


Review Essay: Cognitivism Goes to the Movies

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Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), xix + 672 pp., \$152.00 (cloth).

Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), xii + 280 pp., \$21.33 (paperback).

Torben Grodal, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), viii + 324 pp., \$30.78 (paperback).

In just under twenty five years, analytic philosophy of film and cognitivist film theory have joined forces in a formidable research paradigm, one that has moved from keen rival to would-be victor in the battle for the “arts and minds” (to quote Gregory Currie) of film theorists and students of the moving image. David Bordwell’s *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), Noël Carroll’s “The Power of Movies” (1985), and Bordwell’s “A Case for Cognitivism” (1989), pioneered the wave of film theory during the 1990s that based itself, not on Lacanian psychoanalysis or various *maitres à penser*, but rather on analytic philosophy and cognitive psychology. Noël Carroll’s *Mystifying Movies* (1988) famously attacked what he and Bordwell later dubbed “grand theory” (psychoanalytic, semiotic, and ideologico-critical film theory of the 1970s and 1980s). Bordwell and Carroll followed up with their jointly edited landmark volume *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (1996), which advocated the kind of empirical middle-level theorizing—shaped by analytic and cognitivist approaches—that aimed to define the future of the discipline. Despite individual differences, a host of theorists have since taken up the cause, establishing a flourishing field of philosophical and cognitivist writing on film that continues to grow apace.

The fruits of this apparent paradigm shift are evident in the publication of three major books in 2009: Paisley Livingstone and Carl Plantinga’s massive reference text, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*; Carl Plantinga’s

Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience; and Torben Grodal's *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film*. These books all attest to the vitality of the current wave of analytic-cognitivist philosophy of film.¹ They also mark a critical moment in the emerging sub-discipline of philosophy and film, a field whose identity, direction, and future is a major issue in publications such as these. The appearance of these works provides a useful occasion for a critical glance at recent developments in the philosophy of film, which I take up less from the perspective of a committed fellow-traveler than that of an interested foreigner. This somewhat distanced but engaged perspective allows me to underline some of the broader philosophical issues raised by this emerging genre of film theory.

Bigger Than *Ben-Hur*: The Routledge Companion to Film and Philosophy

The publication of major reference volumes devoted to specific topic areas in the philosophy of film is a sure sign of disciplinary recognition. There is no question, as many philosophers of film wryly observe, that film and philosophy has been a surprise growth area in recent years, surprising because of the traditional suspicion between (mainstream) philosophy and more humanities-oriented, culturally or politically inflected, film theory. The publication of Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga's *Routledge Companion*—following the related anthology edited by Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (2006)—confirms that philosophy of film is now a recognized area of research playing an increasingly influential role in the direction of film studies.

It is always a welcome event when two of the most respected figures in an emerging field edit a volume aspiring both to contemporaneity (summarizing what is most current in the field) and comprehensiveness (providing appropriate overviews of the most important concepts, debates, and developments). Livingston and Plantinga's *Routledge Companion* fulfills these desiderata admirably, providing a rich conspectus of issues, concepts, and debates, a list of significant authors and theoretical trends, and an informative selection of film examples in the concluding section on "Film as Philosophy." Livingstone and Plantinga have assembled a team of highly influential philosophical film theorists—including representatives from both sides of the analytic/Continental divide—to compose pithy and informative entries for the *Companion*. These include Richard Allen (on psychoanalysis), David Bordwell (on cognitive theory and on Sergei Eisenstein), Noël Carroll (on narration, narrative closure, and style), William Rothman (on Stanley Cavell), Vivian Sobchack (on phenomenology), Murray Smith (on consciousness), Thomas Wartenberg (on film as philosophy), and George Wilson (on interpretation). Livingstone and Plantinga also contribute their own *Companion* entries (on Ingmar Bergman, and on spectatorship and documentary). As this impressive list of authors and topics suggests, the result is a rich and authoritative reference work that canvasses

most of the major themes in this emerging field. To their credit, the editors have also gestured toward pluralism, including entries related to the “old” paradigm of film theory; for example, on psychoanalysis, phenomenology, semiotics and semiology, as well on figures such as Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, Christian Metz, Jean Mitry, and Edgar Morin. To this extent, the *Routledge Companion* would reward readers of varying disciplinary persuasions, whether dedicated film theorist or curious analytic philosopher, Continental aesthete or enthusiastic cognitivist. For all its gestures toward pluralism, however, this is a reference text that aims to demarcate an emerging field, making clear in the process what it means, methodologically, argumentatively, and stylistically, to do philosophy of film.

The selection criteria for this weighty 672-page tome seem to be something like the following: a) theoretical relevance for current debates within philosophical film theory; or b) film genres, authors, movements, or films that have elicited attention from philosophically inclined film theorists. This accounts for the selection and emphasis on certain topics (authorship, depiction, emotion and affect, empathy and character engagement, genre, medium, and realism), the selection of particular authors (Arnheim, Bordwell, Cavell, Deleuze, Münsterberg, and Wittgenstein), genres (Dogme 95, documentary, horror, pornography, avant-garde film, tragedy and comedy), or examples of film as philosophy (Bergman, Malick, Tarkovsky, *The Five Obstructions* [2003], *Gattaca* [1997], and *Memento* [2000]). As a compendium of issues, concepts, and debates within the new philosophy of film, the *Routledge Companion* comes highly recommended, not least for showcasing the theoretically productive character of much recent work in this field.

A reference work aiming to be both contemporary and comprehensive inevitably elicits the reader’s own theoretical wish-list, whether this includes pet topics, favored authors, neglected genres, or esteemed auteurs. Although one can always point out various sins of omission in any such compendium, there are nonetheless a few that might call for some critical remarks.

Despite an impressive array of topical issues relevant to current debates, there is no entry on that staple of “bad” film theory of the 1970s and 1980s, which has resurfaced in recent debates concerning global cinemas: ideology. Practitioners of the new philosophy of film frequently complain that the old screen/film theory was blinded by its concern with ideology, so it might have been useful to include an entry explaining why this was a problematic approach, or how the new wave of analytic-cognitivist film theory deals with the ideological dimensions of film. The reader may also wonder why film aesthetics misses out (as does film theory!). To be sure, film style is the subject of an excellent discussion by Noël Carroll, who advocates a broadly formalist, even functionalist notion of style, explaining why film form is the way that it is, in a given case, and how the notion of style explains “the way in which the movie

embodies its point or purpose” (268). Nonetheless, one may still want to know how contemporary philosophy of film relates to aesthetics or how film aesthetics contributes to the philosophical discussion of film, or more pointedly, of film as philosophy.

Genre is the subject of a precise and enlightening entry (by Brian Laetz and Dominic McIver Lopes), and there are also informative entries on “genre and other types,” covering Dogme 95, documentary, horror, pornography, avant-garde film, tragedy, and comedy. Important as these genres are, more obvious choices such as action, art film, classical Hollywood, melodrama, romance, and science fiction have also generated considerable philosophical interest and debate. Wartenberg’s entry on the topic of film as philosophy is excellent, and there are fine discussions of philosophically revered auteurs such as Bergman, Malick, and Tarkovsky, but the selection of films on offer does not really reflect the diversity of work in this area.² It also suggests that there remains, at times, an undesirably rigid opposition between (philosophical) film theory and (philosophical) film criticism in some of the work that explores the relationship between film and philosophy or, more particularly, the idea of film as philosophy. Despite these quibbles, the *Routledge Companion* amply demonstrates how film and philosophy can engage each other to the mutual benefit of both, offering in the process enough theoretical riches to satisfy the most discerning film theorist or exacting philosopher of moving images.

Once More, with Feeling: *Moving Viewers*

Carl Plantinga’s entry on spectatorship in the *Routledge Companion* provides an appetizing entrée to his much anticipated study of the subject, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience*. It represents the crystallization of over a decade of theorizing film, with particular focus on cognitivist approaches to emotion, and extends the approach Plantinga developed in his earlier book on documentary (1997) and important volume edited with Greg Smith (1999). *Moving Viewers* articulates Plantinga’s mature theory of spectatorship; a highly readable account of what a (moderate, pluralist) cognitivist approach can teach us about analyzing the role of emotions in film experience. The title of the book is itself noteworthy. Instead of the more familiar rubrics of “Hollywood” or “classical Hollywood,” Plantinga opts for “American Film,” which captures not only Hollywood blockbusters (notably James Cameron’s *Titanic* [1997]) but also independent or “crossover” films (like *The Royal Tenenbaums* [2001]). Although the films in question are “mainstream American narrative fiction” (6), the spectators are in some sense global or even universal; they are, at any rate, “real persons,” whatever their cultural, historical, or social situation, as distinct from “subject positions” or “ideal spectators” of superseded versions of spectator theory.

Against charges of parochialism, Plantinga suggests that his moderate “cognitive-perceptual theory” of affect elicitation in American movies can accommodate cultural diversity against the background of a shared human nature. After all, popular narrative films the world over are designed to elicit affect and emotion, whether we are enjoying a Hollywood blockbuster in Brisbane, a Bollywood musical in Mumbai, or a telenovela in a Brazilian *favela*. Whatever the case, Plantinga’s cognitivist theory aims to show that “affective experience and meaning are firmly intertwined” (3), and that the spectator’s experience of movies is concerned above all with the “expression and elicitation of emotion” (5). Indeed, it is “emotion and affect” that contribute primarily to the artistic success, rhetorical power, and cultural influence—whether we classify this as “ideological” or not—of Hollywood film and popular international cinema (5).

Plantinga’s moderate cognitivism—in contrast with “cognitive fundamentalism,” which overemphasizes the role of conscious deliberation in generating emotional responses (48)—is evident in his emphasis on affect, defined as “any state of feeling or sensation” (29) involved in conscious cognition. Affect differs from emotion in being without a definite object, whereas emotions, understood as “concern-based construals,” are typically directed toward objects, ends, persons, or events. This moderate stance is also apparent in Plantinga’s insistence on “pre-conscious cognition and automatic, ‘cognitively impenetrable’ processes” (those independent of our beliefs or inaccessible to conscious control) within emotionally engaged experience (8). Rejecting the dubious opposition between affective states and cognitive processes, Plantinga offers a refreshingly pluralist theory of affect elicitation in the movies, one that consistently returns to our ordinary viewing experience, thus generating a theory of film that accords with what V. F. Perkins once described as “the naive response of the film-fan” (18).

Chapter 1, “Pleasures, Desires, Fantasies,” develops one of Plantinga’s central claims, namely the importance of retrieving the “folk-psychology” meaning of concepts (e.g., pleasure, desire, and fantasy) from their technical obfuscation (e.g., in psychoanalytical theory). The pleasure in movies, Plantinga argues, derives not from the ideological manipulation of unconscious drives but rather from a combination of cognitive play (solving narrative problems, puzzles, enigmas), visceral experience (thrills and spills), sympathy (for multiple, often conflicting characters), narrative satisfactions (cueing emotional, visceral, and cognitive experience), and reflexivity (where cultural awareness of film genre, style, and history, meets social communication and interaction) (39). Plantinga’s aim is thus to “naturalize” our pleasure in movies, to explain this pleasure cognitively, and thereby challenge psychoanalytical accounts of the manipulative power of mainstream film.

Chapter 2, “Movies and Emotions,” argues for a “grounding theory” of the emotions elicited by our immersive (bodily, affective, and cognitive) experience of film. Following Robert C. Roberts, Plantinga defines emotional responses as *concern-based construals* (55–56ff.) that are at once cognitive, relational, intentional, and embodied. Contra common criticisms of cognitivist theory, this view does not imply the banishment of unconscious processes from our diverse forms of cognitive experience. On the contrary, Plantinga points to the crucial role of the “cognitive unconscious” in our engagement with others and the world; consciousness requires unconscious cognitive operations and “automatic” responses to various stimuli (56) in order to facilitate our successful affective and emotional engagement with our environment.

This perspicuous account of perception is then brought to bear on the complex emotional experience of film. Although the kinds of emotions elicited by narrative film are similar to those experienced in ordinary life, they are accompanied by an awareness of the “fictionality” of what we are seeing (77). The well-known “paradox of fiction” that arises here—how can we be emotionally engaged with fictional characters that we know do not exist?—can be dispatched provided one holds to a moderate cognitivism that does not insist that emotion depends on belief. The paradox is only a difficulty if we assume that my emotional responses to, say, Garbo’s comic performance in Lubitsch’s *Ninotchka* (1939), are dependent on my beliefs concerning her character’s existence (as a stern, humorless Comrade who yields to the charms of Count Léon, not to mention the decadent pleasures of capitalist America). If, however, we can entertain “unasserted thoughts” concerning Ninotchka’s character, and thus engage emotionally with her character independent of any beliefs about her existence, the paradox, Plantinga argues, readily dissolves (77).³

Chapter 3, “Stories and Sympathies,” examines the temporal and narrative character of emotion. Classical Hollywood narrative, Plantinga argues, explicitly relies on the cueing and elicitation of strong emotions via narrative structure, character engagement, and the use of conventional narrative scenarios (78). Here it is the notion of “affective prefocusing” (adapting Carroll’s “criterial prefocusing”) that plays the starring role. Movies have “prefocused” ways of seeing events and characters; a “built-in gestalt or perspective” (79) that cues specific emotional responses according to the genre of the film (suspense or fright in horror films; sentiment, tears, and laughter in romantic comedies, and so on). Paradigm scenarios also play an essential role; these afford recognizable situations or episodes relating persons and events over time that elicit temporally unfolding emotional responses (80). The “hypercoherence” of narrative film, which organizes experience far more than in ordinary life, draws on prefocused, exaggerated, and dramatic episodes whose “subject matter is drawn from scenarios that will be accessible to mass audiences” (80).

Plantinga's naturalism comes to the fore here. Echoing Grodal, he argues that the prevalence of cross-cultural paradigm scenarios involving innate "primary emotions" essential for survival—for example, fear, anger, sadness, joy, love, and affection—can be explained in broadly evolutionary terms. Indeed, mainstream film narratives, Plantinga continues, are composed of such cross-culturally shared paradigm scenarios involving "coupling/mating, integration into the social group, and/or survival in the face of threat" (83). It is human nature that gave birth to Hollywood, and our evolutionary history that explains its enduring popularity. It may be enlightening to appreciate the commonality of mainstream narrative forms from this naturalistic point of view. But it is not clear how it furthers our aesthetic understanding of Hollywood to point out that it recycles tropes grounded in human nature (our evolutionary history), or how to square this claim with the rise of New Hollywood or the tradition of European art film. Plantinga's response is to deny that these mutations represent a genuine departure from the basic structures of classical Hollywood narrative (86–87). It seems rather a stretch, however, to defend a strong thesis concerning the universality of narrative paradigm scenarios by making passing observations on whether Hollywood narrative remains the template for all other non-mainstream cinematic forms. This is one instance where Plantinga's endorsement of naturalistically grounded account of film narrative and emotion strains against his culturalist commitment to film theory as "an interpretive activity firmly rooted in the arts and humanities" (7).

More convincing is his discussion of character engagement, where alignment and allegiance (to use Murray Smith's terms) can readily differ, and where allegiances can also vary across characters (whether sympathetic or antipathetic to us). Also noteworthy is his analysis of the difficulties surrounding the fine-grained distinctions often made between the cognate concepts of "empathy" and "sympathy," which Plantinga argues should be taken, in keeping with ordinary usage, as synonyms for our complex affective congruence with a character, where such congruence involves both elements of "feeling for," and "feeling with" the character and his or her plight (98–101).

Chapter 4, "The Sensual Medium," explores the visceral aspects of film and how this engages us at a bodily level in our affective experience. Plantinga presents here a fascinating discussion of how body, image, and sound interact, and how representing human figures cinematically activates forms of affective and bodily mimicry and the much-discussed phenomenon of "emotional contagion." He canvasses some of the more interesting recent research in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, including the phenomenon of auditory entrainment and suggestive research into mirror neurons, deftly integrating these findings into his cognitive-perceptual theory of the complex emotional responses involved in film experience. Chapter 5, "Affective Trajectories and Synesthesia," elaborates these insights with specific reference to

film narrative, exploring the way emotional responses are directed by narrative devices such as point of view, structure, and character engagement. The affective trajectory of a film, moreover, involves synaesthetic affects that cluster together and evoke the phenomenological “feel” of having an emotion or even several emotions (as an example Plantinga analyzes the evocation of synaesthetic guilt and shame in Hitchcock’s work).

Chapter 6, “Negative Emotions and Sympathetic Narratives,” addresses the paradox of negative emotions, or why films elicit unpleasant emotions that we might nonetheless seek out. Plantinga offers here an interesting “conversion” theory in response to this paradox, according to which the unpleasant emotions evoked by certain narratives or genres are not trumped by the pleasures of intellectual puzzle-solving or those of aesthetic appreciation. Instead, they are converted into positive and pleasurable affective and emotional states by means of a cognitive “working through” or “reconceptualization” (179). This cognitive conversion of negative into positive emotions reframes the former’s negativity “in such a way that their overall impact is both cognitively and emotionally satisfying, comforting, and pleasurable” (179). Although this account explains the working of many popular genres, Plantinga nonetheless downplays the possibility that there are intractable kinds of “negative” emotional experience—like trauma—that film can provoke that resist conversion, intellectualization, or sublimation. It would be interesting to consider what this conversion theory would make of difficult cases like Michael Haneke’s *Funny Games* (1997 and 2007) or Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009). Although these are hardly mainstream American films, they clearly respond in different ways to mainstream horror and thriller genres, which raises interesting questions concerning the “universality” of Plantinga’s theory of “the spectator’s experience.”⁴

Whatever the case, Plantinga’s investigation of the mass character of affective and emotional elicitation, the phenomena of mimicry and emotional contagion, and conversion of negative emotions into positive ones, all suggest that popular film has much broader cultural significance than any other modern art form. Plantinga thus analyzes, in his final chapter, “The Rhetoric of Emotion: Disgust and Beyond,” the rhetoric of emotion in films, taking “disgust” as a particular case study to show how bodily, physiological, moral, and cultural-historical forms of affective response are combined in this complex phenomenon. Indeed, this makes it a rich topic for the cognitivist-perceptual account of how affect elicitation contributes to the ideological meaning of film. Plantinga takes “ideology” here in a neutral sense as expressing a particular “worldview” “without the assumption of critique” (200), thus minimizing the normative force of the concept. From this perspective, Plantinga’s cognitive-perceptual theory, which promises to develop an approach to “film poetics, film rhetoric, audience response, and issues of ideology” (218), points to an

important area of research that cognitivist theories, more generally speaking, have yet to fully explore.

Plantinga's laudable aim in *Moving Viewers* is to foster a rapprochement between a naturalistic-cognitivist account of the "objective causality of affect," and the more subjective and humanistic exploration of the role of emotion within mainstream film. Affective and emotional engagement is the means by which film narrative gets off the ground, but also that by which the various ideological elements of a film exert their rhetorical force. One question that arises is how successfully Plantinga's cognitive-perceptual theory, with its methodological individualism centered on "the spectator's experience," can make the challenging shift from individual psychology to our shared cultural experience of meaning. Indeed, one promising line of inquiry opened by his book is to explain how our affective and emotional engagement with film is linked with the ideological treatment of certain themes, values, or ideas in a given narrative or genre. Here Plantinga's cognitive-perceptual theory might fruitfully intersect with more culturalist theories of spectatorship that are strong on such normative and ideological issues but much weaker in accounting for our emotionally engaged experience of film. *Moving Viewers* thus shows how a moderate cognitivist approach can provide a persuasive naturalistic theory of film spectatorship but also point to new ways of understanding the cultural significance of our going to the movies.

Planet of the Apes: Embodied Visions

If Plantinga's *Moving Viewers* represents a moderate cognitivism, Danish film theorist Torben Grodal's *Embodied Visions* is the "hard-core" version of such a theory. A bold and original attempt to be naturalistic "all the way down," Grodal's evolutionary bioculturalist approach to film does not flinch from drawing strong conclusions from its cognitivist, evolutionary, and neuroscientific framework—perhaps the most radical attempt in this direction yet. Grodal has been working on neuroscientific and evolutionary-cognitivist approaches to film narrative for over a decade, having previously published an important work on cognitivist approaches to genre that links these to emotional responses (Grodal 1997). *Embodied Visions* is the definitive statement of Grodal's radically naturalistic approach, and presents a powerful and provocative theory of film narrative, genre, and aesthetics.

The ten chapters of *Embodied Visions* can be articulated as developments of a fundamental idea: what can evolutionary psychology and neuroscience tell us about film? Rejecting "blank slate" theories of mind, the first part of the book considers the relationship between film and culture from the biological perspective of evolutionary psychology; the second part explores various aspects of film in light of recent work on the modular functioning of the brain. Here Grodal's innovation is to articulate a comprehensive film theory based

on the relationship between perception, emotion, cognition, and motor action (which Grodal dubs the “PECMA-flow model” of the brain).

Grodal begins with an attack on the “science-phobia” of the humanities before moving to a discussion of how the assumption of a biological human nature can be made compatible with the phenomena of cultural diversity. Despite the shared evolutionary inheritance of all human beings—innate biological dispositions and adaptive behaviors acquired in response to stimuli in our environment—there is significant variability in how these innate universals are culturally instantiated. Using the example of films for children that focus on bonding and attachment with a parent (or the feared loss of this attachment), Grodal argues that those genres and narratives that cue innate emotional dispositions—like children’s films, action, romance, war films, or melodrama—are likely to be universally shared and therefore more culturally enduring.

Chapter 3, “Love and Desire in the Cinema,” throws down the gauntlet by defending an evolutionary bioculturalist account of two genres likely to get film theorists talking: romance and pornography. At the risk of platitude, Grodal observes that the former focuses on “the establishment of personalized, exclusive relations” (19)—personalized bonds of love—whereas the latter is squarely concerned with the depiction of “anonymous desire” (56). Things become more provocative in Grodal’s evolutionary explanation of the enduring popularity of these genres and the apparent gender divide between them. Women are attracted to romance, Grodal argues, because of their evolutionary propensity to find mates willing to bond over the lengthy time required to raise infant offspring to maturity (“without a love bond, big-headed, intelligent humans would be impossible” [59]). Men, by contrast, enjoy pornography, he maintains, because of their evolutionary disposition to desire anonymous sexual encounters in order to maximize the spread of their own genes (“the stronger male preferences for pornography link back to mental structures that supported a promiscuous male competition for mating rights” [64]). From an evolutionary point of view, the nuptials between male and female desire is hardly a match made in heaven; hence the intense focus on the moral-religious regulation of sexual infidelity and cultural centrality of the family to most forms of social community.

Although Grodal insists that he is offering a strictly neutral descriptive account, the latter also has an evaluative dimension: to criticize, on evolutionary-biological grounds, psychoanalytical or feminist theories—like Linda Williams’s (67–69)—that seek to question gendered preferences for romance or pornography with reference to ideological or cultural-historical forces (62–66). Because we are dealing with what Grodal characterizes as a gendered conflict between an evolutionary drive toward pair-bonding (expressed in romance fiction), and a predisposition in favor of anonymous desire (depicted in

pornography), one implication seems to be that cultural critics of romance and pornography are mistaken in regarding such preferences as ideologically driven, and hence misguided in thinking that they can be socially transformed.⁵ To be sure, Grodal's discussion of these genres aims to provide a descriptive (rather than evaluative) theoretical account of their nature and appeal from an evolutionary perspective. The reader might ask, however, how his naturalistic account relates to existing critical debates on romance and pornography, and whether his evolutionary bioculturalist approach can deal with such ethical or normative questions as are inevitably raised in discussions of pornography. For these are questions that loom large regardless of whether we accept that such genres are popular because of innate dispositions or evolutionary history. In any event, Grodal's naturalistic account far from settles the debate, as the normative and evaluative questions pornography raises remain largely untouched by his naturalistic approach.

Grodal seems on firmer ground with his bioculturalist account of fantasy and horror (Chapter 5, "Undead Ghosts and Living Prey"), and of sadness, melodrama, and filmic rituals dealing with the experience of loss and death (Chapter 6, "Sadness, Melodrama, and Rituals of Loss and Death"). Cinema's continuing fascination with the fantastic and the supernatural expresses deep-seated imaginative and cognitive impulses deriving, Grodal claims, from "our prehistory as hunter-gatherers" (120). The intellectual capacity to imagine counterfactuals, or to imaginatively rearrange familiar elements of representation in novel ways, provide the basis for fantasy and horror as creative ways of dealing with our biologically driven and culturally shared anxieties, fears, and longings. We seek to control the external world by seeking causal and sometimes fantastical or supernatural explanations, and frequently advert to these in order to deal "with moral and existential problems" when rational explanations seem unconvincing (120). Viewer preferences for genres that evoke sadness, or other emotions of "negative hedonic valency," are to be explained, Grodal maintains, according to two major adaptive mechanisms. Initially, a learning process concerning negative events and the emotions to which they give rise; and more specific adaptations—concerning pair-bonding, male-bonding, and tribal bonding—that are manifested in various film genres understood as rituals of mourning or as rituals of social bonding (122–123).

Part II of *Embodied Visions* turns from evolutionary psychology to neuroscientific accounts of the brain, presenting Grodal's account of the PECMA flow as a "general theory of film" (145ff.). This represents the most successful part of the book, which manages to combine a user-friendly account of basic neurological architecture and cognitive functioning with a simple but persuasive account of the neurological and emotional basis for the distinction between various film genres. Drawing on phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty) and more

recent work in neuroscience (Damasio, Panksepp, Ledoux), Grodal theorizes the way film experience relies on “a processing flow that follows the brain’s general architecture,” moving from perception (eye and ear), through visual and acoustic brain structures, various areas associated with emotion, to the frontal cortex structures and motor action areas (146–147). The brain, in this view, is a “human biocomputer” capable of integrating perceptions, emotions, cognitions, and muscular activations, which is why we experience physiological and psychological, emotional and intellectual, responses to watching film (146).

Many modular functions of our brains remain “cognitively impenetrable” or resistant to conscious access or control; emotional and arousal cues are also, to a large extent, governed by processes that occur independently of our conscious intentions. These are precisely the elements that are cued by film narrative or genres, thereby activating the PECMA flow that sets in motion our affective, bodily, and cognitive engagement with film narrative. Most genre films involve careful cueing of various emotional and cognitive responses, including repertoires of stored memories and associations that are activated by relevant characters, situations, or scenarios. Some genres, such as art films or subjective sequences in mainstream films, block or freeze the PECMA flow, by either evoking memories or associations that cannot be readily integrated into the narrative, or by refusing to depict any clear goal or narrative resolution through concrete action. This interruption of the PECMA flow, Grodal argues, has the effect of eliciting intense but unfocused affective states (“saturated emotions”), or the kind of abstract, transcendent, or expressive forms of meaning that art films (for example by Lynch or Resnais) are apt to evoke (148).

The PECMA flow and its relationship with the architecture of the brain thus presents filmmakers with various aesthetic options: to cue more intensive focus on perceptual processes; to cue saturated emotions linked to unfocused but affectively intense memories or subjective associations; to evoke strong, action or goal-oriented emotions; to promote relaxation via laughter by interrupting goal-oriented action in an active setting; or to elicit sadness and tears by interrupting such action within a passive setting (151). Films typically deploy one of these aesthetic strategies, Grodal argues, though they also move between them depending on the narrative situation or generic conventions in play.

Grodal then applies the PECMA flow model of brain functioning and cognitive experience to various kinds of film genre. These include computer gaming, which he analyzes in connection with bodily based mental/cognitive forms of simulation coupled with engaged motor activity. These also include the role of character simulation and emotion linked with action in mainstream film narrative; the “freezing” of the PECMA flow in art films, which

evokes more “permanent” forms of meaning and lyrical association than the “transient” forms of meaning characterizing action-driven narrative films. Finally, these include the experience of realism—involving the perceptual salience of elements in a situation, coupled with typical schemata that promote a sense of familiarity—within mainstream audiovisual media.

Grodal’s bioculturalist theory of PECMA flow attempts to provide a comprehensive explanatory account of our embodied cognition of film. One might ask, though, how are we to understand the important transition from the level of individual brains and moving images to the cultural realm of shared meaning and value. Grodal’s “foundationalist” bioculturalist model offers us an explanatory account of how evolutionary history, embodied brains, and the movies are linked, but little explanation of how these link up with the shared cultural lifeworlds within which these embodied brains and filmic practices co-exist and communicate. Some kind of mediating instance seems called for here, perhaps along the lines of “extended mind” theories of cognition that include various cultural and technical artifacts within the purview of “embodied cognition,” where this means something more externalized and extended than simply brains and bodies.⁶ This might help explain more comprehensively how we can move from evolutionary history and PECMA brain flows to audiovisual images and their broader cultural (and ideological) significance.

The Appendix to *Embodied Viewers* offers an interesting bioculturalist interpretation of Lars von Trier’s work as synthesizing the emotional and aesthetic possibilities of mainstream genres with the style and narrative techniques of European art cinema. According to Grodal, this combination of generic play and art film narration interrupts emotion and action—freezes the PECMA flow (279)—in order to shift from goal-driven action narrative to lyrical-associational experience that evokes saturated emotions, multidimensional meanings, and abstract ideas. Grodal also notes von Trier’s artful use of various “affective filters”: comedy, humor, and irony; metafictional devices that distance us from the intradiegetic narrative; and shifting the modal form of affect from “tense” to “saturated emotions” (for example, through the use of perverse sexual scenes that elicit lyrical-associational experiences) (290). This impressive analysis showcases how a bioculturalist approach might be persuasively applied to one of cinema’s more philosophically challenging artists.

For all its enlightening power Grodal’s bioculturalist interpretation does not really address the significance of cinematic self-reflexivity in von Trier’s films, save as an affective filtering device for inducing lyrical-associational experience. Grodal neglects, for example, the kind of metacinematic critique of genre conventions and of the hegemony of Hollywood that von Trier made famous both before and after his Dogme 95 period. Instead of exploring the connections between von Trier’s aesthetic techniques, their experiential ef-

fects, and cultural-ideological significance, Grodal concludes with a rather conventional auteurist account of von Trier's colorful biography and troubled personality (297–298).

As a concluding remark, there seem to be three related questions that all three books open up as directions for future research. The first is showing how a naturalistic theory might provide more detailed accounts of the cultural dimensions of film without reductionism. The second is exploring how cognitivist theories of film might tackle the normative aspects of ideology in popular film. And the third is exploring further various theoretical accounts of how brains, images, and culture are related. All three books make exciting and provocative gestures in these more “culturalist” directions, which also suggests the possibility of fruitful interaction between naturalist and culturalist—or explanatory and hermeneutic—philosophies of film. For a critical reader, these are some of the suggestive ideas that might persist, like philosophical after-images, having accompanied cognitivism to the movies.

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Notes

¹ There are significant differences of opinion concerning these approaches: some theorists are cognitivist but not concerned with analytic philosophy; some eschew cognitivism but embrace analytic approaches to film; some do not recognize either “analytic” or “Continental” philosophy as meaningful terms, and claim to be doing just philosophy or film theory. Nonetheless, the publication of film theory that opposes itself to the “old” paradigm (psychoanalytic, semiotic, “Continental”); that contributes to a well-defined set of shared problems, arguments, and debates; and that involves a circle of authors who explicitly discuss each other’s work, can justifiably be called a movement with shared conceptions of what it means to do “philosophy of film.” My use of the hybrid rubric analytic-cognitivist follows the introductions to the volumes edited by Bordwell and Carroll (1996), and Allen and Smith (1997), which defined the new philosophy of film as a) anti-“Continental,” b) as drawing on the techniques of analytic philosophy, and c) as inspired (for some) by developments in cognitive psychology as a rival to psychoanalytic theory. It does not mean that all such theorists are analytic or cognitivist in orientation. Carl Plantinga used a similar term in a response to a review of his book *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (1997), remarking that his work “might be characterized better as a cognitive/analytic approach” (see Plantinga 1998).

² Three important examples are by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit (2004), Daniel Frampton (2006), and Stephen Mulhall (2008).

³ The pleasure in Garbo’s comic performance is also dependent on the fact that it is *Garbo*—her ironic performance as a remote, European, formerly silent “screen goddess” being comically brought down to earth—we are watching portray the rather ridiculous Ninotchka. Lubitsch’s idiosyncratic brand of satirical comic critique is another important element, as is the backdrop of US-European-Russian relations in the immediate pre-war context (the film was released in 1939). It is this shift from the psychological aspects to the broader filmic and cultural-historical dimensions of film engagement that Plantinga’s theory seems to underplay.

⁴ Haneke’s *Funny Games*, especially the American remake (2007), is a counter-example to Plantinga’s “conversion” thesis in respect of mainstream horror and slasher genres, while von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009) provocatively questions the “cognitive therapy” approach adopted by the therapist-husband character (Willem Dafoe) in response to his wife’s (Charlotte Gainsbourg’s) grief, pain, and despair.

⁵ “It is therefore not appropriate to assume ideological indoctrination as the reason that, on average, women prefer romantic stories more than men do, and men prefer pornography more than women do” (Grodal 2009: 66).

⁶ See, for example, Clark (2008).

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