problem is that we need to address the digital means for sowing division in populations without enlarging those divisions, and discourse that acknowledges divisions in group identification always runs the risk of opening another space for competitive interests to intervene and turn people against one another. Political education that registers and documents inequities and power differentials between identity groups is, at its best, a call for us to be more thoughtful and kinder toward one another, to challenge systems (from everyday language to global economic imbalances) that lack egalitarian care, to allow spaces to collaboratively contest and dismantle regimes of power that afford privilege based on, for instance, skin color; but we must be mindful in choosing our methods for teaching cultural and identity politics, and again hope and solutions and pathways to a

<sup>32</sup> Josephine Lukito et al., "The Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: How Russia's Internet Research Agency Tweets Appeared in U.S. News as Vox Populi," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 25, no. 2 (2020): 196–216.

<sup>33</sup> This is just one manner of "context collapse" in private and public, professional and recreational lives that are managed on the same platforms, requiring all participants to become their own publicists, always aware of and managing their representation and reputation across these contexts. Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 1 (2011): 114–133.

<sup>34</sup> As online communicators, of course, we implicitly attempt to find alternative means to convey goodwill; it can be found, for example, in the signals of levity that emoji bring to distanced conversations. See Alex King, "A Plea for Emoji," *ASA Newsletter* 38, no. 3 (2018): 3.



better world must accompany elucidation of the problems we face. This normativity is simply the more difficult work of pedagogy.

### Teaching Media, Teaching Mistrust

The interrogation of media texts and the articulation of media's problems, being effective practices that media scholars are trained in, can help these systems of power to make a horrible, naturalized kind of sense—and so it is with the kinds of criticism media scholars teach. It is within this broader environment of programmatized suspicion that we operate as educators. When we teach media critically, we run the risk of simply enlarging the breeding grounds for mistrust, so it is important to ask ourselves what kind of critical media literacy would be most advantageous, most helpful for our students. The more traditional methods of interrogation and deconstruction of media texts, and the politicized critical thinkers that the use of interrogative strategies is intended to produce, second-guessing received communications to locate their concealed ideologies, have, in the past, been branded the “hermeneutics of suspicion.”<sup>35</sup> This suspicion-as-professionalism is translated to and then borne by the students who are inaugurated into its unique lexical defeatism, as Rita Felski eloquently puts it:

But negativity is also a matter of rhetoric, conveyed via acts of deflating or diagnosing that have less to do with individual attitude than with a shared grammar of language, a field of linguistic conventions and constraints. Even the most chipper and cheerful of graduate students, on entering a field in which critique is held to be the most rigorous method, will eventually master the protocols of professional pessimism.<sup>36</sup>

One trend within literary hermeneutics, at least (if not civic media literacy or news literacy), has been to advance various notions of “postcritique” as an alternative.<sup>37</sup> Postcritique advocates methods for reading fictive texts that resist the scholarly impulse to uncover their hidden agendas, instead asking what those texts have to say for themselves. Varieties of “flat reading” or “surface reading,” which report on the clear and present signifying relations of a text, have been

<sup>35</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [1970] 2008), 32.

<sup>36</sup> Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 127–128.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. See also Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” and *Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961); David Bordwell, “Why Not to Read a Film,” in *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 249–276; Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 32.

mooted as alternatives to skeptical acts of reading that propose to pull the cover off untruths or hidden meanings.<sup>38</sup> But this makes less sense than ever at a time when fakery is at the vanguard of media innovation and the fictive and nonfictive are blurred into a landscape of narrative-based promotions, when tools for fabricating sounds and images, from Photoshop to the deepfake, fudge all manner of authorship, when we need to stop and ask ourselves consistently how many interests are involved in each message we encounter, in the time of the promotional enthymeme by proxy. While I am calling for some strategies for reintegrating a healthy trust into mediated interactions, I have a problem with the postcritical response, too—it is rendered impossible by our mere acceptance of the realities of, say, product placement in a fictive film or advertorial in a news story. We cannot throw away our suspicious hermeneutics for fictive or nonfictive media, nor for mediated interactions between friends or strangers, even where we apprehend their foundational problems. Media literacy and informed civic participation increasingly entail, as put by ecolinguist Arran Stibbe, a questioning of all the “stories that we live by” and the cultural narratives of progress that support all of the news and all of the fictions we engage in.<sup>39</sup>

Let me reiterate that this chapter asks an open question: how should we teach forms of media in this age of promotional communications that are at once dominant and hidden, and that erode people’s most important currency of their trust in, and ergo healthy mutual care for, one another? There is a clear answer here: that we must do our best to teach the specific problems confronting current global media ecologies, but not pretend that the critique generated in identifying problems permits us to stop safe in the comfort that *more knowledge* of media fragilities and failings, in law or economics or the nature of screen stories themselves, is in itself an answer. This would be an extrapolation from the epistemic *is* to the ethical *ought*. And we ought not conclude our work with the policing of one another’s articulations and explanations of problems in media studies, as important as such debates are, but also extend ourselves to consider active responsibilities that result. Alongside critiques directed toward media texts, or toward scholarly summations of media’s shortcomings, or toward student essays reflecting those summations, we fall back upon an individualized sense of responsibility in teaching critical media studies—the responsibility for the individual to raise the defenses of skepticism against a world of overpowering promotions and manipulations. This approach is not working. A generalized media skepticism is not equivalent to media literacy, and nor is the individualized responsibility

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21; Heather Love, “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 371–391.

<sup>39</sup> Arran Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2015).

of media literacy enough, as not all will be afforded the gifts of such an in-depth mastery, and even those who are will not be insured against encroaching, unforeseen resources of promotion and fakery that target their own particular intuitions.<sup>40</sup> We must instead encourage those we teach, as they move out into the workforce, to pursue solutions to the systemic problems we know so well, as they will be the inheritors of those problems—yet here we are again throwing taxing demands at the feet of an already stressed generation. Whatever the answer, one thing appears clear to me: simply arming more people with more tools of media and cultural critique is no longer a viable pedagogical premise.

### Alternatives to an Individualized Ethics of Mistrust

One positive change in higher education is the advent of hybrid degree structures. More universities are offering, and more students are enrolling in, programs that offer a range of disciplinary perspectives. Perhaps, one could argue, it is the role of the less practice-based media departments to introduce these individualized methods for “reading” media as a shield against its more pervasive influences, and we might acknowledge that this is just one tool the student will gain. We could have faith in other, potentially more vocational disciplines, such as tertiary journalism studies, to balance against those inherently forensic individual reading skills; is it really the job of media studies to provide tools for critique, note situations of reasonable trust, *and* guide the search for solutions to media’s ills together? In Australian tertiary education, the “media wars” of the 1990s brought into focus historic tensions between cultural, media, and communication studies and journalism as each field began to share enrollments and responsibilities; one key takeaway was that there is common ground between these disciplines that could be exploited to benefit rather than compromise students.<sup>41</sup> These kinds of ongoing dialogues reveal that one of the key matters in media education is how we choose to allocate responsibilities as media ecologies change so quickly: the responsibilities of generating trust and goodwill, of problem-solving systemic inadequacies through legislative or regulatory means, of developing and nurturing alternative media formats that might grow to challenge their more problematic forebears, or of locating mechanisms that might fundamentally change the ways in which we access and engage with media.

An obvious answer here is that it should be the role of public regulators to take up the mantle of addressing those problems that arise from media

<sup>40</sup> Susan Currie Sivek, “Both Facts and Feelings: Emotion and News Literacy,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (2018): 123–138.

<sup>41</sup> Graeme Turner, “Media Wars: Journalism, Cultural and Media Studies in Australia,” *Journalism* 1, no. 3 (2000): 353–365.

monopolization, not students within media, journalism, cultural studies, or English departments. And again, the good news is that, at the time of writing, more than fifty inquiries into the prospects of extending regulatory intervention into media platforms are circulating around the world.<sup>42</sup> But I also wonder if a new appetite for regulation (specifically of social media companies, in the majority of cases) addresses just one problem. Perhaps changes in the ways we are asked to think about one another run deeper than the platformization of the internet. Perhaps the ethical issues that confront us go to the very enthymematic and symbolic inferences that increasingly refracted online communications extend into all our private spaces. That is, the problems described here are not just confined to news media; they pertain to media in general, as all types of media increasingly embed a variety of intrinsically unanalyzable promotional enthymemes by proxy that may affect the way we think about others. Apropos the moves we see covert digital communicators making between generalized institutional mistrust and targeted, personal mistrust, is it possible that the more time we spend thinking of each other *through* the symbolism media trains us in, the less space we have for encountering one another's complexity? A space of generalized skepticism tends to be one of emotional judgments, and therefore easier for vested interests to conduct from the generalized to the targeted; is the point of media literacy, as with political communications, to offer a guide to more reasonable targets of suspicion and outrage, to the institutions that appear so distanced and untouchable?

In their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* on "Media Literacy, Fake News & Democracy," Jeremy Stoddard et al. write:

If fake news is simply treated as an add-on to an existing media literacy curriculum, teachers will merely create exercises that will help students determine whether a particular story can be considered fake or not. While this would be useful, it does not begin to address the reasons why the phenomenon of fake news has arisen within the culture in recent years. To examine this, media literacy would need to become a central part of school curriculum . . . [yet] is education even capable of offering an adequate defense for new media environments?<sup>43</sup>

They seem to believe media education does have a place, and they articulate some elaborations beyond teaching the individual analysis of news credibility:

<sup>42</sup> Terry Flew, "Platforms on Trial," *InterMEDIA* 46, no. 2 (2018): 24–29.

<sup>43</sup> Lance E. Mason, Dan Krutka, and Jeremy Stoddard, "Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Challenge of Fake News," *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (2018): 7.

Effective media literacy education requires understanding the media environment in addition to improving cross-disciplinary collaboration; leveraging the current crisis to consolidate stakeholders; prioritizing approaches and programs with evidence of success; and develop[ing] action-oriented curricula that challenge systemic problems created by media, including social media corporations in addition to teaching individuals to interpret media messages.<sup>44</sup>

Of course, our remit as educators is not necessarily to transmit ethical “truths” or tell students the answer to problems we do not have the answer to, and in tertiary education, the highest level of education many will reach, we find ourselves in a position where it is possible to introduce the most vexatious and taxing problems that confront ethicists of all stripes and disciplines. I have developed a few strategies of my own for dealing with this strange situation in the classroom: the pressure to teach analytical interrogation but at the same time teach kindness, and to point to the crisis of trust inaugurated by generalized critical dispositions. Much of my own teaching practice aims to map these problems cognitively by asking students to work outward from a metacognitive awareness of their own thoughts and feelings before, during, and after media engagement; at the very least, self-reflexive tasks that unearth these contradictions of trust and mistrust, pleasurable engagement and painful unknowing can help students gain some clarity about the problems we mutually face. I would note, too, that an affective metacognition (noticing and commenting upon one’s emotions as one experiences media texts) becomes even more important within the context of the burgeoning use of “emotion analytics,” or tools intended to shepherd users’ affective states toward promotional ends.<sup>45</sup> Where the individual’s responsibility to critically evaluate information and stories is to be taught, ethical considerations must move beyond the analysis of specific texts and into the coresponsibilities of sharing activities and the personalized politics of information circulation online; this is a complex site of analysis that involves many processes that are not unilinear, such as seeking, analyzing, sharing, responding, and reevaluating information that can all occur to differing degrees at different times.<sup>46</sup> It pays for students to be aware of these complexities. Such codependencies are a transnational problem, too, posing clear limitations for regulation, policing, and international law, but also for comprehending culture- and nation-specific media ecologies; exposure to unfamiliar media is crucial, along with “dialogues across national and cultural borders [that] may help . . . fill in information gaps with contextual knowledge.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Currie Sivek, “Both Facts and Feelings.”

<sup>46</sup> Middaugh, “Civic Media Literacy.”

<sup>47</sup> Renee Hobbs, Christian Seyferth-Zapf, and Silke Grafe, “Using Virtual Exchange to Advance Media Literacy Competencies through Analysis of Contemporary Propaganda,” *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (2018): 152–168.

The problems we are handing students and the world they will inherit may be cruel, but that does not diminish our duty to convey systemic challenges rather than offer a satisfying yet inadequate “critical” response to those challenges, such as the tools for individuals to protect themselves against disinformation, a potential balm rather than a cure that denies the realities of knowledge asymmetry and context collapse online. I think, perhaps, the most important thing we can do as educators in light of this unavoidable unfairness is to indicate to students how unjust the predicament is that we all find ourselves in. To tell of what is lost in a generalized skeptical disposition, to tell of what is risked in trusting a narrative, and to point out that there is no stable or reliable in-between, simply because current screen and narrative media put us in a position of imperfect information with which to make our determinations of truth and duty. No one is at fault for that, yet it is still everyone’s mutual responsibility to navigate this heavily compromised media world. Hopefully “bringing the problem home” in such a manner has the corollary effect of inspiring the motivation to seek political changes; yet conveying these problems properly requires some sensitivity to the existential position they bring our students to, a sensitivity to the devastation of recognizing the extent to which one’s life and feelings are bought and sold, and to the at times overwhelming feelings of lack of control that are so much a part of undertaking a new program of education and ergo, one hopes, self-awareness. Some of our students will go on to work in media, some will go on to play PlayStation all day for several years, some will go on to leadership positions, some will go on to storytelling positions or caring positions or no position at all. Yet everyone needs the kindness of recognizing that these pressures are not resolved, they are not fair, and they are not to be borne alone. In the classroom, at least, we can share the load of this predicament. Hopefully also some of our students, in recognizing this, will find themselves in a position at some point in their lives to build a little more kindness, a little more care into that system. Media is a work in progress, and now more than ever, each one of us is a part of its progression.

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## Cognitive Film and Media Ethics

Wyatt Moss-Wellington

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## Index

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## Index

*For the benefit of digital users, indexed terms that span two pages (e.g., 52–53) may, on occasion, appear on only one of those pages.*

- Abrams, M. H. 116
- abuses in the workplace 156–57
- abusive relationships 138, 153–54 *See also* [sexual assault](#)
- activism, requirements of 31
- Ae Fond Kiss* (Loach) 105
- aesthetic appreciation, expectations of conflict in 22–26
- aesthetics
  - autotelic 23–24
  - ethicist 23–24
  - hardline ethicist 23–24
  - moderate autonomist 23–24
- affective empathy 16–17, 81
- affective pleasure 24–25
- After Virtue* (MacIntyre) 44
- agency
  - distributed 57–58
  - human 38–39, 43
  - human and machine 163–64, 169–70
  - moral 28n.58, 49, 62, 74–75
  - narrative 55
  - race and 80n.83
  - political 165
  - selfhood and 66
- Ahmed, Sara 100
- Akass, Kim 153–55
- allegiance, empathy and 15–16
- Amator* (Kieslowski) 89
- Amazon 167–68
- American Beauty* (Mendes) 113, 114
- Andrew, Dudley 22–23
- The Antihero in American Television* (Vaage) 13–15, 22–23, 154–55
- antihero in television 151–55
- Apatow, Judd 113–14, 120
- The Apprentice* (tv) 159
- argumentation
  - enthymematic 170–71
  - persuasive 171–72
- The Aristocrats* (Jillette & Provenza) 124
- Aristotle 171
- Aronson, Elliott 103–4
- art cinema 95–96
- art-ethics relation 22–26
- attentional politics 106–7
- audience. *See also* [film audience](#); *See also* [television audience](#)
  - aesthetics-ethics nexus 22–24

characters, judgements of 44  
 fictive-nonfictive thought migration 28–29  
 learned behavior 145  
 self-narrativization from fictions 145  
 autobiographical memory 58, 60–62, 65–66, 107  
 autobiographical narrative, hermeneutics 58–66  
 autonomy  
   aesthetic 23–24  
   autonomy of morality 1  
   moral 32, 74, 75  
   race and 80n.83  
*Babe* (Noonan) 83–84  
 Badiou, Alain 4–5, 26–27  
 Bandura, Albert 15, 109–10  
 Barber, Daniel 106–7  
 Bazin, André 22–23  
 behavioral change, emotional engagement with cinema and 19–20  
 behaviors  
   abusive, television in normalizing 157–61  
   of bullies 143  
   cinema's effect on 69–72  
   fiction's effect on 55, 56–57, 79  
   learned 75–76  
 belief  
   crises of 26–27  
   film, effect on 79  
   morality and 27–28  
 beliefs  
   cinema's effect on 69–72  
   fiction's effect on 55, 56–57, 79  
 Bell, Clive 23–24  
 p. 184 Bell, Stuart 68  
 benign violation model (BVT), humor studies 111  
 benign violation model (BVT), suburban ensemble dramedy  
   candor as humor, candor as politics 120–22  
   dialogue and repartee 114–17  
   humor and the ethics of storytelling 123–25  
   introduction 111–14  
   from lingual jokes to character eccentricity 117–20  
 Bergson, Henri 115–16, 117–18, 122, 125  
 Bernardi, Cory 41–42  
 Biga, Tracy 99  
*Big Brother* (tv) 158–59  
*The Biggest Loser* (tv) 158–59  
*Big Little Lies* (tv) 157–58  
 Billig, Michael 120–21  
*BlackKlansman* (Lee) 79–81, 83, 84  
 Black Lives Matter movement 39  
*Blue Velvet* (Lynch) 94, 96–104

“*Blue Velvet: A Parable of Male Development*” (Layton) 99  
 “*Bolsheviks Do Laugh*” (Eisenstein) 114  
*The Boondock Saints* (Duffy) 105  
 Booth, Wayne C. 4–5, 36–38, 50  
*Borat* (Charles) 30–31  
 Bordwell, David 21–22, 36, 77  
 Brants, Kees 165  
*Breaking Bad* (tv) 24–25, 147–48, 151, 152–53  
 Brecht, Bertolt 79–80, 81, 82–83, 90–91, 102  
 Breskin, David 92  
 Brooks, James L. 135–36  
 Bruner, Jerome 95–96  
 Brylla, Catalin 90–91, 95–96  
 Buckland, Warren 89, 90–91  
 bullying. *See also* [television as bully](#)  
     behaviors associated with 143  
     enthrallment produced through 145  
     gaslighting form of 148–49, 154–55  
     indirect 145  
     normalizing 157–58, 159, 160–61  
     performative aspects of 159–60  
     psychological 145, 148–49, 154–55, 158–59  
     status-bound 159–60  
 bullies, male  
     enabling 159  
     enthrallment with 151, 154–55  
     infatuation with 151, 154–55  
     socially elevated, revering the 159–60  
     white male 151, 154–55, 159–60  
 Bundtzen, Lynda 99  
 Burke, Kenneth 36–38  
*Cable Guys* (Lotz) 151  
*Cahiers du Cinéma* 66–67  
 Caine, Michael 106–7  
 candor as humor, candor as politics 120–22  
 Cardwell, Sarah 146  
*Carla’s Song* (Loach) 105  
 Carroll, Joseph 130  
 Carroll, Noël 1, 13–15, 17–18, 21–22, 36, 52–53, 57–58, 151  
 Casetti, Francesco 21–22  
 Cavell, Stanley 64  
*Celebrity Big Brother* (tv) 158–59  
 change  
     emotional engagement with cinema and 19–20  
     human capability for 20, 45–46  
 characters  
     audience judgements of 44  
     eccentric, in the suburban ensemble dramedy 117–20  
     identifying with 13–15, 65–66, 145

- relational feelings toward 153–54
- characters, engagement with
  - complexity of relationships 145
  - empathetic 18, 79–80
  - ethical self, relevance to the 17–18
  - generalized to schemas 17–18
  - positive, results of 17–18
  - in serialized television 145
  - villanous, dissonance and enthrallment with 152–54
- Charles, Larry 30–31
- Chion, Michel 92–93, 102
- Choi, Jinhee 4–5, 26–27, 30–31, 34
- Cholodenko, Lisa 113–14, 120
- Cine-Ethics* (Choi & Frey) 26–27, 30–31
- cine-ethics 13–15, 26–27
- cinema. *See also* [film](#)
  - affective manipulations 142–43
  - belief and behavior, effect on 69–72
  - biocultural approach to 73–75, 76
  - cognitions employed in 67–68
  - emotional engagement and behavioral change 19–20
  - informing moral thinking and moral action 19–20, 103–4
  - mean-spirited, vengeance with 19–20
  - metaethics of 17–18
  - worlds outside of the, moral consequences in 28–29
- p. 185 cinema, types of. *See also* [comedy](#); *See also* [romantic comedy films](#)
  - art 95–96
  - countercinema 66–67, 79–80
  - extreme 30–31
  - gross-out 120–21
  - political 77–79, 80–82
  - presentational 66–67
  - raunch 120–21
  - representational 66–67
- cinema of engagement 17–18, 79
- Cinematic Ethics* (Sinnerbrink) 3–4, 13–15, 18
- “Cinempathy” (Sinnerbrink) 3–4, 9
- Cioffi, Angelo 77–78
- clarificationism 52–53
- Cline, Rich 127–28
- cognitive benefits of television 146
- cognitive dissonance
  - discomfort of 89–90
  - engagement with antiheroic characters producing 152–54
  - enthrallment through 152–54
  - a “good,” 109–10
  - negative affect, motivating 90–91
  - pleasurable 142–43
- cognitive dissonance in cinema

- conclusions 109–10
- introduction 89–92
- language of profundity and 92–96
- naming 89
- scholarship on 90–91
- cognitive media ethics
  - background 13–22
  - digital trends in media and 22
  - emergence of, factors in 26–27
  - expectations of conflict 22–26
  - film philosophy 26–32
  - hermeneutics of 36
  - introduction 1–10
  - narrative turn in 36–39
  - phenomenology and cognition 32–35
  - scholarship on 3–4
- cognitive media ethics, problems in
  - autobiography, hermeneutics, and evaluations 58–66
  - on ethics, politics, and emotion 77–85
  - introduction 54–58
  - of selfhood and agency 66–77
- cognitive science 7, 8, 13
- cognitivism
  - criticisms of 73–74
  - metaethics of 13–15
  - phenomenology and 32–35
  - rigor of 13
  - value of 13
- Coleman, Stephen 173
- comedy. *See also* [suburban ensemble dramedy](#)
  - defined 111
  - dissonant emotional responses 111
  - dramedy vs. 123–24
  - physical threat in 112
  - quirky 117–20
  - social threat in 111
- comedy devices, dialogic 114–15
- comedy of awkwardness 118n.28
- communication
  - digital 169–73
  - hedging language 6–7, 31
  - introduction 164
  - moral language 4–6
  - promotional agendas 169
  - by proxy 169–73
- The Company We Keep* (Booth) 50
- complex television 146–47, 151
- Complex TV* (Mittell) 68
- consequentialism

basics of 43  
 characterizing 50–51  
 fallibility of 49  
 navigating life via 49–50  
 objections to 46–48  
 prevalent version of 43  
 procedural rigors of 8  
 term usage 46–47

consequentialism, humanistic  
   characteristics of 50–51  
   defined 43, 48  
   for film and media studies 47–51  
   moral reasoning and 42–43  
   rationale for, as applied to narrative media 22  
   on stories and thought experiments 51–53  
   virtue ethics and moral intuitions 44–47  
   virtue ethics example 40–42

consequentialist ethics, purpose of 6–7  
 context collapse 175n.33, 181  
 Conway, Martin A. 58–59  
 Coplan, Amy 9–10  
 Corbett, Edward P. J. 171  
 Corner, John 90–91, 95–96  
 cosmopolitanism 50–51, 133–34  
 Couldry, Nick 156, 160  
 countercinema 66–67, 79–80  
 Cowell, Simon 159  
 Creed, Barbara 99  
 cringe comedy 118n.28  
*Crossing Delancey* (Silver) 135–36  
*Cruising* (film) 73–74  
 culture, media and 75–77

p. 186 Davies, Nick ↵ 168  
 Davis, Colin 35  
 Dayton, Jonathan 113, 117, 119, 120  
*Death Wish* (Winner) 105  
 Deleuze, Gilles 26–27, 92–93  
 Deleyto, Celestino 130  
 Denzin, Norman K. 100  
 deontological ethics 43  
 determinism 75–77  
*Dexter* (tv) 151  
 dialogue, suburban ensemble dramedy 114–17  
 digital media 165–68, 172  
 digital monopolies 165, 168, 172–73, 178–79  
 disbelief, cognitive effort in 92  
 discrimination, right to 40–41  
 dissonance. *See also* [cognitive dissonance](#); [moral dissonance](#); *See also* [narrative dissonance](#); *See also* [self-identity dissonance](#)

- Blue Velvet* and the attentional politics of 96–105
  - causes of 89–90
  - fact of 109–10
  - nature of 109–10
- dissonance reduction/resolution 89, 90, 95–96, 102–4, 109–10, 112–13
- dissonance theory 96
- dissonant pleasure 89, 93–94, 95–96
- documentary film 30–31
- Do the Right Thing* (Lee) 79–80
- Downing, Lisa 4–5, 26–27
- Duffy, Troy 105
- Ebert, Roger 100
- “The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group” (Aronson & Mills) 103–4
- effort justification theory 102–3
- Eisenstein, Sergei 114
- Eitzen, Dirk 75–76
- The Elephant Man* (Lynch) 102
- emotion
  - BlacKkKlansman* 80–82
  - moral value of conflicted 90–92
  - as a reason for action 81
- emotional engagement, behavioral change and 19–20
- emotion-memory relationship 14,5
- emotive dissonance 113
- empathy
  - affective 16–17, 81
  - allegiance and 15–16
  - cognitive 16–17
  - complete and incomplete 81
  - defining 16–17
  - ethics and 15–16
  - felt 16–17
  - sympathy and 15–16
- empathy gap, hot-cold 83–84
- engagement 82–83 *See also* [characters: engagement with](#); *See also* [cinema of engagement](#)
  - emotional, behavioral change and 19–20
  - narrative 144–45
- engagement theory 17–18, 79
- Engaging Characters* (Smith) 13–15, 17–18, 19–20, 44
- entertainment media
  - affective manipulations of 142–43
  - ethics of 156
  - as gratifying puzzle 144–45
- entertainment workplace/industry
  - amorality in the
  - bullying, normalizing 157–58
  - reality tv and the 155–60
- enthrallment
  - bullying producing 145



cognitive dissonance producing 152–54  
 cycles of 147–48  
 with male bullies 151, 154–55  
 oedipal 99, 100  
 serialized television and 144–51, 153–54  
 enthymematic argumentation 170–71  
 enthymemes  
   Aristotelian 171–72  
   building blocks of 170–71  
   persuasive strategies in 171–72  
   procedural definition of 170–71  
   promotional by proxy 171–72, 176–78  
   as tacit arguments 169  
 enthymemes online  
   digital monopolies and trust in institutions 165–68  
   ethics of mistrust, alternatives to an individualized 178–81  
   from mistrust of institutions to mistrust of others 173–76  
   introduction 163–64  
   by proxy, a cognitive-rhetorical model 169–73  
   teaching media, teaching mistrust 176–78  
*Eraserhead* (Lynch) 94, 100  
 estrangement theory 8, 17–18  
 ethical, political as 77–79  
 ethic of reading 64  
 p. 187 ethics ↴  
   in cognitive theory 6–7  
   consequentialist 6–7  
   degrees of failure 49–50  
   emotional proximity of 77–85  
   empathy and 15–16  
   future-thinking 31–32  
   humanist 48  
   of mistrust 178–81  
   ought questions of 27–28  
   political as ethical 77–79  
   from social sciences 1–2  
   of storytelling, humor and the 123–25  
   term usage 4–5  
 ethics-art relation 22–26  
 ethics of the told 65–66  
 evaluation  
   aesthetic 18–20, 22–24, 69n.48  
   autobiography and 58–66  
   character 15, 145, 151, 152–53  
   complexity and 67–68, 104, 105, 146  
   culture and 68  
   dissonance and 67, 104, 105  
   hedonic approach 144–45  
   humor and 114, 120–21

moral 1, 5–6, 8–9, 13–15, 18–20, 22–24, 28, 30–31, 35, 54–57, 71–72, 109, 152–53, 180  
 narrative 36, 52–53  
 perception and 34–35  
 television and 68, 146, 151, 152  
 unreliability of 42–43  
 Everts, Elisa 115–16  
 exceptionalism  
   arts 18–19  
   entertainment industry 158–59  
   narrative 18–19  
 excitation transfer theory 142, 148–49  
*Existential Anthropology* (Jackson) 1–2  
 experience, modeling 33–34  
 extreme cinema 30–31  
 fake news 166–67, 173, 179  
 falling in love 126  
*Family Guy* (tv) 113–14, 120–22  
 family movie, celebration of 116–17  
 fandom, bad 24–25  
 Farino, Julian 120  
 Faris, Valerie 113, 117, 119, 120  
*Fatal Attraction* (film) 73–74  
 Felski, Rita 176  
 Festinger, Léon 89–90, 95–96, 103, 109–10  
 fiction  
   belief and behavior, effect on 55, 56–57  
   emotive qualities of 84  
   future behaviors, informing 56–57  
   ironic displacement 54–55  
   negative affect in 142  
   perspective-taking in 64–66  
 Field, Todd 122  
 film. *See also* [cinema](#)  
   belief and behavior, effect on 79  
   connectedness embodied and illustrated in 3–4  
   critical thought, producing 79–80  
   empowering viewers of 66–67  
   impossible puzzles and 67  
   integrating morality into enjoyment of 24  
   perceptual and sensorial engagement with 32–35  
   reasons for 3–4  
   shaping individuals through 75–76  
*Film, Art and the Third Culture* (Smith) 18–19  
 film, types of. *See also* [romantic comedy films](#); *See also* [suburban ensemble dramedy](#)  
   mockumentary 30–31  
   moral dilemma 105  
   puzzle genre 90–91, 103–4  
   social cleansing 105–7  
   vigilante 105

film audience  
     behavior, learned 75–76  
     conflicted emotions, resolving 56  
     critical thought, producing 79–80  
     drawing meaning from a text 58  
     passive role of 100  
     personality variation 69–73  
     reflexive 81, 82–84, 123–24  
     self-reflexive 79–80  
     skeptical attention in 91–92

filmmakers  
     activist, requirements of 31  
     authority of 98  
     celebrity status as provocateur 30–31  
     ethics of 30–31  
     responsibilities of 109

film philosophy  
     ethics in 18, 26–32  
     metaphysical 32–33

film studies 20–21

*Flat Earth News* (Davies) 168

Fletcher, Anne 138–39

Flew, Terry 174

Flory, Dan 74

Freeman, Mark 57

Freud, Sigmund 99, 112–13, 115–16

Frey, Mattias 4–5, 26–27, 30–31, 34

Frye, Northrop 111

*Game of Thrones* (tv) 25–26, 145, 147–48

gaslighting 148–49, 153–54

Gaut, Berys 23–24

p. 188 gay rights 40–42

gender  
     in television, role expectations 151  
     and violence in Lynch films 9, 100

gender identity in romantic comedy films 136

gender politics 104

Gennep, Arnold van 129–30

*Get a Life* (Klint) 31

*The Girl in the Café* (Yates) 126–27, 130–32, 133–34, 137–38

Gluckman, Max 161–62

*God Bless America* (Goldthwait) 105

Goldthwait, Bobcat 105

*The Good Place* (tv) 50

*The Good Wife* (tv) 151–52

Gotlib, Anna 62–63

*The Grandmother* (Lynch) 92–93

Green, Joshua 15, 46–47

Grindon, Leger 138

Grodal, Torben 77  
 gross-out cinema 120–21  
 Gunn, James 24–25, 105  
 Guynn, William 66–67  
 Habgood-Coote, Joshua 166  
 Haidt, Jonathan 15, 45–46  
 Hajinal, Peter I. 131  
 harm minimization 7  
 Harmon-Jones, Eddie 112–13  
 Harold, James 90–91  
 Harpham, Geoffrey 116  
 Harold, James 91–92  
*Harry Brown* (film) 106–7  
 hazing rituals 103n.71, 148  
 hedging language 6–7, 31  
 hermeneutics 4–5, 18, 36–38, 57–66, 71–72, 83, 112  
 hermeneutics of suspicion 176–77  
 high-end television 146–47  
 Hill, Kashmir 167–68  
 Hjort, Mette 19–20, 30–31  
*Homeland* (tv) 151–52  
 hooks, bell 3–4, 109  
 Hosking, Geoffrey 164  
*How Do You Know* (Brooks) 135–36  
 Hughey, Matthew W. 121–22  
 humanism 48, 130  
 humans  
     capability for change 20, 45–46  
     connecting across difference 3–4, 48  
 humor. *See also* [suburban ensemble dramedy](#)  
     affective incoherence of 112–13  
     candor as 120–22  
     conditions for 111–12  
     as coping mechanism 114–16  
     as a defensive mechanism 114–16, 122  
     defined 112–13  
     dissonance resolution in 112–13  
     ethics of storytelling and 123–25  
     inclusive 115–16  
     moral function of 122  
     as negotiator 114  
     neural processing, stages of 112–13  
     politics as 120–22  
     sources of pleasure in 112–13  
     threat component of 111–12, 114, 117–19, 120–24  
     uses of 125  
 humor studies 111  
 hyper-human era 163–64  
 ideology, term usage 4–5

is and ought distinction 27–28  
*Impossible Puzzle Films* (Kiss & Willemsen) 90–91  
 individualism 159–60  
 intuitionism  
     moral, virtue ethics and 44–47  
     social 45–46  
 ironic displacement 54–55  
 Jackson, Michael D. 1–2  
 Jasper, James M. 84  
 Jeffcoat, John 126–27, 132–34, 139–40  
 Jermyn, Deborah 136–37  
 Jerslev, Anne 92–93  
 Jillette, Penn 124  
 Johnson, Jeff 92, 101  
 jokes 117–20, 124  
 Jones, Ward E. 62–63  
 “A Journey through ‘Blue Velvet’” (Creed) 99  
 Joy, Stuart 24–26  
 Joyrich, Lynne 147–48  
*Judge Judy* (tv)  
*Juno* (film) 119  
 Kaleta, Kenneth C. 101–2  
 Kant, Immanuel 23–24, 43  
*Kick-Ass* (Vaughn) 105, 106–7  
*The Kids are All Right* (Cholodenko) 113–14, 120  
 Kieslowski, Krzysztof 89  
 King, Geoff 119–20  
 Kiss, Miklós 67, 90–91  
 Kivy, Peter 81  
 Klint, Michael 31  
 p. 189 knowledge asymmetry 172n.26, 181  
 knowledge migration 28–29, 30–31  
 Kozloff, Sarah 7, 17–18, 19–20, 79, 117–18  
 Kupfer, Joseph H. 44  
 Lacan, Jacques 99  
 Lagerwey, Jorie 151–52  
*Land and Freedom* (Loach) 105  
 Lang, Fritz 90–91  
*Laughter* (Bergson) 117–18  
 Lawrence, Marc 126–27, 134–35  
 Layton, Lynne 99  
 Lee, Spike 79–81, 83, 84  
 Levinas, Emmanuel 4, 26–27, 31–32, 64  
 Levine, Elana 146  
 Leyda, Julia 151–52  
 limerence, meaning of 126  
 limerence in romantic comedy films  
     appeal to pathos 131–32  
     attachment, ideological conviction, and personality politics 134–36

- conclusions 139–41
- introduction 126–29
- liminal disruptions 129–34
- redefining the self 131, 132–33
- limerent passion 129
- liminal space 129–30, 134
- listening, utility of generous 64–65
- literature, serial 147–48
- Little Children* (Field) 122
- Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton & Faris) 113, 117, 119, 120
- Loach, Ken 105, 107
- Lone Star* (Sayles) 107–8
- Looking for Eric* (Loach) 107
- Lost* (tv) 144
- Lost Highway* (Lynch) 92–93, 101
- Lost Highway, The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* (Žižek) 93–94
- Lotz, Amanda D. 151–52
- Loukides, Paul 116–17
- love
  - complexity of 128–29
  - an ethical impulse 133n.30
  - mystery of 140
- Love and Limerence* (Tennov) 126
- Lynch, David, films of
  - the author in 101–2
  - Blue Velvet* and the attentional politics of dissonance 96–104
  - comedy devices, dialogic 114–15
  - conservative values in 92
  - gender politics in 104
  - narrative strategies 67
  - oedipal enthrallment 99, 100
  - patterns in location of the profound 93–94
  - scholarship on 99–100, 109–10
  - suburban and feminine united in 97–98
- Lynch, David, films of, cognitive dissonance in
  - aural 92–93
  - in dramatic irony 94
  - making sense of 93–94
  - in narrative comprehension 94
  - pleasure of 93–94
  - politicized resolution of 110
  - profound tensions generated 94
  - temporal and spatial disjuncts 92–93, 95–96
- Lynch, David, films of, dissonance in
  - devices of 104–5
  - metaphysical 94–96, 101–2
  - moral 101
  - resolution of 95–96
  - resolving 101

Lynch, David, films of, violence in  
     as about the author 101–2  
     aestheticized 96–99  
     domestic and sexual abuses 101–2  
     gendered 9, 100  
     racial 100  
 Lynch, David, works by title  
     *American Beauty* 114  
     *Blue Velvet* 94, 96–104  
     *The Elephant Man* 102  
     *Eraserhead* 94, 100  
     *The Grandmother* 92–93  
     *Lost Highway* 92–93, 101  
     *Twin Peaks* 102  
     *Wild at Heart* 100  
 M (Lang, Fritz) 90–91  
 MacIntyre, Alasdair 44  
*Mad Men* (tv) 151  
*Maid in Manhattan* (Wang) 127–28  
 manic-satire 120–21  
 Mar, Raymond A. 3–4  
 “Masculine Cities and Feminine Suburbs” (Saegert) 97–98  
 Maslin, Janet 97, 100  
 McCabe, Janet 136–37, 153–55  
 McDowell, James 117–18  
 McElroy, Wendy 156–57  
 McGraw, Peter 9, 111–12  
 McGraw, Phil 159  
 p. 190 media ↵ 167  
     beliefs rehearsed in the 28–29  
     digital trends in 22  
     mistrust of the 165–68, 174, 176–78  
     portrayals of sexuality in the 40–42  
     trust in, engendering 174  
 media campaign opposing marriage equality in Australia 40–42  
 media ethics 17–18, 22, 51–52  
 media evaluation, hedonic approach to 144–45  
 media fakery and fabulation 166–67, 173, 179  
 media literacy 173, 178–81  
 “Media Literacy, Fake News & Democracy” (Stoddard et al.) 179–80  
 media messages, persuasive 59–60  
 media monopolies 165, 168, 172–73, 178–79  
 media pedagogy  
     in a promotional age 163–64  
     teaching mistrust 176–78  
 media regulation 156–57  
 media theory, cognitive 19–20  
 melancomiac 116n.24  
 memory



- autobiographical 36–38, 58, 60–62, 65–66, 93–94, 96–97, 99, 107
- collective 62
- episodic 36–38, 58–59, 61–62
- semantic 36–38, 58
- memory-emotion relationship 145
- men
  - antihero in television 151–55
  - bullying and 151, 154–55, 159–60
  - misogyny as existential comedy 96–97
- Mendes, Sam 113
- Meretoja, Hanna 5–6, 28–29, 35, 36–39, 64–65, 79
- #Metoo movement 24, 39, 157–58
- Middaugh, Ellen 173
- Mills, Judson 103–4, 112–13
- Mirrlees, Tanner 158–59
- misogyny as existential comedy 96–97
- mistrust
  - defined 164
  - ethics of 178–81
  - of government 165, 167
  - institutional 165, 173–76
  - of the media 165–68, 174, 176–78
  - migration from institutions to peers 174–75
  - of others 165, 173–76
  - teaching 176–78
- Mittell, Jason 68, 149–50
- mockumentary film 30–31
- moral actions 19–20, 49, 103–4
- moral criticism 4–5
- moral debates, cinema informing 19–20
- moral determinism 45–46
- moral dilemma film 105
- moral dissonance in cinema
  - conclusions 109–10
  - examples of 104–8
  - introduction 89–92
  - Lynch, films of 101
- moral dissonance in television, antihero in creating 154–55
- moral failure 49–50, 51–52
- moral intuitions, virtue ethics and 44–47
- morality
  - of art 23–24
  - autonomy of 1–2
  - in romantic comedy films 135–36
  - social competence and 136
  - taste and 66–67
  - term usage 4–5
- moral language 4–6
- moral life 51–53

moral luck 47n.22  
 moral message, reading for the 64  
 moral prescription, ideals of 49  
 moral reasoning, rhetoric of 42–43  
 moral systems, fictive 13–15  
 moral thinking, cinema informing 19–20, 103–4  
*The Morning Show* (tv) 151–52  
*Moving Viewers* (Plantinga) 15–16  
 Muradi, Sahara 121–22  
 Murdoch, Rupert 156–57, 168  
 narrative
 

- belief and behavior, effect on 55, 56–57
- emotive qualities of 84
- future behaviors, informing 56–57
- ironic displacement 54–55
- moral impact of 55
- negative affect in 142
- perspective-taking in 64–66
- self-reflexive and naturalizing 79

 narrative art 142, 144–45 See also [television as bully](#)  
 narrative dissonance 67, 89, 95–96, 102  
 narrative engagement 144–45  
 narrative ethics 22–24, 36–39  
 narrative unconscious 57  
 narratology 3–4, 8–9, 38–39  
 naturalism 51–52, 83  
 need for cognition (NFC) 69–71  
 Negra, Diane 151–52  
 Newman, Michael Z. 146  
 p. 191 *News of the World* (scandal) 156–57  
 Nieland, Justus 98  
 Nochimson, Martha P. 94, 102  
 Noonan, Chris 83–84  
 normative, term usage 4–5  
 normative ethics 2–3, 31–32, 62, 78–79  
 normative reasoning 6–7  
 normativity, rigor of 8  
*Not for Profit* (Nussbaum) 38–39  
 Nussbaum, Martha 36–39, 44  
 Oatley, Keith 3–4, 23–24  
 Oliver, Mary Beth 144–45  
 Olson, Greg 98  
*The Oranges* (Farino) 120  
 other-oriented ethics 26–27  
 Ouellette, Laurie 159  
 ought scripts 1–3, 8  
*Outsourced* (Jeffcoat) 126–27, 132–34, 139–40  
 paradigm scenarios 17–18  
 particularism 51–52

passion, limerent 129  
pedagogy  
critical thought in 173, 177–78  
humanities 173  
media literacy 173, 178–81  
neoliberal 160  
normativity in 175–76  
television as 160  
uses of cinema in 104  
pedigree television 146, 159–60  
Pellow, C. Kenneth 100  
perception, sense and 32–35  
personality politics 134–36  
personality variation 69–73  
perspective-taking in fiction 64–66  
*Pervert in the Pulpit* (Johnson) 92  
Phelan, James 48  
phenomenology, cognition and 32–35  
Phillips, Adam 138–39  
Pickett, Kate 165–66  
Plantinga, Carl 1, 3–4, 7, 9–10, 13–16, 17–18, 19–20, 24–25, 36, 42, 57–58, 59–60, 75–76, 77–78, 79–80, 101  
pleasure  
    affective 24–25  
    dissonant 89, 93–94, 95–96  
    in humor 112–13  
political action, drivers of 84  
political cinema  
    *BlacKkKlansman* 80–82  
    defining 77–79  
    romantic comedy films 126–27, 129, 130–35, 137–38  
political comedy 126–27, 129, 130–35, 137–38  
political filmmaking 19–20  
politics  
    meanings of 78–79  
    rational distancing as 77–85  
populism 156, 159–61  
pork industry, *Babe* effect 83–84  
posthuman age 163–64  
Powell, Jeremy 92–93  
Powers, John 92–93  
practical ethics 51–52, 54–55  
prescriptive ethics 35  
presentational cinema 66–67  
press freedom 156–57  
promotional age 163–64  
*The Proposal* (Fletcher) 138–39  
Provenza, Paul 124  
proxy

communication by 169–73  
 enthymemes by 169–73, 176–78  
 puzzle-based entertainment 68–69  
 puzzle film genre 90–91, 103–4  
*Puzzle Films* (Buckland) 89  
 puzzle in media, gratification from 144–45  
 puzzle narratives 95–96, 148–49  
 quality television 146–47  
 quirky comedy 117–20  
 racism 2–3, 74, 80–81, 158–59  
 racial bias 45–46  
 racialized disgust 74  
 racial stereotyping 121–22  
 racial violence 80–81, 81n.86, 99, 100  
 Ramsay, Gordon 159  
*Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* (tv)  
 Raney, Arthur A. 144–45  
 raunch cinema 120–21  
 reading for the moral message 64  
 reading/reception ethics 56  
*Real Housewives* (tv) 158–59  
 reality tv 155–60  
 reason, politically informed 80–82  
 reflection, acting on 83–84  
 reflexivity 33–34, 148–50  
 religious freedom 40–41  
 religious conversion 71–72  
 repartee 114–18  
 representational cinema 66–67  
 retributivism, challenge of 48  
*Rhetoric* (Aristotle) 171  
 p. 192 rhetoric, theories of 170–71  
 Ricke, LaChrystal D. 121–22  
 Ricoeur, Paul 28–29  
 rigor  
 cognitive 6–7, 13, 26–27  
 ethical 6–7, 8–9, 31–32, 46, 53, 68–69, 71–72, 78–79  
 scholarly 1, 5–6, 8–9, 10, 13, 26–27, 55, 71–72, 98, 167  
 Robinson, Jenefer 90–91  
 Rodowick, D. N. 26–27, 28  
 Rogen, Seth 120–21  
 romantic comedy films  
 comic component of 137  
 critiques of 127–28  
 cross-cultural 132–33  
 emotional weight of 138–39  
 fantasies of union 127–28  
 physical sites of 130  
 political 126–27, 129, 130–35, 137–38

potential for failure 137–38  
 self-identity, redefining in 138  
 wish fulfillment 127–28  
 romantic comedy films, emotional politics of limerence in  
   attachment, ideological conviction, and personality politics 134–36  
   complicating comedy, complicating emotions 136–39  
   conclusions 139–41  
   introduction 126–29  
   liminal disruptions and the appeal to pathos 129–34  
*Roseanne* (tv) 114  
 Rousseau, Denise 164  
 Saegert, Susan 97–98  
 same-sex marriage 40–42  
 satire 120–22  
 satirical humor 125  
 Saxton, Libby 4–5, 26–27  
 Sayles, John 107–8  
 Schechtman, Marya 95–96  
 schema 59–60  
 Sconce, Jeffrey 117–18  
 Scorsese, Martin 105–7  
*Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (Plantinga) 3–4, 9–10, 17–18  
 self, the 17–18, 58–62, 109–10, 148–50, 163–64  
 selfhood 36–38, 60–62  
 self-identity, redefining 131, 132–33, 135, 138  
 self-identity dissonance 103–4, 105  
 self-knowledge 36–38, 58–59  
 self-reflection 30–31, 45–46, 79  
 semantic memory 58  
 sense, perception and 32–35  
 sexual assault 24–26, 75–76, 96–99, 100, 101–2, 142–43, 157–58 *See also* [abusive relationships](#)  
 sexuality 17–18, 40–42, 55, 120, 122, 130, 135–36  
 sexual freedoms 43  
 Shakespeare 117–18  
 Shattuc, Jane M. 99, 100  
 Sheindlin, Judy 159  
 Shelly, Adrienne 126–27, 138, 139–40  
 shock humor 120–21, 122  
 Shumway, David 139–40  
*The Siege* (film) 73–74  
*Sightseers* (Wheatley) 105  
 Silver, Joan Micklin 135–36  
 Simon, Linda 103–4  
*The Simpsons* (tv) 114  
 Sinnerbrink, Robert 1, 2–4, 9, 13–15, 18, 26–27, 33–34, 36, 63–64  
 Skeggs, Bev 158–59  
 Smith, Greg M. 20–22, 82  
 Smith, Murray 1, 13–15, 17–20, 44, 63–64, 151, 154–55  
 Snyder, Zach 19–20

Sobchack, Vivian 26–27, 32–33  
 social cleansing film 105–7  
 social media 174–75  
 social norms, fictional media and 55  
 social realism 106–7  
 social sciences, ethics and 1–2  
*The Sopranos* (tv) 151, 153–54  
 Spacey, Kevin 157–58  
 spectator psychology 44  
 spectator response, determinants of 75–77  
 spousal abuse 138  
 Stadler, Jane 1, 3–4, 16, 33–34, 36  
 Stam, Robert 4–5, 19–20, 36, 73–74  
 Stoddard, Jeremy 179–80  
 story  
     criticizing the moral in 62–63  
     gratification of the familiar in 142  
     moral insights, contributions to 62–63  
     revelatory vs. immersive capacity 144–45  
     social functions of 3–4, 144–45  
     transformational experience of 63–64  
 storytelling  
     historical 107  
     humor and the ethics of 123–25  
 Stout, Margaret 130–31  
 Strawson, Galen 36–38  
 p. 193 suburban ensemble dramedy 4  
     dialogic comedy devices 114–16, 117–19  
     family, celebration of the 117  
     features of 113  
 suburban ensemble dramedy, benign violations in the  
     candor as humor, candor as politics 120–22  
     dialogue and repartee 114–17  
     domestic setting 113–14  
     humor and the ethics of storytelling 123–25  
     introduction 111–14  
     from lingual jokes to character eccentricity 117–20  
 Summa-Knoop, Laura T. Di 18–19, 83  
*Super* (Gunn) 105  
 suspicion, hermeneutics of 176–78  
 Swift, Jonathan 120–21  
 sympathy, empathy and 15–16  
 Szita, Kata 21–22  
 Tarantino, Quentin 24  
 taste, morality and 66–67  
 taste-making through television 146, 159  
*Taxi Driver* (Scorsese) 105–7  
 Taylor, Charles 60–61  
 teaching

- history 108
- media 164, 165, 173, 176–78, 179–80
- moral 3–4, 64
- trust 176–78
- television
  - abusive behaviors, normalizing 157–61
  - abusive relationships on 153–54
  - aesthetic and ethical appreciation, expectations of conflict 22–23
  - antihero in 151–55
  - complex 68–69, 146–47, 151
  - complexity, source of 146
  - ethical experience in 13–15
  - ethically pedagogic aspects of 159–60
  - feminine 146
  - high-end 146–47
  - legitimizing 146
  - literary 147–48
  - millennial complex or quality 142–43, 146–47
  - moral failure, exploring 50
  - moral readings, before and after of 24
  - pedigree 146, 159–60
  - puzzle in, gratification from 144–45
  - quality 146–47
  - taste-making 146, 159
  - video-on-demand (VOD) era 151–52
- television, serialized
  - abusive behaviors, normalizing 157–59
  - benefit of 149–50
  - commercial imperatives of 142–43, 145, 148–49
  - crisis of moral identity in 151
  - enthrallment factor, productive capacities 145
  - enthrallment in 148–49
  - enthrallment with the male bully 151
  - ethical ambiguity, enthrallment with 153–54
  - hegemonic masculinity in 151–55
  - literariness of 147–48
  - self-doubt, production of 148–50
  - sense-making, remoralization in 152–53
  - shock tactics 147–48
  - structure, novelistic 147–48
  - women-centered 151–52
- television antihero 151–55
- television as bully
  - conclusions 160–62
  - introduction 143
  - the male antihero and individualist virtue ethics 151–55
  - reality tv and the entertainment workplace 155–60
- television audience
  - affective incoherence, resolving 148



affective pleasure of 24–25  
 aggressive, legitimating 158–59  
 antiheroic characters, relationship with 152–54  
 complex spectatorial experience 153–54  
 conflict, stake in 147–48  
 conflict vs. resolution, investment in 150  
 emotional engagement 147–49  
 engagement, shock tactics for 147–48  
 enthrallment of 148  
 gaslighting 153–54  
 group attachment or identification 147–48  
 improving 146  
 reflexive viewership 81, 82–83, 123–24  
 responsibilities of 109  
 trauma, imbuing with meaning 147–48  
 television renaissance 146–47, 151–52, 153–54, 160–61  
 television studies, characterology in 68–69  
 television writers, adulation of 146  
 Tennov, Dorothy 126, 128  
 text, imagining creators behind a 65–66  
*Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Festinger) 89–90  
 Theory of Mind 16–17, 65–66  
 p. 194 Thompson, Robert ↵ 146  
 thought experiments, stories and 51–53  
 thought migration, fictive to nonfictive 28–29  
 threat in humor 111–12, 114, 117–19, 120–24  
 300 (Snyder) 19–20  
 Thunberg, Greta 78–79  
 Tomlinson, Tom 61–62  
 transcendence of the individual 26–27  
 transference, emotional 81  
 transformational experience of story 63–64  
 transhumanism 163–64  
 trolling 35, 154n.51, 174–75  
 Trump, Donald 142–43, 159–61  
 trust. *See also* [mistrust](#)  
     defined 164  
     importance of 165  
     in institutions, digital monopolies and 165–68  
 truth, ethics of 26–27  
 Turvey, Malcolm 76–77  
*Twin Peaks* (tv) 102  
*Two Weeks Notice* (Lawrence) 126–27, 134–35, 138–39  
*The Upside of Anger* (Binder) 114  
 utilitarianism 43–44, 46–48, 49–50  
 Vaage, Margrethe Bruun 1, 13–15, 22–23, 24–25, 154–55  
 Vaillant, George Eaman 115–16, 122  
 van der Pol, Gerwin 89  
 Vaughn, Matthew 105, 106–7

vengeance, mean-spirited cinema's use for 19–20  
 videogames 147–48  
 viewers-as-spectators 67  
 viewership, reflexive 81, 82–84, 123–24  
 vigilante film 105  
 vigilantism 106–7  
 violence, gendered 9, 100  
 virtue ethics
 

- intuitive 44
- in literature 44
- marriage equality example 40–42
- moral intuitions and 44–47

*Waitress* (Shelly) 126–27, 138, 139–40  
 Wang, Wayne 127–28  
 Wardle, Claire 166–67  
 Warren, Caleb 9, 111  
 Weber, Brenda R. 159–60  
 Weinstein, Harvey 157–58  
*Westworld* (tv) 25–26, 147–48  
 Wheatley, Ben 105  
*When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger) 109–10  
*Wild at Heart* (Lynch) 100  
 Wilde, Oscar 23–24, 117–18  
 Wilkinson, Richard 165–66  
 Willemsen, Steven 67, 90–91  
 Williams, Bernard 44, 47–48  
 Williams, Mark E. 171–72  
 Willis, Sharon 100  
 Winner, Michael 105  
 Wojciszke, Bogdan 135–36  
 women
 

- antihero in television 151–52
- corrosive attitude toward in film 24
- gendered violence in Lynch films 9, 100
- vs. men, morality vs. fun 24–25
- serialized television, women-centered 151–52
- sexual assault/abuse 24–25, 96–99, 157–58

 Wood, Helen 158–59  
*The X Factor* (tv) 159  
 Yates, David 126–27, 130–32, 133–34, 137–38  
 Zengotita, Thomas de 109  
 Žižek, Slavoj 93–94, 96–97