Folk Psychology for Film Critics and Scholars

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Abstract: Film scholars, critics, filmmakers, and audiences all routinely employ intuitive, untutored "folk psychology" in viewing, interpreting, critiquing, and making films. Yet this folk psychology receives little attention in film scholarship. This article argues that film scholars ought to pay far more attention to the nature and uses of folk psychology. Turning to critical work on Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho,* the article demonstrates the diverse and sometimes surprising ways that folk psychology is used in criticism. From an evolutionary perspective, the article defends the critic's and audience's interests in characters as persons. It also defends folk psychology against some of its most vocal detractors, and provides some guidance into how cognitive film theorists might employ folk psychology, arguing that such employment must supplement and correct folk psychology with scientific psychology and philosophical analysis. Finally, the article argues that the application of folk psychology to films is a talent, a skill, and a sensitivity rather than a science.

Keywords: cognitive film theory, cultural studies, film characters, film criticism, folk psychology, *Psycho*

For film spectators, filmmakers, critics, and scholars, untutored and intuitive psychology—or what is commonly called "folk psychology"—is the air we breathe. The makers of *Titanic* (1997), to take a familiar example, decide when to cut to a close-up of Rose (Kate Winslet) weeping after the death of her lover Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) (Figure 1), and how long to hold the close-up; they estimate the possible audience responses to various cuts and shot lengths, relying on an intuitive sense of how people—spectators—will respond. Viewers respond to Rose as though she were a person (in some senses at least), and have an intuitive sense of how people might behave when faced with the death of a loved one. The critic gauges the success of the scene in part by its design in relation to its supposed impact on audiences, and works this estimation into an overall assessment of *Titanic*'s quality or lack thereof. A film scholar, in an article for an academic journal, interprets the scene as a comment on the nature of heartbreak and love, and perhaps announces that the scene embodies the pernicious ideology of romance inherent in mainstream Hollywood.

Figure 1. Rose mourns the death of Jack in Titanic.

In all of these cases—director, audience, critic, and scholar—there is a reliance on folk psychology as a tool for filmmaking, viewing, criticism, and/or scholarly writing about narrative film. Screenwriters in writing scripts; filmmakers in employing techniques to elicit effects on spectators; studios in estimating whether audiences will like a film; audiences in understanding characters and gauging the intentions of the filmmakers; critics and scholars in reviewing, interpreting, and speculating about the reasons for success or failure of a film; all rely on folk psychology. Some scholars, moreover, seem to assume that the *primary subject* of at least some films is *just* this shared commonsense psychology and its implications, as though the purpose of narrative film is to contribute to, comment on, or critique some element of the human condition, and through this to contribute to the storehouse of folk psychological wisdom.

Given this, one might be surprised to find that many scholars distrust and/or dismiss the application of folk psychology to the study of film. Folk psychology is sometimes thought to be insufficiently theoretical, inaccurate, prone to the idiosyncratic responses of individuals, or distorted by racist, sexist, or class bias. It might be thought that film scholars ought to employ only more sophisticated theories of human psychology, and that for this reason folk psychology is uninteresting and unimportant. I argue, on the contrary, that to dismiss folk psychology in the critical exploration of film would be impossible, and, were it possible, counterproductive. The role of folk psychology in criticism and scholarship must be better understood. The proper approach to folk psychology for film scholars and critics is not to reject it, but rather to understand it through serious study and reflection, recognize its place in crit-

icism, interpretation, and analysis, and work to improve its scholarly application by supplementing and correcting it when necessary.

Folk Psychology and the "Filmmaker-Audience Loop"

The term "folk psychology" is contested and can mean many things; we could replace "folk" with any of the following terms: attitude, intuition, commonsense, intentionalism, or naive. As I use the term, folk psychology is both a practice and a set of notions or concepts. We attribute mental states to those around us, and both predict and explain behavior on the basis of these presumed mental states. We hypothesize about how others think, feel, and respond. We engage in the practice of "mindreading." In doing so we rely on a storehouse of knowledge, assumptions, and platitudes about the human mind; these are the notions or concepts of folk psychology. To the extent that the tenets of folk psychology are unstated and unexamined, folk psychology remains an implicit theory; in principle, however, those tenets could be stated in propositional form and systematized, thus constituting an explicit theory of the human mind.

Unlike film scholars Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey, I take folk psychology to be an implicit theory of human psychology. Allen and Turvey appeal to Wittgenstein in rejecting the notion that theory can clarify, expand upon, and modify our folk psychological wisdom. They take the understanding of folk psychology as a "proto-theory" to be a mistake: "if the later Wittgenstein is right, the idea that the psychological concepts we invoke in the practice of engaging with art are part of a primitive theory of responding to art profoundly misconstrues the nature of those concepts," supposing them to be open to empirical discovery (or correction) rather than linguistically autonomous (Allen and Turvey 2001: 31–32). Without the space to adequately address these issues, suffice it to say that many of the concepts of folk psychology, such as the intuitive belief that smiling signals friendliness or happiness, for example, are clearly subject to empirical verification and are not "linguistically autonomous."

It should be noted that in their discussions of folk psychology, philosophers often employ a more restricted notion of the concept than I do here, taking folk psychology to be the basic conceptual framework through which we understand ourselves and others as intentional agents with minds that harbor desires and beliefs. My use of "folk psychology" goes beyond this to encompass all of what we might call untutored or intuitive psychology—to gender stereotypes, impression formation, and ideas about human psychology in relation to marriage, for example. Folk psychology in the narrower philosophical sense is universal; all healthy human beings ascribe minds, intentions, and beliefs to other humans. Folk psychology in the broad sense includes all of the diverse tenets of intuitive or commonsense psychology, including elements that are more culturally and historically variable and with strong moral and ideological implications.

Folk psychological prediction and explanation abound in our lives. For example, suppose that you must ask a friend for a favor. You may think about how and when to do it, based on a sense of the conditions that make people receptive to such requests. As Gregory Currie notes, we employ folk psychology "so often, with such facility and success, that it can be surprising to learn that one is using 'knowledge of other minds'" (1999: 108). In a given day, we successfully gauge the intentions, motivations, thoughts, and desires of others using our own knowledge of folk psychology.

Folk psychology should be a central topic for scholars of the narrative arts because it is fundamental to comprehending stories. Most obviously, audiences employ folk psychology in their understanding of character psychology and behavior. In *Psycho* (1960), for example, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) steals $40,000 from a client of her workplace and leaves town (Figure 2). Spectators infer that she needs the money to allow her and Sam to marry, making this inference based on Sam's earlier revelation that his financial troubles make unlikely the marriage Marion desires. We understand that Marion's desires will likely drive her actions and infer that her stealing the money results from her desire to be married.

But folk psychology is not merely the means by which audiences understand characters in a narrative. The assumptions of folk psychology also guide writers and filmmakers in crafting stories. In *Psycho,* when Alfred Hitchcock decided to have Marion surprisingly and brutally murdered in the famous shower sequence, he speculated about how audiences would respond. Hitchcock was not relying on scientific psychology in designing his film; he was turning to the assumptions of folk psychology and to their intuitive sense of how audiences might respond. As David Bordwell (2008: 335) notes, filmmakers do not merely use a knowledge of folk psychology to design effects; they also simplify, amplify, or otherwise alter representations according to purpose

Figure 2. Marion steals $40,000 in Psycho.

and relevance. Thus an intuitive sense of how a technique might affect audiences is polished through experience and the traditions of the craft.

In Truffaut's famous book-length set of interviews, Hitchcock is explicit in describing his art as one of generating effects in the audience. As he says, the "main objective is to arouse the audience's emotion, and that emotion arises from the way in which the story unfolds, from the way in which sequences are juxtaposed" (Truffaut 1984: 335). Of *Psycho*, Hitchcock claims that his "main satisfaction is that the film had an effect on audiences" (Truffaut 1984: 282). And Hitchcock is often articulate in discussing how cinematic effects will affect audiences. For example, he has famously said that we may have suspense in relation to a character despite having no sympathy for him:

> *A curious person goes into somebody else's room and begins to search through the drawers. Now, you show the person who lives in that room coming up the stairs. Then you go back to the person who is searching, and the public feels like warning him, "Be careful, watch out. Someone's coming up the stairs." Therefore, even if the snooper is not a likeable character, the audience will still feel anxiety for him. (Truffaut 1984: 73)*

How did Hitchcock estimate the effects his films would have on audiences? For the most part, he relied on the assumptions of folk psychology, that is, on intuitive hunches about how audiences would respond to various techniques and strategies.

The folk psychological model can account for what we might call the *filmmaker-audience loop,* or in other words, the common assumptions filmmakers and audiences share about human psychology and behavior. These shared assumptions allow spectators to understand characters and filmmakers to predict spectator response. To the extent that filmmakers successfully move audiences, moreover, they employ folk psychology accurately and with great reward.

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Stepping outside the bounds of film criticism for a moment, we can ask about the merits of folk psychology as an implicit theory of mind. Is folk psychology a reliable guide to the minds of others? The answer to this question depends on whom you ask. The merits of folk psychology have been hotly contested over the past thirty years (Ratcliffe 2007). Some note the failures of folk psychology—all of the ways in which we can be misled in our understanding of others—and claim that mature science will differ significantly from folk psychology (Churchland 1981). Social psychologists delight in finding ways in which we are misled by the assumptions of folk psychology. There has been much research into impression formation, for example. Barbara Von Eckardt (1997: 36) reports that individuals judged to be baby-faced, to take one small

bit of this research, are often wrongly thought to be less intelligent, of low so-
cial status, and lacking physical strength.

Others celebrate the remarkable successes of folk psychology. Jerry Fodor,
for example, insists that folk psychology is much better at predicting behavior
than contemporary scientific approaches, and suggests that folk theory is
roughly right and hence will fit with a mature cognitive science (Fodor 1987;
see also Horgan and Woodward 1999). Garth Fletcher (1995) argues that there
is a significant interrelationship between folk psychology and scientific psy-
chology. The question of whether folk psychology is accurate is particularly in-
teresting for film scholars and critics. The degree to which filmmakers are able
to actually move spectators in the way that they intend lends evidence for the
accuracy of their folk psychological assumptions or those of their craft tradi-
tion. For filmmakers, the test of their folk psychological theories is in the suc-
cess of their films.

But this raises an interesting issue. Does there exist one universal folk psy-
chology, shared by all human beings? Or are there many folk psychologies,
based on nation, historical period, ethnic group, and so on? Per Persson (2003)
notes that although all cultures practice some variation of folk psychology,
and some of the core constituents of folk psychology are likely universal, the
particular content of folk psychologies across cultures will vary, especially
when folk psychology is taken in the broad sense that I do in this article. For
this reason Persson speaks of "Western folk psychology" (2003: 163). Could it
be that Hollywood, for example, adheres to and presumes its own particular
brand of folk psychology? The assumptions of Hollywood filmmakers with re-
gard to the elicitation of emotion, for example, are no doubt in some ways
idiosyncratic to time and place. One could in principle discover Hollywood
folk psychology in the numerous handbooks available to filmmakers that link
techniques and audience effects through the appeal to psychology. These
handbooks have titles like *Writing Great Characters: The Psychology of Charac-
ter Development in Screenplays* (Halperin 1996), *Emotional Structure: Creating
the Story Beneath the Plot* (Dunne 2006), and *Psychology for Screenwriters* (In-
dick 2004).

Historical poetics, as conceived by David Bordwell, involves the investiga-
tion not only of the craft practices of a cinematic tradition, but also of its ex-
plicit rules of thumb and implicit assumptions about filmmaking (see, e.g.,
Bordwell 2008: 11–29). Although this is a task too daunting to accomplish in
this article, an interest in how Hollywood films cue emotion should eventually
lead to Hollywood industry discourse about conventions for eliciting emotion.
One could thus come to a better understanding of the peculiarities, if any, of
the Hollywood brand of folk psychology at a particular historical juncture.

Yet it would be hasty to assume that Hollywood works *merely* within its
own idiosyncratic folk psychological traditions. In a time in which Hollywood

has a global reach, it is legitimate to wonder about the moral and ideological role of Hollywood films and television in their promotion of particular American or Hollywood folk psychological assumptions. To the extent that the movies *actually do* intersect with diverse audiences, however, the folk psychological predictions of filmmakers are borne out to some extent. Although there exist many differences between folk psychologies across cultures (see Thomas 2001), I would argue that most folk psychologies share a universal core set of concerns and beliefs, and that mainstream filmmakers design narratives to appeal to those concerns and beliefs.

Folk Psychology in Film Criticism and Scholarship

Folk psychology is a pervasive and powerful theory of mind, one to which both audiences and filmmakers turn to make sense of characters in narrative films. But how do critics and scholars use folk psychology? The following are examples of the wide range of such uses. All are taken from criticism and scholarship on Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho.* Although I make some evaluative comments from time to time, my purpose here is not to assess the quality of the criticism and analysis, but rather to demonstrate the pervasiveness and range of uses of folk psychology in criticism and analysis.

Many readers will recognize that David Bordwell, in his critique of film interpretation, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema,* analyzed seven critical examinations of *Psycho* (only a few of which overlap with those I examine), with a view toward illustrating the practices of interpretation. Bordwell's purpose is to bring to light the semantic fields, textual cues, schemata, and rhetorical strategies brought to bear by what he called "interpretation, inc." (Bordwell 1989: 21). The depth and diversity of Hitchcock criticism makes it a good choice for metacritical studies such as Bordwell's and my own. My purpose here is different, however. Rather than critique interpretation, my primary interest here is to draw attention to the surprising breadth of discussion of films in relation to folk psychology, ranging from the interpretation of characters to gauging audience response to assumptions about the purpose of narrative film.

Character Psychology

Like spectators, most critics take it for granted that film characters should be understood as persons. "Understanding" is not exactly the right word for much character-centered criticism; "interpretation" and even "speculation" would be more appropriate. Such criticism often takes character as the fundamental locus of interest for narrative film.

Character-centered criticism reconstructs the moment-to-moment thinking, motivations, and/or psychological condition of characters in general based on folk psychological assumptions. Raymond Durgnat, in *The Strange Case of*

Alfred Hitchcock (1974), for example, writes of Marion's thinking process during her conversation with Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in a parlor of the Bates Motel (Figure 3):

> *Gradually Marion realizes that she is his superior, that, if unhappy, she is self-possessed, whereas his 'contented' acquiescence in looking after his domineering mother has something weak and helpless [sic]. His wisdom about money and the example of his servitude help to free her from the power of her impulse. She realizes that what she stole was not love but only money, an attempt to avoid her problems. (Durgnat 1974: 324–325)*

Many critics of *Psycho* assess Norman Bates's behavior despite his abnormal psychological condition. As Lesley Brill writes, "If the lack of a family and a place is crippling, the perverse realization of them is worse. Norman's wretched 'more than happy' childhood has left him with an infantile and divided personality. The respectability of his 'following the formalities' conceals radical personal incoherence" (1988: 228–229). What are Norman's motivations for murdering Marion Crane? Brill notes that the psychologist in the film's ending scene says that Norman kills Marion in paranoid response to his sexual attraction to her, and "Mother's" subsequent jealously. Brill speculates that Norman's motive might be more complex: "it may also be that she sets off his murderous impulses when she threatens to encroach on his fragile sense of place and to force the present into his past. Only when she suggests that Norman leave his home and put his mother 'someplace,' does he display overt hostility to her" (1988: 229). I take Brill here to be appealing to intuitive psychology, although his views may well be inflected by psychoanalysis. It is unsurprising that folk psychologies may become meshed, to a greater or lesser extent, with the dominant clinical or scientific psychologies of a given time.

Figure 3. Norman and Marion in the parlor of the Bates Motel.

Spectator Responses

The assumptions of a shared folk psychology are what allow critics and scholars to *identify* cues in films as designed to elicit particular kinds of effects. For example, when I note that Hitchcock uses a particular technique because it elicits suspense, I reach that conclusion not because the technique made me feel suspenseful, but because it is the kind of technique that would be used by someone who shared assumptions with me about what suspense is and how people generally become suspenseful. This kind of "reverse engineering" most often depends on the commonplace assumptions of intuitive psychology.

Of the scene in Marion's workplace, the Lowery Real Estate Offices, James Naremore writes of how the details accumulated in the scene increase the spectator's sympathy for Marion (Figure 4): "She is surrounded by vulgar, undeserving types who [unlike Marion] have marriage, money, and sometimes both. . . . Everything [Cassidy] says makes us feel the basic injustice of Marion's situation" (1973: 33) and more accepting of her stealing the money. William Rothman (1982), likewise, writes of the audience's sympathy for Norman Bates. By allowing us to think that Norman might leave the money behind in the motel room after the murder, and that Marion's car might fail to fully sink into the lake, Hitchcock creates suspense; Norman might leave some relevant clue and escape detection. As Rothman writes, "Yet I take it that we wish for him to be spared, to be left alone, even if it means that the mother will be free to kill again. We feel that Norman has suffered enough, and surely Hitchcock does not condemn us for our sympathy" (1982: 313).

Few critics can resist an account of the effect of the shower scene on spectators. Of this scene Durgnat writes, "The murder is too erotic not to enjoy, but too grisly to enjoy. Its ferocity and pornography are opposed, we are shocked into violent protest and horror, yet they force on the average spectator a rapid, hysteric, moral oscillation between protest and enjoyment" (1974: 325). V. F. Perkins claims that Hitchcock's treatment of the murder "aestheticizes the horror, abstracting from reality so that we receive the most powerful and vivid *impression* of violence, brutality, and despair . . . without provoking physical

Figure 4. Marion "surrounded by vulgar, undeserving types."

revulsion—which would detach us from the film" (1972: 108). Naremore describes the spectator's experience this way: "If we approach the film innocently, we become victims of an outrageous joke, a trick that is in such bad taste we feel guilty for having appreciated it" (1973: 55). Robin Wood argues that spectators are shocked at the meaninglessness of Marion's murder, which undermines the spectator's "recently restored" sense of security: "so engrossed are we in Marion, so secure in her potential salvation, that we can scarcely believe it is happening; when it is over, and she is dead, we are left shocked, with nothing to cling to, the apparent center of the film entirely dissolved," and ultimately leading into the spectator's descent into a "chaos world" ([1989] 2002: 146).

Linda Williams (2004), to take a recent example, argues for a universal spectator response in her analysis of *Psycho*. She writes that there "can be no doubt . . . that one primary 'attraction' of the film's horror is the spectacle of mutilation of a woman's naked body" (Williams 2004: 180–181). She goes on to write: "all viewers can be assumed to be somewhat identified with Marion and to be relatively, though not completely, unprepared for the attack. . . . They are taken by surprise by this first irrational irruption of violence, mystified by the lack of a distinct view of the attacker, shocked by the eerie sound and rhythms of screaming violins blending with screaming victim, and energized by the rapid cutting of the scene." Williams concludes, "This much is true for all spectators" (2004: 191–192).

Beyond particular scenes and techniques, critics may also assess the aggregate effect of viewing *Psycho*. George Toles (1999) writes that *Psycho* contains no point of release for the spectator, meaning that there is no satisfaction of closure, no therapeutic moment: "Part of Hitchcock's complex achievement in the film is gradually to deprive us of our sense of what 'safe ground' looks like or feels like" (1999: 159). "Art that lacks all mobility, as this art does, can only fester in the place where it's stuck—and hence communicates by infection, spreading the mess that can't be gotten rid of to whatever it touches" (Toles 1999: 162). Donald Spoto claims that a feeling of despair envelops *Psycho:* "For most, a first viewing of *Psycho* is marked by suspense, even mounting terror, and by a sense of decay and death permeating the whole. Yet, for all its overt terror, repeated viewings leave one mostly with a profound sense of sadness" ([1976] 1992: 326). Richard Allen (2007: 110) claims that what makes *Psycho* a "profoundly transgressive and disturbing work" is that Norman is such a sympathetic figure.

Alternatively, for Robin Wood viewing *Psycho* has a certain therapeutic value. Audiences come to understand something about themselves: "We have been led to accept Norman Bates as a potential extension of ourselves. That we all carry within us somewhere every human potentiality, for good or evil, so that we all share in a common guilt, may be . . . a truism; the greatness of

Psycho lies in its ability, not merely to *tell* us this, but to make us experience it" (Wood [1989] 2002: 148).

Spectator Difference: Gender

Some might claim that the application of folk psychology to spectator response is unable to distinguish between spectators. This is hardly the case, however. Many of our commonplace assumptions about human psychology incorporate beliefs about differences in persons according to gender, age, class, and so on. There is no reason to think that estimations of audience effects cannot incorporate such distinctions as well. If one tendency of criticism is to assume the responses of spectators to be universal, it is precisely the intuitive sense that spectators *are* different in some regards that leads us to correct universalist assumptions. To illustrate this, I draw attention to a few considerations of gendered audience response in relation to *Psycho*.

Some critics may assume a universal male spectator, and others recognize gender differences (which themselves are often subject to further division according to age, level of education, and sexual orientation, for example). Of the shower sequence, Naremore writes: "Hitchcock has not only teased us with our voyeurism, he has punished us. It should make the male audience even more uncomfortable to reflect that even while they watched the stabbing . . . they were hoping to catch a glimpse of a naked body" (1973: 59).

Williams (2004) goes further in gauging gender differences in response to the shower scene (Figure 5). Williams, as already mentioned, claimed that all audiences will respond to the shower scene of *Psycho* in similar ways. Yet some types of responses to the scene will be gender specific. Her essay on *Psycho* features several photographic stills of audience members reacting to the shower scene. She notes that whereas men in the photographs tend to look intently at the screen, the women tend to cringe; some look down; some cover their ears. Women

Figure 5. The shower scene of Psycho.

may "identify more" with the image of Marion being attacked "because we are insufficiently distanced from the image." Because terror is "gendered feminine," men take a controlled and distanced reaction to Marion's murder. Women find less pleasure in the scene: "Because women already perceive themselves as more vulnerable to penetration, corresponding more to the

assaulted, wide-eyed, and opened up female victim all too readily penetrated by knife or penis, women's response is more likely to *close down* . . . to such images" (Williams 2004: 193). Noting a photograph that shows female spectators both averting their eyes and laughing, Williams suggests that when women distance themselves from the screen victim, they establish a relationship of shared enjoyment in being scared with other audience members. This is a clear instance in which folk psychological notions of gender difference relate to sociology, biology, and ideology, and where it can be difficult to gauge where folk psychology ends and sociology, biology, and ideology begin.

Theme

To the extent that the film's themes are dependent on its psychological effects, critics call on folk psychology. We saw this above with Wood's claims about the spectator's experience in relation to the theme of common guilt. Naremore (1973), like others, claims that Hitchcock wants spectators to become aware of their *role* as spectators. *Psycho* is about the act of watching, about the act of contemplation itself. Of the scene in which Norman Bates peeps at Marion through the hole behind the painting in his parlor, Naremore writes:

> We, as members of the audience, are bird-watchers, implicated in Norman's voyeurism but also passive and knowing witnesses to his crimes. By the end of the film, we will become uncomfortably aware of the identity between our eyes and those of Alfred Hitchcock—we are detached, ironic observers, like the "cruel eyes" that Norman fears in the insane asylum, which have the power of "watching . . . all the time."
> (1973: 50)

Notice here that theme and psychological effect are intertwined; it is not just reflexivity at work, but the psychological processes that lead to the spectator's awareness of it, and most important, the spectators' realization that they have become detached and ironic observers.

Rothman, similarly, notes the reflexive experience of the spectator and makes this a centerpiece of his interpretation of the film. For Rothman, at the heart of *Psycho,* and indeed of "every film," is "a truth we already know: we have been born into the world and we are fated to die" (1982: 341). In this regard Rothman discusses the appearance of the silhouetted figure within the shower sequence, with knife dramatically raised and about to strike, as compelling the spectator to acknowledge "murderousness and to acknowledge that we are the object of murderous rage." He writes, "The identification of the shower curtain with the movie screen—that 'safety curtain' we assumed would separate us from the world of the film—makes this dramatic gesture

even more terrifying. For it presents the monstrous figure not simply as a denizen of a world safely cut off from our own, but as real" (Rothman 1982: 299). Again, notice that the film's themes are discussed as emerging not merely from the film's techniques, but also from the spectator's responses to those techniques. And those responses are gauged on the basis of sheer intuition, by an implicit appeal to folk psychology.

Folk Psychology Contested and Debated

The uses of intuitive psychology often extend beyond the attempt to understand films and spectator response to much broader concerns. Allen (2007), for example, contends that Hitchcock can be seen as participating in a debate about the proper understanding of heterosexual marriage, which I take to be a debate in part about the assumptions of folk psychology. Debates about heterosexual marriage extend beyond the domain of folk psychology, yet the assumptions of folk psychology figure importantly in those debates. One can imagine that psychological assumptions about gender and sexuality, for example, figure prominently in cultural conceptions of marriage.

In this case, the critic does not merely employ folk psychology to understand the film and its effects, but posits one of the functions of narrative film to be the taking of a position in the construction and critique of common folk psychological assumptions about marriage. Allen (2007: xiii) takes Hitchcock as an amoral romantic ironist or aesthete. Yet for Allen, Hitchcock's films both affirm traditional heterosexual romance and critique it. Thus Allen places Hitchcock at the heart of a political and moral debate about a central social institution. One might legitimately argue that this view sees films as potentially having a role to play in the affirmation and critique of folk psychology itself, in commonplace assumptions not merely of what is "right" or "wrong," but of all of the psychological assumptions that relate to romantic attachments. Are people the happiest or most fulfilled when in a stable heterosexual relationship? What are the effects of divorce or marital strife on a person's psychological condition? The folk-psychological answers to these questions are a contested body of beliefs, and the filmmaker plays a role in altering and/or affirming those beliefs.

Lesley Brill's (1988) work on Hitchcock also demonstrates the affirmation of a role for narrative film in constructing and critiquing folk psychology. Brill does much else as well; he analyzes what he calls arresting images, symbols, the thematic use of props, the use of light, parallels between eating and sex, the motif of the failure of language, and other insightful observations. Yet at a fundamental level, Brill sees *Psycho* as a narrative about people and their desires, needs, and wants, and what they do to attain them. Brill implicitly assumes, like many critics, that narratives are just about human behavior and psychology. More than that, narratives exist to comment on, extend our un-

derstanding of, or take a thematic position on human psychology. Here is the crux of Brill's interpretation of *Psycho:*

> *In a world without grace or forgiveness, Norman and Marion fail in their struggles to find identity and a place among other people. They die or are replaced. . . . No rebirth, only obliteration. . . . What [Bill] Rothman calls "the mystery of the real identity and nature of 'Norman Bates,'" cannot be explained by examining Norman Bates alone. It has to do with the nature of human identity itself, and with the capabilities and inadequacies that allow us to imagine what we might hope to become at the same time that we are unable to attain the self-recreation that we crave. (1988: 236)*

Thus Brill takes the film to be a comment or "position" on human identity, and one central purpose of the film to be to contribute to our knowledge or understanding of persons, to the storehouse of knowledge and assumption that is commonsense psychology. This takes us far afield from the intentions and desires that lie at the heart of folk psychology, more narrowly considered. Yet I see no reason to exclude commonsense notions of basic human well-being from the domain folk psychology, especially in relation to the narrative arts.

Stories and Persons: An Evolutionary Perspective

The turn to folk psychology presumes, and rightly so, that narratives at some level are *centrally* about persons, and that stories presume a folk psychological understanding of characters as persons. By "person" I do not necessarily mean a human being. For the purpose of this article, let us consider a person to be any being with intentions, desires, and thoughts. Thus Shrek and R2D2 are just as much persons as Marion and Norman. On a broad human scale, one of the fundamental uses of narrative fiction is to consider and learn from the situations of persons in relation to their beliefs, desires, emotions, intentions, and behavior. This central function of narrative fiction has a clear role in human adaptation, and can be explained from an evolutionary perspective. As Brian Boyd notes, art in general "increases cognitive skills, repertories, and sensitivities." "A work of art, " he writes, "acts like a playground for the mind, a swing or slide or a merry-go-round of visual or aural or social pattern" (2009: 15). Narrative fiction, in particular, "helps us to understand ourselves, to think—emotionally, imaginatively, reflectively—about human behavior, and to step outside the immediate pressures and the automatic reactions of the moment" (Boyd 2009: 208). Lisa Zunshine, similarly, argues that interaction with fiction "provides grist for the mills of our mind-reading adaptations that have evolved to deal with real people" (2006: 16).

Many narrative films are what Daniel Hutto calls "folk psychological narratives," that is, stories that explain the actions of a person or persons, or that

Figure 6. We maintain our interest in Norman's fate until the very end.

call on viewers to take a strong interest in considering the circumstances of such actions (2007a, 2007b). *Psycho* is clearly such a narrative in that the fascination of the narrative centrally involves a strong interest in Marion and Norman's actions, desires, and fates (Figure 6).

The ability to understand and predict other people's behavior is a basic human skill, and engagement with narratives can develop and hone this skill. Hutto argues that our childhood engagement with age-appropriate narratives "is the basis of these sophisticated abilities—i.e., it is through such socially scaffolded means that folk psychological skills are normally acquired and fostered" (2007b: 47; see also Hutto 2007a). As we mature, more complex tales enable us to apply folk psychological principles in more particular and complex circumstances, to refine and stretch folk psychology. Hutto calls this the "narrative practice hypothesis"—that it is through such narrative practice that we learn to unite beliefs, desires, and actions, and to become familiar with the norms of folk psychology. As Hutto notes, "sustained experience with folk psychological narratives primes us for this richer practical understanding by giving us an initial sense of which kinds of background factors can matter, why they do so, and how they do so in particular cases" (2007b: 63).

It might be argued that Hutto exaggerates the centrality of narrative in the development of human skills in facility with folk psychology. In Hutto's defense, we should note that "narrative practice" is more than simply reading or watching; for children it would also involve interchange with peers, parents, and/or teachers. We might also note that folk psychological narratives are not necessarily fictional, and can include the stories we tell each other about relatives and friends, media reports, and discussions about the antics of celebrities and politicians. Even if the narrative practice hypothesis were thought to be somewhat reductive, it is nonetheless clear that the use of narrative in teaching and refining social cognition remains vitally important.

The critic who speculates about the psychology of characters, estimates the effects of techniques or entire films on spectators, and considers the implications of films for the "human condition," then implicitly acknowledges a chief source of the delight we take in narrative fictions—they are the stories of persons. For most spectators, this interaction with characters "as persons" is one of the chief sources of pleasure in narrative fiction. If such interaction improves the understanding of human behavior, then it has significant adaptive value. If the roots of our interest in the personal stories lie deep within human evolutionary development, then it is not surprising that it is pleasurable. As is the case with sex, eating, and the nurture of the young, pleasure encourages practice.

Against Folk Psychology: Apparatus Theory and Cultural Studies
The employment of folk psychology in film criticism, then, is pervasive, ranging from its use to understand characters, to implicit assumptions that the

very purpose of narrative fiction is in part to negotiate the contested fields of folk psychology. Some approaches to film reception, however, reject the appeal to folk psychology.

Apparatus Theory

Resistance to folk psychology in film studies has come from varied sources. In film studies, the "apparatus theory" of the 1970s and 1980s rejected common-sense psychology in favor of a model of the spectator rooted in Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian conceptions of ideology, together with discussions of the gendered nature of such positions in mainstream narrative films initiated by Laura Mulvey and others. This Lacanian/Althusserian theory of the film spectator quickly, but only temporarily, supplanted the "common sense" approximations of spectator response in the work of humanist scholars such as Robin Wood and V. F. Perkins. In retrospect, however, although "apparatus theory" generated some useful insights, most of these were arguably derived not from Lacanian psychoanalysis, but from the intuitive psychology it was meant to replace. What has been useful about Mulvey's famous essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" ([1975] 1999) for example, comes not from the essay's psychoanalytic underpinnings in discussions of scopophilia or castration anxiety, but from her intuitively plausible claim that mainstream narrative cinema has been designed for a male heterosexual spectator. Mulvey's contention that mainstream narrative positioned the spectator as male was met with a flood of response rooted in an intuitive sense that spectatorship was not so easily defined, that gender itself was not so clearly differentiated, and that in fact even mainstream movies often allow "multiple identifications" and diverse "subjectivities."

Cultural Studies

Apparatus theory, and with it Althusser, Lacan, and Barthes (but perhaps not Mulvey), have lost their aura. The predictable swing of the pendulum away from apparatus theory resulted in a distrust of general theories of spectatorship, and especially in any conception of a "hypothetical spectator." In the current climate that favors cultural studies of film and media, it is a fundamental assumption that audiences, fans, and viewers are socially located, historically grounded members of particular and multiple communities. The general assumption often seems to be that history and ethnic, gender, or some other form of group identity trumps all, that the human being is a tabula rasa, an almost infinitely malleable entity, subject to whatever social discourses pass through her or him, and not subject to any universal "human nature." Like apparatus theory, cultural studies approaches to film are suspicious of folk psychology, but for different reasons. Cultural studies rejects folk psychology because it disavows psychological models of the spectator altogether. It is

common to hear criticism of psychological or formalist theories as ahistorical or "monolithic" for their purported ignorance of historical circumstances of spectatorship. Yet cultural and reception studies are rarely taken to task for ignorance of human psychology.

For some, the goal is to bypass general models of the spectator altogether and to reach "the real spectator." In the introduction to *Hollywood Spectatorship,* Melvyn Stokes writes that one of the book's central purposes is to "question the dominance of theoretical views of spectatorship" (Stokes and Maltby 2001: 1) in favor of conceptions of actual spectators rooted in empirical historical research.

It is useful to briefly examine the model of the spectator at work in one prominent historical reception studies proponent, Janet Staiger, because although Staiger's work cannot necessarily be taken as representative of all of cultural studies, it does embody the suspicion of models of the spectator and of spectator psychology that is characteristic of much work in this area. Staiger writes that historical reception studies is history and not philosophy, and that "it does not attempt to construct a generalized, systematic explanation of how individuals might have comprehended texts, and possibly someday will, but rather [describes] how they actually have understood them" (1992: 8). Staiger is suspicious of any model of the spectator, even of those that hypothesize the nature of subgroups of spectators in relation to identity (class, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) or historical period. Such hypotheses are likely to "universalize" spectator experience, which to her mind is a serious methodological error. As Staiger writes, "a certain predestination in the research guides interpretations of data when categories of individuals are already constituted by the researcher" (1992: 74–75).

Stagier cannot ultimately escape model construction, however; her accounts of historical reception depend on and build from a theoretical model of the spectator. The first tenet of Staiger's theory is this: a film has no immanent meaning. Viewers make meaning in relation to context and personal needs (identity, for example), not in relation to the text alone (Staiger 2000: 162). True enough. Yet audiences and filmmakers rely on mutually shared conventions of meaning, representation, and a shared sense of human psychology; this is context enough to give films meaning. If spectators, filmmakers, and the film industry share a common folk psychology, then spectator responses are likely to have much in common for this reason. I suspect, however, that Staiger is making a more radical claim than that films are produced and interpreted within contexts, and this is where Staiger's model becomes most apparent. She further claims that the social formations and constructed identities of the self are radically contradictory and heterogeneous. Film viewers' interpretations and responses to films are individual and unique—or in Staiger's language, "perverse." "Readers" are "heterogeneous, contradictory,

in process," not unitary (Staiger 1992: 27, 30). As Staiger claims, "contexts of social formations and constructed identities of the self in relation to historical conditions explain the interpretative strategies and affective responses of readers. Thus, receptions need to be related to specific historical conditions as events" (2000: 162). Yet even within a particular context no "reading" of a film is unified "because the historical context's discursive formation is contradictory and heterogeneous" (162). In addition, readers (sometimes, always, commonly?) develop a coherent self in "opposition to the text" and find pleasure in dispersion and contradiction (Staiger 1992: 30).

Staiger's reasons for emphasizing pleasures in dispersion and contradiction are telling: they "are more in line with a historical materialist perspective about readers" (1992: 30). Thus we come full circle, for this is precisely the kind of model of the spectator that Staiger argues scholars should avoid. Staiger's model focuses on some but not all of the activities of the spectator, and her model constrains what she takes to be important or interesting. We could go on to argue the merits of the model Staiger provides, but for now, the point is that no scholar can avoid a model of the hypothetical spectator, and such models must inevitably include notions of spectator psychology.

Is Staiger's model superior to a folk psychological model? That depends on what one wants to discover. If the critic is interested in idiosyncratic or "perverse" responses, Staiger's model is useful. If the examination of commonalities of response among audiences is the goal, then the folk psychological model is superior, not least for the reason that it can account for what I have called the filmmaker-audience loop.

The cultural studies proponent might further respond that the search for commonalities of response is prone to various sorts of stereotypes and distortions, and that it is for this reason that folk psychology must be held in suspicion. As Gregory Currie notes, folk psychology has sometimes been thought to lie at the heart of a racist and patriarchal traditional humanism:

> Much of the revolt against traditional humanistic studies of the arts has been based on a rejection of that tradition's casual assumption of a community of values, concerns, and interests—indeed of a whole conception of human flourishing—which many contemporary scholars reject as unsystematic, subjective, and deriving from the unacknowledged hegemony of a certain class, race, and sex. The "common-sense" view of human beings having been unmasked as the insidious creature of interest, an alternative had to be found. (1999: 108)

Currie claims that this rejection of common-sense psychology in the humanist tradition is a mistake, not least for the reason that folk psychology is "a subtle and successful instrument for helping us make sense of the community of minds in which we find ourselves immersed" (1999: 108).

The set of assumptions that constitute folk psychology is neither fixed nor wholly consistent. In fact, it is contested. If folk psychology is prone to stereotypes, the *correction* of harmful stereotypes may also derive from folk psychology, from the intuitive sense that such stereotypes are incorrect and harmful. The response that Mulvey received in relation to her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999) is a case in point. Her original claim that spectatorship is gendered along clearly demarcated lines received heavy criticism, emerging in part from an intuitive sense that gender is only partially determinative of viewer response and that gendered responses are less uniform than originally claimed. Our intuitions not only provide us with a sense of how spectators might respond, but also lead us to correct counterintuitive aspects of academic theories.

Folk psychology has room for spectator differences, and criticism that employs folk psychology can take a stance opposed to dominant conceptions of gender, race, or any other social distinction.

Folk psychology, in the broad sense I employ, has room for disagreement, and thus it is a site of contestation. The application of folk psychology to films need not presume a privileged spectator, nor need it presume that all spectators will respond in the same way. Folk psychology has room for spectator differences, and criticism that employs folk psychology can take a stance opposed to dominant conceptions of gender, race, or any other social distinction.

Cognitive Film Studies and Folk Psychology

Because cognitive film theory turns to scientific psychology and philosophical analysis to understand films, it might be thought that cognitive film scholars would reject folk psychology for less naive psychological theories. Perhaps some cognitive film theorists do hold folk psychology in suspicion, at least in some regards. In other ways, however, the cognitive approach takes the understanding of folk psychology in relation to film as basic and essential.

Among cognitive theorists, David Bordwell's critique of film interpretation in *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (1989) might be thought to challenge the place of folk psychology in criticism. Bordwell argues for a dislocation of interpretation in favor of what he calls "historical poetics." Bordwell's critique holds that inherent in interpretation is looking beyond the film, a process by which the critic employs various rhetorical schemas to construct the story and characters, then maps various semantic fields onto them, guiding the interpretation away from the work itself. For example, the critic uses the person schema to construct film characters, a schema derived in part from the folk psychology of actual persons (Bordwell 1989: 156). A typical subsequent move is to "make the characters represent abstract semantic fields—spectacle, artistic bad faith, spontaneity, or repressed aspects of Spanish history" (157). In other words, characters are taken to represent broad ideas. This personification in interpretation goes beyond the con-

struction of characters. Bordwell lists examples of critics making implausible claims about directors, personifying the camera and the film's narration, and so on.

Yet though certain passages of *Making Meaning* might be thought to question the very activity of personification, the book is better taken as a warning not to take this personification beyond textual warrant. Bordwell's later work holds a central place for the folk psychological understanding of characters for viewers, critics, and scholars. In his *Poetics of Cinema,* Bordwell (2008) affirms that the study of narrative must begin with our ordinary understanding of human psychology and move on from there. Folk psychology may be unreliable, Bordwell notes, but narratives capitalize on this unreliability. "In real life," he writes, "it may not be fair to judge someone on our first impressions, but we do, and narratives capitalize on this tendency by introducing characters so that their essential traits pop out clearly" (Bordwell 2008: 88). Again, we face the filmmaker-audience loop. Thus Bordwell cannot be taken to reject the application of folk psychology in the understanding of film devices and techniques. Indeed, for Bordwell, an understanding of folk psychology is the beginning point. I would argue that the understanding of the way films elicit responses to characters as persons is an important aspect of the historical poetics of cinema.

It is only by considering folk psychology in relation to scientific psychology and philosophical analysis that we can more fully understand its workings. This is Bordwell's approach, and is what I take to be the approach of many cognitive film theorists and philosophers (e.g., Carroll 2008; Plantinga 2009; G.M. Smith 2003; M. Smith 1995). Even if folk psychology is thought to be relatively accurate in its domain, it is far from comprehensive. Folk psychology is silent on neuropsychology, visual and auditory perceptual systems, language learning, and unconscious learning. There are a host of fascinating issues in the reception of films, from "metakinesis" to the nature of human mimicry (Plantinga 2009: 119–136) for which scientific psychology must be called in. One might argue that folk psychology is insufficiently attuned to automatic processes and to the cognitive unconscious, and more finely attuned to social psychology, personality, and to a lesser extent, cognitive psychology. To the extent that this is true, scientific psychology can supplement folk psychology and can help us understand the filmmaker-audience loop from a critical perspective. Patrick Colm Hogan calls "representationalism" the rigorous systematization of folk psychology, correcting its simplification and lack of "objectification" (2003: 32–33).

Philosophical analysis can also improve the application of folk psychology to film criticism and scholarship. Our folk psychological concepts are often imprecise, ambiguous, and even contradictory. The uses of the terms "sympathy" and "empathy," for example, are often muddled by conceptual confusions,

condemned to fruitless application by differing assumptions about what the words mean (Plantinga 2009 98–101). In helping us sort out the relationships between our psychological concepts, philosophical analysis can improve our discourse. The goal for film scholars ought not to be to wholly avoid folk psychology, but rather to correct and supplement it with the tools of scientific psychology and philosophical analysis.

Where I might part ways with some of my cognitivist colleagues is in my sympathy (and in some cases, enthusiasm) for extra-textual discourse about film characters and narrative generally. If Hutto is correct that one of the primary functions of narrative is a teaching function in relation to folk psychology; if Boyd and Zunshine are right that narratives equip us by increasing social intelligence, sensitivity, and understanding; if this concern for persons and their situations is one of the chief pleasures of the interaction with fictional narrative for many audiences; if all of this is true, then I would think that the discussion of film characters beyond the specific warrant of the text is understandable, and more than that, an important cultural activity in relation to fictional narrative.

A Talent, a Sensitivity, a Learned Skill

My argument has been that folk psychology in filmmaking, viewing, criticism, and scholarship is not only pervasive but should be acknowledged as a necessary and important source of insight into films. The appeal to commonsense psychology, admittedly, is not without dangers. The application of folk psychology, in our lives and in film criticism, is both a skill and a practice. It can be learned and its practice improved, but some of us seem to have innate sensitivities in this area. I often notice this among my students; some have the capacity to understand the motives and intentions of characters at a complex level, while others do not. Whether this is a matter of innate capacities or differing stages of development, I cannot always tell. Similarly, the application of folk psychology in film criticism, interpretation, or analysis can be performed expertly or badly, depending on the experience and sensitivities of the critic. Having heard that Hitchcock is a "master of suspense," for example, a naive critic might examine the shower sequence in *Psycho* for its creation of suspense, without recognizing the central role of surprise in the scene. Experience with many narratives and a mature understanding of what suspense and surprise *are* provide some critics with the tools to work up more sophisticated analyses.

The use of intuitive psychology in criticism can overreach, or it can be used appropriately. It can be learned through practice, as we accumulate life experiences, as we are exposed to numerous fictional narratives, and as we supplement folk psychology with the conceptual analysis of philosophy and with the

findings of scientific psychology. Improvement in the capacity to apply folk psychology to fictional narratives also depends on the capacity to distinguish purely idiosyncratic responses from those shared by other audience members. Thus a good critic will be open to the responses of other persons, and to his or her readers.

If some criticism rooted in folk psychological principles is exaggerated, misplaced, or otherwise faulty, this says nothing of the importance or usefulness of folk psychology in criticism. Rather this points to the fact that some critics are better able to discern the folk psychological principles at work in a film than others. Some critics can become carried away by various enthusiasms or by idiosyncratic understandings of persons, for example. The application of folk psychology to narrative film is a talent, a sensitivity, and a learned skill. We should not expect all critics and scholars to be able to rise to the occasion.

The application of folk psychology to narrative film is a talent, a sensitivity, and a learned skill. We should not expect all critics and scholars to be able to rise to the occasion.

What is the proper place of folk psychology in film scholarship and research? It is useful in "reverse engineering" film effects in light of what I have called the filmmaker-audience loop. It is indispensable in understanding characters in the context of narrative. Moreover, the discussion of characters as persons in criticism is understandable in light of one of the central functions of fictional narrative. Like pretend play, narrative fiction trains our capacities for social cognition, one aspect of which is our ability to understand and apply folk psychological assumptions.

Yet film criticism and scholarship best use folk psychology when it is viewed critically, having been supplemented and corrected not only by experience, but by philosophical analysis and scientific psychology. We cannot expect film scholars and critics to become psychologists or philosophers, but familiarity with the best these disciplines have to offer will certainly be a benefit. As a humanist practice, film and media criticism and scholarship cannot dispense with the speculative nature of folk psychology, but it can supplement it, correct it, and recognize it for what it is. Folk psychology is little discussed, little understood, and rarely subject to sustained scholarly attention. The role of intuitive psychology in filmmaking, viewing, criticism, and scholarship, however, is vital and should become a central object of study.

Acknowledgments

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