The Extent of Mental Completion of Films

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Abstract: According to constructivist theory a film cues us to apply a variety of schemata in mentally constructing a narrative and the diegetic world in which it takes place. But to what extent and with what degree of precision do we mentally construct time, space, causality, and the characters when we watch a film? We are not aware of the real world and our immediate environment much in excess of what our interests, needs, and desires are in any given situation. Similarly, we do not conceive of a complete fictional world when watching a film. Rather, a film cues us to fill in to the extent and with a precision that is relevant to our attempts at making sense of what is happening, often as focalized in terms of character interest. The cueing takes place through an interplay of what Thompson (1988) has defined as the realistic and the aesthetic background construction. This article outlines how this interplay functions to override apparent discrepancies in the material on the one hand, and to produce a variety of aesthetic effects on the other hand. Von Trier's Antichrist serves as an example of how the partial blocking of the filling in function can serve intriguing aesthetic purposes.

Keywords: background construction, character construction, constructivist theory, filling in, Lars von Trier, trauma

According to constructivist theory a film cues us to apply a variety of schemata in mentally constructing a narrative and the diegetic world in which it takes place. In his groundbreaking account David Bordwell emphasizes the active quality of narrative understanding: "spectators are constantly filling in material, extrapolating and adjusting what they remember" (1985: 35). But to what

extent and with what degree of precision do we mentally construct time, space, causality and the characters when we watch, say, a Clint Eastwood western or a Lars von Trier Film? Surely, we do not conceive of an entire fictional world any more than we are aware of the real world and our immediate environment much in excess of what our interests, needs, and desires are in any given situation. Rather, a film cues us to fill in to the extent and with a precision relevant to our attempts at making sense of what we perceive as happening and our perception of why we see it happening. The cueing takes place through an interplay of

a film cues us to fill in to the extent and with a precision relevant to our attempts at making sense of what we perceive as happening and our perception of why we see it happening. what Kristin Thompson (1988) has defined as the realistic and the aesthetic background construction.

The Extent of Mentally Constructing the Real World

All perception and understanding call for a degree of filling in. The way this works out cognitively may differ on various levels ranging from basic perception to making sense of highly structured human behavior, but in one form or another perception and understanding involve both selection and complementation of data. Although direct visual data constantly refreshes our perception of our immediate environment, this process is guided to a substantial degree by previous knowledge and the immediate interest that we take in our environment as guided by our current concerns (Goldstein 2002: 79).1 Raw visual perception is in many ways discontinuous, but normally we are unaware of this gappiness. As Daniel Dennett points out: "One of the most striking features of consciousness is its discontinuity—as revealed in the blind spot, and saccadic gaps, to take the simplest examples" (1991: 356). Yet we are overwhelmed by the apparent continuity of perception and consciousness. It has been suggested that this primal continuity effect is achieved by our mind somehow filling in the gaps in the flow of raw data. Do we, then, construct a mental representation of the world around us? Not according to Dennett, who argues that "the brain does not bother 'constructing' any representations that go to the trouble of 'filling in' the blanks. . . . The judgment is already in, so the brain can get on with other tasks!" (1991:128). What Dennett means is that because we possess knowledge of what the world is like, there is no need to constantly fill in the various gaps in our perception of the world as if a representation would have to be completed for some kind of internal presentation.

P. S. Churchland and V .S. Ramachandran (1993: 48) argue against Dennett's refusal to accept the notion of filling in: "Given the data from psychophysics and neurophysiology, we hypothesize that (a) the brain has mechanisms for interpolation, some of which may operate early in visual processing; (b) brains sometimes visually represent completions, including quite complex ones; and such representation probably involves those interpolation mechanisms." In his reply Dennett claims that this is besides the point. The expression "brains visually represent completions" gives rise to the question "for whom does it *represent*?" Dennett's point seems to be that the brain can make assumptions of the type "more of the same," or that an object that is partially seen is complete, but that there is no reason to assume that it would have to be represented as a complete mental image. He writes: "You don't 'just think' there's a whole dog; you *see* that it's a whole 'non-gappy' dog walking behind the fence; this is certainly a 'visual experience' even though its completion (so that you see what's in front of you *as* a whole connected dog)

involves jumping to a conclusion about what is missing" (1993: 206). Dennett argues that this "jumping to a conclusion" is not an instance of filling in because, although the brain does add information to the perceptual data, it does not thereby create a representation of that complete whole (ibid.).

There is another distinct feature of perception that limits the extent of filling in. Referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings, Thompson, Noë, and Pessoa (1999) emphasize the vagueness and indeterminacy of perception. We perceive a flock of birds, not a certain number of them. Furthermore, perception is always embodied, tied to one's bodily orientation in space and time as well as the interest we as persons take in our immediate environment and our long-term concerns (Thompson, Noë, and Pessoa 1999: 188–190, 194). On the phenomenological level such personal concerns condition the extent and precision of perceptual completion. We may be aware of wholes based on fragmentary perceptual data and be aware of the properties and details of that whole inasmuch as it has relevance to our various concerns. We may first "jump to a conclusion" about what enters into our perceptual field but then perceptual completion takes place to the degree we focus on whatever catches our attention—and ignore the rest.

The notion of filling in is nothing new and has been treated in various fields of psychology and philosophy. One may wonder, for example, whether Dennett and Rudolph Arnheim (1971: 86) are fundamentally at one when the latter writes: "the completion of the incomplete, one of the fundamental accomplishments of intelligent behavior, is purely perceptual when the structure of the context is sufficiently strong to determine the nature of the missing portion." Furthermore, Arnheim's formulation invites us to extend the notion of completing to more structured levels of making sense of the world as we encounter it. We are constantly and on all levels of perception and understanding dealing with wholes based on fragmentary data which enable us to make judgments about our natural and social environment. This is a basic cognitive operation that almost amounts up to a definition of what intelligent behavior is. On all levels with a varying balance between conscious and unconscious mental processes we either fill in or do not fill in incomplete data according to the cognitive and affective demands of the situation we are facing. On the level of basic perception it is for the most part automatic; on more structured levels the autopilot might not suffice in dealing with the situation at hand. In poor lighting we might find ourselves making a conscious effort to determine what an obscure object in our visual field actually is and while remaining undetermined we might fill in features that will turn out to be erroneous as we move closer and are able to make a correct judgment.

Highly analogous processes occur at all levels of perception/understanding. At some point they involve a leap of faith, a jumping to conclusion. Judgments are made based on spontaneous categorization, so that a phenom-

enon is classified in a certain way involving assigning certain attributes to it even when they are not actually detected in the instance at hand. In the field of social relationships this takes the form of stereotyping, some degree of which might be necessary to allow us to relate to people we newly encounter. However, it easily leads to the more sordid forms of categorizing people and making judgments based on preconceptions related to, say, class, ethnicity, religion, or sex. This kind of jumping to conclusions may be seen as an instance of filling in inasmuch as the situation calls for relating to the person thus categorized and having to be able to account for his or her behavior to one's satisfaction. Needless to say, in such an instance the filling in function may actually preclude detecting new and surprising qualities in the other person. Being able to resist the temptation of jumping to such conclusions is surely a sign of intelligent behavior.

The notion of filling in on the level of making sense of social behavior is not confined to stereotyping. Even at the most sophisticated level, we face the task of having to assign attributes to people and their behavior in order to be able to make sense of what kind of people they are, what is bothering them, and what they are up to. Either because the behavior of the person we are observing does not cohere with our assumptions tied to our preliminary categorizations or because we have the sensitivity to be aware that there is something more to this person and his or her behavior, we may end up modifying our preconceptions and understanding. That is, we are aware that some relevant data is missing and so we try to fill in based on our knowledge about human behavior in order to figure out what is going on with this person. We may be satisfied at a point when we feel that within some broad understanding of what motivates human behavior we are able to make sense of what we observe. We do not have to construct in our minds a complete representation of the other person, just enough to gain an intuitive certainty of being able to understand to the extent that is relevant to us in a given situation. Also, not filling in by means of broad classifications and stereotyping may be a sign of intelligent behavior in that to be able to relate socially to other people we only have to be aware of certain broad frameworks that make them behave the way they do. However, sometimes this might amount up to negligence of their actual concerns. At times we might be completely at a loss in our attempts to understand another person: something should be filled in but we do not know what.

The Extent of Constructing a Diegetic World

How does all this apply to the perception of the gappy art of film? In many ways viewing a film involves the process of mentally constructing various kinds of wholes based on fragmentary perceptual data—at least seemingly more fragmentary than the perceptual data related to the observation of the

real world. The perception of film is supported by our knowledge and experience of the real world that have furnished us with flexible schemata. One of their primary functions is to guide our perception and understanding involving both selecting and complementing data. As Bordwell has put it, many cinematic conventions "piggyback on our nonfilmic experiences of the visible world and social action taking place in it" (2005: 259). These conventions may relate to the mental construction of diegetic space, time, and causality as well as to our ability to make sense of the psychological states and social relations depicted and we may find them somehow relevant. As in real life perception, memory plays a crucial role by allowing us to identify, interpret, and supplement filmic perception. Furthermore, as memories tend to be emotionally tagged, they guide the meanings and relevance we assign to what we perceive. Perception also has a prospective aspect as it is intertwined with the needs to orientate toward future possibilities.

The mental construction of the diegesis and making sense of the psychological motivations that generate the story are to varying degrees calibrated by—to borrow and expand on the notion of motivation put forward by Thompson and Bordwell—the unity of four categories of motivations. That is, the construction of these aspects follows only partly the schemas we use when orientating into the real world (realistic motivation), as this process is calibrated by factors such as story development or thematic concerns (compositional motivation), a variety of conventions, most typically related to genres (transtextual motivation), and expressive needs (artistic motivations; see Bacon 2009). Although part of the filling in is based on the information about the real world, it is complementarily based on our competence with regard to narratives, genres, and certain conventions of artistic and audiovisual representation. Or, as Thompson (1988) has proposed, films evoke background constructions that relate to 1) our relevant knowledge of the real world, 2) aesthetic conventions, 3) and the practical purposes for which the film is made.

Of particular interest is how the real and the aesthetic background constructions mutually calibrate each other. My hypothesis is that the aesthetic guides us in various ways in judging what is likely to be a reasonable and rewarding extent of constructing, say, a character in terms of realistic motivation. In certain types of films it might not be all that obvious what kind of balance we should assume to exist between the realistic and the aesthetic, that is to what extent we can account for what we see taking place in terms of realistic motivation and to what extent we are moving in a more fundamentally aesthetic sphere. This becomes apparent in representations in which the mental construction takes place based on a remarkably limited number of cues, often by mere suggestion. Theatrical performances have often excelled in this. As Andrey Tarkovsky sees it, film "reproduces a phenomenon in its concrete detail, sensuous form," but "it is in the nature of theatre to use conven-

tions, to codify: images are established by means of suggestion.... Every phenomenon, of course, has a number of facets and aspects; and the fewer of these reproduced on the stage for the audience to reconstruct the phenomenon itself, the more precisely and effectively will the director be using theatrical convention." Tarkovsky offers an evocative example: "Blood has no right to be spilt on stage. But if we can see the actor slipping on blood when no blood is visible—that is theatre!" (1998: 154).

Although we might be tempted to question whether film should be confined to reproducing phenomena in their concrete detail, we should first ask what kind of mental construction of a diegetic universe takes place while watching a theatrical performance in which the fictional existence of things is suggested by means of props, acting, and verbal reference. Surely, it suffices to entertain the mere notion of those things as they function as parts of the theatrical presentation. In fact, a great part of theatrical enjoyment can consist of appreciating the ingenuity of suggesting the presence of something that is not there to be actually perceived. There is no need to fill in because the "judgment is already in." Particularly as regards understanding characters this works because the schemata which enable us to understand human action and the motivation behind it are flexible and can be triggered easily. This is a natural reaction in that we are tuned to observe what other people are up to, and this tendency extends to our observation of the exploits of fictional characters. In fact, characters are such a salient part of fiction that they tend to occupy our attention to the degree that we are not aware of gappiness or even inconsistencies of other aspects of the diegetic world when a film seeks to create the impression of a coherent and continuous fictional world. Inconsistencies in character development are much more difficult to ignore and we spontaneously seek first for a realistic and then for an aesthetic motivation for such gaps.

Character centrality also functions as the major structuring factor of the sense of temporality that films elicit. One of the very basic narrative skills is the manipulation of time in order to maintain a good narrative rhythm and interest while letting characters and dramatic tensions evolve. Ellipses may be focused or unfocused: it may or may not be pertinent to know what has happened in between. Time has passed, but, as a rule, it is not necessary to be acutely aware of the extent of such duration—realizing that time has passed since the previous scene is enough. Similarly, many dramatic effects are possible only because the spectator does not focus on the temporal disparity between parallel lines of plot development, or between what we see happening in an implied timeframe versus what would be realistic to expect. That such disparities do not catch our attention is not at all strange considering how subjective our lived experience of duration is.

Some of the most memorable sequences in film history are those in which a subjective experience of duration is created by cinematic means that in a

sense run counter to projection time. One brilliant example is in David Lean's Lawrence of Arabia (1962). Two men in the middle of a vast desert observe someone approaching on a camel—friend or foe? The spatial distance is huge, so it would take a long time before this could be determined. Even within the epic proportion of this film time has to be compressed. but without diminishing the sense of excruciating expectation. This is achieved by standard means of editing, that is, cutting between shots of the camel rider approaching and the men looking keenly in his direction—at every cut a long chunk of time is skipped. However, the stillness of the shots—combined with the dreamlike effect created by the use of telephoto lens of the approaching rider—substitutes for the real duration. Thus, within a space of some two minutes of screen time, by means of a dexterous syuzhet configuration, a sense of what must be a quite considerable but undetermined length of fabula time is created (Figures 1–6).

Usually such a standard editing pattern produces an unfocused ellipse and our attention is diverted from whatever the real duration might be. Here, in contrast, the spectator is cued to conceive a much greater extent of time than the duration of the shots. Significantly, the effect is achieved mainly by non-action. Would it be correct to say that we mentally construct an extension of time in our minds in viewing this sequence? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that we are aware that the passage across the desert must take a long time; and that what really matters is the temporal experience of the characters with whom we are engaged. Their nervous expectancy is conveyed

Figures 1–6: In Lawrence of Arabia time is contracted by means of standard cinematic editing while acting and telephoto lens are used to create a sense of excruciating apprehension with the characters trying to figure out whether the approaching rider is friend or foe.













to us by cinematic means employed to keep us enthralled by the dramatic development.

The perception of space in a film consisting of hundreds of shots functions to a significant degree in a way analogous with our perception of the natural world. We perceive the visual field as a continuum although every time we suddenly turn our heads we are technically for a fraction of a second "blind," before a new vista opens to our eyes (Barry 1997: 15–16). Our perception of the world is a mental construct based on a series of disconnected partial views gained as we gaze at our visual environment. Thus, here too we have an analogue with the mental construction of a film's diegesis. According to Paul Messaris, this calls for the "mental activity of synthesizing a sequence of partial views into a coherent whole" (1994: 15). Stephen Prince in turn writes about "the projective geometry of successive camera positions creating a screen geography whose coordinates we can readily analogize with our own visual experience" (1996: 81). Again, in most cases this process is governed by concerns related to characters, starting from their narrative centrality, which crucially guides our construction of the story world. What is of interest to the spectator is how the characters relate to their environment, what king of dangers and affordances it offers them, how the spatial relationships between people and objects is indicative of and shapes the dramaturgical situation.

How the character relate to their environment gets really interesting when we are made aware of previously undisclosed features of the diegetic space, or, more precisely, dramatic space extending in unexpected ways such as in the staircase scene in Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) where a vertical tilt of the camera reveals a staircase with two characters on different levels observing the situation. This is dramatically highly effective because we are suddenly made aware of possibilities the characters have for observing and overhearing each other from totally unexpected positions (Figure 7).

The staircase scene in *The Magnificent Ambersons* exemplifies the dramaturgical possibilities inherent in controlling the construction of the diegesis. Character relationships can be effectively articulated by means of their position with respect to each other in space, in particular built space. The effect is reinforced by the way we are cued to conceive of that space in a way that is both logical and surprising. An alternative strategy is the complete withholding of information about space that has definite bearing on the characters. We may or may not share this information with the characters. This is a standard filmic device used to create both surprise and suspense. It may be used, for example, to make the spectator acutely aware that a building is likely to have extensions in which something threatening might be hiding, or, working on a more subliminal level, to create a claustrophobic effect by engaging the spectator with the experience of characters being confined to a limited space. In *The Shining* (1980), Kubrick succeeds in having it both ways. Al-



Figure 7: A vertical tilt suddenly discloses unexpected space in The Magnificent Ambersons. The setting serves to emphasize the tortured relationships between the two characters.

though the Overlook Hotel appears to have an abundance of both physical and metaphysical extensions, the characters are confined to its closed universe. As spectators we cannot do much filling in because not only is information about the space withheld until a dramatically opportune point in the narrative, but we are also cued to expect that the space-time continuum within the hotel is somehow awry. Thus instead of filling in to form a mental image of the more precise spatial features of the Overlook hotel and figure out what is going on there, for the most part we just have to wait and see what things and places turn out to be like.

Mainstream filmic narration is typically dexterously employed to guide our attention away from spatial, temporal, and causal gaps and discrepancies.

However, in art-cinema narration such gaps may be flaunted for a variety of purposes ranging from alienation effects to eliciting a more subtle emotional involvement. As in the most ingeniously theatrical stage productions, merely suggesting in the film how things are or how they are developing can be much more effective than showing or telling, since this manner of presentation calls for a more imaginative, thus more aware response. In *Dogville* (2003) Lars von Trier makes

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it explicit that we are watching a parable of sorts. An entire dilapidated American town in the middle of nowhere is suggested by ultra-minimalist means. The outlines of houses are merely drawn on the studio floor, while places and many objects are identified merely by written texts. There are no walls and openings and closings of doors are mimed. The story tells of a young woman, Grace, who is trying to escape from the mob, led by her father. The villagers are xenophobic to the extreme but eventually decide to offer sanctuary to the beautiful, tender-appearing woman. She is expected to help the villagers in their various tasks, which she is delighted to do. She gets to know the villagers like no one else but fails to become one of them. Instead, they start taking advantage of her in various ways.

The mode of presentation turns out to be extraordinarily suggestive. The crucial point emerges when Grace is raped. The discrepancy between what the spectator of the film clearly sees but the characters of the film appear not to, emerges as the governing metaphor of the film, a symptom of mendaciousness and hypocrisy, deeply ingrained habits of deception and self-deception. After this Grace is denied her status as a person and she is increasingly ruthlessly exploited by the villagers. The tension between what is there for everyone to see but what is nevertheless not seen becomes almost unbearable. At the end of the film von Trier makes his judgment of the villagers: they clearly do not deserve Grace (Figure 8).

Dogville exemplifies the point that not everything apparently missing from the representation has to be filled in: it is often enough to entertain a notion about how things are in the fictional world. We do not need to fill in to construct a fabula in which the houses of Dogville have actual walls and the gooseberry bushes have real fruit – once again, "the judgment is already in." Constructing a complete fabula would actually be quite misleading from the point of view of following the thematic development implied by the film's

Figure 8: The way walls are merely suggested in Dogville functions as a metaphor of how the villagers prefer to ignore the sordid things they know are taking place.



extraordinary mode of representation. Furthermore, a stylized manner of representation may be used to great metaphorical effect, as it allows for the operation of competing, even contrary schemas, which transcend the limitations set by the schema for constructing the fictional space. The diegetic world created by merely a few suggestive brushstrokes thus serves as a platform on which more urgent issues may be treated.

Character Construction

The question of the extent of mentally constructing features not immediately present in a film is at its most intriguing when it comes to the characters. Both in observing other people and in watching audiovisual fiction the context cues us to be aware of a greater or a smaller number of traits. In many real-life situations operating with an awareness of only a few traits might be an advantage. When we are in a predominantly functional relationship with another person, making clear what we want and common courtesy usually suffice. There are scripts that stipulate how each side is supposed to behave in an encounter. However, sometimes I might observe that for some nonobvious reason the other person is not able to function according to the relevant script. I might then come to the conclusion that to understand what is wrong, to get what I want, and/or because of concern for my fellowmen, I have to make an effort to understand what is bothering this other person. I might have to find out what contextual frame prevents him or her from behaving according to the customary script. Similarly, when trying to make difficult human conflicts manageable, we try to pick up and name the pertinent characteristics and concerns of each participant in fairly simple terms in order to be able to define clearly (if imprecisely) their positions, motivations, and aims in the argument.

Fiction may serve as a training ground for developing this faculty, and the best fiction reminds us that this kind of reduction is merely instrumental, that to be able to share in the true richness of humanity we have to appreciate the complexity of the human mind in all its potential refinement and ambiguity. So while in popular film generic character traits can be fairly easily recognized, traits in art-house films are as a rule less easy to define and enumerate. Thus characters in such films appear more realistic. The challenge thrown to the spectator is to figure out the contextual frames that make the characters behave in the way they do. Again, the situation is analogous with that of the real-life situation discussed above, but with the added problem of having to figure out the aesthetic frames in operation. Why is this story being told in a certain way? To what extent should we try to figure out what these people are up to in realistic terms, that is, what should be the extent of psychological construction of their subjectivities, and to what extent should we observe the characters as vehicles of certain story and theme functions?

Thompson offers a word of warning concerning characters in films: "However much they may strike us as being like 'real people,' we can always trace that impression back to a set of specific, character-creating devices" (1988: 41). We may well agree with this in terms of formal analysis, but we might still find it rewarding, even necessary, to discuss the characters as if they were real persons. This serves as a heuristic device that is tightly tied with the point about the function of fiction in our lives. We find ourselves doing this whenever those character-creating devices alone do not suffice to explain character behavior. We then have to resort to a hermeneutical analysis of what might be a multiplicity of ambiguous, alternating, and conflicting character traits. The difference as compared with real life recognition of individuals, which also takes place to a great extent in terms of detecting traits and observing them change over time, is that whereas in real life the social situation with its scripts and other conventions serves as a framework guiding perception and interpretation, in watching a film, the four categories of motivations serve as the master frame within which we must try to make sense of the characters. In the latter instance, however, it all depends on whether the spectator is able to relate to such a representation, whether it mobilizes his or her imaginative resources to produce an image of human being worthy of care and attention.

Narrative modes and genres differ considerably with regard to how much information we are given about the characters and how much effort we are cued to put into constructing them in our minds. Stock characters, by definition, exist in a ready-made form in a shared cultural sphere. In an individual film they are elaborated by a few character traits, to a significant extent as embodied by the actor and her performance. Their motivations are self-evident, at least by the end of the film. At its most simplistic the mere recognition of a stock character is sufficient to explain a certain type of behavior. Transtextual motivations reign.

Yet even in genre films we might face the question of to what extent is there a point in mentally constructing a character. Think of Clint Eastwood in the westerns in which he acted, a stoic rather than just stock character, staring stonily, exuding deadly calm. What is this guy—referred to as "Man With No Name"—up to? From Sergio Leone's films to the westerns he directed himself, Eastwood's characters are like a theme and variations, in which conventional notions about westerns and what they and their heroes have stood for are questioned—*Shane* (1953) is often mentioned as a particularly pertinent point of reference. In *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) the Eastwood character unexpectedly helps a woman, her husband, and their son escape from the clutches of bandits. He even gives them the money he has just made. When she asks why, he replies: "Why? I knew someone like you once; there was no one there to help." Little details like this can be used to suggest that there is more depth to a character than immediately meets the eye, even if we do not construct a

rounded image of the character. In films such as *High Planes Drifter* (1973) and *Pale Rider* (1985), however, rather than furnishing the character with revealing details about his past, the occasional cue suggests that instead of psychological realism we should appreciate his character in transcendental terms, as an avenging angel or as a figure of moral order. Thus, instead of constructing a character, we find ourselves trying to work out a moral scheme that would appear to govern the story we are offered (Figures 9 and 10).

In a sense this minimalism approaches the kind of art-cinema narration in which information about factors that motivate character behavior and intentionality may be often delayed or left obscure. Part of the film's aesthetic strategy might be to leave audience members to their own devices in trying to understand why the characters behave the way they do. In David Hare's Paris by Night (1988) a British conservative politician becomes the target of disturbing phone calls. One night on an official visit to Paris she, in a fit of anger, causes the death of a man she thinks is her molester. No one sees the event and it looks as if she could get away with it. But that same night the molester phones her again. She calls a young man she has met earlier and invites him to come and see her at her hotel. She is then seen sitting on the side of her bed crying despondently. Yet in the next shot as she opens the door for the young man, she is perfectly composed and smiling. This gives rise to the ques-

Figures 9-10: Clint Eastwood in A
Fistful of Dollars and Pale Rider: from
an anonymous gunfighter with little
sense of justice to a quasi-biblical
archetype of retributive justice. Only a
rough idea of what he stands for in
each case is all that is needed for
narrative comprehension.





tion of what has gone through her mind in between the two scenes, but this gap is left for the spectator to fill in based on his or her understanding of human behavior, ideas about British conservative female politicians, and assumptions about what the director might want to imply about such people as manifested in Charlotte Rampling's performance in this role.

Ambiguous Extensions

The greatest challenges for the mental construction of the diegetic world arise when we are given only a few ambiguous and even contradictory cues as to the direction we should proceed in constructing the diegesis and its characters. In a horror film we might be mislead and kept in uncertainty as to what extent we are to assume that what we see accords with everyday reality, to what extent should the more extraordinary things be taken as subjective distortion in the perception of the characters, and what is to be accepted as the reality of the supernatural within the diegesis. According to the conventional scenario, after the supposedly sane characters have failed to convince the protagonist that there is a reasonable explanation to everything, something supernatural is revealed as the fictional truth of the situation. We, of course, knew this all along, because we came to see a horror film. In other words, we rely on a reality-based background construction for as long as it can be used to explain the events seen in the film, and then switch to an aesthetic one based on genre conventions. From the point of view of the extent of construction this is an interesting case, because its efficacy is based to a high degree on leaving at least a degree of uncertainty as to the nature of the supernatural threat. Showing the horrible creature—a distorted human figure or an oversized insect—might also be effective. It might succeed as shock tactics and persist in memory as an extra fictional extension. But as many horror filmmakers know, leaving the worst to the spectator's imagination is usually even more captivating.

In less conventional films intricate spectatorial experiences may emerge when we genuinely do not know what to expect. Complex forms of narration can be used to raise the treatment of existential issues to a higher level. Stylistic features may be employed to create perceptual and cognitive challenges which, to quote Torben Grodal, "activat[e] the brain to find more signs of hidden meanings than can actually be identified, and . . . to articulate 'lofty', abstract, and allegorical meanings" (2009: 106). In Grodal's view, this kind of aesthetic strategy tends to function within narratives that involve blocking human action, thereby giving rise to what Grodal calls "lyrical, saturated emotions," a mode in which "various components of our perceptions are linked in a diffuse, lyrical-associative way" (ibid.: 233). Moreover, a narrative together with stylistic devices can be used to create a *meaning effect* that triggers the mind to seek for a meaning when the narrative explicitly fails to provide such

a thing. Simply presenting counterintuitive events may produce this effect, provided that the overall narrative context supports the possibility of meaning (ibid.: 149). As in the case of a metaphor, when an explanation in concrete terms is not available, we almost involuntarily seek for a more abstract or higher meaning. This may be seen as a strategy by which we seek to articulate those existential questions which may have root in the workings of our mind but which we are not able to conceptualize.

Von Trier's Antichrist (2009) exemplifies in a particularly haunting way the possibilities of the art of film narration with regard to the nature and extent of constructing character subjectivity. All through the film information regarding place, time, and even the nature of causality is extremely limited. In the opening sequence we are given the bare minimum, even slightly less than the bare minimum of information about the place where the sequence takes place. Less, in that any attempt to figure out spatial relationships between the events we see taking place with any degree of precision is virtually blocked. We only see images of a couple (the two characters have no names) making love, a baby getting out of its bed, household equipment and miscellaneous items, which at that point make little sense. These are shown mainly in quite tight framings. Apparently the baby sees his parents making love. At least in retrospect, because the female protagonist later remarks that Freud is dead, this may be taken as an almost jocular cue to start constructing a psychoanalytical interpretation of what is happening. Finally the child and his plush toy (Figure 11) fall out through the window and get smashed on the snowy street below. All this to the accompaniment of the sublime aria "Lascia Ch'io Pianga" from Handel's Rinaldo.

Figure 11. The child and his plush toy are about to fall through the window in Antichrist.



As the film progresses we follow the couple trying to cope with their grief, the woman accusing herself for negligence that allowed the accident to take place and engaging in increasingly self-destructive behavior. He is a therapist by profession and tries to help, although he acknowledges that a therapist and a patient should not be related to each other. Obviously not: she needs him as a partner, not a therapist. This mistake seems to evoke traits in her that should be allowed to lay dormant.

The couple withdraws to a cabin called Eden in the middle of a thick forest. Again, we are not given any coordinates. It is not even clear in what country all this is supposed to take place. The two main characters played by Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg speak English and a few fragments of text appear in English, but apart from that there is very little to connect the story with any English-speaking country. Arguably the story takes place in the United States because the medical statement concerning the baby's death comes from Seattle, but this does not appear to be a significant reference. We do learn that she and their son Nick spent the previous summer in the forest when she was writing a thesis. As the story proceeds, events take place in a number of spots in the forest, but we are not given much clue as to their spatial relations or distances from one another. Apart from a few memory flashes and one slightly extended flashback, time seems to proceed in linear fashion, but we are not given cues about duration. However, events emerge from the past, that reveal things in ever more sinister light.

The way constructing spatial, temporal, and narrative extension is virtually blocked creates a sense of psychological and spiritual claustrophobia. This is achieved in a highly artful way, although in itself this is a fairly standard horror film narrative device. But while in a run-of-the-mill horror film we know pretty well the parameters within which the story will develop, a viewer of Antichrist will be busy trying to figure out what parameters, or frames of interpretation, could be rewardingly applied. This connects closely with the problem of constructing the psychological extension of the characters.

The initial narrative situation is quite universal. The idea of losing a child is so gripping that we can easily sympathize with the agonizing sorrow and selfaccusations of the parents. Similarly, it is easy to find parallels between the bickering couple and what one has gone through or witnessed in real life in less devastating circumstances. Thus, initially, we can fairly easily grasp what these people are going through. But as the story progresses we are given ever more ambiguous cues that are exceedingly difficult to fit into an understanding of the psychology of the female character. We share this problem with the male character who functions as a narrative focalizer. He, too, is engaged in character construction as he tries to explore previously hidden dimension in his beloved wife. Together with him we begin to wonder what kind of reality she inhabits, what kind of causality is really operative in this universe? Furthermore, we as the spectators have to sort out how much of what we see might be his imaginings of what he begins to suspect is going on. We see the characters amid nature that appears increasingly formidable and hostile. At first we may rely on an assumption of natural causality. But, nature is revealed as a realm of death and decay that does not allow humans to celebrate it as a source of life.

The woman is increasingly distraught, which at first appears an extreme reaction to her trauma. Gradually her behavior becomes increasingly excessive. She appears to be suffering from a loss of the sense of self as the center of her mental activities. On a phenomenological level it is as if her inability to cope with the loss and self-accusations would give rise to a subjective reality of the witchcraft she has studied in their Eden the previous summer. Furthermore, she appears to have the power of sucking her husband into her distorted view of reality, first with partial, then possibly with complete, even if posthumous, success. In stylistic terms the way the film develops until this point might be called *traumatic realism*.

But as the film develops an increasingly hallucinatory and brutal quality we have to assess whether even recourse to subjective reality suffices to account for what we see. In terms of the diegesis the question is whether she is somehow possessed and what kind of reality should be assigned to this possession: Is she merely held captive by irrational fears generated by the traumatic accident, or does this possession have some sort of a supernatural reality? From an extra-fictional point of view this is an instance of the spectator losing sight of characters and character motivation as the primary source of meaning. Our attempts at extending character construction in terms of everyday psychology have been blocked, and even the distinction between subjective distortion and fantastic fictional reality has more or less evaporated. The film now moves in a poetic realm in which certain motives can be freely explored. Perhaps this narrative strategy should be called *traumatic ambiguity*.²

The title *Antichrist* could be understood as standing for the loss of Eden as a spiritual state, of a loss of spiritual cohesion that makes life a manageable entity. This is an extension without which we humans as conscious beings cannot survive—or even exist. Instead of cosmic harmony, here "Chaos reigns!" as the disemboweled fox tells the male protagonist. While Almira in Handel's *Rinaldo*, captured by the witch Armida, could still be redeemed by Christian forces, the woman in the meshes of her trauma in von Trier's film has no such recourse. She falls prey to her trauma, which like witchcraft also engulfs her knight-errant. Armed merely with his love for her and the pseudogospel of psychotherapy, he is unable to perform the redeeming feat of reconstructing her as a consistent character. Likewise, the spectator, even with all the sympathy for the grieving couple and wide-ranging competence in mak-

Perhaps this narrative strategy should be called traumatic ambiguity.

ing sense of human behavior, real or fictional, in the last instance has to admit defeat in trying to mentally construct the characters and the world they inhabit. But the gripping agony of the characters that the spectator has witnessed is likely to assure him that the experience does not evaporate into indifference. Thus *Antichrist* serves as a reminder of the discrepancy between everyday perception of what it is like to be human and the depths and complexities of the full ambiguous extent of conscious existence.

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Notes

¹ Goldstein explains how vision is only partly constructed on the basis of the stimuli received on the retina and processed by cells before reaching the Lateral Geniculate Nucleus (LGN). The LGN receives information from many sources, including back from the cortex, and then sends its output to the cortex. Thus the LGN appears to regulate and organize neural information as it flows from the retina to the cortex

² I am grateful to Paisley Livingstone for this reformulation.

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