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Putting the Culture into Bioculturalism

A Naturalized Aesthetics and the Challenge of Modernism

Dominic Topp

Abstract: In Chapter 6 of *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, Murray Smith argues for a biocultural account of the emotions, which treats them as an interaction between universal and cultural dimensions. He goes on to test this approach in relation to the representation of emotions in films by considering an example from the tradition of modernist filmmaking.

This article suggests that, while Smith's case is broadly convincing, there are several ways in which it could be presented more forcefully. In particular, his discussion of the challenge of modernism to a biocultural account could be strengthened by emphasizing rather than downplaying the role that various types of cultural knowledge play in our interaction with modernist works.

Keywords: bioculturalism, cultural specificity, emotion, modernism, naturalized aesthetics

When Raymond Bellour complained that “in their dogmatic application of knowledge of the cognitive sciences, most cognitive theoreticians of the cinema are . . . inevitably attracted by Steven Spielberg's films and Hollywood blockbusters” (2010: 92), one can only presume that he was unfamiliar with Murray Smith. Far from limiting his attention to the “average, standardised” film, the “bad cinema” that Bellour (following Deleuze) sets against the “real cinema” of directors such as Chris Marker and Alain Resnais (2010: 91–92), Smith has always been interested in a wide variety of films and filmmakers. His first book, *Engaging Characters* (1995), explored viewers' emotional responses to cinema by juxtaposing the work of classical Hollywood directors like Alfred Hitchcock and Otto Preminger with the

Soviet montage films of Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Dovzhenko and the modernism of Robert Bresson, Luis Buñuel, and Raúl Ruiz, and this “comparative approach” (Smith 2017: 9) has continued in his subsequent research. It comes as no surprise, then, that Smith’s new book, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* (2017), explores a diverse range of filmmaking traditions. These include Hollywood both old (Hitchcock again, along with Howard Hawks) and new (Paul Greengrass, M. Night Shyamalan, and, yes, Spielberg), but also the European art cinema of Carl Theodor Dreyer, Lars von Trier, and Julio Medem along with films by non-Western directors such as Takeshi Kitano and Wong Kar-Wai, and the work of experimental filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and John Smith. A characteristic example of Smith’s approach can be found in Chapter 3’s exploration of neuroscience’s potential contribution to the study of film, where a discussion of the startle response compares and contrasts scenes from Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man* (2008) and Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran* (1985).

Smith’s insistence that there are useful connections to be made between apparently discrete areas of the cinematic landscape offers a riposte to the suspicion that many film scholars still harbor toward the research tradition within which he operates.¹ This suspicion goes something like this: an awareness of certain evolved human features and capacities may provide insights into low-level perceptual phenomena that are common to all films that we watch, such as critical flicker fusion and apparent motion. It might even give us an understanding of how certain widespread cinematic practices have “piggybacked” onto pancultural norms of behavior (for example, David Bordwell [1996] argues that the shot/reverse-shot convention commonly used in films to represent an interpersonal exchange draws on and streamlines “contingent universals” of human interaction such as face-to-face encounters, conversational turn-taking, and the deictic gaze). But, the suspicion holds, this kind of approach is not going to be useful for analyzing less conventional, less broadly appealing films, which may require higher-level interpretative practices on the part of the

viewer that are more culturally specific and which may avoid stylistic devices that mesh neatly with our natural capacities.

In both his new book and elsewhere, Smith confronts this suspicion, and he is right to do so. If a naturalized aesthetics is going to explain our experience of art, it should be able to shed light on a variety of works, including those that manifest various degrees of originality and innovation (since these are factors that we generally value in artworks), as well as those that provoke “the shock of discomfort, or the bewilderment or the anger or the boredom” that Leo Steinberg (1972: 5) suggests we feel when faced with an unfamiliar artistic style. In what follows, I discuss one section of Chapter 6 of *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, which deals with this kind of challenge in reference to the tradition of modernist filmmaking, since this is one area where I think Smith’s case could be presented more forcefully. I then offer a few suggestions as to some possible avenues to explore in this regard.

The section I wish to address comes within a broader discussion of emotion as “an integral feature of ordinary existence” that is “central to our experience of most forms of art” (Smith 2017: 154–155). Smith proposes that we should “steer a course between” a culturalist account of emotions, which sees them as almost entirely culturally constructed, and a biological account, a strong version of which sees emotions as universal across cultures and basically hard-wired into us as a species via evolution. He argues instead for “a *biocultural* view which rejects the dichotomous views of both emotion and the study of emotion.” According to this model, culture arises “from certain evolved features of the human species” (2017: 156–157), and cultural variation is a series of adaptations (or by-products of adaptations) to different environments and social relationships. Thus, while culture and biology may conflict with one another at times, they are nevertheless mutually dependent. From this biocultural perspective, an “emotion episode” (163) can be understood as a dynamic interaction between an immediate hard-wired affective response and a subsequent

process of cognitive monitoring that leads to more fine-grained distinctions and more complex subtypes of emotion, thus allowing for considerable cultural variation.

From here, Smith goes on to explore how this biocultural account of the emotions can be relevant “to our experience and understanding of a work of film art” (2017: 166), focusing specifically on the representation of emotions and on our recognition of the emotional states of characters in a scene from the German film series *Heimat 3: Chronik einer Zeitenwende* (Edgar Reitz, 2004). His choice of this example relates to the fact that it may appear to present a significant challenge to the biocultural account of emotions because it involves cultural specificity in several ways. First, since it traces the lives of several generations of Germans across the twentieth century, understanding *Heimat* could be thought to require a fairly detailed knowledge of German culture, history, and language. Second, while Hollywood movies revolve around scenarios and psychological states that are relatively universal (and so may be a good match for a naturalistic approach, which can help us explain their accessibility to a wide international audience), a film such as *Heimat* is designed for “narrower audiences possessing specific sorts of cultural knowledge” (166). Third, Smith’s choice of *Heimat* is based on its association with the tradition of modernism, which he characterizes as a self-conscious and experimental mode of artistic practice that positions itself against the so-called transparency of mass art.² The idea, then, is that if bioculturalism can accommodate the cultural particularity of an example like this one, even while it rejects the culturalist account of emotions, it will have met the challenge of showing the value of a naturalized aesthetics not just for conventional, broadly accessible works but also for more unusual ones.

While the case Smith makes throughout the book for a naturalized aesthetics is convincing, and while it is one to which I am sympathetic, his testing of the biocultural account of the emotions against the challenge of modernism could be strengthened in several

ways. Most broadly, it would benefit from a more detailed account of the “dominant culturalist paradigm” (2017: 15) that he rejects. Who exactly are the cultural extremists that would consider *Heimat* to be inaccessible to viewers unfamiliar with Germany’s language, history, and culture or to those unaccustomed to or bewildered by modernist art? While he does mention the anthropologist Catherine Lutz’s (1988) warning that Western theories of emotion are inevitably shaped by Western cultural categories and assumptions and will therefore distort the emotional experience of non-Westerners, the work to which he refers is 30 years old. It would be useful to know how widely Lutz’s culturalism is maintained by current anthropologists. Certainly, some branches of anthropology now accept Paul Ekman’s findings on the universality of basic emotions and emotion expressions while recognizing that this still leaves “a great deal of room for cultural fine-tuning” (Anderson 2011: 319). But even if Lutz’s views do represent a school of thought that still prevails, it is not clear that her objections are relevant to the case of *Heimat*, which as part of “the tradition of European artistic modernism” (2017: 166) falls firmly within the domain of Western culture.

When it comes to the particular case of modernism, I would also appreciate more evidence to support Smith’s suggestion that “[t]o the modernist sensibility, the easy cross-cultural accessibility of Hollywood fare is an intellectually nutritionless gruel” (166). While the idea of modernist art as an attack on other systems of representation is a persistent one among critics, it is not clear that it is necessarily held by artists themselves, and it would be useful to learn whether filmmakers such as Kitano and Wong, both of whom Smith includes under the banner of modernism, consider their work to be in opposition to mainstream American cinema. It would also help to know whether *Heimat* has in fact proved any more challenging to general audiences than the “international popular filmmaking embodied by Hollywood product” (166) against which he positions it, and, if it has, whether this challenge

was felt by both German and non-German viewers—which would support the idea that it is not just local cultural knowledge that is the difficulty here.

Smith's attempt to show that “a naturalistic approach can shed light on experimental as well as orthodox works” and his rejection of a “contemporary culturalist view [that] emphasizes the differences and even ‘incommensurability’ among works emerging from distinct cultures” (2017: 14–15) might also benefit from more distinct and unorthodox examples. Put simply, the scene from *Heimat* that he analyzes, which depicts an “emotion episode” made up of a series of emotional subevents as one character reacts to her elderly mother's arrival first with surprise, then puzzlement, then anxiety, then reassurance, and finally relief, turns out (at least by his account) to be not especially culturally particular and a pretty mild form of modernism.

First, there is the issue of language. Smith suggests that viewers who do not understand German can still make sense of the actions and emotions that the film represents by means of subtitles, along with “more extended critical commentary” (2017: 172) for those concepts that are not succinctly expressed in English. While subtitles can certainly provide a translation of dialogue that allows viewers to comprehend the gist of a scene's emotional content, it would have been worth acknowledging that they bring with them their own problems. Most significant, perhaps, is the fact that, as Mark Betz (2009: 50) points out, subtitles “often leave significant portions of the dialogue untranslated” due to restrictions of space and time. Anyone who has watched a subtitled foreign film in a language in which they are reasonably proficient will have noticed that the version of the dialogue offered by the subtitles is a simplified one that tends to iron out or simply omit cultural specificity and local flavor. As a result, subtitles work against just that “semantic unpacking” that Smith proposes as a means of understanding “initially unfamiliar emotion concepts” (2017: 173). By ignoring the possible limitations of subtitles for providing thorough linguistic access to the film, Smith

paints himself into a corner. Since, by his own admission, he is “almost entirely ignorant of the German language” (166) and is therefore at the mercy of the subtitles, how can he know that the dialogue in the scene he has chosen does not involve any of those “culturally specific terms” (173) that would require unpacking? We might also note a further drawback of subtitles: since “they divide viewer attention between reading text and watching images” (Betz 2009: 50), they may distract us from visual details such as facial expressions, including eye behavior, that would otherwise provide useful cues for comprehending characters’ emotions.

When it comes to other forms of local cultural knowledge that might be useful for understanding the emotion episode represented in the scene, such as a familiarity with social norms, Smith effectively sidesteps the issue by asserting that no such knowledge is required, at least for Western European audiences: “a British and German viewer are likely to share preconceptions about the issue [of care of the elderly] and the range of attitudes it elicits, precisely because both are from modern European liberal democracies” (2017: 174). This may well be the case, but if the point is to counter the claim that cultural particularity is an inevitable barrier to comprehension for cultural outsiders, why not look at an example that involves some significant cultural particularity?

Then there is the matter of the scene’s aesthetic qualities. Since elsewhere in the book Smith discusses “facial expression in modernist cinema” in relation to the unconventional stylistic practices of Kitano and Bresson, both of whom tend to deny us access to characters’ emotions by minimizing expressive facial behavior on the part of their performers (2017: 147), we might expect his *Heimat* example to also involve some significant challenge to the realistic portrayal of emotions generally found in much mainstream cinema. In fact, the scene offers a fairly standard treatment of emotional expression, with the actors providing relatively naturalistic performances that are rendered legible by way of stylistic elements such as

lighting (high-key), framing (medium shots and medium close-ups), and staging (frequently frontal), to the point where, for example, we are able to discern an absence of muscle activity around one character's eyes and understand by this that her smile is insincere. As Smith recognizes, "*Heimat* is hardly a work of unalloyed aesthetic realism; and yet its performance style answers to many of the patterns of behaviour that we encounter in reality" (2017: 175). It is thus not clear how this example is any more "unnatural" in its depiction of emotions than the Hollywood films it is supposed to stand in contrast to. Why is a biocultural account necessary when almost everything of significance can be explained by universals? An example highlighting rather than downplaying the role of specific cultural knowledge would allow Smith to demonstrate the potential of the biocultural approach more forcefully.

With this in mind, in the space that remains I offer a brief discussion of one modernist work, the Japanese New Wave film *Eros + Massacre* (*Eros purass gyakusatsu*, Yoshishige Yoshida, 1969). I have chosen this film because, after watching it several times, I feel that I still only partially understand it, a situation I believe relates to various sorts of cultural specificity, some having to do with "local" historical and linguistic knowledge, and some with formal and stylistic practices characteristic of cinematic modernism. What follows is not a detailed analysis of the film, but an attempt to raise some issues that could be explored further regarding the "interplay between cultural and biological factors" that Smith emphasizes (2017: 153).

Several types of cultural knowledge might be thought necessary, or at least desirable, in order to understand and appreciate *Eros + Massacre*. Some of these relate to the film's subject matter and themes. The narrative juxtaposes two plotlines: one is set in the past (1916–1923) and revolves around the life and death of the historical figure Sakae Ōsugi, a Japanese anarchist and advocate of free love who was murdered, along with his mistress, Noe Itō, and his nephew by the military police; the other is set in the present (1969) and concerns

a female student, Eiko, who is investigating Itō's relationship with Ōsugi. Soon after the film's release, Yoshida explained that Ōsugi "is well known in Japan, he's almost legendary" (Bonitzer and Delahaye 1970: 10). Consequently, many of its initial Japanese audiences would have approached the film armed with expectations about its protagonist that may have been confounded or confirmed, an experience to which viewers unfamiliar with Ōsugi's biography (which, we should note, might include modern Japanese audiences) do not have access. The narrative does start with a prologue offering some basic expository information about Ōsugi, but without more detailed knowledge of the social and political structures of early-twentieth-century Japan (specifically, the Taishō period in which the story takes place), many details of Ōsugi's rebellion against the mores of his time are obscure. Historical knowledge might also help contextualize the film's second narrative line. For example, a familiarity with Japanese student politics of the 1960s could clarify Eiko's fascination with Itō and Ōsugi. While a viewer familiar with Western European radical politics of the 1960s might assume some broad similarity with the Japanese situation, Yoshida's reference, when discussing Ōsugi, to "the anarchist students, the Zengakuren" (Bonitzer and Delahaye 1970: 11) suggests that there is more local knowledge that would be useful to make sense of the specific issues at play. How might viewers' understanding of the film's subject matter vary depending on the historical knowledge they possess, and how might this affect their emotional response to the film?

Since the film's dialogue is in Japanese, viewers like myself who are reliant on subtitles in English (which belongs to a different language family) might feel less confident than in the case of *Heimat*'s German (to which English is closely related) that these will allow them fluent comprehension of the emotional interactions between characters that many scenes involve. Of course, this is a matter of degree—there is no hard and fast definition of what constitutes fluent comprehension. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that a translation

from Japanese into English risks smoothing over or distorting semantic nuances that a native speaker would grasp. For example, a comparative analysis of conceptual metaphors involving the heart and related body parts in English and Japanese finds that, while there is considerable overlap in conceptual patterns between the two languages, metaphors involving the Japanese word *hara* (stomach/belly) can encompass processes of thinking and decision-making as well as feeling. This suggests that, while English maintains a “‘dualistic’ dichotomy” between emotion (heart) and rationality (mind), in Japanese there is “no division of labor between the rational and emotive modes of communicating” (Berendt and Tanita 2011: 76). Since one of the central themes of *Eros + Massacre* is the relationship between politics and sexual love, it is possible that references to “heart” in the subtitles (which might be translating any of the Japanese words *kokoro* [heart/core/mind], *mune* [breast/chest], or *hara*) are imposing foreign cultural constructs regarding the emotive and rational aspects of interpersonal relationships. Do viewers who need subtitles come away from the film with a less precise understanding of its themes than those who speak Japanese?

What of the film’s formal and stylistic practices? We can first note the rather opaque plot structure (with story events regarding Ōsugi and Itō presented out of temporal order, unspecified ellipses between scenes, and a general absence of time markers), which limits our ability to construct a clear causal chain. The relationship between the two narrative lines is also quite complex. Scenes set in the past are sometimes staged in modern settings, and characters from past and present occasionally meet, as in a sequence in which Eiko interviews Itō while they walk through contemporary Tokyo. In fact, there is some ambiguity as to the status of the scenes involving Ōsugi and Itō: should we consider them to be relatively objective, or do they represent Eiko’s imagined version of the past? We might also understand some of them as unsignaled subjective flashbacks offering Itō’s own recollection of prior events. While this indeterminacy is a characteristic feature of international art

cinema, we should not assess its effect independently of cultural contexts related to the film's country of origin. My familiarity with art cinema conventions may help me recognize that the film's juxtaposition of its two narrative lines implies some thematic parallels between past and present, but without the knowledge of Japanese history discussed above, how well-equipped am I to infer what those parallels might be?

[INSERT FIGURES 1 and 2 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT FIGURES 3 and 4 ABOUT HERE – i.e., to form a “box of four images”]

[CAPTION: Figure 1. Stylistic strategies for withholding facial expressions in *Eros + Massacre / Eros purass gyakusatsu* (NBCUniversal Entertainment Japan, 1969).]

An interaction between the film's modernist aesthetics and more “local” cultural aspects can also be seen in the difficulty I have understanding characters' emotions. This is partly a result of several stylistic devices that Yoshida uses to withhold the kinds of facial expressions that allow me to “read” emotions in *Heimat*. Characters are often filmed in long shot, or from high or low angles, or positioned behind reflective surfaces and other elements of mise-en-scene that obscure their faces (Figure 1). In addition, actors sometimes adopt what seems to me to be an impassive performance style. But whether I am seeing a realistic portrayal of emotional reticence or a stylized suppression of facial expression (or something in between the two) is harder for me to judge in the case of a national culture of which I am relatively unfamiliar. How can I know to what extent my incomplete understanding of the film is an intended effect of artistic strategies common to the international culture of modernist cinema (in Chapter 5 of the book, Smith analyzes many of the same techniques as they have been used by Bresson, Kitano, and Wong), and to what extent it derives from my ignorance of specifically Japanese cultural matters?

Smith's call for a naturalized aesthetics opens up a range of possibilities for how the tools of the humanities and the natural and social sciences can contribute to the study of film. Despite the skepticism of some within film studies, this does not mean only focusing on mainstream cinema or on the biological constraints, innate to us as humans, under which filmmakers and film viewers operate. It also means appreciating the considerable freedom that is possible within those constraints. One of the ways we can do this is by analyzing unorthodox, idiosyncratic films, doing justice to the role that various types of culture play in our interaction with them.

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Notes

¹ While Smith describes his project as a naturalized aesthetics of film, he has long been associated with "the cognitive approach," which has been characterized by Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham as "an investigation of cognition, encompassing attention, learning, memory, reasoning, problem-solving, and perception, that draws upon research in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, artificial intelligence, linguistics, neuroscience, philosophy, and psychology" (2014: 5).

² Although Smith initially describes *Heimat* as an example of “*European* artistic modernism” (2017: 166, my italics), his references to modernism elsewhere in the book include examples (Kitano, Wong) that suggest he views it as a more wide-ranging tradition. While this broad characterization might be thought to ignore just that cultural specificity in which he claims to be interested, his discussion of these and others filmmakers highlights that, even when they use similar stylistic strategies to restrict viewers’ access to characters’ emotions, they have different aims in doing so (147–151).