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# AESTHETICS NATURALISED

## *An Interview with Murray Smith*

Angelo Cioffi

### 1 Introduction

This interview has been long in the making; we started it on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2017. I met Murray in his office at the University of Kent, and we spent an intense but pleasant afternoon drinking coffee and talking film, art, and aesthetics. In preparation for the interview, I sent Murray a list of questions I wanted to discuss with him; but, in all honesty, I only managed to get through a third of all the questions I had in mind, and that's because the conversation developed in ways I didn't anticipate, and brought new questions to the table. So, our initial plan for the conversation looked like a jazz score, with some general indications, but with room for improvisation. Ironically, despite having taught with him on his undergraduate module 'Sound and Cinema', among the things I didn't manage to ask Murray were things about his work on film sound and music.<sup>1</sup>

Since our meeting, we have been in contact via email, editing the interview. As a result, the fruits of our improvisation have been manipulated in post-production, and what you see here is an edited version of our conversation rather than just a transcript of the recording. At the time of our meeting, 'Film, Art, and the Third Culture' ('FACT')<sup>2</sup> was about to be published, so a large chunk of this interview is devoted to an analysis of the main arguments presented in that book. Indeed the relationship between aesthetics and science

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<sup>1</sup> Smith 2002, 2006b.

<sup>2</sup> Jerrold Levinson's 'poetically licensed' acronym for Smith 2017a, in Levinson 2018b ('FACT is a Fact of Both Art and Life'). Levinson's paper also appears in slightly modified form as a review, Levinson 2018a.

is the central theme of the interview, as this relationship remains relevant even when considering topics that have long been among Murray's research interests, such as the role of empathy and emotions in our engagement with films. We have amended the tenses of a few sentences: on the occasion of the original interview, Murray referred to the twentieth anniversary of the first Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image conference as a future event, but as it is now squarely in the rear view mirror, you will read about the conference in the past tense. In addition, Murray held a Laurance S. Rockefeller Fellowship at Princeton University's Center for Human Values for 2017–18, and during the editing of the interview he added some hints of his project there.

The first section of the interview, 'Aesthetics Naturalised', is an introduction to 'FACT', as we talk about the aims of the book and the story behind it. In the second section, 'Aesthetic Experience Triangulated', we delve deeper into the arguments that bind together science and the study of art and aesthetics—in particular, we clarify the role the hard sciences may play in the study of aesthetic experience. In the third section, 'Spectatorship', I ask Murray to reappraise his first—and extremely influential—monograph, 'Engaging Characters' ('EC'), in light of his latest work.<sup>3</sup> In this section, Murray also shows how a naturalised account of aesthetic experience may help provide a solution to the paradox of horror and the paradox of fiction. In the final section, 'Film and/as Philosophy', Murray clarifies his viewpoint on the relationship between film and philosophy, and ends with advice for young academics working in the fields of film and aesthetics.

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<sup>3</sup> Smith 1995a (revised edition forthcoming 2020).

## 2 Aesthetics Naturalised

**Angelo Cioffi:** Let me start with your most recent book, 'Film, Art, and the Third Culture'. What is the 'third culture' you refer to in the book's title?

**Murray Smith:** The idea comes from a debate that was initiated in the late 1950s by C.P. Snow, who was a Cambridge physicist, but also a novelist, as well as a government minister for a period. So, he was a kind of a polymath figure. Snow wrote an essay—"The Two Cultures"—and delivered a version of it as a lecture in 1959.<sup>4</sup> Snow's essay was essentially a complaint that, as he put it, the culture of the sciences—by which he meant the natural sciences—and what he called 'literary intellectuals'—that was his expression, but really that was a stand-in for the humanities as a whole—were moving apart from one another, that there was a widening gulf between those two domains of intellectual life, those two parts of the academy. So, that became known as the 'two cultures debate'. The 'two cultures' is really a very central debate in the public sphere throughout the 1960s, petering out in the 1970s. Now, within that debate, Snow uses the expression the 'third culture' at one point in his essay, as a way of referring to a kind of intellectual culture that transcended the two cultures. The 'Third Culture' of the title of my book, then, refers to that ideal, the ideal of not being bound into an intellectual culture that sees a simple and rigid divide between what we do in the humanities and what we do in the sciences.

That is where the 'Third Culture' phrase originally comes from, and it has been picked up before, so I'm not the first subsequent author to adopt the phrase and the idea of a third culture. In particular, it was used by John Brockman (the well-known founder of the 'Edge' website). Brockman is a sort of intellectual

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<sup>4</sup>The first published piece by Snow on this theme appeared in 1956. Generally speaking, though, the start of this debate is dated from 1959, when Snow delivered a revised and expanded version of his essay as the Rede Lecture at Cambridge.

entrepreneur, who works with high-profile, mostly scientific academics. In the mid-nineties Brockman published a book called ‘The Third Culture’, which was a large collection of interviews with figures like Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and others of that ilk.<sup>5</sup> Now, with that venture Brockman is doing something a little different to what I am doing with the idea of the third culture. What Brockman is really interested in are scientists who are willing and feel able to speak about questions and issues that are traditionally dealt with by the humanities. For example, evolutionary theorists, who have things to say about how culture works; along with the figures I’ve mentioned, Lynn Margulis and Stephen Jay Gould also appear in the book. So, in Brockman’s version of the third culture, the humanities do not have much of a role to play; the idea is that certain scientific disciplines are now sufficiently well developed, they now have enough momentum, so that they can begin to say things about culture without reference to traditional debates. So, that’s Brockman’s version of the third culture, where, so to speak, the humanities are swallowed up by the machine of science. My version is, I would say, more interdisciplinary, arguing not that we can or should jettison all of the traditional techniques that have been developed in the humanities over decades—indeed, centuries—but that we should complement them and integrate them with the knowledge and methods that come out of science.

Let me try to round off the answer to this first question: I am saying that there are at least these two ways in which the idea of the third culture has been adopted. One way is the Brockman version, in which science colonises the territory of the humanities, and the other one is mine, which suggests that it is a fruitful project to try to integrate the traditions of humanistic and scientific methods.

**AC:** The book is mainly focused on aesthetics, but do you think that an integration of humanistic and scientific methods can also be fruitful in other domains of knowledge?

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<sup>5</sup> Brockman 1995.

**MS:** I am focused on aesthetic questions, but the aesthetic questions are usually a narrower form, a specific form, of a broader question. Now of course, the more specific question will often bring very particular things into play, but I still think, in general, that a lot of the arguments that are specifically about aesthetics in the book will have an echo in other domains, at a high level. So, to take a quick example, one could adopt a third cultural perspective on morality. And I am not talking about morality just as it enters aesthetic experience—that is, the debate about the relationship between aesthetic and ethical value. Let's just say we want to understand ethics and morality on their own terms. And that's our primary focus. There is a whole approach to ethics and morality, parallel to the third cultural approach to aesthetics, which treats them as part of our evolved, natural behaviour, perfectly amenable to scientific enquiry.

**AC:** This would include the work of Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Prinz, for example?

**MS:** Indeed. As a general rule, to answer your question, yes, the focus in this book is clearly on aesthetics but in many, many ways this is a version of an argument that can be run with respect to other specific domains. And I have to say that this was one of the challenges in writing the book, that a lot of the time what I am trying to digest and distil is an understanding of some more general area. For example, empathy is not a uniquely aesthetic phenomenon, right? So, the task is, number one, let's understand empathy as a general phenomenon, and of course that is a very complex and controversial area on its own terms. And let us understand it in a naturalised spirit—that is, against the backdrop of relevant scientific knowledge; that's the second part of the task. And then when all of that's done, let's think about how all of this has implications for the aesthetic deployment of empathy.

So, I suppose that is a feature of the way I approach aesthetics—that at every moment I am trying to say, aesthetics *is* a

particular thing; I am not one of those theorists or philosophers who think that aesthetics has been eliminated from our theoretical vocabulary, and that somehow it is just an archaic concept. I think it still picks out something fundamental and real in our experience. But part of the naturalised approach to it involves saying that it is not something inexplicable, something mysteriously distinct from ordinary forms of emotional response or experience. It is particular, but not mysterious; distinctive, but not ineffable. So that is why there is always an effort to relate what is going on in the domain of aesthetics with kindred things that happen in other parts of our lives. Another example, I guess, would be suspense. We might think of suspense as something we mostly experience in artistic and aesthetic contexts—in relation to narratives. But it wouldn't be weird to talk about being in a state of suspense in an ordinary context, when you are waiting for some important result that is about to come through and you are hopeful but fearful about what the outcome is going to be. That is at least very much akin to what we call suspense. So there again, I think we have a relationship between something that seems to be especially relevant in the domain of aesthetic experience but is connected with ordinary experience. One of the principles or general strategies of the book—and I can't remember if I talk about it (laughs) but it strikes me talking to you now—is that that is another way in which aesthetic questions can be made as concrete and as naturalistically tractable as possible.

**AC:** Your response echoes the subtitle of your book, which sounds more specialist than the main title: 'A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film'. Perhaps this can be taken as a statement of purpose: what is the aim of the book?

**MS:** I probably should have given the book a subtitle more like '*towards a naturalized aesthetics of film*' (laughs), because one thing that is certainly true of this project is that, you know, every time I would do a spell of work on it, I felt that as the clouds cleared, the

mountain range that I'd set out to climb seemed to get ever higher. If ever there was a project where eventually I reached the point where it was a case of—"this is either going to drive me insane, or I am going to die before I complete this project. So I have to find a way of wrapping up what I have discovered at this point"—this is that project. And that is why I say maybe it should be called 'towards a naturalized aesthetics of film', because to realise the project in its full form is not a project for one person. It's really a research programme, meaning it is a proposal for a whole different way of approaching film in particular, and aesthetics in general, which, if it has a justification—if it is a worthwhile endeavour—it is not for one person alone to realise. Another way of putting this would be to say that what the book tries to be is not so much a realisation of the research programme as a kind of philosophical defence of a research programme that I think is already coming into being. I am not inventing naturalised aesthetics, but rather recognising something that I think has happened around me across my academic career. I have been part of it, but just a part of it. So the book is an attempt to recognise what that thing has been and to give it some shape and to justify it. And when I say 'justify it' I mean also to try and identify its limits, its character, what it can do, what it can't do, what it can claim to do.

**AC:** And the expression 'naturalised aesthetics', where does that come from?

**MS:** I am not sure how far it goes back. It probably goes back many decades, but however far it goes back I think its origin must be as an echo of an expression used by the philosopher W.V.O. Quine, in a famous essay from the late 1960s called 'Epistemology Naturalized'. According to Quine, knowledge is an empirical phenomenon, amenable to scientific—and in particular psychological—enquiry. Quine writes: "Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It



studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject”.<sup>6</sup> ‘Naturalism’ had been a term of art in philosophy for many decades before that—it goes back at least to the early twentieth century. But Quine’s work in general, and that essay in particular, was certainly an important landmark and polemical moment in suggesting how far the claims for a naturalistic approach to philosophy could be pushed. So, a couple of decades later you begin to hear aestheticians talking about naturalised aesthetics as an echo of naturalised epistemology. That is part of the explanation of the subtitle and the story of the book.

**AC:** And what actually is a ‘naturalised aesthetics’?

**MS:** One important thing that I talk about at the beginning of the book is that naturalism, for most people in the humanities—not philosophers, but just about anyone else in the humanities—would usually be understood as referring to an artistic style or a tradition of art; if we think of the novel it’s going to be Zola, or Dreiser in an American context. Or a filmmaker like Ken Loach maybe. It’s related to realism ... naturalism has some particular nuances, but it is about rigorously capturing the way the world actually is. That is what people understand by ‘naturalism’ in the context of art and art theory. However, in philosophy, naturalism really picks out something quite distinct. There might be interesting connections to make between naturalism as a philosophical stance and naturalism as a style of art (though I do not make these connections in the book). So, what does naturalism mean philosophically? Naturalism essentially means an approach to philosophical questions that says that the methods of the sciences have been the most successful knowledge-generating approach to the world that we have invented, and it therefore behoves us, when we think about any question at all, to approach that question against the backdrop of a scientific

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<sup>6</sup> Quine 1969, p. 82.

understanding of the world. Now that is quite a broad definition, so again to restate it very simply, naturalism is a stance in philosophy that is oriented towards a scientific approach to the world.

To take what is going to seem like an absurd example, but just to pump some intuitions about why this would be an attractive and indeed an important way of proceeding: if I put forward some kind of theory that seems to rely on the idea that the world is flat, or disregards the fact that for many centuries now we have had an understanding of the topography of the earth which holds that it is spherical, people would think that I am crazy, because I would be flouting a pretty fundamental and almost universally shared item of knowledge about the world. So, you could think of naturalism as if it was basically generalising over that principle. If this example strikes people as plausible, the principle is: you should at least seek to make any theory you have about a specific aspect of the world not conflict with firmly established knowledge that is already in place about the world in general. That is a broad-brush idea of what naturalism is.

Let me say a couple more things here. First of all, there is a strong parallel between naturalism in philosophy and the third culture proposal. Really the main title and the subtitle of the book are doing exactly the same thing. The main title is using an idiom which has been used in the public sphere, is a little better known and which tries to flag up the relevance of the two cultures debate, and the idea of a third culture, for some major academic and intellectual debates of the last fifty years. The subtitle is pointing us towards a more localised debate in philosophy, but a very central debate, which I think is essentially the same or very closely-related to the two cultures debate. What these two ideas—the naturalistic stance in philosophy, and the third culture—share is a focus on the question: what is the purview of science? How much weight should we put on scientific knowledge and scientific method when we seek to understand the world as a whole? Are there domains of experience where, so to speak, we put science on the backburner and we just proceed without it, or is that a mistake? Within philosophy, there are

approaches which one can think of as non-naturalistic, which hold that there are certain domains of enquiry, including aesthetics, including morality, where science has no grip, because the phenomena are not apt for scientific enquiry. That's the non-naturalistic perspective. So, the main title of the book and the subtitle are mainly echoes of one another, but addressed to slightly different audiences. One thing I am trying to do is to put these things together, to show how they are related. I think this is part of the role of philosophy—as Wilfrid Sellars famously put it, “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”.<sup>7</sup>

**AC:** Well, then let me ask you, what is the role of philosophy in the context of naturalised aesthetics? What role can philosophy play in the analysis of, say, our aesthetic experience of films, given that such an approach seems to put so much weight on science? In other words, what is left for us?

**MS:** One thing philosophy can and does bring to the table is a kind of synthetic approach, whereby what you are looking to do is connect the insights of a broad range of disciplines. So, it is a feature of the modern intellectual world that it is increasingly specialised. We all talk about interdisciplinarity, but what we don't say is “hey, why don't we just *merge* film studies and media studies and cultural studies, why do we not just merge them all?”. On the contrary, things always generally tend towards further sub-specialisation rather than the merging of fields towards more unified and larger academic disciplines. So, one of the jobs for this ancient breed we call ‘the philosopher’ is to look for the underlying shared principles across apparently disparate domains and different academic disciplines, but also for points of conflict and incoherence which may go unnoticed unless somebody is charged with looking for these things. This takes

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<sup>7</sup> Sellars 1962, p. 37. The passage is used as an epigraph for Chapter 1, and is discussed on p. 21, of Smith 2017a.

us back to the passage from Sellars I mentioned a moment ago, which I think is a beautiful expression of what makes philosophy different from any branch of empirical enquiry. So, I suppose, though I haven't really thought to put a description of the book in these terms before, you can think of what I am doing in the book in that spirit, in the way I am trying to talk about *both* evolutionary theory and neuroscience. It is not a discovery that these two areas of research are somehow related, but it is true that they are both very specialised disciplines, and each of them is broken down into sub-disciplines. Thus, I think there is a job to be done—to say ok, we've got these two trends in the sciences, and it is true for both neuroscience and evolutionary theory that these are areas where many of the participants are very interested in making statements about how their research has relevance for the way culture works. So, I think that there is a task to be done there. We have these trends, we have these bodies of scientific research which have these ambitions, let us try and sort out what is going on here, let us see how these things relate to one another and in turn how it all relates to the kinds of traditional work that we do in aesthetics and in other domains like the one I originally come from—film studies—which take as their foci particular artforms.

**AC:** Before we delve into the theoretical standpoints you develop in the book, I would like to ask you about the story of the book itself: why did you decide to write this book, and how did you develop the project?

**MS:** I was in graduate school in Film, in Madison, Wisconsin, from 1985–91. In that particular department, it wasn't regarded as unusual ... but let's put it positively: it was regarded as a perfectly respectable research project which took as part of its methodology that it would engage with scientific, generally, and specifically psychological, research. This was the moment when David Bordwell was really launching the research programme which became known as

cognitive film theory. I should note that David had some forerunners, so he wasn't exactly the first person to have had that notion, but he was really the person that put everything together in some crucial books and essays in that period. So, from a sociological point of view, he was the person with both the institutional and the intellectual power to bring things together in a sufficiently cogent way that he was able to make a dent in the way film was studied; and he achieved that partly through his graduate students, including me. So, what I am getting at is that through David and through some other people, an intellectual climate was created—at least where I was based ... let's call it a micro-climate (laughs), though I am not sure how far I recognised it was only a micro-climate! —a climate in which you could freely engage in what I am now calling a naturalistic approach to aesthetics, and film in particular or, alternatively, a third cultural approach. Though I wouldn't have used these expressions at the time. That was the period when I wrote my doctoral thesis on character, which would become 'Engaging Characters'. It'll be evident to anyone who reads that book reasonably closely that it draws quite extensively on cognitive science, psychology, and other empirical domains, for example anthropology.

So, that was that period, and that was that project; and then I was released from Madison, back into the wider academic world, and in particular I came back to Britain. I was brought up short by the fact that the intellectual micro-climate that I had been living in for several years really was a very different climate to the one that I returned to in Britain and, in general, I guess I came up against the fact that much of the humanities was still either actively hostile to the interventions by scientists into humanistic questions or, if not actively hostile, it was indifferent to a naturalistic approach, not interested in it. But whichever of those terms you use, the point was: I came up against the fact that the ground was a lot less fertile for the kind of approach that I had been schooled in, at graduate school, than I had anticipated. I have only gradually come to this realisation, but to some extent 'FACT' is the culmination of a very long

experience lasting some twenty-five years, the first phase of which was the period of research in graduate school which concluded with the book 'EC'. That phase involved an unself-conscious immersion into what I can now call a naturalistic approach to those questions. And although 'EC' has been successful enough—it has its fans as well as its detractors (laughs)—in spite of all of that I felt a pressing need, which maybe grew as the years went by, to offer a kind of defence and justification of what I had mostly taken for granted at the time that I was working on that first book. So, that's the broad story of the new book, which is to say that it is a self-conscious justification of a kind of approach to research and to aesthetics in particular, which I adopted really early on in my career but have increasingly felt the need to spell out and justify for my own sake, but also as a project of independent value.

**AC:** During these years, do you think this method has been spreading in film studies or aesthetics in particular?

**MS:** I think to some extent it has. Take a couple of symptoms: again around the late 80s, early 90s, you see cognitive film theory gradually coming into being as a new approach to the study of film and it begins to create various institutional structures, one of the more important of which has been SCSMI.<sup>8</sup> Now, that's still quite a modestly-sized academic society, but it has been around now for about 20 years (in fact 2017 was the twentieth anniversary of the first ever meeting of the society). So, I would say that it has grown to some degree, it has consolidated itself and there are parallel developments in literary studies, for example, but I wouldn't say it has massively spread. I don't think you can claim that there's been exponential growth year on year. Indeed, if there had been exponential growth, by now we would be talking about naturalised aesthetics being the dominant approach, and it just clearly isn't. And it's the same with

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<sup>8</sup> The Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image. Murray is a founding advisory board member of SCSMI, and served as its President from 2014-17.

cognitive film theory—it is still a minority approach, albeit a significant one.

**AC:** Whatever the current, actual state of affairs, though, yours is still a normative claim, right? That is, you think this is how aesthetics should be done?

**MS:** ... Well ... Yes. (laughs) I mean, I would need to say more about how the approach I am talking about fits into the broader scope of aesthetics. I was saying earlier that the project is a defence and a justification of naturalised aesthetics, but part of that is about delimiting it, right? So it's not like I want to say: "this method will answer every single question you might have about a work of art, or an experience of natural beauty, and is your one-stop shop or all-encompassing solution". But to come back to your question about it being a normative claim: yes, it is a normative claim, so I agree with you there, but *what* that normative claim is, I may want to spell out a bit more carefully. You know the claim would be: for certain kinds of questions, which I think are central questions, the naturalised method is the best, and, you might even say, the only respectable method. But there might be other questions that people can legitimately ask, where naturalism does not have any claim to be necessarily the best approach to take.

**AC:** Do you have an example of one of these questions?

**MS:** I think that if you are talking about the aesthetic evaluation of a single work, it is not that I think that you cannot learn anything from a naturalised approach to aesthetics, but it is going to be very indirect. So, those are the kinds of questions, which I think are going to be the most remote from the method I am talking about, and in general, I am very wary of suggesting that a naturalised approach can answer evaluative questions, normative questions. Because in order to be a scientifically oriented and informed method, it has to hold evaluation and judgement at bay. You can't allow preferences and

judgements of that sort to start colouring the answers you give to what you are posing as empirical questions. How would I like it to turn out to be? That's the whole point about science: it tries to bracket all of those evaluative questions in order to accurately describe and explain the world. So, I don't think a naturalistic philosopher can have it both ways. You can't say that this is the strength of this approach to philosophy and then also say, "and it can answer all these normative questions", because the normative questions have a different character.

**AC:** Let me get back to something you said earlier about naturalism as requiring a scientific approach to the world. In your book, you mark a difference between scientific knowledge and scientific method. How is this difference relevant to naturalism?<sup>9</sup>

**MS:** I don't think that distinction is registered often enough. There's an important difference between taking note of *what* science seems to have discovered about the world (scientific knowledge), and *how* science goes about investigating the world (scientific method).

I suppose the way to look at it is this: I would say the first obligation for a naturalistically-inclined researcher is to think about how the question they are posing, the kind of evidence they are drawing upon, the conclusions they are reaching ... how these sit against the backdrop of already recognised knowledge of the world, much of which would be scientific knowledge of the world. Now this does not mean we ought to *slavishly* follow current scientific orthodoxy, because of course what science tells us about the world often changes. One-decade butter is bad for you, the next decade it might be good for you after all (laughs). But taking account of current, relevant scientific wisdom is a kind of pressure or a constraint. That does not yet imply that we are obliged to adopt scientific methods, however. It is a further step for a naturalistically-

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<sup>9</sup> Smith 2017a, pp. 24-37.



inclined researcher not only to be vigilant and aware of the best scientific knowledge relevant to their inquiry, but to adopt scientific methods.

To narrow the claim down a bit, what I am saying is: if you identify yourself as a naturalistic philosopher, the first thing you do is to be vigilant about your background assumptions concerning whatever domain you are doing research in. So, if you are asking questions about, let us say, empathy in relation to film viewing, I am not going to reach for some arcane theory which may no longer stand as an accepted theory of mind, and think that that is a perfectly legitimate thing to do. I am going to feel some obligation to orient my enquiry to what are regarded as reasonably well-established ideas about the mind. So that is the softer constraint, that is 'naturalism 101'. 'Naturalism 301' is when you start to say, "well, we might be philosophers but, insofar as there is an empirical aspect to the question we are asking, maybe we should actually get our feet wet and engage in some data-gathering".<sup>10</sup> That's where you are beginning to adopt the scientific method. The fashionable name for that trend in philosophy is XPhi, Experimental Philosophy. And there are small subsets of aestheticians who are doing experiments. So that is well established. I should add that I am only on the cusp of really doing that myself, in other words, collaborating with scientists to run experiments; I have done a little bit on it with eye tracking and I might be doing some more with Vittorio Gallese in relation to suspense, using EEG techniques ... But again, to characterise 'FACT' correctly, the book cannot lay claim to what I am calling 'naturalism 301' (laughs).

So, that hopefully gives you an idea of why there is an important difference between scientific knowledge and method. A really humdrum example I use in the book concerns painkilling drugs. We all walk around with what we take to be reasonably reliable knowledge about how painkillers work. Now painkillers are

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<sup>10</sup>American terminology: 101 is the most elementary course in an academic programme, 301 is a more advanced course, 501 still more advanced, and so on.

absolutely a product of the modern scientific medical world, but as lay individuals, we haven't used scientific methods to prove to ourselves that ibuprofen and paracetamol work the way that we take them to; we've just accepted this knowledge because we live in a scientifically-informed society, which embeds, so to speak, scientific knowledge in so many of its technologies and structures. Like it or not, we're already implicated in a lot of scientific knowledge in that way. To the extent that you take painkillers and you assume that they are going to work reliably in a certain kind of way is just to have accepted a certain body of scientific knowledge. A different step would be to say, "you know what, I am a bit uncertain about the claims that are made for aspirin, I am not so sure that aspirin really is a painkiller, I am going to run some tests!" (laughs) And of course there are people who are sceptical about certain medicines—see all the stuff about vaccination—and the truly scientific answer to that scepticism is, well, run some tests then! Now, of course that is not easy to do, unless you are within the scientific establishment and you've got all the personnel and the equipment to do so. But the principle is what I am getting at. I am saying that it is one thing to accept, as most of us do in an everyday way, the deliverances of scientific knowledge, and it is another thing to go to naturalism 301— where I actually get engaged in some tests of these elements of scientific knowledge, and investigate them for myself. And of course, we can't all do that all of the time.

### 3 Aesthetic Experience Triangulated

AC: You endorse what you call a form of 'Cooperative Naturalism'. Could you explain this position, and clarify how is it different from what you call 'cherry-picking'?"

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<sup>11</sup> See the discussion in Smith 2017a, pp. 1-3, which also considers 'Autonomism' (the view that the study of human behaviour should remain wholly independent of the study of the physical and non-human animal world) and 'Replacement Naturalism'

MS: Let me start with the second concept and then work my way backwards to the first one. ‘Cherry-picking’ is just an everyday expression which I use to refer to academics in the humanities, including philosophers, who will draw upon or allude to scientific discoveries, but do so in an *ad hoc*, unsystematic fashion. They pick scientific cherries when it suits them to embellish and garnish some claim that they wish to make. I think a very good example of this is our friend Gilles Deleuze, less so actually in the books on cinema, but Deleuze’s work on mathematics was the subject of a major critique by the physicist Alan Sokal.<sup>12</sup> So, Deleuze would be a good example. He will often appeal to some particular scientific insight or discovery, but without really any more general effort to think about how that discovery fits with his theory in general, how that particular piece of scientific research came out of a larger body of research. Another metaphor I use in my book is “the magpie theft”<sup>13</sup> of scientific ideas. “Oh that’s a shiny looking thing, let’s grab that scientific claim and we can make something of this”, we can use it for rhetorical purposes. So, ‘cherry-picking’ is where a researcher from the humanities pays this kind of instrumental, short-term, very unsystematic attention to scientific discovery.

Now that contrasts with what I am endorsing as the right way forwards, ‘Cooperative Naturalism’, where the idea is that if you are researching a question or a domain in the humanities, you should be alert to whether this research touches upon discoveries and knowledge which have been acquired in any other domain, and in particular—bearing in mind that naturalism says, “we tend to learn most about the world through those disciplines which have adopted a scientific method”—why not look to the sciences, to see if there is

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(the view that the study of human behaviour should, and in time will, be entirely subsumed by the natural sciences).

<sup>12</sup> Sokal & Bricmont 1998. See also Smith’s 2010 comments on the ‘Sokal Hoax’, triggered by Sokal 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Smith 2017a, p. 3.

anything relevant in those specific disciplines? So, much of the book, as you know, talks about various aspects of emotional response to film and to the arts, and that would be a very good example. If you were going to write about emotions in films, there are at least two other ways you could approach this, non-naturalistically. You could either say, we actually have a pretty rich everyday vocabulary for emotions—this is sometimes referred to as ‘folk psychology’—so we just stick with that, we just do an investigation of how emotions enter our experience and judgements of films, using nothing more than our folk psychology. And I think that that would take you a certain distance. That’s one possibility. Another one is that you might locate some arcane, possibly outdated, body of theory about the emotions, for example, a psychoanalytic one (laughs) ...

AC: (laughing) ... just a random example ...

MS: ... and you might say, yes, this looks kind of interesting, on its own terms. Let’s not worry too much about whether it holds up to empirical enquiry, testing, replication, and so forth; it just looks interesting, so let’s run with this, let’s use this as our model of what the emotions are and set it against a body of films and see where it takes us. I am not even saying that that approach has no potential value at all, but I am not sure how it has any *knowledge-generating* value. In other words, it may have a kind of aesthetic value, founded on its ingenuity. A lot of theory works in this way; it’s less about the degree to which the theory persuades you that it is insightfully and illuminatingly telling you things about some part of the world, or how the world works. Rather it is a thing unto itself. It’s a kind of invented world.

AC: It would be, though, like building up a theory out of the claim that the earth is flat?

**MS:** Exactly. There is a kind of theorisation where, I think, really the kind of value that it's seeking to fulfil has more to do with the inventiveness of the theoretician, irrespective of what it claims to be studying. But as soon as you hold such a theory up to a more empirical standard it doesn't look very strong. Such work is more like aesthetic performance than empirical investigation. So again, to line up our options here: at the extremes we have autonomism, and replacement naturalism; and we have cherry-picking, which is just an opportunistic use of individual scientific discoveries. Then we've got what I'm endorsing, cooperative naturalism, which is an effort to assess systematically what one is trying to say about an aesthetic question against the backdrop of what is more generally known about human psychology.

So, with all of that in the background, let us just think about what claims can be made for the kind of cooperative naturalism which I am endorsing. In effect, I am saying: "ok, let's take our folk psychology, and put that alongside what various scientific disciplines are telling us about the nature of emotion". And that is going to range over various types of psychology, for example, the very famous work conducted now over several decades by Paul Ekman and his associates about facial expression.<sup>14</sup> It's going to include neuroscience, but also anthropology, and possibly parts of sociology, so there are social sciences which have an important role in this debate as well. But what we are trying to say is: let us see if we can get a more nuanced and deeper understanding of the way emotions work by pressing on beyond folk psychology into the kinds of things that have been discovered scientifically about the emotions.

**AC:** Let's turn our attention to aesthetics *per se*, and in particular to aesthetic experience. You define aesthetic experience as a particular kind of experience, one that is not merely *had*, but that is *savoured*.<sup>15</sup> So, aesthetic experience is characterised by, or perhaps is a type of,

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<sup>14</sup> Ekman & Davidson 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Smith 2017a, p. 57.

self-consciousness. I would like to ask you if you could position your own definition within the wider debate on aesthetic experience in philosophical aesthetics. What kind of features make an experience aesthetic? This is a vexed question in the debate on aesthetic experience, since it is related to the unclear distinction between features of the experience itself and the features of the objects that elicit the experience. Does the naturalised account of aesthetic experience offer a solution to this quarrel?

**MS:** Well, there are several things to say here. First off, I am committed to the idea that there is such a thing as ‘aesthetic experience’—that it isn’t a myth which ought to be eliminated from our theories. And second, leading on from this, I hold that aesthetic experience can’t be reduced to something more basic like attending to particular features of an object. In my view, we need an account which treats aesthetic experience as a distinctive, multi-layered, and complex experience. And yes, as you say, the self-consciousness of aesthetic experience is central to this complexity. This is also the foundation for the idea that aesthetic experience is something that matters to us, something that we value. After all, you can only ‘savour’ something that you’re positively disposed towards! This third point isn’t one that I particularly stress in the book, but it is the focus of the project I’m now working on at Princeton.<sup>16</sup>

As for whether a naturalistic approach can illuminate the nature of aesthetic experience: absolutely! I don’t take the view that consciousness in general, or aesthetic experience as a type of conscious experience, somehow eludes or transcends empirical investigation. As Daniel Dennett puts it, these phenomena are puzzles, but not mysteries. The primary idea in relation to this point

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<sup>16</sup> This point is qualified by Smith 2019, p. 132 (‘Proust Wasn’t a Neuroscientist’), his contribution to ‘Is Psychology Relevant to Aesthetics?’, a symposium on both Smith 2017a and Nanay 2016 (‘Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception’). The first fruits of Murray’s research project at Princeton will appear as ‘Human Flourishing, Philosophical Naturalism, and Aesthetic Value’, forthcoming in Corrigan 2020.

in ‘FACT’ is that we can get a much better grip on the idea of aesthetic experience—often cast in very abstract terms and consequently subject to scepticism—by drawing on psychological research on aspects of aesthetic experience or closely-related phenomena. Here I draw on work by Diana Raffman in relation to ‘nuance ineffability’ in music perception, Jenefer Robinson’s extensive and rigorous engagement with scientific research on emotion, and Bence Nanay’s strategy of bringing ideas from perceptual psychology to bear on aesthetic experience.<sup>17</sup> The idea is to soberly insist that aesthetic experience is no more and no less than another facet of human mental life. Moral psychology is widely regarded as an aspect of morality that can be studied empirically. Think of a naturalised approach to aesthetic experience as equivalent to that. In fact, a few years back Elisabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie hosted a conference on ‘aesthetic psychology’ that issued in their edited book ‘The Aesthetic Mind’. Those enterprises are very much in the spirit of naturalised aesthetics.<sup>18</sup>

**AC:** As you acknowledge, many believe that consciousness in general cannot be the subject of scientific study, nonetheless you hold that this specific sub-species of consciousness, the one involved in aesthetic experience, can be analysed with a scientific method. You propose to take into account three different levels of analysis we have at our disposal to study mental phenomena (the phenomenological level, the psychological level, and the neurophysiological level), and argue that we can ‘triangulate’ aesthetic experience. That is to say, you aim to explain aesthetic experience by bringing together evidence from different spheres of knowledge—an example of consilience, if I understand it properly. Can you sketch for us your account of a triangulated aesthetic experience?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Nanay 2016; Raffman 1993; Robinson 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Goldie & Schellekens 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Smith 2017a, pp. 57-82

**MS:** Triangulation is the idea that our best hope of understanding the human mind—and particular aspects of our mental life, like aesthetic experience—is to be open to the various kinds of evidence we have at our disposal: evidence from phenomenology (introspection, self-report), psychology, and neuroscience. So this is a kind of methodological pluralism, compared with approaches like hardcore functionalism (which holds that we have little to learn from neuroscience) and some varieties of phenomenology (which reject any empirical investigation of the mind). And yes, insofar as triangulation seeks to integrate these different types of evidence, it is indeed a form of consilience, characterized by William Whewell (who invented the idea) as the ‘jumping together’ of different bodies of evidence.

The primary examples of triangulation at work in the book concern empathy and suspense. To take the case of suspense: suspense is a distinctive kind of affective state, and most of us think we can recognise it when we feel it. So, there’s our phenomenological evidence. There is also a well-established psychological account of suspense: on this theory, suspense arises when we don’t know how a story will turn out, and where we hope for a good outcome but fear a bad one. So, according to that theory, suspense won’t arise in situations where we know the outcome of a story—on repeat viewings, say, or films narrating well-known historical events. And yet the evidence of experience—of the phenomenology of watching such films—suggests that we do or at least can experience suspense in such contexts. That gives rise to the problem of ‘anomalous suspense’, the apparent experience of suspense where the orthodox theory says it shouldn’t arise.<sup>20</sup>

This is where neuroscience comes into play: I argue that one way of adjudicating between what introspection tells us (“this feels like suspense!”) and what the psychological theory says (“sorry, it

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<sup>20</sup> The problem of ‘anomalous suspense’ is explored in *ibid.*, pp. 69-72.



can't be suspense") is to look at the neural correlates of suspense. If we find that the profile of brain activity for a subject engaging with a story in the classic suspense condition (that is, in ignorance of the story's outcome) is identical in the relevant respects with the profile of a subject engaging with a story in the 'no suspense' condition (that is, knowing the story's outcome), then we have reason to revise or reject the orthodox account of suspense, because we have a new source of evidence suggesting that suspense does or can arise even when we know a story's outcome. By the same token, if those two profiles of brain activity look notably different, then we'll have reason to think that our phenomenology is misleading, and that what's going on in the 'suspense' and 'no suspense' conditions are really different. That shouldn't surprise us; introspection is fallible. What also comes out from this example, then, is the idea that, although at the outset we take all three types of evidence seriously, further downstream in the process of triangulation, we may decide that a given piece of evidence is misleading or needs to be reinterpreted. This is where, so to speak, triangulation bares its teeth.

#### 4 Spectatorship

**AC:** Before, while you talked about the history of the overall project behind 'FACT', you mentioned that in 'Engaging Characters' you were already using a naturalised approach to the study of film. Can you trace a sense of continuity between the two books?

**MS:** Well, for one thing there is a good amount of continuity in terms of a focus on emotion. That is another reason to think about emotion as a compelling example of a phenomenon which seems to demand a naturalised or third-cultural approach. More specifically, both 'EC' and the new book are heavily concerned with emotional response to art in general, fiction as a sub-type of art, and film fiction as a sub-sub-type. And there is a methodological connection: both are works of naturalistic theory or philosophy. 'EC' is a largely unself-conscious

piece of naturalistic theory, while the new book—and unfortunately it may not be better for it—is burdened with self-consciousness. That’s also one of the explicit goals of the new book—to reflect on the underlying principles that gave birth to the first book.

**AC:** In ‘EC’, you deal with crucial psychological aspects that shape our aesthetic experience of film, but I also see a continuity in the way you treat spectatorship. In ‘EC’ (and in a couple of essays you published around that time—I refer to your debate with Richard Allen)<sup>21</sup>, you outline a new conception of spectatorship that significantly diverged from what had been the predominant theories in film studies, which saw spectatorship as an illusion or a dream-like experience. In contrast, your new conception underlines the role of consciousness in our experience of fiction. Can you sketch for us your account of spectatorship? How does it relate to the naturalised method you propose in ‘FACT’?

**MS:** It is very important to remember that at the time of the genesis of that project there really was, and I think one can use this kind of language, a reigning view of film spectatorship, which was largely psychoanalytic in inspiration and in which the key term of art was ‘subjection’. On this view, to be a spectator is to be subjected to the ideology of the film. In the most sophisticated versions of that theory, the ideological values of the film are manifested in the narrative and the visual structures of the film. What I’ve just given as a capsule description of the theory can be laid out with a great deal of nuance. But what I am trying to stress was central to that vision of spectatorship was the idea (you know the word ‘subjection’ says a lot) that individual human spectators are more subjects than agents.<sup>22</sup> And spectators have very little flexibility of response, very

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<sup>21</sup> Smith 1995b, 1998; Allen 1998.

<sup>22</sup> This contrast might be more precisely stated in terms of a contrast between ‘patients’ and ‘agents’, but Murray is adopting the language of contemporary film theory here.

little awareness of the nature of their response, very little ability to reflect upon the nature of their response, all of which simply seemed a caricature of the way, not just film spectatorship, but any kind of engagement with art, or any kind of human engagement with the world, works.

So, you are absolutely right that, put at its simplest, the goal was to say: “Ok, let’s put two things back at the centre of our understanding of film spectatorship: one is agency; the other one is consciousness”. So, when we go to see films, we are acting in a certain way, and much of that agency takes an at least partially-conscious form. Now, that’s the broad thrust and the motivation for a new theory of spectatorship. That said, it is important to stress that in the alternative theory that I articulate, there is still a recognition that there are aspects of film spectatorship that have an involuntary character and over which we have no real control, so to speak, once we’ve made the decision to engage with a film. In relation to these aspects of film experience, we are passive recipients, being worked on by the film, rather than agents. I am thinking of things like the mere fact that we perceive motion; we have no control over that level of our physiology. But in my view, it would be crazy to regard that as somehow compromising our freedom. We have made a decision to engage with this experience—with the wonders of the moving image; it is not as if this has been imposed upon us. Another example of what I mean, in terms of the more passive aspects of spectatorship, would be reflex responses. This is something that the new book talks about a lot: that there is an aspect of our emotional response—low-level startles, shocks, chills, shivers in the spine—which arises from the way in which films are engineered to work on us in a very directly causal fashion. The larger theory that I am putting forward insists, however, that this is just one dimension of film spectatorship. And we shouldn’t think of these visceral, more passive aspects of film spectatorship as somehow necessarily in tension with the more conscious, more intellectual, more reflective dimensions of film spectatorship, any more than we would think of those two things

being somehow in problematic tension with one another in our ordinary engagement with the world. So, the fact that you are cooking dinner and you jump when you realise you've accidentally put your hand on the stove—that's not in problematic tension with the fact that while you are cooking dinner you are also thinking about the lecture you are going to give tomorrow, or for that matter thinking about the recipe you're using, right? Or maybe that crucial part of the puzzle in that final chapter of your dissertation finally gets worked out, as you are stirring the spaghetti sauce. What I am saying is: we are multileveled embodied agents. And that is true across all the domains that humans act and exist within.

Now, there are various kinds of opponents I have here, not just one type of opponent. So, against the psychoanalytic school of thought regarding film spectatorship, I want to stress the cognitive, conscious, and reflective aspects of spectatorship, and say that however it is that we experience a movie as it unfolds—and that may include a lot of reflex behaviours over which we exercise very little immediate control—nevertheless in the longer run, and considering the experience as a whole, we are perfectly capable of reflecting on all of that. And of course, what else is a discipline like film studies if not systematic reflection on the nature of spectatorship? I am insisting that we only have things like film studies because of this capacity, a more basic capacity to reflect on our experiences. So against the psychoanalytic school of thought I am insisting on the active, cognitive and reflective aspects of spectatorship. But in the new book, another school of thought which I am equally opposed to downplays or denies altogether the involuntary, reflex aspects of film and aesthetic experience. My boogie man in the book is Raymond Tallis, so this is mostly in the chapter on neuroscience.<sup>23</sup> Tallis, I should say, does not write about cinema—he generally writes about philosophical issues and to the extent that he writes about the arts it is mostly about literature. And there is a beautiful irony to this story

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<sup>23</sup> Smith 2017a, pp. 82-105.

which I will come to in a moment. The key thing to emphasise is that Tallis objects to neuroscientific and evolutionary accounts of human experience because he thinks that such accounts reduce us to biological machines. Essentially, he thinks that neuroscientific and evolutionary explanations entirely wipe away any recognition of things like consciousness, our capacity to reflect, our capacity to understand the nature of our actions, and so forth. Now I just think that that is another kind of caricature, a caricature in the following sense: I am with Tallis in recognising that we have all of those capacities and that they are an important part of what makes us human; and these capacities are surely central to what separates us from most of the rest of the animal world. But the idea that you can really understand human behaviour, or the little slice of it that is watching movies, while disregarding things like reflex reaction and basic physiology—that strikes me as an equally reductive perspective. Do you see what I am saying?

**AC:** Yes, but then how do you reconcile the fact that, as you've argued, aesthetic experience requires conscious reflection on the very kind of experience we are having (we 'savour' the experience, as you put it) with the idea that many of the mechanisms that are involved in our experience actually happen at the level of the sub-personal and the cognitive unconscious?

**MS:** The way I have been talking about it so far would lead you to think that the reflection I am referring to can happen only after the fact. So you go watch your movie and while you are watching the movie you are jumping around in your seat as the shocks bear down upon you, and you are jamming in the popcorn and gulping down the sugared water ... so you're basically a bag of nerve-ends and reflexes and synaptic firing and there is nothing much going on beyond those physiological reactions. And then, after the fact, you are away from the heat of battle and you can reflect on the nature of the experience. Now clearly, that is part of the picture, in the sense

that I think that for any artform what happens when you are away from engaging with the work is a massively important thing. That is true for literature as much as it is for film. When you are attending to an artwork, you are not at the point in the process where you are reflecting on how you are experiencing whatever it is you are experiencing, or possibly learning from that work ... that is, you are not, at that moment in the process, engaging in any kind of reflection on how the artwork might have implications for life itself. So, one thing that makes reflection on our experiences of artworks away from our engagement with them important, is that that's when we think about and reflect upon how our experience of a work might have implications for the way we live our lives, how we learn things about the world, and so forth. But I also want to say that this happens to some degree in the experience itself. And this comes back to your question about reconciling the importance of the underpinning sub-personal components of aesthetic response with the overall character of aesthetic experience, which, as you point out in your question, has this reflexive, self-conscious character where we not only experience a work but we savour our experience of the work. If such reflection just happened after the experience of the work, it would be a much weaker claim. So, I think that part of what is happening, certainly when you have a very powerful and rewarding—a successful—aesthetic experience, is that you are having it and you know you are having it, you know you are gripped by this. And part of that feeling of being gripped and compelled by a work of art is the recognition that “wow, this is really holding my attention, this is really fascinating”. But it is important to note that this state of self-consciousness represents the apex of aesthetic experience; I don't mean to suggest that for something to count as an aesthetic experience, the second-order layer must be in evidence throughout the duration of the experience. For certain stretches of an aesthetic experience, and perhaps for the entirety of very simple aesthetic experiences, we may simply be engrossed in whatever the object offers up to our senses and imagination. In 'FACT' I say that

we savour, and don't merely have, aesthetic experiences, when such experiences 'go well'.<sup>24</sup> So what I am really describing is a kind of ideal prototype or exemplar.

Now this complex response—the reflexive, 'double-ordered' character of aesthetic experience—can cash out in a number of ways, depending on the individual work and the genre in which it is situated. Take horror, for example. As everyone in aesthetics knows, through Noël Carroll's work especially, one of the many paradoxes we can talk about in the aesthetic domain is the paradox of horror—which is a modern equivalent of an age-old problem, the paradox of tragedy—where the puzzle is: "how can we explain the fact that we seem to be attracted to something which on the face of it is something that repels us?". It is in the nature of horror as ordinarily understood that it's aversive, it's something that we want to avoid. But, in the context of horror fictions, including horror movies, we (or at least those of us who are horror movie aficionados) seem to be actively attracted to this horrific subject matter. Now, part of what I am saying is that the reflexive character of aesthetic experience gives us a partial explanation of things like the paradox of horror, in the following way: that one stage of engaging with a horror movie for sure might involve those moments of repulsion and disgust and shock, moments where many of us are even going to turn our eyes away from the screen or at least wince. We are going to have emotional reactions which, considered locally, are unpleasant things to experience. But they are contained and framed within a larger kind of project of engaging with this work which—let us put it this way—we calculate, we gamble, will be a rewarding experience, as a whole experience. So that, if the experience of a horror movie was nothing other than a series of disgusting, horrific, localised shocks then it would be very hard to see a solution to the paradox of horror.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. For more on the question of whether second-order 'savouring' is strictly necessary for an experience to count as aesthetic, see Paisley Livingston 2018, 'Questions about Aesthetic Experience', and Murray's 2018 response, pp. 71-5 and 116-19.

But once we introduce into the argument the idea that there is a second-order dimension to our experience, a solution comes into view. We have first-order responses, including, in the case of horror, reactions of disgust and shock. But we also experience second-order responses, in which we reflect on the way our first-order responses to the film are unfolding, the way they are evolving. And that dimension of self-awareness is central to our ability to take pleasure and find something rewarding in things which are, at a first-order level, just repulsive. So, again to tie that back to your question, many of the first-order disgust reactions that I am referring to will have a sub-personal character. They will just be working on some specific physiological mechanism. So, a certain kind of sound, or a certain kind of visual image just will generate a reaction of disgust from us, or a loud unexpected sound will trigger a 'jump scare', a startle response. So that is the sub-personal end of the experience. But that is not mutually exclusive with the reflective end of the experience.

Let us put it this way: to be a human agent is to be this complex of different orders of response, from the very low-level physiological responses to the highest-level, most reflective, most integrated responses. In other words, I am not saying that any human agent is a perfectly consistent and integrated entity, but what I am saying is that there is a part of what it is to be a human agent which involves an attempt to make sense of oneself, as a consistent being.<sup>25</sup> And that is never complete, it is never perfect, but it is an ambition. It goes beyond aesthetics, but it is highly relevant to aesthetic experience, and that's how I reconcile the sub-personal dimension with the conscious reflective character of aesthetic experience.

**AC:** But then I have another question.

**MS:** You mean I haven't answered it perfectly? (laughs)

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<sup>25</sup> On this point, see Smith 2017a, pp. 81-2.



**AC:** Let's say that it was a perfect answer, but then we have another problem. You solve the paradox of *horror* by pointing at the reflective dimension of our aesthetic experience, yet, the paradox of *fiction* may pose a different challenge: how can *fictional* events and entities elicit *actual* emotions?<sup>26</sup> After all, why are we moved, if we are conscious of the fact that we are attending to a fictional representation? In relation to the paradox of fiction one might even say that perhaps the illusion-based conceptions of spectatorship that you criticise may be in a better position to face the challenge posed by this paradox. According to illusion-based theories of spectatorship, our emotional responses to fictions could be explained either because we take a fiction to refer to real events and persons, or because we mistake the fictional representation for an actual event. Your view of spectatorship as a conscious experience needs to resort to different kinds of arguments to solve this paradox, for it implies that when we apprehend fiction films we never cease to attend to the fact that fiction films are representations built upon conventions. So, how do you solve the paradox?

**MS:** The way I tend to see this is that there are essentially three kinds of solution that can be offered to the paradox of fiction. As you say, there is the *suspension of disbelief* solution, which essentially says that when we are in the heat of the moment, immersed in and engaged by the work of art—a film or another work of art—we actually lose awareness that it is merely a fiction. And as you are saying there are various different versions of this, but interestingly, this is generally regarded as the longest-standing attempted solution to the paradox of fiction; it goes back at least as far as the Romantics. The phrase 'suspension of disbelief' is from Coleridge and perhaps one can understand why historically it's been a favoured solution, because it is very neat. It simply says, "ok, we can only have emotions when we take ourselves to be responding to something actually

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<sup>26</sup> See Doran & Moser 2019, Willard 2019, and Robinson 2019 in this issue for an outline and discussion of the nature of the paradox of fiction.

happening, or to have happened at least". So, if we just observe the way in which people become very absorbed in fictions, maybe we can say, within that frame, they've lost their ability to discriminate the real and the fictional. That's one possible solution. The second possible solution is the one most famously articulated by Kendall Walton, which denies that the kind of affective responses we have to fictions are emotions in exactly the same sense as the emotions we experience in real contexts; rather, fictions prompt 'quasi-emotions'.<sup>27</sup> The more I contemplate this question, the more I think that Walton's 'quasi-emotion' solution may actually be the right solution.

**AC:** So you think that we do not actually feel real emotions when we engage with fiction ...

**MS:** Yes, except that this is an easily misunderstood solution. It is very important to understand that Walton is not saying that the responses we have lack an affective character, that they cannot be intense, and that they do not in many respects resemble straightforward emotions. To come back to our horror example: when you are sitting there, gagging, bouncing around in your seat, shocked, appalled, weeping, or whatever your specific responses are, Walton is not saying that you are not deeply moved; he is making a very technical point about the difference between those responses and the very similar responses you would have, let us say, if you were on the edge of a motorway, and you were witnessing very similar scenes of actual carnage. In this context, the possibility of intervening in the scene would indeed be a real possibility. Walton's position can easily be misunderstood to be saying that the affective responses we have to fictions are somehow weak, dilute, not very powerful; but the qualifier 'quasi', in the expression 'quasi-emotion',

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<sup>27</sup> Walton 1978.

has nothing to do with the strength of the feeling. It has to do with the way the response relates to one's beliefs. That's the nub of it.

Now let me run through the third kind of solution. This is the so-called 'thought theory', associated with Noël Carroll and Peter Lamarque.<sup>28</sup> It points out that there are lots of contexts where we appear to have emotional reactions to things which we don't believe to be taking place. And that is not unique just to our experience of fictions. So, we can contemplate things which might happen to us, and sometimes we might contemplate things which might plausibly happen to us. And contemplating things which *might* happen to us, *actually* helps us to plan. So, if you are a person of a very cautious sensibility, then contemplating what a period of unemployment would be like might guide your actions in a very different way to the way somebody who is much more inclined to risk-taking would find their actions steered if they imagined what it is like to be unemployed for a period. The imagination, the power of the imagination, is not something which is only narrowly pertinent to the arts. This is another way of stating a point that came up earlier in our discussion, when I was stressing that part of the perspective of the new book is to say: "look, aesthetic experience is distinctive, but it is not entirely disconnected from the rest of ordinary experience". This is a very good example of that, right? We create fictions, which build on our capacity to imagine things, things which are not true of the world. But where does that capacity come from? Well it comes first of all from the fact that our minds are such that we can plan and anticipate, we can shape our future actions by delimited acts of the imagination representing possible future states. That is what planning is. So, fictions, in a grand way, work on the same basis.

That, I think, all argues very much in favour of the thought theory of emotional response. And that theory is not something which Carroll invented just for the case of horror; it fits with a more general feature of our emotional life, that we do not just have emotions in response to events that have actually happened. We also

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<sup>28</sup> Carroll 1990; Lamarque 1981.

have emotional responses to things which plausibly might happen, and we also sometimes have such responses to things which never will happen, or never could happen, and that is when emotions tend to be called phobias: when they become entirely irrational. So, I think that, coming back to your original question, about how the model of spectatorship in 'EC' copes with the paradox of fiction, when it looks like the old 'illusion theory' of spectatorship has the advantage of being much better prepared to solve the paradox of fiction, my answer is: well, there are at least two alternatives to the suspension of disbelief theory, both of which are better candidates. The one that is historically and—probably as I see it right now—my own favoured response is the 'thought theory' ...

AC: But you said the 'make-believe theory' before ...

MS: (laughs) I did, yes.

AC: So, in the span of five minutes you changed your mind? (laughs)

MS: Yes, in the span of five minutes (laughs) ... No, let me clarify this. What I am saying is, I have always thought that the thought theory was the solution to the paradox of fiction, and it lines up best with the theory of spectatorship in 'EC' ... but a few nights ago I read an essay by Stacie Friend (laughs), which was a defence of Walton's theory of quasi-emotions, which made me think that maybe there is more to be said in defence of his account.<sup>29</sup>

AC: Ok, so your reply to the paradox has changed over time? (Indeed, I did remember that you favoured the 'thought theory').

MS: Well, in all honesty I would say that it always seemed to me that the thought theory and the 'quasi-emotion theory' are the leading

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<sup>29</sup> Friend 2003. See also Friend's 2018 critical commentary on Smith 2017a, Smith's 2018 response, especially p. 125, and note 51, p. 258, in Smith 2017a.

contenders because the suspension of disbelief theory just has too many costly and implausible implications.

**AC:** But I would also like to ask you about the role of the physiological dimensions of emotions in the make-believe theory of emotion, because you stress the relevance and importance of the sub-personal and automatic reactions. Do they still play a role in the make-believe theory of emotion?

**MS:** You are quite right that another part of my perspective is—and this connects with what I was saying a few minutes ago about the multileveled nature of human agency—that when we are watching a movie certain things are happening on a primal physiological level, where discriminations between what's real and what's merely a representation don't come into it, *at that level*. So, if we are strictly talking about the sub-personal level, again, when you jump at a loud unexpected sound, your body reacts just as it would do if you were walking down the high street and a car backfires, or a firecracker goes off. It's the same phenomenon. And your body goes: HUH! In both of those contexts, you exercise no deliberative control over those responses. By the way, the firecracker too is a kind of representation, even though it is also an actual explosion: a miniature, controlled explosion mimicking a larger, uncontrolled explosion. But whether it's a movie explosion, a firecracker, or an actual explosion, which you may one day have the misfortune of witnessing, your body reacts in the same way to all three of those events. But of course, our reaction isn't just at the bodily level. At the same moment that our body jumps, we also cognise what's happening and a few milliseconds later, or certainly a few seconds later, we've already gotten a more sophisticated, conscious (and usually more accurate) understanding of what it is that's happened to us. Combining this personal-level response with the lower-level, sub-personal reactions is an important part of what I term a 'thick explanation'—one that

attempts to capture the various levels and layers of embodied, emotional, human cognition.<sup>30</sup>

Let's take the example of 3D experience. We go to see a 3D movie and it's a strange experience for us; 3D is still a sufficiently new form of cinema that when you sit there and you put your glasses on, and these objects are floating around somewhere between you and the screen—it's a weird visual experience. 3D experience in the movies has almost nothing to do with the three-dimensional experience that you and I are having right now—that is, our experience of navigating a three-dimensional spatial world. Actually, that picks up on another theme of the new book. The idea of *expansionism*. But we'll come back to that ... (phone starts ringing) ... sorry that's my wife calling but I am going to ignore her (laughs).

**AC:** I will make a note of that ...

**MS:** Yes, you can keep that on record for posterity ... So let's return to the example of 3D experience. You are having this weird visual experience, which is not like any other visual experience you are likely to have outside a movie theatre. And you don't really have an understanding of how on earth the technology is working on your perceptual system to create this bizarre set of sensations, this experience you are having. But at the same time that that is happening, you know full well that you have signed up and paid to have this 3D experience, and you're watching yourself having this experience. That comes back to the self-conscious part of the aesthetic experience—the idea that we don't merely have aesthetic experiences, but that we savour them. And I do not necessarily mean that at every moment you are having this second-order experience, but I am saying, globally, it is a feature of your experience with the film or work of art. You can think of it as an intermittent thing. During certain parts of the experience, you are just going to be focused on first-order visual or narrative experience. But there are

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<sup>30</sup> On thick explanation, see Smith 2017a, pp. 51-4.

other moments when you will be having a second-order, more reflective kind of experience.

Now let me connect this back to my discussion of the paradox of fiction. Here's an idea which I'll just float as a final hypothesis. One thing that differentiates the kind of emotional experience that we have when we are watching a movie from ordinary emotional experience is that it is partly characterised by a second-order, self-conscious dimension. Now that lines up pretty well with the make-believe emotion theory. So, when I am using my imagination to contemplate future possible courses of action and I am scaring myself with the thought that I might become unemployed, that doesn't necessarily have a second-order dimension to it. The focus here is straightforwardly practical and action-oriented: what am I going to do? Well, that's a really scary thought, and I am not going to let that happen. I would rather work in McDonalds than be unemployed, some people might say, on the basis of such imaginings. So, the thought theory may not discriminate—or at least it may not discriminate very well—between the kinds of emotional experience we have when we engage with artworks, and ordinary emotional experiences prompted by the kind of imagining characteristic of everyday planning. Whereas the quasi-emotion theory captures this difference. It's also really important to remember that that is a small piece of Walton's much bigger make-believe theory of the representational arts, and you have to look at it in the context of the more general theory to understand the strength of the quasi-emotion theory. In this context, it may be a more powerful theory than the thought theory.

And there is a further, interesting difference in this respect: Walton is a system builder. He's got this overarching, very detailed, very nuanced, very ambitious general theory of the representational arts. Carroll by contrast is a piecemeal theorist, he likes to bite one problem off at the time. I wouldn't say that he disregards the systematic perspective, because, you know, the guy has written so much and so broadly of course there are connections in his overall

pattern of thinking. But what I am saying is that he is less concerned with how his answer to any one question connects with a set of related questions and coheres with them. That's a methodological preference. But I think that a piecemeal perspective is an incomplete perspective; ultimately, as a theorist, you need to look at how all the 'pieces' do or do not fit into a larger picture. Sellars' adage again: how does it all hang together? Walton is really—programmatically—interested in that.

## 5 Film and/as Philosophy

AC: With Tom Wartenberg, you have edited a special issue of 'The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism'.<sup>31</sup> The theme of the issue was film's capacity to convey philosophical meaning or to philosophise. On that occasion, you published an essay where you sounded sceptical.<sup>32</sup> More precisely, you argued that films cannot function like thought experiments because they prompt different kinds of imagination, related to their different purposes and contexts of appreciation. A thought experiment requires *hypothetical* imagining, where the possibility of some counterfactual is imagined in a *spare* and *abstract* way; whereas films require *dramatic* imagining, which involves *elaborating* and *ramifying* the bare counterfactual in one or more ways.<sup>33</sup> Such a difference in the details we are required to imagine seems to point at the fact that a philosophical thought experiment and an artistic thought experiment are 'geared toward different tasks', or so you argued. In addition, you held that the relationship between narrative and argument was impressionistic and undertheorised, implying that narratives could not be taken to make philosophical arguments. Do you still stand by these

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<sup>31</sup> Smith & Wartenberg 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Smith 2006a.

<sup>33</sup> The distinction is made by Moran 1994, pp. 105-6.



arguments, or has your position on the issue changed?<sup>34</sup> In the same essay you say that there is a difference between knowledge in general and philosophical knowledge more specifically, but then can you clarify what is this philosophical knowledge?

**MS:** I do think that there is a great deal of work out there which seeks to forge a very close tie between film (and art in general) and philosophy far too quickly; I am very sceptical of the most strident claims in this area. But I have tried to make sense of these arguments and the impulse behind them. I argue that the ‘film as philosophy’ thesis really amounts to a strong claim about the (potential) cognitive value of film—we can learn things by watching films, and perhaps learn from films in a unique way, specific to film. Few people would deny at least the first part of this claim—that we can gain knowledge by watching films—but by casting this in terms of films ‘doing philosophy’, the ante is greatly upped. In my view, if we put it in these terms, we’re implying that the knowledge we can derive from films meets especially exalted standards, benefitting from the kind rigour and depth of reflection that we expect of philosophy. To my mind, that just mischaracterises the way most art works and what it seeks to achieve, in two senses. First, it tends to obscure the ways in which films and other types of art matter to us non-cognitively—that is, aesthetically—by furnishing us with what I refer to in ‘FACT’ as “adventures in perception, cognition, and emotion”;<sup>35</sup> complex, multimodal experiences which we value for their own sake, that is, independently of any further value they may have. This is the sense in which films are generally ‘geared toward different tasks’ than works of philosophy. And second, by assimilating films to the category of philosophy too quickly or too completely, we also mischaracterize the *way* in which they can be sources of knowledge.

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<sup>34</sup> Both Smith and Wartenberg have pushed this debate further in a recent book edited by Katherine Thomson-Jones 2016. On a related topic, see also Smith 2017b.

<sup>35</sup> Murray does not use this exact wording in Smith 2017a, but the idea is discussed on pp. 138-141.

What films lack in argumentative rigour, empirical adequacy, and reflective maturity—the three marks of specifically *philosophical* knowledge—they make up for in terms of imaginative vividness and particularity.<sup>36</sup>

Thinking about the relationship between film (as an art) and philosophy takes us back to the relationship between philosophy and science that we touched on earlier. This is a question of interest because one might think that a naturalised aesthetics is nothing more or other than a scientific, empirical aesthetics; that a naturalised aesthetics is one that is wholly absorbed into science. But that's not my view. As in other areas of philosophy, while a naturalistic stance is one that aligns itself with the sciences, it's not reducible to science in general or any particular science. I mentioned above three hallmarks of philosophical excellence: argumentative rigour, empirical adequacy, and reflective maturity. What marks out philosophy is its combination and self-conscious pursuit of these ideals. It's not that these standards are entirely absent from the sciences, of course; but they do not combine to occupy centre stage as they do in philosophy.

**AC:** To wrap up, a last question. Do you have any advice for young academics working in philosophy and/or film studies?

**MS:** There's an old Hollywood adage, usually attributed to John Ford, who said that he'd survived in the film industry by alternating films 'for the studio' with more personal projects. Something like that applies to surviving in academia, I think. On the one hand, it's very important to be intellectually honest, not least with oneself—to pursue the questions one finds important, and the answers one finds most plausible. On the other hand, it's important to be aware of, and not get run over by, the realities of the environment in which one works, and that means everything from government and university

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<sup>36</sup> Murray characterises philosophy and philosophical knowledge in these terms in 'Film, Philosophy, and the Varieties of Artistic Value', his contribution to Thomson-Jones 2016.

policies to the fads and fashions of academic disciplines. Somehow one has to balance strategic awareness of the opportunities and dangers which present themselves, with authenticity, truth to oneself. And, as the man said: it ain't easy!

[angeloe.cioffi@gmail.com](mailto:angeloe.cioffi@gmail.com)

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** Angelo Cioffi received a Ph.D. in History and Philosophy of Art from the University of Kent where he worked as an assistant lecturer in the departments of Film and History of Art. His research is focused on the cognitive value of political cinema; his *Philosophical Theories of Political Cinema* is forthcoming with Routledge in 2020.

**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE** Murray Smith is Professor of Film and co-director of the Aesthetics Research Centre at the University of Kent. He was President of the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image from 2014–17, and a Laurance S. Rockefeller Fellow at Princeton University's Center for Human Values for 2017–18. He has published widely on film, art, and aesthetics. In addition to the recent *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film*, his publications include *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Clarendon); *Trainspotting* (BFI); *Film Theory and Philosophy* (co-edited with Richard Allen) (Clarendon); *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (co-edited with Steve Neale) (Routledge); and *Thinking through Cinema* (co-edited with Tom Wartenberg) (Blackwell).

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