Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film - Précis

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Abstract: In this overview of my *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film*, I outline the main themes, questions, and arguments of the book. Part 1 of the volume explores philosophical naturalism and its applicability to the domain of aesthetics and the arts. Searching for the principles which might undergird a naturalistic or "third cultural" approach to the arts, I defend a model of "triangulation" which aims to find consilience among phenomenological, psychological, and neurophysiological evidence. Such triangulation is closely related to two other strategies: "thick explanation," combining personal and "subpersonal" levels of analysis; and "theory construction," conceived as an empirically-oriented alternative to conceptual analysis. Part II turns its attention to the topic of emotion in the arts in general and film in particular, as an especially relevant and fertile territory for a naturalized aesthetics. I examine emotion and empathy in film and the arts against the backdrop of, among other ideas, Darwin's account of the expression of the emotions, the notion of niche construction, and the related theory of the "extended mind."

About sixty years ago C.P. Snow began his campaign against the "two cultures" – the debilitating divide, as he saw it, between traditional "literary intellectual" culture, and the culture of the sciences, urging in its place a "third culture" which would draw upon and integrate the resources of disciplines spanning the natural and social sciences, the arts and the humanities. Where we do stand now in relation to Snow's intervention? In *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* I argue that, with the ever-increasing influence of evolutionary theory and neuroscience, and the pervasive presence of digital technologies, Snow's challenge is more relevant than ever. We live in a world teeming with insights and innovations borne out of scientific discovery; coming to terms with and understanding such a world is a critical task.

Working out how the "scientific" and everyday or "manifest" images of the world – to use the terms of Snow's contemporary, Wilfrid Sellars – "hang together" is no simple

matter, however. In *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, I explore this question in relation to the art, technology, and science of film in particular, and to the world of the arts and aesthetic activity more generally. Over the first part of his book, I explore the general strategies and principles necessary to build a "third cultural" or naturalized approach to film and art – one that roots itself in an appreciation of scientific knowledge and method. These strategies include "thick explanation" (which combines everyday and scientific psychology) and the "triangulation" of knowledge from experience, psychological theory, and neuroscientific data. In the second part of the work, I focus on the role of emotion in film and the other arts, as an extended experiment in the third cultural integration of ideas on emotion spanning the arts, humanities and sciences. Here I explore, among other things, the role of facial expression in film in the light of Darwin's work on the emotions, and the dynamics of suspense, shock, and empathy in film in relation to contemporary neuroscience. While acknowledging that not all of the questions we ask are scientific in nature, I contend that we cannot disregard the insights wrought by taking a naturalized approach to the aesthetics of film and the other arts.

Pursuing a naturalized aesthetics of film art throws up a number of questions and motifs; the **Introduction** provides an overview of *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*'s approach to them. What is philosophical naturalism, and how does it relate to other trends and debates, such as the "two cultures" controversy of the 1960s, or the contemporary cognitivist interventions in film and literary theory? Why speak of a naturalized "aesthetics" rather than a naturalized "philosophy of art"? And what hangs on the use of the word "film" rather than a number of other possible candidates, such as "cinema" or the "moving image"? Having cleared the ground with respect to these initial questions, and made the case for a "co-operative naturalism" which seeks to integrate the knowledge and methods of the humanities and the sciences rather than aiming to replace the former with the latter, the chapter introduces a number of themes which thread through the entire work. These include engagement with evolutionary theory and neuroscience; with theories of embodied cognition and the extended mind; worries about theories which place an emphasis on the importance of language in human cognition at the expense of attention to perception, emotion, embodiment, and action; attention to the "subpersonal" mechanisms of the mind as well as person-level explanation; and the contextualization of film spectatorship, art, and aesthetic experience within more general theories of consciousness and cognition.

The two cultures debate of the 1960s, along with its antecedents and subsequent disputes of a similar character, set the stage for an exploration of the possibility of a 'third cultural' approach to art and aesthetic experience – one that seeks to integrate and generate dialogue between the humanities and the sciences, rather than keeping them apart and maintaining the "autonomy" of the cultural sphere. Naturalism, as a philosophical stance, shares much with the ambition of a third culture. But what general strategies and principles might be put in place in pursuit of a naturalized aesthetics of film, and art more generally? **Part I** of the book, "Building the Third Culture," seeks to provide an initial answer to this question.

Naturalism has established itself as perhaps the dominant approach to philosophy, at least in the analytic tradition. **Chapter 1**, "Aesthetics Naturalized," explores the prospects for naturalism in aesthetics. Is it a plausible approach to the arts and other aesthetic phenomena? Minimally, naturalism requires engagement with scientific *knowledge*, though more robust forms of naturalism also embrace scientific *methods*. Understood in these terms, explanation is the core goal of naturalism, and explanation plays an important role in research in the humanities—not least in explaining the "expansive" nature of perception and cognition in the arts. Thus a neat distinction between scientific explanation, and humanistic understanding, seems implausible. Relatedly we find that the explanation of human action must be understood as a type of causal explanation, and must encompass the subpersonal as well as the personal level of description. "Thick explanation," incorporating explanatorily relevant subpersonal mechanisms alongside intentions, is advanced as an ideal for a naturalized aesthetics. In tandem with the emphasis on explanation, I advocate in favor of "theory construction" (or "theory building") as the most appropriate methodology for naturalistic philosophy, as an alternative to conceptual analysis. In contrast to the latter, theory construction allows for the continuous interplay between conceptual clarification and empirical discovery, in place of an insistence on their separateness.

What is aesthetic experience, and can a naturalistic approach help to shed any light on such an elusive phenomenon? This is the problem tackled in **Chapter 2**, "Triangulating Aesthetic Experience," which proposes that the most promising strategy in illuminating aesthetic experience involves the triangulation of phenomenological, psychological, and neuroscientific evidence. The key idea here is that all three types of evidence may act as a starting point in enquiry, and none is straightforwardly privileged above the others. "Neural

behavourism"—the idea that neural evidence speaks for itself, and always trumps other forms of evidence—is identified as a pernicious fallacy. By contrast, progress is made through the convergence of two or more of these forms of evidence. Across the chapter, the model is explored through a variety of case studies, on colour perception, empathy, and suspense. Particular attention is paid to the problem of "anomalous suspense" – the (apparent) experience of suspense in circumstances where the outcome a storyline is known – and the way in which neuroscientific evidence might act as a 'tie breaker' between otherwise equally plausible theories of suspense.

Can neuroscience illuminate aesthetic and artistic phenomena? Do the arts pose special problems for neuroscience? And are the doubts expressed by various "neurosceptics" justified? **Chapter 3**, "The Engine of Reason and the Pit of Naturalism," seeks to tease out the distinctive contribution that neuroscience might make to the study of art, aesthetics, and the mind. Various criticisms of neuroscience are aired, including the argument that neural evidence can do nothing more than reveal how particular mental functions and experiences are 'implemented' neurally. Raymond Tallis's sustained critique of neuroscience, and in particular his claim that contemporary neuroscience fails to recognize the extent to which human agents—unlike other animal agents—are 'uncoupled' from the world, is given particular attention. Against this backdrop, case studies on the startle response and on empathy seek to make salient the insights delivered by neuroscientific methods.

Aesthetic experience is a variety of consciousness, and the exploration of consciousness has exploded in the last thirty years. **Chapter 4**, "Papayas, Pomegranates, and Green Tea," begins with the question: How does aesthetic experience fit into the larger picture? The chapter reviews the fortunes of consciousness as an object of study across the past century; various contemporary perspectives on consciousness; and the different dimensions and levels of consciousness. The representation of aspects and types of consciousness in diverse forms of filmmaking is explored. Special attention is paid to the work of Oliver Sacks and similar authors, who in combining phenomenological, psychological, and neuroscientific considerations exemplify the strategy of triangulation. Finally, the chapter considers the implications of Frank Jackson's "knowledge argument," and his associated thought experiment about Mary the color scientist, for both aesthetic experience and the cognitive value of film art. I hold that the *qualia* of experience are

central to aesthetic experience – the sourness of a lemon, the staccato abruptness of a David Mamet script – but remain within the purview of a naturalized aesthetics.

Emotions feature prominently in both ordinary and aesthetic experience; and the study of the emotions cuts through a multitude of disciplines, with both humanists and scientists laying claim to expertise on them. For these reasons, emotions constitute an ideal domain in which to test the depth and robustness of a naturalized aesthetics, and the extent to which knowledge drawn from these diverse areas of study can be integrated. **Part II** of *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, "Science and Sentiment," works through a series of case studies exploring this view of emotion.

The representation and expression of emotion has been central to the arts throughout history. Through its combination of depictive, performative, musical, and linguistic elements, the art of film develops this ancient practice to a new level of intensity and nuance. **Chapter 5**, "Who's Afraid of Charles Darwin?" shows how the representation of emotion through postural, gestural, vocal, and especially facial expression plays a critical role in conveying narrative information and in shaping the viewers' experience. How have filmmakers exploited facial expression? What is the relationship between facial expression and other techniques, such as editing and scoring? How might scientific research on the emotions enrich our understanding of these artistic practices? The chapter argues that the power of facial expression of emotion is often underplayed, in part due to the "Kuleshov fallacy"—a mistaken and (in extreme forms) incoherent holism which stresses the force of contextual factors, such as editing and music, over the role of the face.

Is it desirable or possible to keep apart the natural and cultural constituents of a phenomenon like emotion? **Chapter 6**, "What Difference Does it Make?" approaches this question via a "biocultural" approach to emotion, one which resists the separation of the biological underpinnings of emotions and their elaboration within cultures into separate silos. What are the grounds for such an approach, and how does it fare with 'classical' narrative films on the one hand, and the tradition of more oblique, modernist filmmaking on the other hand? Exactly how do the biological basics of emotion "hang together" with their expression in culturally specific contexts? These questions are addressed in relation to the dramatization of emotion in a sequence from the late modernist epic film cycle *Heimat*. The nature of culture, the crosstalk between cultures, and the interplay between cultural and

biological factors are discussed and shown to be accommodated within the theory advanced.

Chapter 7, "Empathy, Expansionism, and the Extended Mind," concerns itself with one widely recognized form of emotional response to others. How does empathy relate to a variety of other mental states and processes, such as imagination, sympathy, and emotional contagion? I argue that empathy is a form of other-directed personal imagining, which is sometimes "scaffolded" by lower-level responses such as motor and affective mimicry, and emotional contagion. Developing arguments from Chapter 3, I contend that our understanding of empathy and these related states is further illuminated by neuroscientific discoveries. But the brain is not the whole story; according to the theory of the "extended mind," human cognition relies extensively on the environment beyond the skin and skull of the individual agent. And according to the evolutionary theory of "niche construction," humans have adapted their environment to enhance and augment their capacities. Artistic representation and narration are here treated as instances of such environmental extension; returning to a theme established in Chapter 1, I explore how our empathic capacities are expanded by the arts. The chapter concludes by arguing that empathy is a real and distinctive phenomenon, not easily eliminated from our psychological or aesthetic vocabulary.

The majority of the existing literature in the sciences focuses on 'garden-variety' emotions, which arise repeatedly in and are learned through various 'paradigm scenarios'. But don't we value artworks, and the experiences they make possible, for their particularity? How much illumination of artworks can a focus on such basic states as fear, disgust, and anger really provide? In Chapter 8, "Feeling Prufish," I meet this objection half-way. The significance of genre categories shows that we do not understand or value each artwork as utterly unique; our ability to discern the particularities of individual works necessarily happens against the backdrop of more general categories and expectations. Picking up on the debate staged in the final section of Chapter 4, this chapter explores the role of language, narrative, and cinematic style in creating distinctive qualia – including the specific and notionally 'ineffable' nuances of the individual work – and the strategies by which critics aim to evoke such qualia.

Film, Art, and the Third Culture takes the reader on a tour exploring various ways in which knowledge and methods from the humanities and the sciences might fruitfully

interact. The **Conclusion** takes stock of this journey. While we need to make space to recognize the unique features of artworks, as I argued in chapter 8, we also need to be wary of the trap identified by William James – the obsession with detailing what is special about every token, at the cost of attention to the character of each token as a type. Understanding art and aesthetic experience involves, in large measure, setting individual works in the context of larger regularities and patterns of behavior. That said, we may need to live with some degree of tension between our naturalistic, theoretical perspective, and our ordinary experience of artworks. Writing in the same period as Snow, Wilfrid Sellars argued that we are faced with two "images" of the world, the "manifest" and the "scientific," and the task of reconciling them. Only the eliminativist or replacement naturalist would argue that the former will simply be supplanted by the latter. *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* has sought to demonstrate that we need to keep both perspectives in play. But, just as we can accept that while we still experience the surface of the earth as flat though we know it is curved, we should probably not expect that the scientific and manifest views will ever align with one another perfectly.