Moral Blindfolds and Ethical Reflections:

Imagination, Ethics and Film

Matthew Thorpe

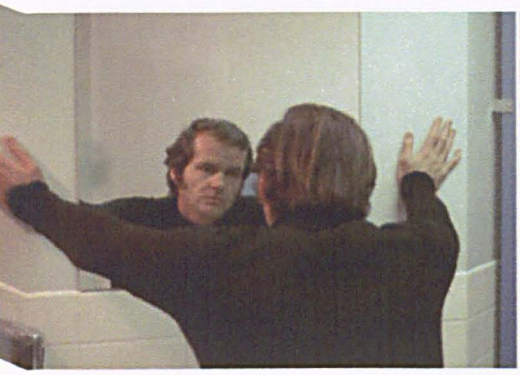
Abstract

The thesis explores the connection between the imaginative engagement with narrative fiction films, and the imagination as it is employed in moral reasoning. I begin by describing a variety of imaginative and non-imaginative stances towards fiction in terms of a general internal/external schema. I then describe a similar schema as it applies to engaging with fictional characters - imagining from a subjective and an objective perspective. I argue that in both cases - internal/external, and subjective/objective - an either/or choice between them should be rejected in favour of an account that incorporates both perspectives.

The second part of the thesis begins with an account of how the internal/ external distinction is related to the question of how, or if, narrative fiction films can be sources of moral knowledge. I consider the idea that films can act as 'thought-experiments' (the FTE thesis) and find it lacking. I argue, however, that the idea should not be rejected but modified. I do so with reference to Bernard Williams' distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' ethical concepts, and I show that re-conceiving films as examples of thick ethical concepts meets the objections that I have levelled at the FTE thesis. It also, I claim, satisfies the condition that if films are to have moral-cognitive value, that value must be tied in a substantial way to their aesthetic properties. I then go on to discuss in chapter four what might seem the most natural ethical function of engaging with fictions - coming to know 'what it's like'. Subjective imagining, or empathising, I argue is not intrinsically beneficial, but becomes so when it is conducted within a more objective context.

The final two chapters are a more detailed discussion of Eric Rohmer's series of films *Les Contes Moreaux/The Moral Tales* in which I flesh out some of the theoretical claims of the thesis, and connect them to a tradition of ironic realism exemplified by Rohmer's series.

Contents



Introduction

If you just learn a single trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... Until you climb into his skin. Walk around in it.

Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962)

Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective, by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision...It is a kind of goodness by proxy.

Iris Murdoch[1]

It is better to be simultaneously engaged and detached ... for this is the opposite of self-denial and the result of full awareness.

Thomas Nagel[2]

Each of the following chapters contributes part of an answer to the following question: What is the relationship between the form of the imagination which mediates our understanding of works of narrative fiction film, and the form of the imagination which is involved in moral reasoning? Atticus Finch's (Gregory Peck) small-town, home-spun, fatherly wisdom suggests one possibility. Imaginatively projecting oneself into the perspective of another is something that is ordinarily considered a basic principle of ethics. Thomas Nagel calls it the fundamental moral argument - 'How would you feel, in his shoes?' Imagining ourselves in the position of another - 'identifying' - is also something that we (in varying personal degrees) do in responding to fiction. So it seems that one very strong candidate for a dual ethical and aesthetic role for the imagination is imagining 'what it's like' for another.

But even if it can be shown that we do imagine the perspectives of characters 'from the inside', does this necessarily have any ethical benefit? If the ability to project oneself into the perspective of another is an ethical use of the imagination, does it follow that 'identification' with fictional characters is also of ethical value? Does the latter form of imagining cultivate or develop or strengthen the former? Imagining how another person feels can indeed make us more alive to their experiences, their interests and their reasons for acting in the ways that they do. But getting too 'caught up' in empathy with a person can often blind us to their flaws. A passionate emotional response to a work of fiction can

---

[1] Murdoch, I. *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970) p. 86

[2] Nagel, T. *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 223

also be put to distinctly immoral ends, utilised as the fuel which stokes anger, prejudice and hatred. Getting too emotionally 'caught up' with the concerns of one group of people might also blind us to the interests and rights of another group to whom they are opposed. For all the moral value which Atticus assigns to subjective imagining, there is a weight of opinion which sees the moral value of imagination as an ability to detach oneself from *any* particular perspective - not just one's own.

The question with which I began needs to be approached in two stages. First we must ask what role the imagination plays in our experience of narrative fiction film. The interpersonal subjective imagining of 'identification' is one form, but is it the only one? What other functions does the imagination perform in engaging with fiction? Secondly, we must ask what the role of fiction is in ethics. Atticus' advice occurs in a scene where Scout (Mary Badham) is complaining that being forced to go to school interferes with her precious reading time with her father, when each night Atticus sits on her bed as she reads *Robinson Crusoe* - 'Teacher got mad as the devil at me and said you were teaching me to read all wrong.' It is important to recognise the grounds of Scout's complaint. It is not that she feels her fun is being curtailed by the duty to go to school, but rather that she senses a conflict between two incompatible forms of education. As she says: 'If I keep going to school we can't ever read anymore.' It's as if her *real* education is being interrupted by the illegitimate demands of her formal education. One of the principal themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (especially seen as a *bildungsroman*) is moral education; its sources, its reliability, and the basis of its authority. From whom do we learn to be moral? Where does moral education take place? Is it from institutions, from family, from experience, or from imaginatively engaging with works of fiction like *Robinson Crusoe*, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*? When does our moral education end?

In a sense, academic film studies has always been concerned with the moral impact of movies; their potential to change our outlook, the ends to which they are put, the ethical ecosystem in which they are produced. Traditionally, however, the terms which I am using here 'moral' or 'ethical' have taken a more public form in words like 'ideological' or 'political'. Even from the infancy of the medium commentators, academics, journalists, were centrally concerned with the political and social impact of the new art form. How might the new technology have a moral effect - either positive or negative - on its audience? Robert Stam informs us that as early as 1911 Native Americans were so concerned about the representation of their community in film that a delegation was sent

to petition President Taft for a congressional investigation.[3] Indeed, perhaps the greater part of the historical attention to the ethical aspect of film has been concerned not with how films might be beneficial but with how they might corrupt their audiences. Theodor Adorno and much of the Frankfurt school, for example, were highly contemptuous of film for two main reasons. First, the photographic nature of the medium tied it inseparably to the reality which a truly revolutionary art form must critically transcend. Secondly, and related to the first reason, they criticised film for what they saw as the stupefying effect of mass produced Hollywood movies.

For every attempt to show the pernicious effects of film (and, more specifically, mass-produced Hollywood movies) there has been, however, an alternative view which finds therein a potential for political and social progress. While Adorno was lamenting the stupefaction of the movie-going masses, for example, Walter Benjamin argued to the contrary, that film could act as an instrument which enables the viewer to achieve a clearer understanding of reality. For Benjamin, the artistic value of film lies in its technological innovation and particularly in its nature as a mechanical reproduction of the phenomenal qualities of ordinary life. But for Benjamin it is not just that film can faithfully document reality, he goes further to say that it can *reveal* aspects of reality that would otherwise have been hard to detect: '...the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions...'[4] This is something like a more restricted version of what I will argue later (particularly in chapter five) is form of instruction peculiar to film, and to narrative art more generally. It is a form of ostensive instruction - look at it this way - which operates through the formally heightened salience of some parts of a fictional situation and the de-emphasising or elision of others. The formal cinematic technique which, for Benjamin, is the quintessence of this revolutionary potential is *montage*. It is montage which reveals the ordinarily hidden class structures and oppressive mechanisms of bourgeois society.

For Benjamin, the moral/political potential of film is inseparable from its aesthetic form, from its technological characteristics, and from the uniquely cinematic confluence of the two in montage. Andre Bazin made a similarly organic connection between aesthetic form and ethical content, but in precisely the opposite direction. For

---

[3] Stam, R. *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) p.26

[4] Benjamin, W. *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt; trans. H. Zorn, (London: Pimlico, 1999) p.230

Bazin, montage is a formal technique which, far from revealing reality, serves to obscure it:

> In short, montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression... On the other hand, depth of focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image if not of necessity - Wyler's films are never ambiguous - at least as a possibility. Hence it is no exaggeration to say that Citizen Kane is unthinkable shot in any other way but in depth. The uncertainty in which we find ourselves as to the spiritual key or the interpretation we should put on the film is built into the very design of the image.[5]

Bazin (a major influence on Eric Rohmer, artistically and ethically) held a theory of cinematic realism which had at its core an ethical principle. For Bazin the aesthetic and the ethical aspects of film are not separable, but are mutually reinforcing; certain formal features of realist film contribute to their ethical value, while a general ethical stance towards life determines the development and deployment of those aesthetic features. One might even go so far as to say that Bazin's aesthetic theory *is* an ethical theory. There is an ethical significance, therefore, in Bazin's conception of realism in two respects. First of all, the realist image has a faithfulness to the complexity and ambiguity of the world whereas an Eisensteinian form of montage imposes a falsifying simplicity and determinacy. Secondly, in a Sartrean existentialist vein, the ambiguity of the realist image provides an opportunity for the spectator to exercise choice, a choice which he is denied by the careful shepherding of montage. The realist film image offers the viewer *freedom*.

Bazin's ethically inflected humanism was engulfed by the tide of criticism newly politicised by the events of May 1968. *Cahiers du Cinema*, which up until this point had been edited by the Bazinian realist Eric Rohmer, was radically transformed by the shift to a Marxist, and in the early 1970s a Maoist, political agenda. Much of the work of this period echoes with the earlier debate between Adorno and Benjamin about the role of film in changing the ideological consciousness of society. Whereas the Bazinian old-guard had been concerned with a morality of the individual, of freedom and existential choice, the new filmmakers, critics and theorists now made their starting point the work of Louis Althusser. The pressing moral questions now are; first, how is film used as an instrument of the ruling classes which reinforces bourgeois capitalist ideology, or in Althusserian terms how does film 'interpellate' its viewers in order to 'construct a subject'? And secondly, how might a revolutionary film expose and disrupt this process? For theorists like Stephen Heath and Colin McCabe (associated with *Screen* magazine in Britain), the

---

[5] Bazin, A. *What is Cinema?* Vol.1 trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967/2005) p.36

analysis of film became an analysis of the ways in which it functions to 'position' or 'construct' its subjects in the interests of the continuation of the *status quo*. The kind of realism that had been defended by Bazin and continued in the work of Rohmer or Francois Truffaut, now came under suspicion not merely as positive representations of bourgeois values, but as instruments in the creation and maintenance of the system itself.

Since the 'Screen theory' of the 1970's, Althusserian, feminist and psychoanalytical scholarship, the moral aspect of film has also been inseparably bound up with the nature of our imaginative engagement. Perhaps the primary feature of realist film which is implicated in this process is the point of view of the camera. For the Althusserian critics, this all-encompassing view gives the spectator an illusion of omniscience which mirrors the illusory certainty of freedom and common sense which offers false comfort to the bourgeois subject. For feminist theorists the issue of 'identification' with an imagined point of view was no less ideologically saturated. In her highly influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', for example, Laura Mulvey fuses Althusserian theory with the work of Jaques Lacan and claims that the reinforcement of dominant patriarchal social norms is achieved in classical Hollywood movies through a process of the spectator's imaginative 'identification' with the 'male gaze' of the camera.[6]

However, even within the post-structuralist/psychoanalytical/marxist critical landscape there have been voices arguing for a positive ethical role for mainstream narrative fiction films. Most notably, there is a tradition associated with the British journal *Movie*, which, since the late 1960s, has incorporated within the political approach a concern for aesthetic and ethical evaluation of films that can be traced back to Bazin, and also to the literary criticism of F.R. Leavis. Robin Wood, for example, encompassed both positive and negative ethical evaluations of film - both in their thematic content and also in their impact on the spectator. Wood's position changed over the years, from a broadly liberal and humanist one to a marxist/psychoanalytical political one, but the thread that can be traced from beginning to end is a concern with morality - in the morality that films display and in the moral effect which they can have on their viewers. As he put it: 'It is one of the functions of art to disturb: to penetrate and undermine our complacencies and set notions, and bring about a consequent readjustment in our attitude to life.'[7] *Pace* the dominant theory of the time, according to Wood, just as films can be a source of

---

[6] Mulvey, L. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Screen* 16 (3) 6–18

[7] Wood, R. *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) p.67

corruption, they can also can operate as a means of *learning*. In his seminal work on Alfred Hitchcock (to which he returned again and again over his career) Wood argues for an ethical function for the imagination which resonates with some of the ideas which I put forward in chapter four. The disturbing quality of Hitchcock's films, according to Wood, has two main causes. The first is his refined sense of the ubiquity of evil and his willingness to explore its reach into ordinary life. The second, '...is his ability to make us aware, perhaps not quite at a conscious level (it depends on the spectator), of the impurity of our own desires.' Wood describes the complex and shifting patterns of emotional identification and sympathy in Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), which are manipulated towards an ethical end: 'The scene is extremely disturbing because we share the fury of the attackers sufficiently to feel ourselves personally involved in the killing., and are at the same time made to feel ashamed of that involvement.'[8]

Whereas other psychoanalytically-oriented critics saw 'identification' as a pernicious influence, co-opting the passive viewer into a patriarchal system, Wood argues that the identification which is elicited by Hitchcock works to confront the viewer with the unsettling moral implications of his or her sympathies. In Carl Plantinga's terms, the moral force of Hitchcock's films lie in their utilisation of *meta-emotions*. For Wood, the emergence of these hitherto suppressed or denied emotions are to be understood in Freudian terms; the viewer is confronted with an eruption of unconscious desires which the superego has worked hard to deny. In *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951), for example, the audience imaginatively enters into both the anxiety of Guy (Farley Granger) and also the murderous desires of Bruno (Robert Walker): '...of what exactly does this suspense consist?...conflicting, apparently mutually exclusive responses are set up in the spectator, with disturbing results...It is this conflict within the spectator that is the essence of the ensuing suspense: we, as well as Guy, are implicated in miriam's murder.'[9] For Wood, Hitchcock's films are both a model of moral sophistication, recognising the messiness and complexity of moral situations, and at the same time they are an invitation to interrogate our own responses to their situations and to ask ourselves what those responses indicate about ourselves.

As the Althusserian/Lacanian school of criticism was becoming the dominant academic paradigm, an alternative possibility was beginning to be explored by Stanley Cavell. Just like Wood and Mulvey, Cavell sees film as inseparable from morality, and

---

[8] Ibid, p.75

[9] Ibid, p.92

specifically from questions of the morality of gender relations. Unlike the new orthodoxy, however, Cavell takes film (or certain genres of American film) to be exploring the moral task of the achievement of human community, of mutual acknowledgement, equality between men and women, what obstacles lie before this ethical ideal and how we might, with the instruction of these films, overcome them. While Mulvey and her interlocutors were exploring the pernicious patriarchal function of classical Hollywood cinema, Cavell was beginning to argue for their ethical value as works of art - indeed as works of art within a tradition that he traces back to Shakespeare - which place women at their centres. Whereas Mulvey notoriously called for the 'destruction of pleasure' offered by Hollywood films, Cavell calls for precisely the opposite - for us to give ourselves up to them, and by doing so, to be receptive to the lessons which they may teach us.

In his 1981 work *Pursuits of Happiness*, for example, Cavell describes what he calls the genre of 'Comedies of Remarriage'. From his discussion of seven films of the classical Hollywood period (*The Philadelphia Story* [George Cukor, 1940], *The Awful Truth* [Leo McCarey, 1937], *It Happened One Night* [Frank Capra, 1934], *Bringing Up Baby* [Howard Hawks, 1938], *His Girl Friday* [Hawks, 1940], *The Lady Eve* [Preston Sturges, 1941] and *Adam's Rib* [George Cukor,1949]) Cavell shows how each of these films depart from the classical form of comedy in which a couple overcome obstacles in order to finally be together; they each recount a story of a couple who overcome a separation in order to come together *again*. According to Cavell, in *re*marriage comedies, unlike classical comedies, the ultimate happiness of the couple depends on a kind of personal transformation. It is, moreover, the women who are at the centre of these films because it is they who undergo the transformation. The men, on the other hand, play the secondary role of representing either a form of life which must be left behind, or representing a reminder or a challenge to the woman in order that her transformation is possible. The man who is worthy of the woman is the one from whom she can learn - illustrated, for example, by C.K Dexter Haven's (Cary Grant) remark to Tracey Lord (Katherine Hepburn) in *The Philadelphia Story* 'You'll never be a first class human being until you learn to have some regard for human frailty.' Women are the active subjects of these films for Cavell in a very different way than they are the passive objects of films for Mulvey. The happy ending is achieved in these films with the finding of an equal partner, an equality reflected in the quality of their conversation.[10]

---

[10] See the chapter on *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* for a variation on this theme of the quality of conversation.

For Cavell, the peculiar power of movies lies in their potential for transformation and improvement, or what he later calls, after Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'moral perfectionism'. In Cavell, however, we can see a concern, in Bernard Williams' terms, not with the *moral* but with the *ethical*, not with questions of right and duty, but with the Socratic question 'How should one live?' And as such, he sees these films not as escapist entertainment but as a form of moral philosophy themselves. In this Cavell anticipates the more recent trend in film studies to take films seriously as themselves 'doing' philosophy, and the associated debate about how this might be so. According to Cavell, art and philosophy are inseparable. It is not that they are the same thing, but as Martha Nussbaum also argues and as I discuss in more detail in chapter three, neither one is a complete or a wholly satisfactory account of human life without the other.

What follows sits at the confluence of the multiple streams of debate which I have tried to briefly outline above. First, how does our imaginative engagement with works of art have an ethical dimension? Is the imagination, as Mulvey argues, an accomplice in our own subjugation? Or is the ability to imagine alternative points of view, as Wood claims, a crucial mode of detachment which is at the heart of our moral lives? Secondly, there are moral questions about film which have been asked in some form about all of the arts since Plato. Does film corrupt us by participating in the creation of a false and damaging view of reality? Or does film contribute to an expansion of the ways that we might think about the world? Does film, as Adorno thought, tranquillise its consumers by presenting them with, in Iris Murdoch's phrase, a self-consoling fantasy? Or does it have the potential which Benjamin claimed to open our eyes to aspects of reality ordinarily concealed? Above all, what role does film play in the attempt to answer the question 'How should one live?'

1. Film and Imagination

Imagine the following scene:

'A man is climbing through a window'

When you entertained this proposition in imagination, what was it that you imagined? Perhaps you imagined being inside the room as the man came in, or maybe you were outside seeing him disappear inwards. Did you picture *yourself* as a part of either scene? Did you imagine *being* the man himself? Or did you imagine the scene from no particular perspective at all? Did it stir a memory? Did you feel a little pinch of fear as you watched,

or excitement, or anger? Or did you feel nothing at all? Do certain logical problems arise if we add 'unseen' to the end of the sentence? The differences between these ways and degrees of imagining are at the heart of the question of what kind of thing we are doing when we imagine fictions.

Now suppose that we see a man climbing through a window in a film - say, *To Catch a Thief* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1955). How does this change or restrict the ways that we imagine it? Do we need to *imagine* it at all? Reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for example, we might (but we need not) picture, or mentally represent, the characters and events described, but watching a film adaptation of the novel that work is done for us by the filmmakers. Novels seem to require an effort of the imagination in conjuring up fictional worlds from the text on the page, which films ostensibly do not.[11] I do not need to imagine that John Robie (Cary Grant) is climbing through a window, because I can see it - I *know* he is climbing through a window. If everything is present to us on the screen and in the soundtrack, what is there left for the imagination to do?

One possible answer has to do with the *fictionality* of films. Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make Believe* revolutionised the field of aesthetics partly by bringing the imagination centre stage.[12] Walton's innovation was to give the imagination a central role not just in the creation of works of art, but in the engagement with them. According to Walton, works of art represent fictions by acting as props in a game of 'make-believe', which in their particular forms, prescribe that we imagine corresponding sets of fictional truths. Just as a cardboard box can be a prop standing in for King Arthur's castle in a children's game, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* performs a similar (albeit more complex) role as a basis for an elaborate operation of the imagination, mandating some imaginings and ruling out others. Therefore, the film image of Cary Grant climbing through a window in a film set, acts as a prop in a game of make-believe in which we imagine seeing John Robie climbing through a window on the French Riviera. At this point Walton's make-believe theory intersects with what has become known as the 'imagined seeing' debate. Given that film is a significantly visual medium of fiction, what is the role of the imagination? Do we imagine ourselves as ghostly witnesses within the world of the fiction? In chapter one, I employ Walton's make-believe theory to argue that 'imagining seeing' should be understood not as referring to the *content* of a psychological attitude, but as a mode of one. To imagine seeing, I shall argue, is to adopt a certain stance towards what one is actually seeing.

---

[11] This thought might, in part, motivate the traditional, and highly questionable, opinion that the watching of films is a more passive (and less respectable) activity than the more imaginatively *active* reading of novels.

[12] Walton, K. *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) esp. Ch.1

The first role for the imagination is therefore as a kind psychological *attitude* which we adopt in order to understand the story. We adopt an internal perspective on the 'world' of the fiction by imagining sets of fictional truths. Much of the information which constitutes the fictional truths of narrative films, however, is not presented to us directly. How do we infer fictional truths from narratives which are necessarily highly compressed and elliptical? How is the imagination involved in filling in the gaps between the story elements which are explicitly represented, to reconstruct the elements which are not? This question has a special relevance for film, which functions to a large extent in what is implied by the juxtaposition of elements in montage. The second possible role for the imagination is therefore not as an *attitude* towards fictions, but as an *act.*[13] This form of the imagination is one that David Hume considered to be a fundamental part of all cognition - the imagination, for Hume, is the associative and combinatory faculty at the core of all forms of understanding.[14] We understand film narratives not just by combining fictional truths at the internal level, however, but by making associations and connection between externally recognised formal features of the work. In Richard Moran's phrase, this is an operation of 'imaginativeness' - seeing patterns, making connections, recognising recurring motifs and themes, all depend on the associative and combinatory faculty of imagination.[15]

The third role for the imagination is as the vehicle of our engagement with film characters. Part of imagining what is the case according to the world of the fiction - the internal stance - is imagining how things are from the perspective of the characters who populate that 'space'. In recent years the ordinary (and ordinarily vague) concept of 'identification' has been much analysed and contested. Murray Smith breaks the concept up into a tripartite structure of recognition, alignment and allegiance.[16] Richard Moran calls it 'dramatic imagining', the imaginative enactment of characters' mental states.[17] Berys Gaut retains the concept of 'identification' but distinguishes between identification in different respects - emotional, epistemic, perceptual, and so on - which can, but need not, be experienced together.[18] Alex Neill has argued that imagining a character's perspective

---

[13] The act/attitude distinction is one that was originally made by Lamarque and Olsen. See their *Truth Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) p. 243

[14] Hume, D. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (ed.) Selby-Bigge and Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978 [1739-40]) p.10. All references are to this edition.

[15] Moran, R. 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination' *Philosophical Review*, 103:1 (1994) 75-106

[16] Smith, M. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) *passim*

[17] Moran, R. 1994, p. 104

[18] Gaut, B. 'Empathy and Identification in Cinema' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 34:1 (2010) 136-157

amounts to *empathising* with them.[19] What they all have in common is the idea that 'identifying' with fictional characters involves an imaginative rehearsal of their mental and/or emotional states. Others, however, have questioned not just the usefulness of the term, but the validity of the concept. Noel Carroll, for example, doubts that we ever really 'identify' with fictional characters. For Carroll, we respond to characters not by imagining ourselves to be identical with them, or even by empathising with them, but rather by *sympathising* with them as a more detached observer. Both sides seem to have difficult questions to answer. On the one hand, it seems unlikely that there is, in Carroll's phrase, a '...curious metaphysical process, like Dr. (*sic*) Spock's Vulcan mind-meld...'[20] But on the other, the more detached observer theory seems to leave out of the picture not merely the ordinary, pre-theoretical opinion that we *do* imaginatively enter into the experiences of characters, but that this is one of the primary reasons that many of us value and participate in the practice of narrative fiction.

2. Film and Ethics

The question of the relationship between works of fiction and philosophy, is one which, in one form or another, is both very old and yet has become in recent years a freshly controversial issue of debate. Do fictions generate knowledge? In what way do they aim at truth? Plato, of course, had a rather negative answer, banishing poets from his Republic for fear their imaginative creations would impede the philosophical pursuit of truth; the multiplication of shadows of reality leading us not closer, but further away from truth in the realm of ideas. An echo of Plato's fears - though a very faint one - can still be heard in contemporary arguments for the autonomy of art from philosophy, and in claims that of all the very good reasons to value art, the production or advancement of knowledge is not one of them. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen's highly influential *Truth, Fiction and Literature* proposes a 'no-truth' theory of literature.[21] Art and philosophy, they claim, are different kinds of human practice, each with their own particular set of aims and ambitions, and neither should be conflated with the other. Paisley Livingston has argued against a recent surge of attempts to assimilate - or even *identify* - film and philosophy.[22]

---

[19] Neil, A. 'Empathy and (Film) Fiction' in Carroll, N. and Bordwell, D. (eds) *Post Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) 175-194

[20] Carroll, N. *The Philosophy of Horror* (London: Routledge, 1990) p.88

[21] Lamarque, P. and Olsen, S.H., 1994, esp. part 1

[22] Livingston, P. *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

According to Livingston, films can supplement and support more traditional forms of philosophising, but they cannot do the job on their own.

There are, however, some areas of philosophy which might seem to have a closer affinity to narrative fiction than others. Films may have little to add to debates on logic, but are they not well-suited to discussions of *moral* issues? That is, on questions to do with how one should live? How does imaginatively engaging with works of fiction contribute to our moral attitudes and beliefs? Murray Smith suggests that one 'salient possibility' for film as philosophy is '...the idea that certain films might embody *moral* philosophy in the way that Martha Nussbaum and others have argued that certain novels do (such as, perhaps, Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake*, (2004)).'[23] Abortion in *Vera Drake*, social justice in Ken Loach's *Riff Raff* (1991), capital punishment in *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1995), racism in *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1991), racism *and* capital punishment in *Monster's Ball* (2001), each provide specific thematic contexts within which the implications of one course of action or another can be worked through in the imagination. The issues that these films confront are matters of public debate; films like *Vera Drake* are participants in a public conversation around the question of what we, as a society, ought and ought not to do, and should and should not allow to be done. Films, in this sense, might be seen as a kind of applied ethics, presenting us with scenarios which question social inequalities, flesh out the implications of established moral views, or promote principles of justice. Films can present morally interesting situations just as works of philosophy can include mini-narratives which crystallise particular issues or highlight difficulties. But is film as *moral* philosophy any more immune from Livingston's criticism than other kinds? How can film use a narrative scenario to question the bases of our assumptions, or to interrogate the coherence and consistency of competing claims, or set out arguments and counterarguments? Even if film *can* perform these functions, can it do so as *effectively* as traditional philosophy?

2.1 The Rationality objection

Livingston discusses two objections to the assimilation of art and philosophy which were made by Hegel.[24] The first is what Livingston calls the 'rationality objection'. Why choose film, or any other kind of fictional art, to advance or question a philosophical thesis if there are more rational means available? What can film do that an essay or a philosophical

---

[23] Smith, M. 'Film Art, Argument and Ambiguity' in Smith and Wartenburg, T. (eds.) *Thinking Through Cinema*, Blackwell, 2006, p. 33

[24] Livingston, P. *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 39

paper cannot? Films *could* be seen as a form of applied ethics, dramatising controversial public issues like abortion, but could not moral issues be worked out more clearly, more comprehensively and more effectively in a linguistically conducted argument? Surely, the more difficult aspects of such issues are better approached in a more systematic and rational form? And, moreover, in a form unclouded by the emotional charge which narrative fictions aim to generate?

As Smith notes, Nussbaum argues that narrative fiction (specifically the novel) has an important role to play in moral philosophy. But her claim is stronger; there are, she says, aspects of life which *only* fiction can adequately capture. As she puts it: '...certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist.'[25] Nussbaum's argument brings in another crucial consideration. In her account, the special ability of art to capture aspects of moral experience is rooted in an inseparable and organic connection between the form of a work of art and its ethical content. This condition is agreed on both by the advocates of a philosophical mode of film, and also by those who question its philosophical potential, and the violation of the form/content condition provides the basis for their objections.The challenge for an ethically oriented criticism, therefore, is not just to extract a moral message from the film, but to find a way of preserving a necessary connection between a work's ethical content and its aesthetic form.

This challenge is most explicitly faced in chapters one, three and five, but it is an issue which runs through the core of the entire thesis. It has long been a central principle of the ethical criticism of *literature* that the aesthetic qualities of a work determine its moral character. As Nussbaum argues: 'Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content - an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.' [26] A similar ethical criticism of *film* will therefore need to find a corollary for Nussbaum's attention to literary qualities of language, metaphor, cadence and rhythm - what is the cinematic equivalent of finding just the right word or phrase? Indeed, *is* there an equivalent? I shall argue that there is, and that the ethical work that is conducted in and through a novelist's prose style, choice of metaphor, and so forth, is manifested in film as patterns of editing, repetitions of visual motifs, juxtapositions of image and sound.

---

[25] Nussbaum, M. *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) p.5

[26] *Ibid,* p.3

2.2 Propriety objection

The second Hegelian objection is what Livingston calls the 'propriety objection'. Even if works of art *can* perform a morally educative function, is this what we really value them for? On the one hand, it seems just obvious that engaging with fictions contributes in a centrally important way to one's personal ethical viewpoint, and that the views that they express are crucial to our appreciation. But on the other, assigning a moral function to works of narrative fiction seems to drastically misdescribe and undervalue their nature as autonomous works of art. This is part of Lamarque and Olsen's objections to the recruitment of art to philosophical ends. We *can* see *Othello*, for example, as a cautionary tale about the danger of jealousy, but seeing it only in these terms seems somehow to miss the point. The objection is that when works of art are seen as moral lessons an artistic entity is valued in non-artistic terms.

Milan Kundera expresses a similar concern. Looking for a moral message in *Don Quixote*, he argues, represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the essential uncertainty and ambiguity of the form of the novel. Moral interpretations of this kind '... are mistaken because they ... seek at the novel's core not an inquiry, but a moral position...'[27] There is a distinction, therefore, between two ways of conceiving of an ethical mode of fiction; between, first, a mode which promotes particular moral principles, arguments or positions - call this the *didactic* option - and fiction as a form of reflection on ethical concepts - call this the *exploratory*.

The distinction between these two possibilities corresponds to the distinction that Bernard Williams makes between the terms 'morality' and 'ethics'. According to Williams, the 'morality system' is a system of rules and principles based on the notion of obligation. Moral philosophical theorising, of the sort exemplified by the deontology of Kant, for example, or the utilitarianism of Mill, is built around the questions of what one ought, or ought not, to do. But as Williams argues, moral philosophy is a narrow subspecies of what the ancient Greeks would have recognised as *ethics*. For Aristotle, for example, ethics involves not just questions of duty, but questions about the constituents of our general well-being; the roles of virtue, of pleasure, of friendship, of work, and so forth, and the complex relations between them. The Aristotelian question of ethical virtue is first of all what constitutes, say, *courage*, but also what are the contingent factors which might prevent us from achieving it. I shall argue that it is not *morality* but the more expansive concept of

---

[27] Kundera, M. *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) p.7

ethics in Williams' sense, that better describes the concerns of a certain species of realist fiction, exemplified by Eric Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*, and also, as I will describe in section three, *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970). This is not a didactic, but primarily an exploratory mode of ethical fiction, I will claim, because it does not suggest rules or principles for right action (except perhaps indirectly), but rather seeks an understanding of what shapes the conditions under which we act.

The films that I am focussing on are all, in various ways, concerned with the ethical theme of a circumscribed vision; self-deception, sentimentality, rationalisation, narcissism - a view of the world that is distorted by the force of its attachment to the self. This theme is played out in each one in the dissonance between the account of the characters which emerges from the story that they tell about themselves to themselves, and the account that is given by the formal features of the work. Therefore, while Rohmer's *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* in chapter five and *The Sopranos* in chapter two might seem at first an odd pairing, they are, I will argue, closely connected in the way that each work is centrally concerned with the self-serving rationalisations of their principal characters. Each of the films that I discuss show us a view of the characters which is not available to the characters themselves. Moreover, they each participate in a tradition of ironic realism that has its roots in the nineteenth century European novel. It could be argued that what seemed so innovative about *The Sopranos* was in fact its importation to television of a long tradition of irony that runs not just through the history of European film, from Jean Renoir to the Czech New Wave to Eric Rohmer, but also the European novel. Just as Rohmer participates in the ironic tradition of the realist novel - the protagonist of *L'Amour L'Après-midi* shares not merely his name with the hero of Flaubert's *L'Education Sentimentale* - so does *The Sopranos*, something implicitly acknowledged in an episode entitled 'Sentimental Education'.

3. Summary of chapters

The thesis is divided into three parts, each of which is made up of two chapters on a related theme. The first two are concerned with the imagination, the second two bring in the topic of ethics, and the third part is made up of two chapters which take a closer look at Eric Rohmer's series *Les Contes Moreaux/The Moral Tales* (1963-1972). But across these six chapters the reader will also notice a second parallel thematic structure; the first, third and fifth chapters might be grouped according to a thread linking their subjects, and the second, fourth and sixth according to theirs. Chapters one, three and five are related in

their discussion of the imaginative and reflective attitudes towards *works* - the difference between the internal imaginative stance and the external awareness of aesthetic and formal properties. Chapters two, four and six, however, are concerned with the dual internal/external perspective on *characters*.

Chapter one asks what forms the imagination takes in our engagement with fiction film. The imagination can be seen either in the Humean sense as the cognitive mechanism for the association of ideas, and therefore as instrumental in the (re)construction of narratives - either creatively (for the artist) or re-creatively (for the reader/viewer). Alternatively, it can be understood as a mode of engagement or an attitude within which we understand propositions as fictional. The constructive imagination conceived along Hume's lines, however, is absolutely fundamental to all forms of cognition, not only those that are involved in the understanding of narratives, and still less only *fictional* narratives. Similarly, a definition of the imagination that describes it merely as a (or the) propositional attitude which contrasts with belief will be just as unhelpful. The imagination so thoroughly underwrites all areas of human life, practices and experience that one of the first tasks of this chapter must be to refine and restrict the form of the concept which is involved in our engagement with film. Moreover, a clearer picture of the imaginative structure of film engagement will help to provide a firmer basis for the later account of the ethical dimension of that engagement. This chapter explores the internal/external stance schema which has been proposed in various forms by both Kendall Walton, and by Lamarque and Olsen. It proposes a way in which this schema provides a helpful context in which to situate the long-running debate around 'imagined seeing'. And as a kind of groundwork for the discussion of the ethical role of film in chapter three, this chapter outlines the model developed by George Wilson in *Narration in Light* of 'rhetorical figures of narrational instruction'.[28] That is, aesthetic, formal, *externally* recognised, features of film narratives that determine the nature and quality of the *internal* imaginative stance.

Chapter two examines a similarly dual structure in our engagement with fiction film; not the internal/external perspective on the work, but a subjective/objective imaginative attitude towards characters. The dual perspective is imagining the 'world' of the fiction from within the subjective perspective of characters, and imagining that same world as it is independent of how the characters experience it. In asking what is involved in subjective imagining, I make the distinction between imagining 'in his shoes' and imagining *being* a character, and argue that the latter is to be understood as an imaginative

---

[28] Wilson, G. *Narration in Light* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) p.49

rehearsal of a character's perspective, or what Richard Moran calls 'dramatic imagining'. I ask what formal features of a film contribute to the subjective imagining of a character's point of view, and using a conceptual scheme described by Wilson, address the issue of 'subjective shots'. I discuss some of the objections that have been raised against the notion of subjective imagining, or what has been called 'the participant view', by Matthew Kieran and by Noel Carroll, and argue that the debate benefits from being placed within the internal/external schema discussed in the last chapter. I argue that engaging with characters should not be seen in terms of a binary choice between *either* participant *or* observer, feeling-with *or* feeling-for, empathy *or* sympathy, subjective *or* objective, but rather as a combination of both. The dual structure of the imaginative attitude is particularly important in an ironic mode of narration. The task of this chapter is to establish an account of the dual *imaginative* structure of fiction on which the model of the dual *ethical* stance outlined in chapter four is based.

Chapter three introduces the ethical aspect of imagining fiction films. From fairy tales, to Aesop's fables, to biblical parables, to the novels of Henry James, fiction has been taken as an important source of moral education. This chapter asks in what way fiction films can contribute to the way we think about morality, in light of the recent doubts, as I mentioned above, about the philosophical potential of film. One of the most promising possibilities is seeing films as moral thought experiments, which as Carroll argues, can either propose or question philosophical theories. However, as Smith notes, a crucial difference between philosophical thought experiments and works of narrative fiction is the bare and schematic nature of the former and the richly particularised narrative detail of the latter. If films are to be likened to thought experiments, what, as Smith puts it, '... is all that detail doing there?' The problem of detail seems to deal a fatal blow to the film/ thought experiment analogy. Drawing on Bernard Williams' distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' ethical concepts, I propose a modified version of films as thought experiments. I claim that rather than offering didactic 'ought' narratives, films could rather be offering examples of 'thick' ethical concepts (TECs). I argue that reconsidering the film-as-thought-experiment thesis (FTE) in the light of Williams' distinction answers Smith's objection and removes what has hitherto been a serious obstacle to the otherwise highly plausible FTE thesis. Through an analysis of the role played by music in *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970), and using the schema developed by Wilson explored in chapter one, I describe how the constructive and associative operations of the imagination work on externally

recognised formal features of the work in order to illustrate one possible variant of the 'thick' ethical concept of sentimentality.

Chapter four explores the idea that the ethical value in engaging with works of fiction is in imagining 'what it's like' to inhabit the subjectivity of another (fictional) person. What is the ethical benefit of empathising, or sympathising, with fictional characters? I discuss some objections to the idea of the ethical value of subjective imagining, and claim that on its own empathising with a fictional character is not sufficient for ethical value. I then look at the corresponding notion that it is an objective act of imagination that is a better candidate for the ethical role of fiction film. Objective ethical imagining, I claim, can be understood in two senses. First, it can mean imagining out of the perspective of a fictional character. Secondly, it can mean transcending one's own actual perspective in the process of engaging with art. The latter view is held by Iris Murdoch, for whom the ethical value of fiction is found in its role as fostering a 'just mode of vision'.[29] In the last part of this chapter I refer to a philosophical issue famously discussed by Thomas Nagel, as he puts it: '...how to combine the perspective of a particular person inside the world, with an objective view of that same world...'[30] And through an analysis of *A Blonde in Love* (Miloš Forman, 1965), I argue that the ethical value of a kind of ironic realism involves the simultaneous adoption of subjective and objective points of view.

In the final two chapters I take a closer look at Eric Rohmer's series *Les Contes Moreaux/The Moral Tales*. In a more detailed and extended discussion of the series I hope to flesh out some of the more abstract and general arguments that have been discussed in the first four chapters.

Chapter five focusses mainly on *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* (1969) as a way of connecting the topics of the first and the third chapters - the dual stance towards fictions, and the derivation of ethical value. It asks how the recognition and appreciation of formal patterns, from the external perspective, contributes to the internal perspective, the imaginative construction of the fictional 'world', and to an ethical interpretation. I argue that certain unconvincing 'readings' of *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* are a result of understanding the film's ethical and philosophical concerns as the product of the conversations between the characters - that is, an understanding derived exclusively from the internal perspective. A more satisfying account of the film emerges, I argue, from a comparison of different

---

[29] Murdoch, I., 1970, p. 91

[30] Nagel, T. 1986 , p.3

levels of representation within the film. First of all, there is a revealing dissonance between what the characters say and what they do - between word and action. But there is also a fruitful juxtaposition between the account the characters give of themselves, and the account that is contained in, or implied by, the formal features of the work. This narrational authority, I claim, consists in patterns of symmetry, visual rhyme, and across the series, a structure of 'musical' variation. Misreadings of the film arise from a failure to see the ways in which the formal, externally recognised, aesthetic strategies determine the nature of the internal imagining.

Chapter Six is concerned with the topics of chapters two and four, the dual subjective/objective perspectives that we take towards characters. Focussing mainly on *L'Amour L'Après-midi*, but also *Le Genou de Claire* (1970) and *La Collectionneuse* (1967), I claim that while in one respect Rohmer can be seen as the most objective of filmmakers, it is also vital that the viewer is drawn in to the subjective perspective of his self-deceptive protagonists. I discuss how the unstable subjective to objective imaginative tension is generated in the texture of the film and through intertextual literary references. That is, how imagining into and out of the subjective perspective of the characters is determined by an awareness of formal features of the work. We are drawn in to the perspectives of the characters through what Wilson calls 'subjectively inflected' shots and shot sequences, but we are also detached from them by the film's ironic narrative mode. How does the internal stance, subjective imagining, contribute to an ethical understanding of the film? How does a combination of subjective and objective imagining contribute to an ethical stance?

1

Internal and External Perspectives

Reading Mary Shelley's novel, or watching the film adaptation of *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), or watching John Robie climb through a window in *To Catch a Thief*, we are engaging with a fiction. It seems likely, therefore, that it must in some way involve the mediation of the imagination. Recently, however, doubts have been raised about the safety of this assumption. Malcolm Turvey, for example, argues that if to imagine is to entertain thoughts of what is possible and not what is actual, thoughts about what we *don't* know, then, '...it cannot be the case that I imagine the content of a fiction when I am engaging with it if I know what the content is.'[1] What role can imagining play in our experience of film if, as I mentioned in the introduction, we *see* the characters and events before us on the screen? Derek Matravers argues that the assumption that our experience of film must be explained in terms of the imagination, what he calls the 'i-claim', is false.[2] And because it is the starting point for most analytical philosophical accounts of how fiction is mediated it is an impediment to progress because it points us in the wrong direction. The concept of 'the imagination' is so vague and amorphous, he claims, that it obscures and mystifies as much as it reveals. Turvey has similar doubts about the usefulness of the term in the absence of any clear understanding of what we mean when we use it. Matravers' suggestion is that the concept be abandoned. Turvey, on the other hand, allows for the possibility that it might be refined and clarified. In the next two chapters, therefore, my task will be to try to arrive at a clearer picture of the imagination, which I hope will explain why it seems so central to the experience of fiction film.

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are two senses in which we imagine fictions; the first is a kind of mental *attitude* or stance that we adopt, and the second is a kind of cognitive *activity* that we engage in. The first sense of fiction-directed imagining is as a mode of engagement in which we understand propositions to be fictional - to imagine the events and characters of fictions is, in Lamarque and Olsen's (hereafter L&O) words, to adopt a 'fictive stance'.[3] L&O's is an approach to the role of the imagination in literary fiction, but the role of the imagination in fiction film brings with it its own set of problems. The kind of films with which I am concerned are fictions, and if they are fictions then the stance we adopt towards them is imaginative. But if they are *visual* fictions, does this mean that the mental attitude of the viewer is best described as a kind of visual imagining? How

---

[1] Turvey, M. 'Imagination, Simulation, and Fiction' *Film Studies*, 8 (2006) 116-125

[2] Matravers, D. 'Why We Should Give Up on the Imagination' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 34:1 (2010) 190

[3] Lamarque, P. and Olsen, S.H., 1994, esp. Ch. 2. The term 'fictive stance' is taken from Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) although Wolterstorff uses it to refer to the activity of the author rather than a consumer of fiction, the idea is roughly the same.

does the idea that fictions are imagined, map onto the putatively visual medium of narrative fiction film?

The conjunction of the imaginative condition of fictionality and the visual condition of the medium, seems to result in the idea that imagining films must be visual imagining. But that cannot mean *visualising*, as one could (but need not) while reading a novel, because when we see the characters and events of films we see *something*. We also see the words on the page, of course, but in film we see, in some sense yet to be defined, the events and characters themselves. Then why claim that imagining has anything to do with the perceptual experience of watching films? How can we understand, for example, the much debated and controversial notion that watching films involves 'imagining seeing'? Imagining seeing, I will argue, is better understood not as a kind of imaginary activity, but rather as a form of the imaginative *attitude*. The second sense in which we imagine fictions, the imaginative *act*, on the other hand, is the cognitive mechanism for, as David Hume would put it, the association of ideas, and therefore instrumental in the (re)construction of narratives - either creatively (for the artist) or re-creatively (for the reader/viewer). In this second sense the imagination is crucial in how we comprehend narratives; by connecting fictional propositions, filling in narrative ellipses, and reconstructing the order of events.

There are, then, three issues that need to be separated within the overall question of how, or if, we imagine films: (1) imagining seeing, (2) the imaginative attitude, and (3) the imaginative (re)construction of narratives. Each of these aspects is, of course, a huge subject on its own, but my aim here is not to give a complete account of each one, but to explore the relations between them. And in doing so I shall also describe how they fit within the broader schema, proposed by both L&O and by Kendall Walton, of *internal* and *external* perspectives on works of fiction.[4] Engaging with fictions involves imagining the 'world' of the fiction from within, adopting the internal perspective, and it also involves an awareness of the work *as* fiction, from the external perspective. Imagining seeing, the imaginative attitude and the active imagination are all to be associated with the internal perspective, but I shall argue that the external, aesthetic, critical perspective on a work is also partly mediated by the active imagination. We can respond to Matravers' scepticism, therefore, by attempting to answer Turvey's call for conceptual clarification. The further issue of our imaginative engagement with film characters will be taken up in the next chapter. I shall begin with what has become known as the 'imagined seeing thesis'.

---

[4] This schema has also been adopted by Gregory Currie in his most recent work, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) see ch.3

1. Imagined Seeing

The sentence 'He imagined seeing a UFO' might be given a variety of different interpretations. It could mean (1) that he thought he saw a UFO when he was in fact seeing the lights of a jumbo jet; he was mistaken about what he saw. Or (2) it could mean that, being a science-fiction fan, he saw what he knew to be a jumbo jet and imagined of it that it was a UFO. Or (3), that the same fan could be sitting at his desk in the middle of the afternoon, daydreaming about seeing a UFO. Or (4) he could be watching a movie. How do the first three options differ from the last? Why are they different sorts of activity than the imaginative seeing that he does when watching *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1978)?

Number one is a kind of illusion. The science fiction fan (let's call him George) *actually* sees something but believes that he is seeing something else. Number two also has George actually seeing something, but he is not under an illusion. He *decides* to see it in a certain way, to see it *as* something else. This differs from (1) in two ways; George's attitude is one of imagining rather than believing, and his activity is volitional. Number three is also imaginative and volitional, but it differs from one and two because there is no percept to be seen; it is a purely imaginative kind of seeing, visualising. Which of these seems closest to the experience of watching a film? Number three is ruled out because unlike movie-watching George, daydreaming George is having a purely imagined experience, without any visual sensory input. And unlike the film experience, it is one which might be improved by closing his eyes. Watching the film there is no need for George to visualise anything because he is in actually seeing something on the screen; he is seeing the events.[5] Visualising preserves the imaginative requirement in 'imagined seeing', but not the seeing. Number one is the opposite - seeing but not imagining. It seems likely that in (1) George would be inclined to either run away, contact the police, or try to make contact with the alien visitors. None of these seem to be the reaction George would have sitting in the movie audience, and this behavioural disanalogy is one of the reasons that 'illusion theories' of fictional response have generally fallen out of favour. We are therefore left with number two; unlike (3) George is actually seeing something, and unlike (1) the attitude that he adopts towards what he sees is not belief. In Walton's terms what George is doing in (2) is engaging in a game of *make-believe*.[6] The jumbo jet that he actually sees, like the film

---

[5] Reading a novel there is no *need* to visualise either, but the difference is that the presence of the film image excludes the possibility that George *could* visualise the same thing.

[6] Walton, K., 1990, esp. ch.1

image, acts as a prop in this game, one which he uses to generate a certain set of imaginings.

1.1. Imagining Seeing Fictions Face-to-Face

But number two is not an exact match either, of course. George can use the 747 to generate his game of make-believe, and the imaginative project is entirely his. A film, however, controls, directs and determines the nature of our imagining; we imagine seeing a film in the way that the film prescribes that we should imagine seeing it. Moreover, in presenting the events in a certain way, from a certain angle, in a particular kind of shot, and so on, we are directed to imagine seeing it from a certain implied spatial perspective. The question is, does that mean that we must therefore imagine *occupying* the perspective from which we imagine seeing the events of the film?

The notion that we imagine ourselves into the diegesis as imaginary witnesses to events - what George Wilson calls the 'face-to-face version' of the imagined seeing thesis (IST) - seems to bring with it certain problems.[7] It seems, for example, to entail imagining oneself as a being capable of witnessing an event in New York at one moment, and in Beijing the next. Or imaging oneself in an impossible physical position, floating in space or inside a human body. Or that we could witness the most intimate moments of lovers without either them minding, or being disturbed, which might involve further imagining oneself to be invisible. It might present problems of a more logical kind. Recall the scene with which I began the introduction. How would one imagine seeing a burglar entering the room unseen? How would Point of View (PoV) shots fit in to this account? How can I imagine myself and a character seeing the same object, simultaneously and from the same spatial perspective? We can divide these problems into two sorts. The first three are problems of imagining *implausible consequences* that follow from the original imagining. The last two are problems of *conceivability*. Even if I can imagine the physical impossibility of being a floating spectator of space battles, or the view of a human artery as I am swept along inside, I cannot imagine the logical impossibility of a contradiction. Imagining seeing something that is unseen is a little like trying to visualise a four-sided triangle. Each of these objections has been made by Gregory Currie in his case against the imagined seeing thesis. [8]

---

[7] Wilson, G. *Seeing Fictions in Films: The Epistemology of Movies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 37

[8] In his most recent remarks on the subject Currie in fact concedes defeat in the debate. But I will use his earlier arguments as an influential example of the anti-imagined seeing position.

According to the implausibility objection, the imagined seeing thesis seems to involve us in imagining magical feats; it requires us to imagine impossible leaps between perspectives that would themselves be impossible to occupy. In Currie's example, imagining seeing a scene in *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963) would involve imagining a highly implausible jumping back and forth between the shore and the boat and a point outside the boat in the sea. For Currie, to see is necessarily to see from a point of view, so imagining seeing is necessarily imagining seeing from some particular perspective. But as Walton says, this is not so; *actually* seeing involves being in a particular relation to what is seen, but *imagining* seeing does not. We can imagine seeing a scene from a certain point of view, but it does not follow that we must also imagine the conditions which would make the view possible. I can imagine seeing Melanie Daniels' (Tippi Hedren) boat in Bodega Bay from the outside, but for this to be possible I do not need to have any supporting imaginings about how I came to be there, or what is keeping me afloat. Walton's response to this problem is similar to his reply to the other problems of imagining implausible consequences; imaginings are, according to Walton, indeterminate. Berys Gaut adds that in this way imaginings are unlike beliefs; if I believe P and believe that Q follows from P then I must also believe Q. The same rule, however, does not apply to what we imagine.[9] For Walton, not only does imagining seeing the events in Bodega Bay not involve imagining moving between perspectives, but it need not involve imagining being *located* in any perspective at all.

Currie and Ian Ravenscroft (hereafter C&R) describe the logical problem: 'If visually imagining these events required me to imagine seeing them myself, I would be obliged to imagine contradictory things: to imagine seeing these things, and to imagine no-one sees them.'[10] At the end of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), for example, the fiction mandates that we imagine that the sled burns unseen by anyone, and that Kane's secret remains unknown. According to C&R, the imagined seeing thesis seems to involve us in imagining a contradiction - imagining seeing it and imagining no-one is seeing it (and imagining knowing and that no-one knows the secret). But as Jerrold Levinson points out, this objection fails to recognise that there are two separate dimensions in play: 'There is no contradiction: 'unseen' here means, or is elliptical for, 'unseen by any character in the story.'[11] Imagining seeing the sled burn unseen by anyone just means unseen by anyone

---

[9] Gaut, B. 'Imagination, Interpretation and Film' *Philosophical Studies,* 89 (1998) 335

[10] Currie, G. and Ravenscroft, I. *Recreative Minds,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) p.30

[11] Levinson, J. 'Seeing, Imaginarily at the Movies' *Philosophical Quarterly*, 43:170 (1993) 71

within the fictional world. The logical impossibility only arises if I place myself, as an imaginary observer within the fictional world that is observed.

Walton's indeterminacy argument abrogates any need for elaborate imaginings about what makes our imagined perceptual access to the fictional world possible. When we imagine ourselves seeing the characters and events of fiction films we do not ordinarily do so by imagining ourselves within the fictional world as ghostly witnesses. Neither do we need to imagine the events recorded by an imaginary film crew, not, at least, where one is not also part of the fiction. But neither should it be understood as a form of propositional imagining; imagining seeing is not imagining *that* I am seeing. To imagine *that* I am seeing the Eiffel Tower does not (unlike visualising it) involve imagining any spatial perspective because the content of the imagining is not the Eiffel Tower as such, but my imagining it. Imagining seeing the events of a film, however, does involve imagining seeing them from a particular perspective. The phrase 'imagine seeing' tends, I think, to invite a misunderstanding of the concept. It could be taken to mean that I imagine myself seeing, where myself and my seeing both become part of the content of what I imagine. Placing oneself in the fictional world, what Currie calls the 'Imagined Observer Hypothesis', leads to the problems discussed above.

1.2. Imagined Seeing as an Imaginative Attitude

Walton's theory of imagined seeing is rooted in what he calls the 'transparency' of the photographic image. When we look at a photograph, according to Walton, we see not just a visual representation of the subject, we see, indirectly, the subject itself. So if films are photographic, and photographs are transparent, then what we see at the beginning of *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) is not Ethan Edwards walking into his brother's cabin, but John Wayne walking onto a film set.

Wilson also appeals to the indeterminacy principle, and he agrees that a 'Modest Version' of the imagined seeing thesis need include no imaginings about being in an implied spatial position, but he argues that what is needed is an account which includes the idea that the film image is *mediated* in some way. Wilson's 'Mediated Version' claims that we imagine that the images that we see are 'motion picture-like shots' transparently derived from the fictional world.[12] In *The Searchers* we *actually* see a visual record of John Wayne, but we imagine seeing a transparently derived *visual record* of Ethan Edwards. But is this not

---

12 Wilson, G., 2011, p. 88

open to similar charges of absurdity levelled against the Face-to-Face version above? Are we also to imagine that in every fictional world there is a ghostly documentary crew recording events? But, Wilson argues, the indeterminacy of imaginings still applies; we imagine the film as a record of a fictional world without also satisfying in imagination the logical conditions of the production of that record. Wilson's Mediated Version of IST is, therefore, a significantly weakened one. We imagine seeing X, and we imagine that our seeing of X is indirect and mediated in some way, but we imagine nothing about the nature of that mediated access.

Why does Wilson introduce this additional stage of mediation? The Modest Version alone, he argues, fails to mark the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic elements of the film image. He gives the example of the opening shot of *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960); we see Marion (Janet Leigh) and Sam (John Gavin) in their hotel room, and we also see the textual inscription, 'Phoenix, Arizona. Two Forty-Three P.M.' But we surely do not imagine seeing them both in the same way, the words somehow hanging in the same fictional space. But one could argue there are many aspects of a fiction film which we do not appreciate in terms of *imagining* at all. Watching the opening scene from *Psycho*, we adopt more than one psychological stance towards the same image simultaneously. We *imagine* seeing Marion and Sam in a hotel room, but we recognise the text as a rhetorical feature of the film - one that directs our imagining, but is not itself to be imagined as an element of the fictional world. The same might be said of the conspicuous virtuosity of the camera movement, or Bernard Hermann's score - we recognise them as aesthetic features which determine the form and quality of the imagining, but are not themselves imagined. My doubt is whether there is a need to expand the Modest Version of IST to accommodate within the imaginative attitude those aspects of a film which we normally recognise as features belonging to a view of the film *qua* film, as an artefact. If, as I will argue in due course, there is a dual psychological stance towards any fiction - both imaginative and critical, internal and external - the distinction that Wilson identifies can be accounted for by the twofoldness of our attitude rather than by assigning the artefactual features of a film to the imaginative dimension of our attention.

In fact, Wilson's example from *The Spirit of the Beehive* (Victor Erice, 1973), where Ana (Ana Torrent) sees the rippling transformation of her reflection into that of Frankenstein's monster, nicely captures what seems to me the most appealing version of the imagined seeing thesis; as he puts it, '...movie spectators have an imaginative *impression* of its being *as if* they are seeing the fictional objects...'[13] It is not, however, that we imagine *that* we are seeing a visual record of the characters and events of fictions, but rather, it is an imaginative *mode* of seeing, or a form of perception which is shaped and directed by the imagination. The photographic nature of film means that we indirectly actually see John Wayne, but because *The Searchers* is fiction, we imagine seeing Ethan Edwards. Imagined seeing therefore describes an imaginative *way* of seeing something, it does not refer to the *content* of what we imagine. Recall the example of George and the UFO; John Wayne is to Ethan as the jumbo jet is to the UFO, in both cases a single object can be seen in two possible ways, actually and fictionally. This is the nub of Levinson's reply to Currie; the problem is that Currie ignores the role that the imaginative stance plays in questions about the logical implications of the perspectival design of shots. From the internal, imaginative perspective thoughts about where I must be located in order to be seeing the events in the way that I am are not usually (although they can be) part of the game of make-believe. And as I shall argue in the next part, following Walton, it is an essential feature of engaging with fiction that we adopt both stances towards works of fiction, the internal and the external, simultaneously.

2. The Imaginative Attitude

To imagine seeing then, is to place oneself in a certain relation to what one is actually seeing - not a physical spatial relation, but an imaginative one. I actually see John Wayne walking around a film set, and I imagine seeing Ethan Edwards disrupting a wedding. To imagine seeing is to adopt an imaginative attitude towards what we are actually seeing. In Walton's terms the transparent photographic film image gives us indirect access to people and their actions in the actual world, and this representation gives us access to a fictional

---

[13] Wilson, G. 2011, p.37

counterpart, a fictional world. As he puts it: 'Representational works of art and games of make-believe thus *generate* fictional truths.'[14] The actions of the actors on the film set, Ford's direction, the lighting, the editing, all generate a fictional world in which it is fictionally true that Ethan Edwards disrupts Laurie's (Vera Miles) wedding. But why do we need to qualify statements about the events of the film by adding 'it is fictionally true that...'? Or rather, why is this qualification almost never part of what we ordinarily say about films?

2.1 The Fictive Stance and Making-believe

The world of *The Searchers* is, in important respects, remote from our actual world; not just remote in terms of history, or culture or geography, but metaphysically inaccessible. I see, or imagine seeing, Ethan chasing Debbie (Nathalie Wood), and, fearing that he intends to kill her, I have a desire to prevent it. But of course I can't, because I am unable to influence the events of the fiction. Moreover, I don't need to, because neither Ethan or Debbie exists, and therefore no-one is actually in danger. How then, can we explain the fact that the fictional world is able to exert a psychological influence on the real world in making us care about what happens to entities who are fictional, and are therefore entities who do not actually exist? Attempts to answer this question mainly do so by asking about the nature of the mental attitude that we adopt towards fictions. When one calls a proposition true, it follows that one believes it; but in what sense do we believe fictional propositions to be true? In one sense, the question, 'Does Ethan intend to kill Debbie?' has no answer because they are fictional and do not exist. But in another sense it is a highly pertinent question for an understanding of the narrative, and if there is an answer to it that is either true or false, then it must be subject to belief in some way. In what sense does one *believe* the proposition that Ethan intends to kill Debbie?

One suggestion is that imagining just is a weak kind of belief, a point somewhere lower on a continuum but essentially the same kind of mental attitude. So, when one imagines that Ethan is chasing Debbie one faintly, provisionally, temporarily, accepts it as true. This is the kind of thought that is at the heart of illusionistic theories of imaginative fictional engagement; that when we imagine fictions what we are doing is, according to Coleridge's much quoted phrase, 'suspending disbelief'. Casting fictional imagining as a special kind of believing (or of not disbelieving) seems to provide an answer to questions like why it is that we can have emotional reactions to fiction. But imagining is not a kind of

---

[14] Walton, K. 'How Remote are Fictional Worlds from the Real World?' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37 (1978) 16

belief; to imagine something is not to believe it. I can very easily imagine that I am an astronaut, without in any way believing that I am.[15] The 'willing suspension of disbelief' is the decision to remain neutral on the question of whether or not a proposition is true. Or to be more precise, it is the rejection of the question. Coleridge's meaning is revealed more clearly when he ends the sentence, '...which constitutes poetic faith.'[16] To have faith, in this context, is not to choose to believe a thing as true when there is a possibility that it is false, but rather to believe in the uselessness of asking the question. It is the imagination that allows us to comprehend the meanings of fictions, but we must separate this from the idea at issue here, that it is the imagination that allows us to consider fictions *as* fictional. The imagination performs a sort of cognitive bracketing function, wherein propositions are entertained yet unasserted. Suspending disbelief is what L&O refer to as adopting the 'fictive stance'. To adopt a fictive stance is to bracket a part of reality, to insulate it from questions of truth or falsity; it is to hold it in a dimension of mental space in which truth value (at least in terms of a correspondence to facts of the actual world) has no application.

The fictive stance should not be confused, however, with what I have referred to as the internal perspective on fictions. To imagine the events and characters from the internal perspective is to enter into a mode of engagement that takes these states of affairs to be true. The fictive stance, on the other hand, is the cognitive context in which our imaginings are played out, and a context which 'suspends' the thoughts that we entertain from the actual world. Using Walton's analogy, the fictive stance is the general guiding rule of the game of make-believe that things which happen within it *are* make-believe. With this rule in place we can go on to play the game of make-believe which is constituted by sets of internally imagined thoughts. The sentence 'It is fictionally true that Ethan intends to kill Debbie' is an explicit articulation of the fictive stance, and it is uttered from an external perspective. From the *internal* perspective, on the other hand, the sentence would be 'Ethan intends to kill Debbie', and it is an expression of an imagining that is conducted within the framework set by the fictive stance.

To adopt the fictive stance is to place oneself in a certain psychological relation to the work of fiction, and it is a different relation than the one that we take towards a work of non-fiction. Matravers claims that one of the (mistaken) reasons that the imagination is enlisted in accounts of our engagement with fiction is that it helps to explain the curious fact that we are not motivated to act by what we see on screen. One of the premises of the

---

[15] It is another question, however, whether I can so easily imagine that I am Neil Armstrong. I will come back to this in the next chapter.

[16] Coleridge, S.T. *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. XIV

'i-claim' is, as he puts it: 'If the audience did believe what they were watching, then they would be motivated to act.' But this, according to Matravers, is false: 'If the audience believed they were watching a documentary, they would believe what they were watching. However, such audiences are no more motivated to act than audiences of fictions.'[17] Certainly in neither case is the audience motivated to jump up and physically intervene, because in both cases they know that what they are seeing is an audio-visual representation of events and not the events themselves. But watching a documentary one might be motivated to act indirectly, by donating to charity, or even just by saying 'someone should do something about this.' It makes sense to respond to a documentary in this way - it would be rational to act if one were in a position to do so - but watching a fiction it would not. A fiction film might also spur one to donate to charity, but one would not think that that would help the particular characters on screen.

The fictive stance is what enables us to approach a film as fiction, and not as a record of reality. But describing it in terms of bracketing reality, or insulating propositions from truth conditions, might suggest that fictional experience is therefore segregated from all other experience, and this may contribute to concerns about the rationality of fiction-directed emotions. However, understanding that a work *is* fiction allows us to appreciate it in terms of the conventions and presuppositions of fiction; it makes sense of incongruities that distinguish it from real experience, such as the beauty of Othello's speech, or the sudden singing of New York street gangs, or our mysterious access to characters' thoughts. It removes logical barriers to one's emotional engagement that might otherwise be erected by such worries about rationality. Those formal qualities that might act as evidence of a work's artificiality, traces of authorship that would testify to a work's unreality, are accounted for in the fictive stance. That does not mean that the fictive stance conceals these formal qualities with illusion, by generating a credulous mind state, but rather that it creates an imaginative context within which these aesthetic conventions can function, and have meaning. It creates a context in which the strange beauty of the opening shot of *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), the shot from below, of Joe Gillis (William Holden) floating dead in the swimming pool, for example, rather than obstructing engagement by calling attention to the film's artistry, actually plays a role in generating that imaginative and emotional force. The fictive stance is also what prevents us from asking how it is that we are able to see Joe from this strange angle. Rather than removing us a degree from the imaginary world of the fiction, taking a fictive stance is what allows us contact.

---

[17] Matravers, D. 2010, 191

The way that I have described it, the fictive stance might be starting to sound like what has been known since the eighteenth century as the 'aesthetic attitude'. If it does bear some similarity it is not in the Kantian sense of disinterested aesthetic judgement, but rather in the sense of a mental attitude that enables us to engage with a work in the appropriate register; to engage with a film as fiction and therefore to appreciate its qualities *as* a fiction film. But this should not be taken to imply that the emotional relation between the film and the viewer is thereby severed. It *is* a sort of cognitive detachment, but one that enables us to experience emotions that are appropriate to their intentional objects. The fictive stance prevents us fleeing the cinema when King Kong snaps his chains and runs amok through the theatre audience, or from rushing to the aid of Debbie. It allows for the development of basic emotions (that we would feel in actuality) into the more complex ones that we have towards fictions; fear is a necessary part of the frisson of excitement, sadness is 'mixed in' with the pain and the pleasure of sympathy.[18] The fictional stance doesn't make our emotional and moral reactions to fiction more puzzling, but less.

In the fictive stance propositions have no truth value because they are bracketed from reality. But from another point of view, from *within* the brackets, it seems to make perfect sense to ask whether they are true or false. Surely there is also a sense in which we entertain fictional propositions *and* imagine them as asserted as true (or false). Imagining fictional propositions, according to Walton, is something more than just entertaining a thought: 'Imagining (propositional imagining), like (propositional) believing or desiring, is *doing* something *with* a proposition one has in mind.'[19] According to Walton's make-believe theory, 'I imagine that P' is equivalent to 'I fictionally believe that P'. It is an imaginative form of the belief attitude; or in other words, I entertain a proposition and pretend that it is true. As he says: 'To pretend to assert something (in the relevant sense) is to be an actor in a game of make-believe; it is to make it fictional, of oneself, that one is (actually) asserting something.'[20] The game of make-believe that is *The Searchers*, involves pretending that we are seeing Ethan, and pretending that we see him chasing Debbie, and pretending that she really is in danger. It is important to note, therefore, that the game of make-believe comprises not just the story world of the fiction; it is a game in which the story world is a prop (like George's UFO). So according to Walton it is not just fictional that Ethan is chasing Debbie, it is also fictional that I fear for her safety. My responses are elements of

---

[18] The question of whether it is sympathy or empathy that one feels will be taken up in the next chapter.

[19] Walton, K. 1990, p.20

[20] Walton, K. 1978, p.21

the fictional game, they are what he calls 'quasi-emotions'. This, perhaps unfortunate, terminology has lead many to conclude that for Walton fiction-directed emotions are in some sense false, or illegitimate, but what the 'quasi' prefix is meant to indicate is just that the mental attitudes are conducted within a game of make-believe, not that they are insincere, or not real, or not really felt. They are not *fake* emotions that we pretend to have when we don't really have them, as a politician might feign sympathy or indignation according to circumstance and the demands of his public image. They are real emotions, but of a class defined by the context of imagination in which they are felt.

Richard Moran raises an objection that might seem to undermine Walton's theory, or rather he questions an assumption that seems to make 'make-believe' necessary. For a kind of emotional response to seem problematic or irrational it must be contrasted with a set of examples or paradigms which constitute a rational and unproblematic norm - little micro-narratives that illustrate a simple and central example of the concept which serve as a benchmark against which other instances might be measured. The paradigm example of fear, for example, is often given as an encounter with a wild animal. But, according to Moran, the range of situations in which we experience what we ordinarily call fear is much wider. Modal statements of what could or might have happened, '...things that might have happened to us but didn't, things we might have done...' cause us to shudder; for example, following out in imagination the likely consequences of what might have happened if one had not missed the plane that later crashed. The empathetic mirroring of someone else's emotion, the memory, or the anticipation, of a traumatic incident, are all emotions directed towards the non-actual, and yet we do not consider them, unlike fiction-directed emotions, to be irrational. As Moran puts it, '...the person who says that it still makes her shudder just to think about her driving accident, or her first date, is exhibiting one of the paradigms of emotional response, not an exception to the norm.'[21] If fiction-directed emotions are irrational in virtue of the lack of an immediate physical object, then so are emotions directed towards memories, hypothetical situations, counterfactual imaginings, and so on. But it seems to me that the emotion that one would feel at the memory of a car accident and the emotion that one felt at the time are significantly different. The pinch of fear that one might feel at the thought of one's child going missing, is very different to the abject terror of the actual situation. One factor that makes them different is the reality, the presentness, of the danger. Walton is not claiming that quasi-emotions are not real emotions, just that they are of a different character than the actual emotions which they

---

[21] Moran, R. 'Feeling in Imagination' *Philosophical Review*, 103:1 (1994) 78

mirror. In all of the examples that Moran gives it is the awareness of either the hypothetical, or modal nature of the object that in some way mitigates the emotional response; fictional emotions are mitigated by an awareness of their fictionality.

This thought seems to lead naturally to the idea that the more the aesthetic, formal features of a work intrude, and the more aware we are of the artifice of the representation, the more a full imaginative and emotional immersion in the story world is blocked. Conversely, the force of our imaginative and emotional responses are dependent on the degree to which we can imagine the fiction to be 'real'. The idea is what motivates the style of horror filmmaking initiated by *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) - the film will be frightening to the extent that the representation makes it easier to imagine what we are seeing is or has actually happened. The assumption is that the less a fiction draws attention to its status *as* a fictional representation, then the greater its potential is to move us. But this is false. Walton, in defence of his 'make-believe' theory, makes this claim about Van Gogh's *Starry Night*: 'One can ignore the brush strokes enough to lose oneself in the fictional world.'[22] But, as Moran rightly points out: 'We know that Starry Night would not really be *more* emotionally engaging if Van Gogh had calmed down and left out all that overwrought brushwork.' Often those features of a work that make it more emotionally powerful, more affecting, are exactly those features that make it a less veridical representation of reality. Such features of a work, according to Moran, '... may thus directly impair the aptness for make-believe, without contributing any additional fictional truths of their own, while yet being directly responsible for the emotional involvement of the audience.' [23]

Film might be thought the medium of fiction which has the most direct connection between mimetic realism and imaginative and emotional response. But the effects of mise-en-scene, lighting, camera angles, zooms, close-ups, and most significantly music, are all non-mimetic formal features which promote engagement by diverging from verisimilitude. This, according to Moran, casts doubt on the make-believe theory's assumption that the obstacle to understanding our imaginative and emotional involvement, what must be overcome, is the fictionality of a work: 'The very expressive qualities that disrupt any sense of a fictional world are in fact central for our psychological participation with artworks. But if such emotional engagement is to be explained in terms of the imagining of various fictional truths, about the fictional world and about one's relation to it, it seems that this is

---

[22] Walton, K. 1990, p.277

[23] Moran, R. 1994, p.83

just what should not be so.' [24] The dispute rests, I think, on what we consider 'expressive qualities', and whether they can be said to 'disrupt any sense of a fictional world'. There is an important distinction to be made between aesthetic features that are constitutive of a fictional world, and aesthetic features that sever imaginative and emotional engagement with it. Van Gogh's brushstrokes may be non-mimetic aesthetic features, but they are, I suggest, to be counted as constructive of the fictional world. Magritte's reflexive inscription 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe', on the other hand, does not function to construct a fictional world, but to snap us out of an imaginative mode of engagement. An interesting and complicated example in film is the case of Douglas Sirk. On one level the lurid colours and lush romantic musical scores could be seen as aesthetic features that construct fictional truths about the characters' psychological states. They could equally, however, be taken according to the interpretations associated with 'Screen theory'; they could be seen as 'Brechtian' distancing techniques which, in their visual hyperbole, call attention to their own artifice.

Moran's objections indicate the importance of understanding Walton's make-believe theory within a context of the fictive stance. That is to say that our emotional responses are not solely products of imagining fictional truths, facts that are internal to the story world, but are also generated by features of a work that belong to an external point of view, aesthetic features of a fiction. To participate in a game of 'make-believe' is to take up one possible stance towards a work of fiction, and to see it *as* a work of fiction is to take up another, but that does not mean that either stance makes the other redundant. As Walton says, '...our standpoint is a dual one. We, as it were, see Tom Sawyer *both* from inside his world, and from outside it. And we do so simultaneously.'[25]

3. Internal and External Perspectives

At this point I want to draw together the last two sections. The imagined seeing thesis, I argued, should be understood as the adoption of a certain imaginative attitude towards what one is seeing; I am actually seeing John Wayne, but I am imagining seeing Ethan Edwards. This is part, or a perceptual manifestation, of the wider attitude of the fictive stance; imagining seeing is seeing conducted within a particular mode of engagement. To adopt the fictive stance towards a fictional work is not just to make-believe that the events

---

[24] Ibid, p. 82

[25] Walton, K. 1978, p. 21

of the story are true, but to imagine them from within a framework of awareness that they are fictional. Imagining seeing Ethan Edwards, and imagining that Ethan's hatred of the Comanches will lead him to kill Debbie, are both ways of adopting an internal perspective on the film. It is the *external* perspective, however, the awareness of fictionality, that prevents us from interceding on Debbie's behalf. There is a risk in assimilating imagining seeing with adopting an internal perspective that we are led back to the idea that the viewer imagines him or herself within the story world as a ghostly witness to events. It is important therefore, to keep in mind that talk of fictional worlds and internal points of view is metaphorical; imaginatively projecting oneself into a fictional world is more neutrally put as adopting an imaginative attitude.

Peter Lamarque describes the distinction between internal and external perspective as revealed in the different kind of answers we might give to the same questions: 'Who created Frankenstein's monster? Frankenstein, of course. That's the answer from the internal perspective, and it is quite proper. Only from the external point of view must we reply: Mary Shelley.'[26] Within the internal perspective our attitudes, beliefs, motivations, mirror those of the characters; we see them as they see each other, as persons. From an external point of view we notice aesthetic features of the work that constitute them as characters. From an internal point of view we imagine Ethan hesitating at the threshold of the family homestead; from an external point of view we notice that the visual characteristics of the shot are echoed in other shots at various points across the film.

From an internal perspective we wonder what is behind Ethan's murderous glare at the rescued Comanche captives; from an external perspective we admire the elegant dolly in to a close-up, the delicate line of the brim of his hat, and the subtle way that the lighting picks out his eyes in the shadow, glistening with disgust.

---

[26] Lamarque, P. 'In and Out of Imaginary Worlds' in Knowles, D. and Skorupski, J. (eds.) *Virtue and Taste*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) p. 145

It should be emphasised that the internal/external distinction refers not to any quality or feature of the work, but rather to the psychological attitude that we adopt towards it. Carl Plantinga proposes a model of emotional response to films which seems to fit quite naturally with the internal/external schema.[27] Put crudely, the model differentiates classes of the emotions that we experience in film-viewing according to their objects. *Direct* emotions are those, like suspense, fear, excitement, and so forth, which are 'about' events and situations of the story. *Sympathetic* or *Antipathetic* emotions are responses to characters. Both the direct and sympathetic classes of film-directed emotion, '*fiction* emotions', are mental states which are a product of the *internal*, imagined perspective. *Artefact* emotions, on the other hand, are those which arise from an appreciation of features which are recognised from an *external* point of view.[28] Admiration for a camera movement or amusement at catching an inter-textual reference, are not about the 'story-world' but about the formal qualities of the film, and they involve an awareness and an appreciation of the film as a constructed object.

The important point is that the internal and the external perspectives are not modes of attention that exclude each other, or that we shift between like gears (now I'm seeing the film internally and now externally), but, as Walton says, they are stances that we

---

[27] Plantinga, C. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) p.72

[28] There are also *meta-emotions*, which are responses not to the film (though *caused* by the film) but to the emotions that we (or others around us) have towards the film. Crying at *E.T* (Steven Spielberg, 1984), for example, is a direct emotional response, but feeling *embarrassed* at crying is a meta-emotional response. This will be important in chapter four where I discuss the ethical dimensions of responding sympathetically to morally dubious characters.

adopt simultaneously. Or as Lamarque puts it: 'Being caught up in fictional worlds and at the same time recognising their fictionality involves a delicate balance - even a tension - which certainly accounts for much of the pleasure and value of imaginative works of art.'[29] The tension that this dual standpoint generates is harnessed by a certain kind of reflexive comedy, for example. In *The Man with Two Brains* (Carl Reiner, 1983), Dr Hfuhruhurr (Steve Martin) leans on a solid, heavy looking castle gate and falls straight through what is revealed to be only paper. The butler then puts his hand through the castle wall, saying, 'Everything today is made so cheap. Here, look at these walls. Like paper.' The comedy is not in realising that what we had taken to be a castle wall is just an element of a film set, but in the acknowledgement that we had been colluding to see it this way - we are invited to see how absurd the *internal* perspective looks when it is seen from an *external* point of view. The narrative strategy of revealing the gap between the internal and external perspectives is more central in comedy than in most other genres; when characters step through mirrors, or when in *Annie Hall* (1977) Woody Allen addresses the audience, breaking the 'fourth wall', and enlists Marshall McLuhan in his dispute with the man in the cinema queue - 'Boy, if life were only like this'. What seems funny is not the double aspect itself, but the acknowledgement of the absurdity of submitting to the authority of fiction. The humour is generated by the tension between simultaneously held internal and external perspectives.

Many of the things that puzzle us about fiction, Lamarque argues, begin to seem less mysterious when approached from within this internal/external schema. What is the nature of our relationship to fictional characters? A teacher of mine used to say, with a kind of mystified and wistful amusement, that he had a deeper relationship with Emma Woodhouse than with most of his colleagues.[30] How is it that we can grant fictional characters such a measure of reality? Calling a character 'selfish', or 'kind', or 'cruel' or 'deluded', belongs to a different level of description than, say, 'stereotypical' or 'symbolic', and each is a product of a different level of psychological engagement. How can we see them as persons and also explain their incompleteness, for example? Seen from the internal perspective, as *persons*, it is the same epistemological limit that we face with actual people; there are many things we do not, and never will, know about them. But from the *external* perspective it is an ontological feature of *characters* that they are constructs and are necessarily incomplete.

---

[29] Lamarque, 1993, p.144

[30] The protagonist of Jane Austen's *Emma*.

Confusions of this sort arise from a failure to recognise that there is a dual perspective. According to Walton, there are some questions that we are not supposed to ask about fictions; why in Da Vinci's *Last Supper* does everyone sit on one side of the table? Why is no-one puzzled by the elaborate language of Othello, or why the gangs in *West Side Story* suddenly break off their battle to break into song and dance? How can we be seeing Joe Gillis from this strange angle? These are what Walton calls 'silly questions'. They arise from conflating the internal and external perspectives. The beauty of Othello's language or the singing of characters in musicals or the conflicted pleasures of horror movies and Greek tragedy only begin to seem incongruous when we take features that belong to the *external* point of view, norms and conventions of particular modes of artistic practice, and consider them according to the logic of the *internal* point of view.

How, for example, can we explain the incongruities in our emotional and cognitive responses to fictional characters? At the end of *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) we pity Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) and sympathise with his despair, yet most of us would not welcome a remake which tacked on a happy ending. We seem to experience two conflicting desires at the same time; both that Jake does not suffer, and also that he does. The curious pleasure of horror movies is partly rooted in conflicting desires; both that characters escape and that they do not. Our fear and anxiety imply a desire for one outcome, and our pleasure implies a desire for its contrary. These are examples of what has become known as the 'paradox of tragedy'. We feel, in Hume's phrase, an 'unaccountable pleasure' at witnessing the suffering and misfortunes of fictional characters for whom we also feel care and affection.[31] The emotions that we feel towards fictional situations of suffering are very different, and would be highly inappropriate, in comparable real-life situations. There is no space for a full discussion here, but I will briefly note how the internal/external schema provides a useful explanatory tool, and one that corresponds to Hume's answer.

Hume examines several explanations for why audiences are '...pleased in proportion as they are afflicted.'[32] First, our natural attraction to heightened emotional states and our equal aversion to boredom and indolence is satisfied by the emotional experience offered by fiction. This is true, says Hume, but does not explain why we do not also consider *actual* tragedies pleasurable diversions in the same way. The second suggestion is that we experience sorrow and horror, but console ourselves with the knowledge that the events which generate them are fictional. The awareness of the

---

[31] Hume, D. 'Of Tragedy' in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund,1985/1777) p. 216

[32] Ibid, p.217

unreality of the events depicted, 'softens' the passions that we feel. This seems, at first, like an application of the internal/external distinction; the conjunction of an internal imagining with the mollifying influence of an external awareness of fictionality. But, as Hume points out, 'fictionality' is not sufficient on its own, because we can also respond in a similarly puzzling way to gruesome historical accounts which we know to be describing actual events.

For Hume, what transforms the negative emotions into positive ones is not just an awareness of fictionality, but an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the representation: 'This extraordinary effect proceeds from that very eloquence, with which the melancholy scene is represented.'[33] This helps to explain the apparent emotional conflict in the end of *Chinatown*. The pity that we feel, from the internal imagined perspective, for Jake, is 'sweetened' by our appreciation, from the external aesthetic perspective, of the films' refusal of a trite happy-ending. The question of incongruous or conflicting emotions is removed when we understand that our pity for Jake belongs to the *internal* perspective, and our simultaneous desire that his fate not be altered to the *external*. In other words, in Plantinga's terminology, the former is the *sympathetic* form of the class of 'fiction emotions', and the latter is a manifestation of *artefact* emotion. The pleasure of horror movies is not, according to this view, in seeing their characters butchered, but in the appreciation of the inventiveness of the representation. In this way the *direct* emotion of suspense involves an important element of artefactual emotion -an awareness and appreciation for the formal ways in which that suspense has been generated. We smile at the resolution of a suspenseful sequence not just in relief, but also in appreciation of the way in which the film successfully generated that suspense.

Our overall attitude towards works of fiction, therefore, is a complex mixture of internal and external perspectives. Moreover, the nature of the internal imagined perspective, is often shaped, to a large extent, by an external awareness and appreciation of aesthetic form. As Moran points out, we become emotionally and imaginatively involved with Van Gogh's Starry Night *because* of the expressive brushstrokes, and not, *pace* Walton, *despite* them. The violent brushstrokes are aesthetic features of the work recognised from an external perspective, but they play a crucial role in determining the nature of our *internal* imaginative engagement. And this appreciation of the aesthetic features of individual works is understood within, and shaped by, a context that is more external still. It is not just seeing *Chinatown* as a film but seeing it as a particular kind of film, one that is situated

---

[33] Ibid, p.219

within a certain genre, a particular historical period, and as a particular species of narrative fiction that has its own system of assumptions and appropriate responses. The suspense of horror films is often generated by a manipulation of the expectations of the audience which are based on an understanding of the rules and conventions of the genre. As Lamarque says, '...an awareness of modes of representation, dictates the kind of involvement appropriate from the internal perspective...the attitude we adopt towards fictional characters...is largely determined by the forms of their representation.'[34]

However, just as external features shape and control our imaginative internal engagement, so too can they block it. According to Lamarque, one reason that we might fail or refuse to be caught up in an imaginative involvement with a work is if, from an external perspective, we judge it to have certain aesthetic flaws. Simplistic, shallow and superficial handling of themes, obviousness, stereotypical or schematic or conventional characters, are all aesthetic defects that we might notice from an external perspective and which inhibit, or we judge not to warrant, an internal imaginative and emotional engagement. We often refuse the invitation to enter into an emotional involvement because we judge a work to be sentimental, for example, attempting to elicit a depth of feeling unwarranted by a simpleminded and manipulative narrative. This, of course, introduces a further *ethical*, as well as *aesthetic*, judgement to the external perspective, but I shall wait until chapter three to explore it. In Plantinga's terms, a *negative* artefact emotion can block the fostering of direct and sympathetic emotions. I emphasise, however, that it *can*, but it need not, block our imaginative and emotional involvement; most of us will surely admit to having being 'swept-up' in a film despite our better judgement, ethical or aesthetic. Critical and reflective judgments of merit, or of aesthetic quality - or of ethical status - from the external perspective, determine to some extent, but not entirely, the nature and the degree of our internal imaginative and emotional involvement.

To end this section I want to emphasise the importance of Lamarque's claim that our attitude towards fiction involves a *balance* between internal and external perspectives. As he puts it: '...the simple conclusion must be that the twin perspectives of imaginative involvement and awareness of artifice are both indispensable in an appropriate response to imaginative works of art.'[35] That is, to note the fact that there is a *pre*scriptive as well as a *de*scriptive component to the idea. At the more extreme end of the scale, an exclusively internally imagined attitude would be cause for concern, a form of concern associated

---

[34] Lamarque, P. 1993, p.150

[35] Ibid, p.151

with any lack of critical distance and the possibilities of mistaking fiction for reality, imagining for belief, fiction for truth. More usually, too total an imaginative engagement would obscure from view those features of the work that are only visible from the external aesthetic point of view. In other words the excessively internal perspective risks both a failure of aesthetic appreciation, and also a kind of indulgence in illusion which is beginning to be an *ethical* danger. On the other hand, an exclusively external perspective on a work is a failure to recognise that an internal perspective is required for full appreciation.

4. The Imaginative Act

Imagining seeing and the internal perspective both refer to an attitude that we adopt towards fictions, but as I claimed at the beginning, the imagination is also instrumental in the way that we make sense of narratives, as an act. And just as the attitude can be understood in terms of an internal/external distinction, so too can the imaginative act. The active imagination is combinatory; it combines concepts into propositions, and propositions into more complex propositions. It is associative; it makes connections between propositions. It is productive; these connections produce new propositions. The imagination is, in David Hume's terms, the mental faculty which makes possible the association of ideas; it is what allows us to comprehend stories by inferring information from narrative ellipses, to reconstruct fictional truths and the order of events. These are all operations of the imagination as an act within the internal perspective. But I will also argue that the constructive imagination is important from an external perspective, as the means by which we make connections between aesthetic features, what Moran calls 'imaginativeness'.

4.1 Active Imagining from an Internal Perspective

Just as a fictional truth is generated by the presence, or the particular visual characteristics, of the screen image, so too can they be inferred from the conjunctions of other fictional truths within the work. We come to know what is fictionally the case in films both from what we see (or imagine seeing) and also from what is implied by narrative ellipses. I am not (yet) talking about what could be termed an interpretation or a 'reading' of a film's themes or subtext, or any extra-diegetic significance that its content might imply. I am talking only about the narrative content of what the film prescribes that we imagine; who characters are, what they do, their reasons for doing those things and the consequences of

what they do. The constructive imagination allows us to make sense of fictions by filling in narrative gaps and making connections between fictional events, just as, according to Hume, it provides us with the sense (or the illusion) of causality and continuous experience. Within the internal perspective the constructive imagination acts on two features of narrative; ellipsis, and order.

4.1.1. Ellipsis

The sets of fictional truths that films present are necessarily incomplete and limited, and as viewers we must bridge the gaps between information given explicitly, and imagine those fictional truths that are left implicit. Otherwise fictional narratives would become not just tedious, but impossible. If a fiction asked us to imagine the proposition that 'Jones left London and eight hours later was in New York' we would assume or infer that Jones flew. The question is, do I also imagine it? According to Walton, just as we can have occurrent and dispositional beliefs, so too can we have, as he terms it, occurrent and non-occurrent imaginings. The fiction makes no explicit mention of Jones' means of travel, but nevertheless I have the non-occurrent imagining that he must have travelled to New York by plane. An implicit or non-occurrent imagining (that Jones flew) is one that is entailed by (1) explicit or occurrent imaginings (that Jones was in London eight hours before he was in New York) and (2) my dispositional belief that if one wants to travel thousands of miles in a few hours one must fly.

Fictions take place against a background, or are embedded in a context of, propositions that we believe to be true. Not just those sorts of historical, geographical facts that occur in war films or biopics, but the sorts of principles of physical reality that a fiction must agree to in order to be taken as representing reality. I believe that when a person jumps out of a plane without a parachute they will likely be killed; so when James Bond is shoved out of a plane without a parachute I imagine him to be in mortal danger, but it is not so clear that I am also *imagining* the supporting proposition that people who fall out of planes tend to die. Engaging with a fiction involves both imagining some things and believing others; occurrent fictional imaginings are supported by dispositional beliefs. One's system of dispositional beliefs provides a framework upon which occurrent fictional imaginings can be constructed. And of course, some of my dispositional beliefs have to do with the workings of film genres; so when my beliefs about gravity suggest that I should imagine Bond will die, my beliefs about film reassure me that he won't. This is an example

of when an external awareness of particular fictional conventions modifies the nature of one's internal imaginative involvement.

Without such a background of beliefs it is hard to see how imagining would even be possible. Would it therefore be right to suggest that what Walton calls a non-occurrent imagining is in fact a dispositional belief? I think that would be to conflate two separate levels of fictional engagement, a supporting dispositional belief with a narrative-specific non-occurrent imagining. For example in the narrative of Jones' flight we have the supporting dispositional belief that if one is to cross the Atlantic in eight hours one needs to fly, whereas the narrative-specific (although unspecified) non-occurrent imagining is that Jones flew. That Jones flew cannot be a dispositional belief because the proposition could only have any meaning in connection with this particular fiction. Jones' flight is not a single imagining, but an imagining composed of several imaginings not all of which are occurrent. As Walton metaphorically puts it: 'The various imaginings are woven together into a continuous cloth, although only some of the strands are visible on the surface at any particular spot.'[36] But how can one imagine something and not be occurrently aware of it?

Why not say that rather than there being non-occurrent imaginings entailed by occurrent ones, fictional imaginings are, like mental images, in some respects indeterminate? That rather than imagining to fill the gap of logic, there just is no (fictional) answer to the question of how Jones managed to cross the Atlantic in 8 hours. The non-occurrent imagining [Jones flew] only appears (becomes occurrent) when one reflects on the logical implications of the conjunction of elements of the narrative, that is, *after* one has imagined it. It might seem that in proposing such entities as non-occurrent imaginings Walton is inventing entities where none are needed. Why not say that in fictions, if it is not made explicit, there just is no fact of the matter for imaginings to correspond to? Although it is logically implied by Ethan's existence in the world of *The Searchers*, we do not have a non-occurrent imagining of the date of Ethan's birthday. How is this different to the case of Jones' flight?

Fictional states of affairs are indeterminate in a way that real ones are not; in reality there are facts of the matter, reasons, causes and effects, existing independently of our acquaintance with them. In fictional worlds, however, these imagined facts, although implied by other imagined facts, just do not exist and therefore need not be imagined, occurrently or non-occurrently. Moreover, this was one part of Walton's defence of the imagined seeing thesis; although a visual spatial perspective is implied by the film image,

---

[36] Walton, K. 1990, p. 17.

we need not follow out the consequences of what we imagine. Yet this seems to be precisely what 'non-occurrent imaginings' are for. So the objection is not that one *cannot* imagine to fill these temporal gaps, just that one does not have to - because the gaps are not really gaps. In a discussion of David Bordwell's constructivist theory of narrative understanding, Richard Allen argues along these lines when he says: 'Narrative events as they are presented to us are not ambiguous or incomplete judged in relation to an elusive fabula. The question of ambiguity or incompleteness only arises when a narrative purposively manipulates elements of the plot and withholds information.'[37] If the imaginative construction of narratives did involve reconstructing a *fabula* from a *syuzhet* there would in principle be no end to what one is required to imagine. What, for example, would we imagine to fill the gap left by the famous cut in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) from the prehistoric ape to the space station?

One way of revealing the existence of these mysterious 'inferred imaginings', is by looking at how they are used in certain kinds of narratives not to create an accurate picture of the fictional world, but to misdirect the viewer. In *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), for example, the narrative twist of the film hinges on a particular ellipsis which the film encourages us to imaginatively fill with false information. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), a child psychologist, is shot by a former patient. As he lies on the bed clutching his stomach the camera pulls back in an overhead shot, and the scene fades to black.

The next scene fades in to a long shot of a suburban street, overlaid with the words "The Next Fall. South Philadelphia'. Then it cuts back and forth from a PoV shot of a page of case-notes, to him sitting on a bench, to a PoV shot of a boy leaving a house, back to the page; and from this sequence we understand that he is waiting for the boy who is a patient. The ellipsis leads us to assume that between this scene and the last he must have been rushed to hospital, saved, made a recovery, and gone back to work. Daniel Barratt has shown how this scene helps to set up and conceal the twist, by exploiting our natural psychological strategies for making sense of the world; by imposing schemas.[38] It is also an

---

[37] Allen, R. 'Cognitive Film Theory' in Allen, R. and Turvey, M. (eds.) *Wittgenstein, Theory and the* Arts, (London: Routledge, 2001) p.192/3

[38] Barrett, D. 'Twist Blindness' in Buckland, W. *Puzzle Film*s (London: Routledge, 2009) p. 73

example of what Hume described as the imagination's associative role of making connections between distinct episodes in order to generate a sense of the continuity of experience:

> Reason can never shew us the connexion of one object with another...When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determined by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination.[39]

For Hume, what we believe about the world is to a large extent determined by what we imagine; but Hume's empiricism also means that what we imagine is also shaped by what we have experienced. In this respect we can also see how the viewer's awareness and knowledge of the external aesthetic features of film is used against him or her. The fade transition, for example, tends to indicate the passing of time, and the PoV shot is used to represent the quality of a particular character's vision. The conjunction of these formal devices leads the viewer to the erroneous assumption that what is represented is the passing of time for the same character. The imagination constructs our understanding, according to Hume, by acting on these ellipses according to what prior experience dictates: 'We have no other notion of cause and effect, but that of certain objects, which have been *always conjoin'd* together, and which in all past instances have been found inseparable.'[40] The narrative ellipsis is therefore bridged by an imaginative application not just of our 'real-world' knowledge, but also of our understanding of the formal conventions of film.

4.1.2 Order

Imagining what lies between fictional propositions is not in itself enough to make sense of a narrative because films often present those propositions in an order that does not conform to our ordinary assumptions about cause and effect. How do we make sense of a narrative like *Sunset Boulevard,* or *Serpico* (Sidney Lumet, 1973) which opens with the story's conclusion? Or a film like *Chinatown*, which involves the imaginative reconstruction of events that took place prior to the events that are represented by the story? One of the things that defines the detective genre, for example, is the requirement to imaginatively reconstruct the story by reorganising the events which are presented non-chronologically. It is active imagining that allows us to reorganise fictional propositions in temporal order to make sense of the story.

---

[39] Hume, D. *Treatise,* p. 92

[40] Ibid, p.93

It is also what allows us to make sense of the representation of simultaneous events in different spatial locations. In *Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1941) John Sullivan (Joel McCrea), an idealistic film-director, stumbles into the real world of hardship that he had been researching, and is mistakenly presumed dead. At this point the paths of the story diverge; he takes one path and those who are left behind take another. We understand that these are simultaneous strands of a single story by making connections between the imagined spaces that we switch back and forth between. We move from a scene in which we imagine that Veronica Lake believes him to be dead, to a scene where we see that he wakes up in a freight train.

From the conjunction of these two scenes we arrive at an expanded understanding greater than that of either character alone; we understand that she *mistakenly* believes him to be dead. This is crucial to the issue of imagining into and out of the points of view of characters, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

And just as it allows us to fill in narrative ellipses, the associative aspect of the imagination is often exploited to misdirect the viewer. Towards the end of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) the FBI investigation is closing in on the serial killer Buffalo Bill. While Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is following up leads on her own, she is contacted by her boss Crawford who tells her that his SWAT team know where Bill is, 400 miles away from Clarice, and they are about to arrest him. There are three separate locations of simultaneous action which this sequence alternates between; Clarice making enquiries, Crawford and the SWAT team, and Buffalo Bill in his house. Clarice asks a girl, 'Can you give me Mrs Lipman's address?' and the film cuts directly to a long shot of a house. It then cuts to an interior shot of Bill admiring his moth larvae.

Each shot is connected to the next by an ominous theme on the soundtrack. From the conjunction of these shots we imagine that the locations of Clarice and Bill are about to converge, and that Crawford is on the wrong track. But now it cuts away from Bill to an exterior shot of the same house, where we see two members of the SWAT team take up positions behind a tree. It immediately cuts back to Bill, preserving the connection between him and the house. It now seems that Crawford was on the right track after all, and the convergence of Crawford's and Bill's locations is now implied in the rapid and accelerating alternation of interior and exterior shots. Bill's dog barks, he looks up, and the film cuts to an exterior shot of the SWAT team.

The imaginative association that Hume says is the foundation of our ideas of cause and effect operates in the association of the sound of the bark and an image of what might have caused it. The dog barks not because it was disturbed by the FBI, however, but because it is grabbed by Bill's captive. But the imaginative connection which is shaping the way that we (mis)understand the sequence is strong enough to resist being corrected by this new knowledge. As Bill and his captive argue over the dog inside, the FBI get ready to swoop outside. An agent posing as a florist delivering flowers walks up the path and rings the doorbell. It cuts back to an interior shot of the bell ringing, and then to Bill, looking up at it, disturbed.

As Bill comes up from the basement to answer the door the bell keeps ringing, but now we hear two different kinds of doorbell, one an insistent buzzing tone and the other a 'ding-dong' sound. But before this has a chance to fully register the film cuts back to Crawford saying 'We're going in.' As Bill opens the door, however, we see not Crawford and his team, but Clarice.

The viewer has a stock of knowledge and a set of assumptions about the function of parallel editing in film and this 'folk knowledge' is exploited in order to give the impression that we are seeing the same event from two aspects, when we are in fact seeing two separate events. We are caught off-balance because the associative and constructive power of the imagination is turned against the viewer in order to generate the momentum necessary for the surprise.

The comprehension of fictional narratives involves imaginatively reconstructing the story by making connections between elements, filling in the gaps and reorganising the events. As Wilson says, in *The Searchers* we come to know that the cavalry have massacred the Comanche tribe because we make an inference from a central elliptical section of the film - we don't see it happen but we can arrive at a reasonable account by inferring from the narrative information that frames it. This is an operation of the constructive imagination in the internal mode. It might seem that imagining could only be an appropriate attitude within the internal mode. We need to imagine to fill out the ellipses in the narrative, to explain motivations, predict the course of events, and so on. But we also employ the imagination in the external mode to make connections, see patterns, notice similarities, echoes of themes, and the recurrence of visual motifs. And these sorts of imaginative acts lead us to the kind of interpretation that is rooted in but moves beyond the facts of the story. Wilson's interpretation of *The Searchers* depends first of all on a very rich engagement with the events of the story, by following in imagination the implications of events and what they suggest about the fictional truth of the narrative. But his conclusion also depends on an external view of the general shape of the narrative, an awareness of the way that it is put together.

4.2. Active Imagining from an External Perspective

According to Lamarque, the internal perspective is imaginative and the external is critical; we get caught up and involved in the internal, but in the external perspective: 'No make-believe is involved; its descriptions are of what is the case in the real world, about authorial

purposes, literary devices, or fictionality.'[41] While it is true that the external view requires no imagination of the make-believe kind - as an *attitude* - it does, I suggest, involve imagination of the productive, combinatory, associative kind - as an *act.* Or what Moran calls 'imaginativeness':

> The sense of "imagination" I have been drawing attention to in the examples of the effects of figurative language has less to do with simply imagining something to be the case, or imagining doing or feeling something, and more to do with what we ordinarily think of as "imaginativeness." This concerns the ability to make connections between various things, to notice and respond to the network of associations that make up the mood or emotional tone of a work.[42]

As Moran argues, to a great extent our emotional response to a work is generated not by make-believe fictional truths, but by its non-mimetic rhetorical features. Literary fiction conveys its emotional and imaginative force through alliteration, figurative language, rhythm, metaphor, allusion, and so on. None of these are features that are imagined from an internal perspective, they are aesthetic features that we attend to from an external point of view. But as I have argued they are also features that shape and direct the course of our imaginative involvement within the internal perspective. The centrality of film in debates about make-believe and the imaginative powers of mimetic realism has, according to Moran, the effect of distorting the debate. The ostensibly visual nature of film draws us towards the idea that emotional responses depend on the creation of a sense that events are actually present to us, and that our responses depend on imagining them to be in some sense 'real'.

While it is true that film does involve certain different modes of comprehension and engagement than reading a novel, most obviously the automatic cues of facial expressions, body language, automatic reflex responses, and so on, much of what fosters the sense of being 'caught up' in a film is not internally imagined fictional truths, but externally recognised non-mimetic rhetorical features. And as Moran puts it: 'Not only don't they usually contribute to making something fictionally true, but they introduce elements that are often impossible to imagine as part of any fictional world. And yet their contribution to what the audience feels is direct and profound.'[43] Music is the most obvious example of such a rhetorical device in film that does not involve the viewer imagining it as part of the fictional world. In *The Silence of the Lambs* it is music that both generates an emotional tone and momentum, but also that, by connecting the different

---

[41] Lamarque, P. and Olsen, S.H. *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) p. 144

[42] Moran, R. 1994, p.86

[43] Ibid, p.85

story spaces, helps to lead our imagining in a particular (wrong) direction. We do not, however, also imagine that it is fictional that the characters hear this music.

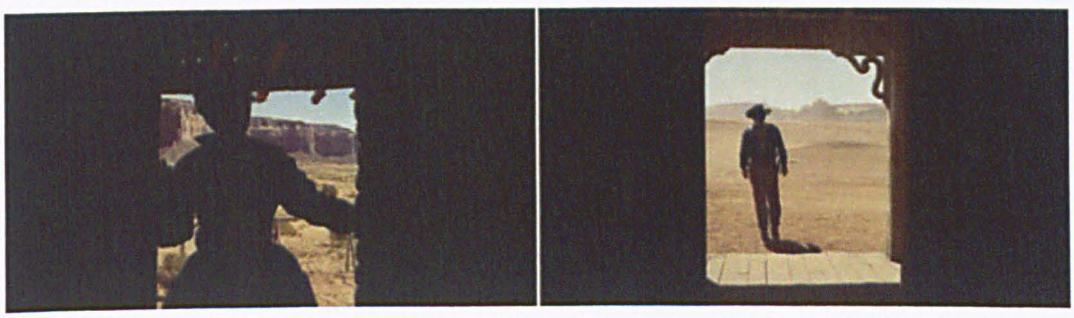
We need to distinguish the constructive imagination as it acts on external aesthetic features, from the way that it extrapolates from make-believe fictional truths. In *The Searchers*, for example, when Ethan returns to his brother's homestead we imaginatively fill out a great deal of background information to do with the characters' relationships, their histories and what might have led up to this point. The way that Ethan's gaze seems to follow Martha (Dorothy Jordan), his brother's wife, suggests a complicated history and a possible reason for his long absence. A thought which is confirmed when we briefly glimpse Martha through a half-open door, tenderly stroking Ethan's overcoat. When Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) arrives for dinner, the first thing Ethan says is, 'Fella' could mistake you for a half-breed.' And the odd hostility with which he regards him suggests some unspoken hatred and a history of violence done to, or done by, him. And of course, the event which motivates the course of the narrative, the murder of Ethan's family, the horror of either the act itself or the results, is not shown, but 'left to the imagination'. The constructive imagination in the internal mode is what allows us to piece together and supplement the elements of the story, but in the external mode it is what helps us to make connections and associations between aesthetic features of the film.

Noticing an echo of the beginning of *The Searchers* in its end, Wilson identifies a significant narrative symmetry which is the basis for an expanded and enriched game of make-believe. According to Wilson, the similarities in the visual design of shots which reoccur at different points throughout a film, lead the viewer to imaginatively connect them with each other in a 'network of associations'. For Wilson the central theme of the film is the affinity between Ethan and Scar (Henry Brandon), the Comanche chief. This is confirmed in the symmetrical construction of the narrative in which the Comanche raid on the settlers at the beginning is mirrored by Ethan's raid on the Comanche village at the end. Ethan assumes the position and role of scout; and his 'muffled bird cry' echoes the Comanche signal which started the murder raid on his brother's homestead. As Wilson says: 'Clearly, a set of circumstances and a point of view have been reversed: Ethan occupies the earlier position of the unknown Comanche scout who watched, with a perspective similar to the one that Ethan (and the film viewer) now has, the trapped objects of incipient destruction.'[44]

---

[44] Wilson, 1986, p. 48

This symmetry is a feature of the design of the narrative, and it is revealed by the association of the similarities in the beginning and the ending sections of the film. Moreover it is this aesthetic feature of the film seen from an external perspective that, according to Wilson, provides a clue to the 'explanatory coherence of the plot'. As we saw earlier, there is an impossibly huge amount of supplementary information that we could imagine about a film, therefore in a film like *The Searchers* in which so much is implied rather than given explicitly, there needs to be some way of directing the viewer's imaginative comprehension. This is achieved through, as Wilson terms it, 'rhetorical figures of narrational instruction' - features of a film which provide a practical tuition in its own understanding: 'In such a scene...the primary function of the local narration is to establish a stressed configuration of audio-visual elements which adumbrates features of the way in which the global narration is to be read.'[45] In other words, it is a point in the narrative at which the external artefactual perspective makes itself apparent, and the pattern that emerges provides a kind of hermeneutic map for the imaginative reconstruction of the internal perspective.



The mirrored opening and closing shots of *The Searchers*, Wilson points out, serve this rhetorical function, and between them they contain the set of visual motifs that reappear at various moments across the narrative. The silhouette of the open doorway reappears as the mouth of a cave, or the entrance to a teepee or the outhouse, an image which '... emblematizes the protection (which may be violated) of a home...'

[45] Ibid, p.49

The motif of a threshold reoccurs as a boundary which separates opposed communities, '...inner and outer, private and public places...': the Comanche are separated from the posse by a river, Ethan restrains Martin from entering Scar's tent, and in the disrupted wedding Martin and Charlie, the rival suitor, confront each other across a log. This scene, as Wilson says, acts within the film as a kind of chorus, comically summing up the motif, and encapsulating the subject of the film, the battle between two men for the possession of one woman. The '...image of the self-enclosing circle (implied by the reversed symmetry of the pair of shots)...' , according to Wilson, represents both the futility of the search and '...the larger symmetries of narrative and narration which shape the counter-structure of the film.' In these patterns of recurring imagery, themes and stylistic motifs the film builds a '...complicated system of rhyming and variation...'

Attention to these formal patterns allows us to construct a perspicuous understanding; noticing features of the film from an external perspective feeds back in to an enriched understanding of the internal view of the narrative. For example, at the beginning of the film most of the action in which Ethan is reacquainted with his family is shot with a kind of visual neutrality, in its inconspicuous framing. He is placed in the same shot with the family, but there is nothing in the visual design to suggest that he is *part* of the family. The question of kinship is introduced with the arrival of Martin. The more reliable indicator of where his actual bonds of kinship are to be found is given in the pattern of repetition in the formal visual design of certain key shots. On Martin's arrival he is framed in the doorway in silhouette as he hesitates for a moment before entering. The shot establishes his outsider status in its design, but it also establishes his real kinship with Ethan because the visual motif in its design echoes the quality of the representation repeatedly associated with Ethan.

The visual design of the sequence, moreover, contradicts the explicit disavowal of any family bond with Martin which Ethan insists on at the dinner table - what the film shows us contradicts what the character tells us. The bond between them is further emphasised in the visual similarity of a pair of shots which seem to reflect each other. Just as Martin responds to Ethan's hostility by going outside to sit on the porch, so too does Ethan respond to his brother's suspicions in the same way, and the similarity in the two men's actions is pointed out by the formal similarity of the shots.

The two shots are similar, but in important respects also very different. There is, in Martin's shot, a warm and inviting shaft of light which seems to prefigure the end of the film where he is taken back into the community. In Ethan's however, there is no such comfort. The frame has closed in, the inviting doorway is excluded from the frame, and the scene is lit in a much colder blueish tone. Martin's outsider status is temporary, but for Ethan it is permanent. The greater understanding of the nature of the relationship between Ethan and Martin, from the internal perspective, is shaped and enriched by a closer attention, from the external perspective, to the formal qualities of the design of the sequence. There are, therefore, two channels of narrative information about the characters; the first is what we infer from the internal imagined perspective, and the second is what we infer from the external recognition of the significance of formal patterns. Which of these is a more *reliable* source of information is an important question, and will be taken up in more detail in later chapters.

We began with Matravers' doubts that the imagination can be a useful notion for an understanding of fictional engagement, and with Turvey's call for the clarification of the concept. This chapter has attempted to answer the former with a response to the latter. Imagined seeing, the imaginative attitude, and the imagination active in comprehension are each illuminated by approaching them in terms of an internal and an external perspective. It becomes clearer under this view that imagined seeing is not imagining oneself as a ghostly witness within the world of the story, but an imaginative *way* of seeing. Approaching the constructive imagination, in terms of this internal/external distinction, is useful because it sheds some light on an important distinction - between the kind of interpretation that we do in order to comprehend the events of the story, and the interpretation that we do at a different level - interpreting what the story is about. An insufficiently clear idea of how the imagination is involved in each of these activities has led, I suggest, to an impoverished view of what the latter sort of interpretation involves. Internally, we imaginatively reconstruct events of narratives, fill in ellipses, and follow out in imagination what the film implies. Externally, we step back to a view that takes in features of narrative and visual style, features that feed back in to an internal comprehension. Interpretation considered in this way becomes not a decoding exercise by which imagined fictional propositions symbolise other propositions, coming to see that one thing is in fact something else. To interpret a film in the way that Wilson interprets *The Searchers* is to make connections, draw parallels, point out symmetries and echoes of style and theme, it is to persuade someone to adopt a revised view - to see the film another way. It is an exercise of the associative and productive powers of the imagination; drawing together and connecting elements of the external perspective to bring us to a more perspicuous view of the internal.

2

Subjective and Objective Points of View

The last chapter claimed that our response to fictions is characterised by a dual imaginative structure. We adopt a dual stance; an external one (seeing the film as a film, as a constructed fiction, as an artefact), and an internal one, we imaginatively project ourselves into the fictional world. Both stances involve the imagination, but in differing ways. The external stance involves both a critical non-imaginative awareness of the work's artefactual status, but also what Richard Moran calls 'imaginativeness' - the power of the associative and constructive imagination to recognise and make connections between formal features of (and between) fictional narratives.[1] The internal stance involves, in Moran's terms, both 'hypothetical' and 'dramatic' imagining; imagining both what is the case in the world of the fiction, and also adopting in imagination the perspective of its characters. The subject of this chapter will be the subjective/objective division within the internal stance; imagining a dual perspective, both of and on characters.

By referring to a dual perspective on characters, I am not now talking about a distinction between an external critical view (seeing them as *characters*) and an internal imaginative one (seeing them as *persons*). The dual perspective which is the concern of this chapter is the difference between the fictional world as it is experienced by the character, and the fictional world as it is independently of how the character experiences it. In the sense that I have in mind, to imagine the subjective perspective of a character is to adopt a certain stance towards the fictional world from within that same fictional world. It is to approach the events and situations and characters of the story from a character's point of view.

Now, the proliferation of visual and spatial metaphors in these sentences leads me to note a possible source of confusion. The language that we use to describe the ordinary concept of a 'point of view', might, in the context of film, lead us to blur the distinction between a person's attitude and a person's visual field. In a debate about the ethical aspects of engaging with *literature*, this would not present the special problems that it can in a debate about film. The partly visual nature of film presents particularly tempting opportunities for confusion along these lines, and in this chapter, which discusses the points of view of characters, there is a special risk of conflating metaphorical and non-metaphorical uses of language of vision. It should therefore be borne in mind in what follows that there is a difference between a character's general *attitudinal* point of view (his attitudes, beliefs, emotions, desires, motivations, and so on), and his *optical* point of view (his visual field). I am not suggesting that the debate should, or could, be stripped of these

---

[1] Moran, 1994, p.86

spatial metaphors, however. Primarily because they are too deeply embedded in the language for that to be possible. But also because, as we will see, especially in chapter four in relation to the 'ethics of perception' and the 'moral vision theories' of Martha Nussbaum and Iris Murdoch, these metaphors structure some of the ways that we think about ethics. However, keeping the distinction clear will be important because one of the tasks of this chapter is to ask about the extent to which a representation of the *optical* point of view (PoV) of a character provides access to the character's *attitudinal* point of view. The question of how films narrate the story from a character's general perspective, therefore, should not be conflated with the related but separate issue of how films may sometimes show the events from a character's *visual* perspective.

1. Subjective Imagining

It is a common idea that one of the ethical roles of fiction is its peculiar ability to grant us imaginative access to the subjectivity of others. According to this view, when we imagine our way into the perspective of a fictional character we come to know what it is like to be that person. When we imagine what it's like to be someone else there is an expansion of the range of our experience which is the basis for an expanded and improved ethical outlook. It is, according to this view, the extension into fiction of the ordinary and indispensable ethical ability to *empathise* with others. The lack of such an imaginative ability is, conversely, held to be, if not itself a vice, certainly a psychological impediment to virtue (and at its most extreme, a form of psychopathy). The issue of whether subjective imaginings themselves can be items of ethical knowledge will be taken up in chapter four, but before this question can be answered there are questions to be asked about what subjective imagining is.[2]

When we imaginatively adopt a character's perspective, what is it that we imagine? As a simple initial distinction we might think of it as two possibilities; either (1) I imagine myself in the situation of a fictional character; I imagine myself 'in their shoes', or (2) I imagine *being* that other person. The difference is between imagining what it is like *for me* to experience something, and imagining what it is like *for someone else* to experience something. Why should it matter? One of the ethical benefits of fiction is imagining what it is like to be someone else; not in the sense of wondering how I would act in a similar

[2] The concept is variously referred to as central imagining, imagining from the inside, empathising, imagining what it's like, dramatic imagining. These terms are roughly synonymous, and I shall use them interchangeably, and in accordance with the context of each of the theorists to whom I will refer. My own preference is for 'subjective imagining', for reasons which I hope will emerge in due course.

situation, but in the sense of seeing how the world appears to a person who is different to me in crucial ways - in terms of attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and so on. But if option (a) is correct, when we project ourselves imaginatively into the position of a fictional character an experience of what it is like to be someone else cannot be what we acquire. We may benefit from 'working through' in the imagination our own possible responses to hypothetical situations, but this will be a different (though still valuable) kind of imaginative ethical project. On the other hand, imagining *being* someone else seems to bring with it problems associated with 'identification' (in its strictly numerical sense).

Option (1) - call this the 'in his shoes theory' - might be taken two ways. The first is, in one sense, both common and relatively unproblematic. It is part of the normal experience of watching fiction films that they often provoke thoughts about how I would act faced with a similar situation in reality. What would I do were I faced with the situation represented in *Sophie's Choice* (Alan J. Pakula, 1982), for example? I might also derive from this imagining further thoughts, judgements, altered beliefs, about what the content of this self-imagining might indicate about my character. This construal is unproblematic (and for the current discussion, uninteresting), because in this case my imaginings are, in a sense, external to the work. The imaginative act is not an intrinsic part of engaging with the work, they are not thoughts about the fictional world; these imaginings are (conditional) thoughts about myself in the actual (or one possible) world which are merely prompted by situations in the world of the fiction. This is one important variety of self-imagining, but it is not the meaning of 'imagining from the inside' that is at issue. The second, stronger, construal of option (1) takes it as claiming that I imagine myself as the subject of the very same experience as the fictional character. In other words, when I imagine things happening to, say, Tony Soprano, I am imagining those very same things happening to me. This is not imagining what I would do in a similar situation, but imagining myself as Tony as the protagonist of the fiction - not imagining being a mob boss, but imagining being a *particular* mob boss.

This is an unattractive option for several reasons. According to Kendall Walton, even the stronger version seems to leave out of the picture the very thing that is the object of the imagining. In Walton's example, when Joyce imagines being Napoleon, and when she '...imagines being crowned at Notre Dame and suffering defeat at Waterloo, she could be imagining simply that she existed *in place* of Napoleon...This is not imagining herself "being Napoleon".'[3] Under this view fictional characters become mere placeholders

---

[3] Walton, K. *Mimesis as Make-believe,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) p. 33

whose function is only to mark out a certain role in the fiction which we as spectators fill with the details of our own personalities. The particular features which define them, and which make them interesting to us, seem to become incidental, even impediments, to the imaginative act.

Richard Wollheim objects to the 'in his shoes' theory on logical grounds. If it were the case, he argues, that when I imagine myself as Sultan Mahomet II I am imagining myself in the Sultan's place, this '...leaves it open to me at any moment to imagine myself brought face to face with the Sultan.'[4] But the project of imagining *being* the Sultan rules this out. It is important to note that the problem is not in imagining a physical impossibility; if it is possible to imagine travelling back in time to prevent your own birth, it seems possible to imagine the sultan meeting himself. The problem is a logical one; the impossibility is in having two distinct imaginings simultaneously which exclude each other.

If imagining from the inside is not of the 'in his shoes' variety, we are left with the alternative, that I imagine that I *am* the character. But the 'identity theory' seems to run into its own problems. One of the spurious senses of 'identification' that Noël Carroll attacks is that when we identify with a character we temporarily believe ourselves to be that character in some sort of strange metaphysical fusion.[5] This is a sub-species of the illusion theory of fictional response, and we might reply that of course spectators do not *believe* themselves to be numerically identical with the character, they *imagine* it. But there is also something puzzling about *imagining* oneself to be numerically identical with a character. Imagining oneself to be Tony Soprano, for example, is more common (and less worrying) than *believing* oneself to be Tony Soprano, but nevertheless it seems to involve certain special problems which are not involved in imagining oneself to be a gangster.

Wollheim objects to the identity theory in virtue of the symmetrical nature of the identity relation; 'I imagine being Sultan Mahomet II', according to Wollheim, amounts to no more or less than 'I imagine the Sultan being me.' Wollheim's point is not that the latter is an implausible consequence of the former - if I imagine myself as the sultan therefore, to be consistent, I must also imagine him as me - but that the two imaginings just are equivalent. And yet we know perfectly well that by saying 'I imagine I am the Sultan' we do not also mean to say 'I imagine the Sultan is me', they are not *used*

---

[4] Wollheim, R. *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) p.77

[5] Cf. Carroll, N. *The Philosophy of Horror* (London: Routledge, 1990) esp. Ch.2. I shall come back to this in chapter four.

synonymously, so a relation of strict numerical identity cannot be what we mean when we talk about imagining being characters.

Wollheim describes how the 'in his shoes' theory and the identity theory fail as accounts of, in his terms, central imagining, in order to illuminate the problematic assumption that they both seek to preserve - that central imagining must necessarily be imagining about oneself.[6] Central, or subjective, imagining cannot be of the 'in his shoes' variety because it puts myself in the place of the imagined target. Neither can it be imagining an identity between myself and the target because that would be imagining an impossibility. The way out is to look again at the assumption that imagining from the inside is imagining *about* oneself.

Walton argues that subjective imagining is essentially self-referential. For Walton, the concept necessarily includes a reference to the self in the same way that intending or remembering or trying does: 'To imagine seeing a rhinoceros is to imagine *oneself* seeing a rhinoceros.' [7] Imagining from the inside is, for Walton, necessarily *de se* imagining, and therefore imagining being *someone else* from the inside is necessarily self-referential. On the face of it this seems much too strong; why should imagining someone else from the inside necessarily be imagining about oneself? Walton maintains that the 'I' that features in his model need not be '...a very rich or full one ... I don't pick out a person - myself - and then proceed to imagine about him. Nor do I in any ordinary manner *identify* someone (myself) as the object of my imagining. We might express this point by saying that the self whom I imagine to be seeing a rhinoceros may be a bare Cartesian "I".'[8] For Walton, imagining being someone else must be channeled through imagining oneself: '[Joyce] imagines (herself) seeing a rhinoceros. And *by means* of this first-person self-imagining she imagines Napoleon to be seeing a rhinoceros. Let us say that she illustrates for herself what she imagines Napoleon to experience, by imagining experiencing it herself.'[9] How is this different from the 'in his shoes' version that Walton rejects?

To use Walton's terminology, Joyce is using her imagined self as a prop in a game of make-believe; so in imagining being Napoleon she imagines herself looking out across the ruins of Austerlitz, for example, and she imagines of this imagining that it is Napoleon looking out on the same scene. Walton is not discussing centrally imagining characters in film, but if he is correct that all central imagining is necessarily imagining about oneself

---

[6] Wollheim, R. 1984, p.76

[7] Walton, K. 1990, p.31

[8] Ibid, p.32

[9] Ibid, p.34

then when we imagine what they feel, believe, desire, fear, and so on, we are imagining having those states ourselves, and then using these imaginings as props to imagine the characters' having those states. To use Walton's model when I centrally imagine Tony's anger at a betrayal, or fear for his son's safety, I imagine myself feeling it, and then imagine of that imagining that it is Tony's experience. Walton's account seems cumbersome, because he has to include this extra stage; he must preserve the bare Cartesian 'I'. Who, we might then ask, is this 'I'? And can we do without it?

If one were to narrate the project of imagining being Tony Soprano from within the imagining, so to speak, one might come up with sentences (spoken in the appropriate idiom) such as 'I'm a New Jersey wise-guy' or 'I'm worried he's flipped' or 'I'm prostate (sic) with grief'. Who or what does the "I" in each sentence refer to? It is uttered by me, but it does not refer to either the actual me who utters it, and neither does it refer to an imaginary me who takes the place of, either in his shoes or identical with, Tony, in the world of the fiction - it refers to Tony. As Bernard Williams has pointed out, '...what I am doing, in fantasy, is something like playing the role of Napoleon... only two people need figure: the real me and Napoleon. There is no place for a third item, the Cartesian "I", regarding which I imagine that *it* might have belonged to Napoleon.'[10] As Williams says, the language in which we frame the issue tends to have a distorting influence on our attempts to resolve it. The sentence 'I imagine that *I* am Napoleon' tends to draw us towards the idea that 'I' refers to a part of the content of what is imagined. If however we remove the personal pronoun which is the object of the sentence, and reformulate it as 'I imagine being Napoleon', this mysterious third figure, the Cartesian 'I' which is the content of the imagining, is taken out of the picture. The problems encountered by the 'in his shoes' and the identity theories, arose from the inclusion of this third entity. Centrally imagining X is imagining being X, it is not imagining *myself* being X.

Including oneself as a part of the world that is to be imagined, gives rise to a confusion between two distinct modes of imagining, between, as Williams puts it, '...imagining with regard to a certain thing, distinct from myself, that it is such and such; and that of imagining being such and such.'[11] This distinction could alternatively be described as a distinction between propositional, and what Moran calls 'dramatic imagining'. If central imagining is conceived along the lines of propositional imagining then the extra 'I' that is part of the propositional content generates the difficulties which

---

[10] Williams, B. 'Imagination and the Self' in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) p.44

[11] Ibid, p.44

derail the 'in his shoes' and identity theories. If, however, we understand central imagining to be a kind of imaginative enactment or rehearsal of the character and his mental states, it is, as Williams says, '...as unproblematic that I can imagine being Napoleon as that Charles Boyer could act the role of Napoleon.'[12] Walton's use of phrases like 'imagining *about* oneself', rather obscures the fact that the Cartesian 'I' to which he refers is not part of the content or the object of the imagining. The 'I' of 'I imagine being Napoleon' is the subject of the sentence, not the object, and therefore the *vehicle* of the imagining and not the content.

1.2 Identification

How does this account of subjective imagining fit with the ordinary notion of 'identification'? The term is, as has often been pointed out, vague. It can be used to refer to a sense of caring for a character, 'rooting' for them, being on their side. It could mean recognising some similarity between oneself and the character, or an echo in the features of his situation of some aspect of one's own history. Or, more controversially (for some), it could mean something closer to the etymological root of the word - experiencing the fiction *as* the character. As I hope to have shown, this should not imply any metaphysical confusion about imagining oneself to *be* the character, or imagining anything about oneself at all. Identifying, in the sense I have in mind, is the imaginative adoption, or 'trying on', of characters' experience.

Berys Gaut has argued that the ordinary notion of 'identification' should not, as some have recommended, be abandoned, but kept and refined. Instead of 'identifying' with characters we should talk of either epistemic identification (imagining knowing what they know), perceptual identification (imagining seeing what they see), affective identification (imagining feeling what they feel), motivational identification (imagining wanting what they want), and so on. All of these are forms of imaginative identification, and they are to be distinguished from what Gaut calls 'empathic identification' - not just imagining how a character feels, but actually having the same kind of feelings oneself. The crucial point is that one form of identifying does not necessarily entail any other; so we can, for example, imagine knowing what a character knows (epistemic identification) but not then also imagine feeling what he feels (affective identification), and not *actually*

---

[12] Williams, 1973, p.45

feel what he feels (empathic identification). This means, according to Gaut, that it is always pertinent to ask in what respect a person identifies with a character.

We might ask, however, what is the difference between affective and empathic identification? As Gaut says, 'We can imagine feeling terror at the near-destruction of humanity, but it is also possible actually to feel terror at this merely imagined scenario: We can feel genuine emotions toward merely imagined or fictional situations.'[13] The emotional aspect of Gaut's scheme seems to throw up problems that are not associated with, say, epistemic identification. There is a clear difference between imagining believing what a character believes, and actually believing it; in the former case we entertain a hypothesis, in the latter we assent to its truth. But what is the difference between imagining what a character is feeling and actually feeling what a character is feeling? It can't be in the truth or existence of what the emotion is about (as it is, for example, in Walton's 'quasi-emotions') because Gaut claims that we can have genuine emotions towards imaginary states of affairs. The comparison suggests that affective identification is imagining of the propositional kind; I can imagine *that* X is feeling terror, yet not experience the same emotion myself. But this seems to draw us away from what we ordinarily mean by 'identification', which involves entering into that state oneself.

At the same time it seems correct that there is, if not a sharp distinction, then certainly a scale of imaginative emotional involvement; at one end bare supposing and at the other a full blooded dramatic reenactment of a character's emotional state. Varieties of imaginative emotional engagement should be seen therefore as differing not so much in the kind of propositional attitude, but in the degree to which we 'enter into' a character's emotional state. This will vary according to the nature of each film, and with the disposition of each person, and no doubt with factors of circumstance; there might be occasions where one is more willing or more able to be carried along in this way. Should 'enter into' be thought unacceptably vague, let us think of it as going beyond a mere hypothetical imagining, which is achievable as long as we understand the concepts involved. Dramatic imagining involves imagining more detail and also more of what follows from it; in Gaut's terms the richer a dramatic imagining the more forms of identification are added. There is no space to pursue this question here, but the point that I want to emphasise is that while Gaut is correct to claim that we identify in varying respects, it should also be noted that we identify in this sense in varying degrees.

---

[13] Gaut, B. 'Empathy and Identification in Cinema' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 34:1 (2010) 138

1.3 Formal Cues to Subjective Imagining

How is this kind of subjective imagining generated by the form of a film? No-one would suggest that we subjectively imagine the perspective of every character and each to an equal degree, so we must ask what are the formal features that direct us to adopt one imagined 'perspective' rather than another?[14] Is there any direct causal relationship between them? One of the more obvious, but also more controversial, candidates is the Point of View (PoV) shot. The idea is that the optical point of view of the camera replicates the optical point of view of the character which leads the viewer to 'identify' with that character. In his analysis of the PoV shot, Murray Smith makes the crucial point that what is often loosely referred to as a PoV shot is more accurately described as a PoV *structure* of shots. Smith argues that it is a structure of two shots: of the object seen from a spatial perspective that represents the character's field of vision, and a reaction shot that shows the character's emotional response. I would add to this, however, that an initial establishing shot of the character should also be included in the structure.

Much has been written on the link between this formal device and 'identification', and it has been argued quite rightly that there are many occasions where there is no such connection. *Jaws* (Stephen Spielberg, 1975), for example, famously uses a 'shark's eye view' of the vulnerable dangling legs of swimmers, and yet most of us do not 'identify' with the shark. But, as Smith argues, this shows only that there is no internal or necessary connection between the PoV shot structure and the psychological attitude: 'Not all PoV shots produce subjective access, and not all subjective access is produced by PoV shots.'[15]

But there are many examples where a PoV structure does seem to 'locate' us within a character's perspective, perceptual and/or cognitive, without thinking of the PoV shot as some sort of hypnotic trigger that automatically produces, in Carroll's phrase, a 'mind meld'.[16] PoV shots can be, but are not always, and are not the only, cues to subjective imagining. Following a scheme described by George Wilson[17], we can divide 'subjective shots' along the following lines: (1) A shot structure that replicates the visual perspective of the character (PoV shot), (2) a shot sequence which represents the character's subjective state, but not his visual experience, and (3) a shot sequence which represents both the subjective state and the visual experience - we see what the character

---

[14] There are, no doubt, extra-textual factors like one's social background, gender, and so on, which play a crucial role, but I will concentrate on those elements of the film which might foster subjective imagining.

[15] Smith, M. 1995, p.161

[16] Carroll, 1990, p.88

[17] Wilson, G. 2011, ch.7

sees in the way that he sees it. The last option can be further divided between shots which represent more and less complex subjective states, from basic physiological states, like being drunk for example, to (4) shot sequences which represent attitudes and beliefs.

1.3.1 PoV Shot Structures

In *The Sopranos* episode 'Luxury Lounge' (Season 6, Episode 7), Christopher (Michael Imperioli) and 'Little' Carmine Lupertazzi (Ray Abruzzo) are in Hollywood for a meeting with Ben Kingsley, hoping to sign him up for their film. Following Kingsley around the titular luxury lounge where celebrities are given complementary gifts, Christopher and Carmine become increasingly awestruck as it begins to dawn on the two gangsters that, 'all this shit's free'. At each table of designer merchandise there is a repeated pattern of PoV shot structures; first the establishing shot, then the PoV shot of the coveted objects, and then the reaction shot of the wide-eyed wise-guys.

The spatial features of the PoV shot sequence represent the visual properties of the characters' field of vision, but it is the reaction shot which indicates through facial expression the characters' attitude towards what is seen. In the example above the PoV shot indicates that Christopher and Carmine are looking at the watches, but the PoV shot itself tells us nothing about what they are feeling. It is only with the cut back to their reactions that we can 'read' their expressions as incredulous, excited, greedy, and so on. The reaction shot on its own, however, cannot quite do the job either. It is a central part of the cognitive view of emotion that in order to know which type of emotion a token example is, one must also know what it is about. Emotions are partly constituted, and defined, by their intentional content, they are *about* something; anger, for example, is anger because it is about injustice, fear because it is about danger, and so on. In this example, we know the emotion in question is greed because we are shown in the PoV shot the object of the emotion which constitutes its intentional content. In the absence of the PoV shot, relying only on the facial expressions, we would have more difficulty correctly

identifying the emotion. So the basic structure of the PoV shot - object/reaction - mirrors the structure of the emotion - intentional content/affective state.

Of course, it will be pointed out quite correctly that our understanding of what they are feeling here is not merely a product of what we infer from the PoV structure. We imagine their points of view to a large extent according to what we know of them already and how we imagine these two gangsters in a room full of free luxury goods *would* feel - in other words we apply a theory to the situation. But it is no part of my account that our understanding of the mental states of characters is *entirely* a matter of imaginative rehearsal of their feelings. I'll come back to this point later. The basic point here is that the PoV shot structure represents a character's perceptual experience, and it can, but it need not, also provide access to that character's mental states, or in other words, act as a prompt to subjective imagining. Moreover, as this example shows, neither must a PoV structure be restricted to one character, in which case it seems even more unlikely that it can have the necessary connection with subjective imagining that is popularly thought. When we see the PoV shot of the watches, who is it that we are 'identifying' with, Christopher or Carmine, or both? It might be stretching the notion to say that we subjectively imagine being two characters at once.

Some formal devices are, no doubt, a better match for the phenomenal qualities of human vision than others. A simple cut, for example, seems closer to the way that we shift our attention from one object to another than a pan, or a dissolve, let alone a Kurosawa-style wipe. The close-up shot, although an analogue for the focussing of attention on a specific object, does not, in its sudden switch between focal lengths, mimic the way that we (unaided by technology) actually see. One, or perhaps *the*, reason that the PoV shot has commonly been supposed to provide a 'direct line' into the subjectivity of characters - what Smith calls the 'fallacy of PoV' [18] - is that it does so, ostensibly, by accurately replicating the nature of human vision. To use Carl Plantinga's phrase, the 'perceptual realism' [19] of film is taken to guarantee a greater degree of psychological realism, which in turn produces more powerful emotional responses. This thought seems to lead naturally to the idea that the force of our imaginative and emotional responses are dependent on the degree to which we can imagine the fiction to be 'real'. In other words, the more faithfully a film visually replicates the way that we actually see, the more easily we can imagine the world of the fiction to be true. But as we saw in the last chapter, it is

---

[18] Smith, M. 1995, p.156

[19] Plantinga, C., 2009, p.113

often the case that those features of a work that bring it further away from mimetic realism are the very same features that foster a more powerful imaginative and emotional response. The fallacy of PoV, therefore, might be an example of a general misconception that ought to be resisted, the idea that the degree of subjective imagining is directly and naturally dependent on the degree of perceptual realism.

1.3.2 Impersonal Subjectively-inflected Shot Sequences

Subjective imagining is often generated by means of what George Wilson calls 'impersonal subjectively-inflected' shots.[20] The subjective quality of a character's experience is not represented by any shots from the character's visual perspective, but instead is expressed in the style of the *mise-en-scène* and visual texture of the image. In *A Serious Man* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2009), the protagonist Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg) is drawn into smoking marijuana by his erotic fascination with his neighbour, Mrs Samsky (Amy Landecker). She passes Larry the joint and the film cuts to a skewed close up of the record player, the needle repeating at the end of the record. The next shot, camera tilted a few degrees to the left, is filmed with a very shallow depth of field so that while parts of it are crisp others are blurred, and overexposed so that the highlights become solid white. In parts of the frame edges are distinct while in others the warm shadows deepen and merge, and bright little shards of sunlight pick out the shapes of fingers, the radiant joint, the shining point of light at the bottom of Larry's glass that holds his attention.

The effect arises from the disassociation of parts of perceptual experience - elements of the scene are given a heightened and strange salience. The disorientating effect of this scene in the recreation of the characters' mental states is a function of three formal elements; the visual style, the shift in the tempo of the editing and the use of sound. Prior to Larry's first puff on the joint the film cuts between characters in a snappy conversational back and forth. Larry's nervousness is expressed in jittery movements. Mrs

---

[20] Wilson, G. 2011, p.152

Samsky's dominance shows in the way it cuts away from Larry as she finishes his sentences, keeping him on the back foot. After the joint, however, the rhythm of the scene slows to a crawl, and the camera holds the same position for much longer between cuts, sentences are spoken in a slow, broken, meandering way, until they are both shaken out of this somnambulant state by the sound, or the quickly gathering realisation of the sound, of a distant siren.

In the debate surrounding subjective and PoV shots and their connection to central imagining the emphasis on the visual risks obscuring the importance of sound. In this scene, for example, the abrupt shift between lucidity and somnolence is signalled in a dramatic change in the sound environment. Pre-joint, from when Larry enters the house, they talk against a background of ambient sounds and Jefferson Airplane's 'Today' subtly building in volume until the cut to the shot of the record player, when all we hear is the dry repetitive scratch and click of the skipping needle. After the first puff, sounds seem to be individuated from each other and amplified against a background of silence. The needle sounds like a heartbeat, the breath of smoke a gust of wind, and the sound of the ice in Larry's glass the clink and jangle of distant cow bells.

But there is an important clarification to be made here. In this example of a subjective shot it is not that the visual qualities of the image replicate the way that a character sees, the phenomenal qualities of that character's vision. Rather, the visual (and sonic) qualities of the film - the soft focus, the depth of field, the exaggerated sounds - act as a kind of shorthand for the mental state. As Wilson puts it, 'The basic idea is to let properties of the way in which the fictional world looks to us on the screen *stand in for* properties of the way in which that world is experienced by the character.'[21] Wilson describes the paradigm case of a subjectively inflected shot as the blurred image 'standing in for' the experience of a drunk, but that is not to say that drunks actually see the world that way. The phenomenological experience of being stoned may have no specifically visual quality at all - what it *feels like* to be stoned need entail no distortion of vision - yet the experience is represented in visual terms. The image *expresses* the experience of the characters, but it does not do so by representing their perceptual experience.

Gregory Currie asks how this kind of subjective shot can be expressive of a character's mental state. He uses an example from the end of *En Passion* (Ingmar Bergman, 1968) in which Andreas Winklemann (Max von Sydow) is shown collapsing in a long shot which is blown up to the point where the grain of the film stock loses its

---

[21] Wilson, G.,1986, p.87

coherence. What makes the visual image able to express the character's mental state? There is, first of all, the behaviour that we see which we interpret in the same way that we ordinarily interpret behaviour as indicative of mental states. But this information is also conveyed by the formal features of the film image. There is, he says, a parallel between Andreas' collapse as a failure to function in a normal way, and the distortion of the image as a failure to function as a depiction:

> ...the dissolution of the image is something we are invited to see as an analog, in representation, of the relation between mental state and behavior...The fate of the depiction parallels and underlines that of the person depicted. Its expressive impact is inherited from the expressive relation it mirrors.[22]

The same terms that we use to describe the distortions of the film image are the same kind of terms that we would use to describe the disintegration of a person's psyche. In other words it is a kind of film metaphor. And as a metaphor in order for its meaning to be intelligible it must be interpreted in relation to its context in the rest of the film. Wilson describes the scene from *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) in which Scottie (James Stewart) and Madeleine/Judy (Kim Novak) embrace in a hotel room and the camera moves around them: '...the dynamics of this non-POV shot suggest a narrational comment on the narrative situation. For example, they hint at the entrapment of both characters in their private obsessions...'[23] The fact that these aspects of the scene are revealed through an interpretation indicates that we ought to understand them as metaphorical in nature. If the subjective inflections of the shot are to be seen as metaphors, then they are more properly seen not as belonging to the world of the fiction, as depictions of features of the perceptual experience of characters that are to be imagined, but as rhetorical devices that are textual features of the work. In other words, recalling the distinction that I described in the last chapter, the subjectively-inflected elements are features of the *external* (artefactual) view of the work, and not features of the *internal* (imaginative). They are, however, external features of the work which control and direct the course of our internal imaginative engagement. Moreover, the connections between the subjective inflections of shots and the mental states that they represent are grasped through an operation of what I described in the last chapter as the active imagination, the associative and combinatory functions of the imagination that Moran calls 'imaginativeness'.

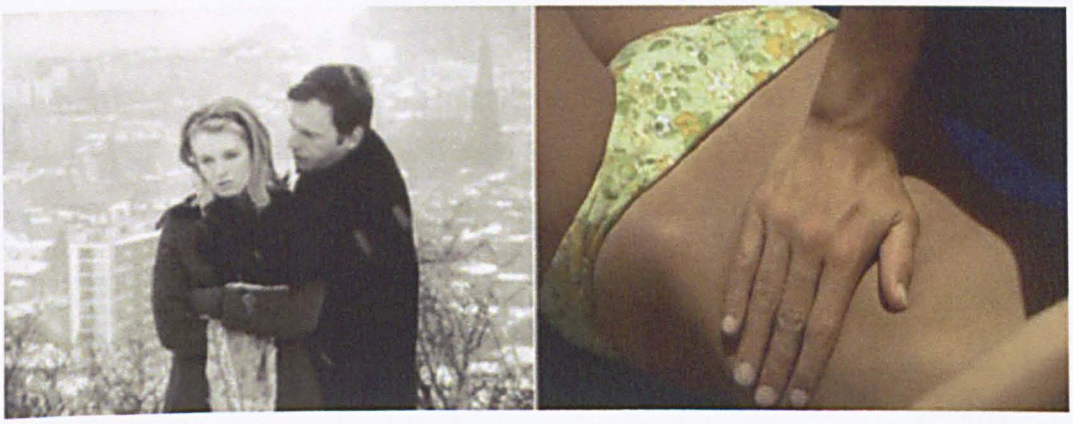
In each of these examples there is a direct and relatively specifiable connection between a quality of the visual image, sound design, and a feature of the character's state

---

[22] Currie, G. 'Bergman and the Film Image' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 34:1 (2010) 324

[23] Wilson, G., 2011, p. 155

of mind - blurriness/stoned, visual/mental disintegration, spatial/psychological entrapment. But there are occasions which might also be described as subjectively-inflected which are both more extensive and more diffuse. That is, such cases are not determinately metaphorical but are expressive of a character's general stance, or personality, or *weltanschauung*. In these cases the subjectively-inflected elements manifest in a kind of visual tone carried across the entirety of the film, and this tone provides a context from within which to imagine the fictional world. I shall explore this in more detail in chapter six, but in order to illustrate what I mean compare the strikingly different visual registers of Rohmer's *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* (1967) and the next film in the series, *La Collectionneuse* (1969).



Ma Nuit Chez Maud takes place in the cold dark winter gloom of suburban Clermont-Ferrand, and its bleakness and austerity seems to evoke the perversely puritanical will of its un-named hero (Jean-Louis Trintignant). In *La Collectionneuse*, on the other hand, Adrien's (Patrick Bauchau) louche libertine attitude is reflected in a luxuriance in the texture of things, in lingering close-ups of Haydée's tanned skin, sandy toes, luminous shadows, the electric hum of cicadas. What the subjective inflections of the film image represent in each case is not an *occurrent* mental state, but a more general *disposition* to see the world in a certain way.

1.3.3 Subjectively-Inflected PoV Sequences

As Wilson argues, there is a distinction between PoV sequences like the one in 'Luxury Lounge' that are *un*inflected, and PoV sequences in which: '...a range of the visual properties of the shot are supposed to represent subjective enhancements and distortions of the character's field of vision at the time.'[24] In 'The Ride' (Season 6, Episode 9)

[24] Wilson, 2011, p.149

Christopher has been struggling with a heroin addiction and has, during the feast of St Elzear, fallen off the wagon. The PoV shots that represent the subjective 'feel' of Christopher's experience function within, and as part of, a longer sequence that includes a variety of different kinds of shot and, crucially, an extended music track.

The move into Christopher's subjective state is marked by the opening few chords of Fred Neil's 'Dolphins'; a slow, jangling, vibrating, reverberating guitar chord that builds softly as Christopher watches Corky (Edoardo Ballerini) shoot up heroin. In a PoV structure we see first a close up of the needle in Corky's arm, the blood swirling into the syringe, and then a cut, as the music builds, to the needle in Christopher's. The slow rhythm and pulsing bass seem to resonate with the slow movements of the camera, and the way that elements of the scene are picked out, abstracted from ordinary perception, the raindrops on the car, the lights of the fairground, the tinsel. The PoV shots here are inflected with the phenomenal qualities of Christopher's experience. The world around him moves to a slower pace, the colours become more vibrant, ordinary things take on a strangeness; he watches, for example, as a plane passes slowly across the moon.

There is a distinction to be made, however, between music used to generate or reinforce a certain mood, and occasions when it is more directly linked to the visual image. Early in this episode Christopher and Tony stumble across some bikers robbing a restaurant, and they gleefully seize the opportunity to rob the bikers. The excitement, and the simple pleasure that they take in the act - the sheer fun of the crime - is expressed and generated for the viewer in the driving rhythmic momentum of the soundtrack, 'All Right Now' by Free. The music functions to give the scene a kinetic energy, and also to draw the viewer into an emotional complicity. But while the music is both expressive and productive of a particular affect, there is not the more complex resonance between sound and image that there is in the later scene. Towards the end of the heroin sequence in the fairground we see Christopher in profile against a background of fairground lights. The visual design of the image and the rhythm of the music fall into step as the lights are switched off section by section, and the song comes slowly to an end instrument by instrument, until just a repeated base note remains.

Christopher's drift out of consciousness is expressed in the visual and sonic rhythm of this sequence in the same way that in *En Passion* the disintegration of Andreas' mental state is expressed in the disintegration of the visual coherence of the image. They might be seen as film metaphors in the same way that the 'ghostly green light' and the circular confining camera movement that Wilson identifies in *Vertigo*, are metaphorical representations of Scottie and Judy/Madeleine's '..entrapment...in their private obsessions.'[25]

1.3.4 The Representation of an Attitude in a PoV Shot Sequence

Beyond these relatively basic affective and perceptual states, more complex mental states can also be rendered in a shot's subjective inflections - not just what a character sees, but his *attitude* towards what he sees. In 'Walk Like a Man' (Season, 6, Episode 17), towards the end of the final series of *The Sopranos*, Christopher falls off the wagon again, and for the last time. Feeling increasingly alienated from the rest of the gang due to his sobriety, and at the end of an episode which has tracked the escalation of a minor but heated feud with Paulie (Tony Sirico), he finally agrees to a drink with Paulie in the private bar above the Bada Bing. When he quickly becomes drunk and confused the hard, tough, wise-guy banter soon overwhelms him. In this drunken moment the way that he suddenly now sees Tony and the rest of the gang is crystallised in a shift in the visual texture of the sequence.

Mainstream fiction films generally tend to align us with one or two central characters, but a television series like *The Sopranos* often has a greater range of subjective perspectives which we might adopt. How then does it indicate whose to take up at any particular time? How are we aligned with Christopher in this scene, and not Paulie, or Tony? The PoV structure plays an important role here, not just in transmitting information about a subjective perspective, but in signalling to the viewer which perspective it is that we ought to take up; its function is to direct the course of our imaginative involvement. The shift into Christopher's point of view is marked, first of all, by a change from a standard shot/reverse shot structure to a PoV structure. He agrees to

---

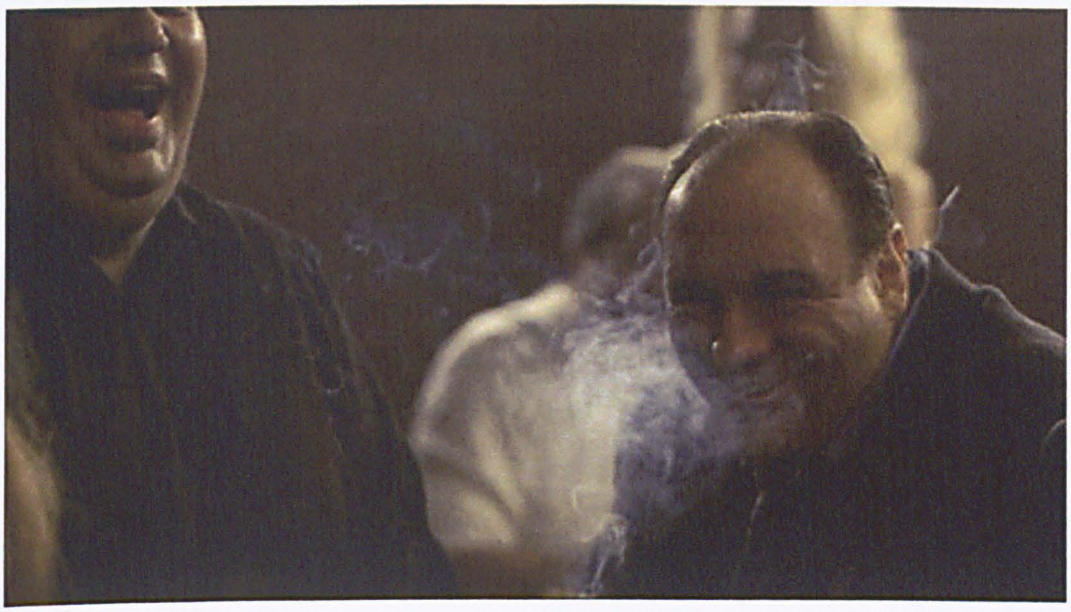
25 Wilson, 2011, p.155

the drink with apprehension, and as he does it cuts to a close-up of the drinks being poured.

It then cuts to a separate storyline, before coming back to the Bada Bing where Christopher is already drunk. As he struggles to express his thoughts on parenthood, becoming more and more incoherent, Paulie interjects with expert comic timing, playing to the room, with jokes at Christopher's expense. When Christopher says, with paternal wonder, 'Do you realise by the time Caitlin's out of college it'll be the year 2027, or something?' Paulie replies, 'If she takes after you she won't be out of fourth grade by then.' The rest of the gang laughs, as Christopher, the stooge, scans left to right to take in their reactions. Paulie continues with, 'Of course, by that time she'll be working here, so who gives a shit?' The gang laughs again, even harder, and Christopher again scans left to right, but this time the sequence is slowed down. The subjective quality of his perspective is expressed in the change in the speed, slowed from normal, both of the image and of the soundtrack.

The change in the quality of the two shots is what tracks Christopher's slowly dawning realisation that he is the object of the others' cruel jokes. The first pan is filmed at normal speed, in a relatively 'neutral' way. But by slowing down the second pan the faces of Tony and the others become grotesquely distorted; and the sound of their laughter becomes less recognisably human, more animal, more savage. It is filmed (like the sequence from *A Serious Man*) in a shallower depth of field so that people and objects are individuated with an eery salience, the smoke seems to hang in the air and creep around them like

ectoplasm. As the pan comes to rest on Tony, his face twisted into a predator's toothy grin, the slowed down laughter echoes with an animalistic roar.



Suddenly, the men whose friendship had been a central organising principle of his life are transformed into monstrous, bestial, demonic figures, wreathed in smoke, cruel and callous. The transition is particularly powerful because it seems to mirror and reinforce, reify, the shift in the sympathies of the audience - suddenly and finally we 'see' Tony in a way that our moral principles tell us that we ought to have seen him all along. Seeing Tony and the others now 'through Christopher's eyes', the veil of roguish charm is lifted and we see the ugliness that lurks behind it.

Hitchcock's famous 'Vertigo' shot, with its zoom-dolly distortions of perspective, is a subjectively inflected PoV shot in a slightly different way. It is a PoV shot because it is from the character's spatial perspective, and its subjective inflections are expressive of the character's state of mind. They are not, however, a veridical representation of Scottie's (James Stewart) *visual* experience, but an analogue or a metaphor for his vertiginous feeling. Moreover, the perspectival distortions are not, unless one is hallucinating, something that one *could* see. In this respect it is similar to an earlier scene in 'Walk Like a Man' in which , A.J. (Robert Iler), Tony's troubled son, is struggling to cope with being ditched by his girlfriend. At his job in a pizzeria one night he watches a happy young couple laughing and flirting, and the sight overwhelms him. This is represented in a PoV structure but the intensity of his attention on the couple is represented in a slow zoom, something which is not possible in human vision. The function of the PoV shot structure in each of these cases is not to give us information about the character's perceptual

experience, but to inform us whose experience it is; it is the subjective inflections that transmit information about what the character is thinking and feeling. Neither should it be claimed that the subjectively inflected PoV shot prompts central imagining in isolation from inferential reasoning based on our knowledge of the narrative. We can imagine what A.J. is feeling to a large extent because we know what has led up to this moment. Christopher's 'view' of Tony and the others is reinforced by our knowledge of the course of his history with Tony, and also by Paulie's jokes about Christopher's new daughter, seeming to betray the hypocrisy in their veneration of family and loyalty.

The Sopranos is centrally concerned with the inner lives of its characters, yet there is a relative lack of subjective inflections which indicate to the viewer what the nature of those inner states are. Why is this? It has, I suggest, something to do with the *authority* of these kinds of shots. When we are provided with shots like the ones in *En Passion* or *Vertigo*, there is no place for any reasonable doubt that this does in fact accurately represent the mental state of the character. There may be doubt about how it should be interpreted, but this is a different sort of doubt from whether whatever it asserts about the character should be accepted. Seeing the slow disintegration of the image and understanding that it expresses the disintegration of Andreas' state of mind, it would make little sense to then question whether the film was telling the truth about this - as Moran says, 'If we start doubting what the story tells us about its characters, we may as well doubt whether it's giving us their right names.' [26]

Film narratives can, of course, be unreliable. As we saw in the last chapter with *The Silence of the Lambs*, our understanding of the events of a fiction can be wrong-footed by the manipulation of our assumptions and expectations. And film narratives can be unreliable in virtue of the dissembling or the delusions of a narrator - as we will see in Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*. But in order for one set of facts about what is the case in a fiction to be revealed as false, there must be some more reliable account against which that falsity can be discerned. Subjective inflections, although they express the subjective states of a character, have an *objective* narrational authority which provides a more reliable account of the characters true feelings and attitudes than that which they provide themselves. In *The Sopranos*, assertions of emotion or desire or belief which are made by the characters in the course of the narrative - like Tony's exchanges with Dr Melfi - are rather less reliable, and are therefore subjectively *un*inflected. This is the difference

---

[26] Moran, R. 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination' *Philosophical Review*, 103:1 (1994), p. 95. This is leaving aside the issue of unreliable narrators, and by extension the issue of whether films *have* narrators. I shall assume that if they do, unreliable ones are an exception.

between believing what the story tells us about the characters and believing what the characters tell us about themselves. That is not to say, however, that we do not therefore subjectively imagine the characters, just that it is part of the project of the series that we can be drawn in to an imaginative re-enactment of self-deceptive states of mind by basing the imagining as much on what characters say as on what we see.

1.4 Subjective Imagining and Narrative Comprehension

All of these formal devices are used to give us information about the interior mental states of characters, in Smith's terms they foster 'alignment'. But it will be objected that it does not follow that we must also use this information in any sort of imaginative recreation or simulation of those mental states. It is, according to this view, much more likely the case that we can understand the nature of Christopher's sudden drunken epiphany without needing to imaginatively participate in the state ourselves. In fact, it is argued, that if we *did* exactly replicate the mental states of Christopher or Larry, we would not be in a state where we were able to make the sort of fine-grained critical judgements that we do. In the same way, replicating Andreas' psychic breakdown would actually prevent us from attending to and comprehending the film metaphor. There are two objections here: the first is that subjective imagining is not necessary for an understanding of characters, and the second is that it would in fact be an impediment to understanding. I shall come back to the second of these objections in the next section, and turn now to the first.

Both of these objections are made by Matthew Kieran against a version of subjective imagining, simulation theory. There are many variations of simulation theory but I am taking it that the version that is Kieran's target is a general concept which includes what I have referred to as dramatic imagining - the imaginative rehearsal of characters' mental states. According to Kieran the idea is that we imagine into a character's perspective in order to gain information about the beliefs, motivations and desires of characters. The simulation thesis is, as he construes it: '(1) When I want to really understand the nature of a character's experience and their attitude towards their own experience (what their character is really like), then I need to simulate. A deep understanding of fictional characters requires simulation, although a shallow understanding need not.'[27] But, he argues: '...central imagining, whether of a fictional character or a narrator, is just not required to both grasp and affectively respond to the

---

[27] Kieran, M. 'In Search of a Narrative' in Kieran and McIver Lopez, D. (eds.) *Imagination Philosophy and the Arts*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p.70

character of Gradgrind as portrayed. Furthermore, and just as crucially, I need not imagine "being someone" in the weak sense of just "taking on" the sorts of thoughts and responses Gradgrind is portrayed as having in order to understand him. What information is unavailable here?'[28]

There are, I think, several ways of responding to this. The first is that few, if any, simulationists would claim that understanding fictional characters is entirely a matter of simulation. Kieran argues that understanding characters is a matter of applying a theory: '...we standardly employ prototypes, schemas, and general categorisation in making sense of the states people are in and attributing certain characteristics to them...'[29] No doubt this is partly true, as I mentioned in the example from 'Luxury Lounge' above, but none of this is incompatible with also simulating their mental states. Alvin Goldman, for example, holds a hybrid simulation/theory-theory view which would not exclude these factors. Our subjective imagining of Christopher's state of mind as he sees Tony and the gang in a new light is informed by our knowledge of the story, but this does not exclude the possibility that we also imaginatively rehearse that state of mind.

Kieran's focus is on literary fiction, and not on film, and the difference is a significant one. In verbal fictions it is possible to explicitly articulate in language what the precise nature of a character's mental state is. This sort of direct access to characters' mental states is also possible in film (in voice-over narration for example), but it is more common that we infer a character's mental state from a look, or a gesture, or from contextual cues that indicate their nature. As Alex Neil says, films differ from novels because: 'We typically know much less about [film] characters than we do about literary fictional characters.' In films we rely to a much greater extent on the everyday 'mind-reading' skills that we use in everyday life. Neil continues, '...empathising with a film character may be the only way we have of understanding her'[30] This is a little too strong; films *can* supply us with the same kind of information as novels, just in their own ways. Many film techniques, it could be argued, have been developed as a practical solution to the problem presented by the ambiguity of facial expressions; the PoV shot, as I suggested earlier, could be seen as supplying the intentional content of the reaction shot, which work together in a PoV structure to depict an emotion. The kind of *authoritative* subjective information about characters that Kieran rightly says is frequently given to us directly in

---

[28] Ibid, p.72

[29] Ibid, p.70

[30] Neil, A. 'Empathy and (Film) Fiction', in Carroll, N. and Choi, J. (Eds.) *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* (London: Blackwell, 2006) p.255

novels, is often transmitted in films via subjective inflections. Moreover, with a long running television series like *The Sopranos*, we build up a great deal of knowledge about characters which serves as a pretty reliable basis on which to interpret their behaviour, attribute (self-deceptive) motives and (false) beliefs, and so on. So we have both reliable access to characters' occurrent subjective states, and also an extensive acquaintance with their personal histories which helps to explain their occurrent subjective states.

Kieran describes a passage from *Hard Times* in terms of the traits and attributes that Gradgrind possesses, and he is quite correct to say that the description provides us with what we need to know in order to develop a rich understanding of his character. As he says: 'In the very first few paragraphs we feel as if we have got into Gradgrind's mind and character very deeply indeed without any simulation.'[31] The narrative function of simulating characters' mental states, however, might not be to allow us to understand the situation as it is right now, but rather to make us better able to imagine how it might turn out in the future. Simulation theory arose as a theory not just of how we are able to 'get into' other minds in order to *explain* human behaviour, but also of how we are able to *predict* it. A simulationist would counter that observed human behaviour provides data for a simulated mental model which we use to *predict* likely behaviour. If following a narrative is, in some sense, forward-looking, in order to predict Gradgrind's behaviour we might do well to use that detailed textual information as input to a simulation. In 'Walk Like a Man' we are provided - in the sudden shift in the quality of the image, in the demonic facial deformations, in the slow motion and distorted sound - quite explicit information about Christopher's state of mind, but a simulation theorist could argue that this information is used to run a simulation in order to determine what will happen next in the story. Will he run out of the bar, or cause a disturbance, or start a fight with Paulie, or sit silently and suffer? Christopher's changing relationship with Tony is a major narrative thread of *The Sopranos*, and it seems likely that anticipating possible future scenarios would involve subjectively imagining his point of view. If it is right that what drives a narrative is the setting up of questions and expectations, then it could be argued that the simulation of the mental states of characters is central to working out the possible courses that a character-driven narrative could take.

The third possible response changes tack, away from one that argues for an instrumental value of central imagining, towards an intrinsic one. We must make the distinction between two claims: (a) we imagine the perspective of a character in order to

---

31 Kieran, M. 2003, p.72

comprehend the narrative, and (b) we comprehend the narrative in order to imagine the perspective of a character. Kieran seems to assume that the role of simulation in a narrative can only be (a), to give us knowledge of characters' mental states, but I suggest that it might be the other way around - the information about characters' mental states given by the work is what enables us to run the simulation. Simulating characters may or may not be done in order to comprehend the narrative, but we need to comprehend the narrative to provide a basis for the simulation of characters. Simulation need play no role in understanding a character, if the sort of understanding meant is restricted to propositional descriptions of the kind that he applies to Gradgrind. The trouble is that Kieran goes beyond this when he introduces the more nebulous word 'appreciation': '...the interesting and robust claim was that the process of simulating the beliefs, desires and attitudes of a character, or, more minimally, simulating the same sorts of beliefs, desires and attitudes that such a character has, was required in engaging with the work in order to understand and appreciate the narrative.'[32] Appreciating a work seems to encompass more than just comprehending it. Moreover, where simulationists like Gregory Currie, for example, do claim that simulation is important in the comprehension of narratives, it is not primarily the simulation of the mental states of characters, but the simulation of a belief - and not necessarily a believer - that the events of the story are true.

Many of the objections to identification, or imagining from the inside, central imagining, simulating, empathising, or what I have been calling subjective imagining, can be grouped around the idea that it is not necessary for an understanding of characters; call this the redundancy objection. Noël Carroll, for example, says: 'In order to understand a situation internally, it is not necessary to identify with the protagonist.'[33] A similar objection is made by Jinhee Choi in a discussion of PoV shots: '... it is important to note that central imagining, understood as an exemplar of simulation, does not need to be activated unless there exists an epistemic gap for the viewer to fill in.' Choi continues: 'In fact, such a [PoV] shot seems to relieve the viewer from the burden of imagining from the inside... Why should the viewer need to imagine anything when the character's perceptual state is directly available to him or her?'[34] I shall leave aside the question of whether in seeing the content of the shot, we then need to imagine it as the content of the

---

[32] Kieran, 2003, p.73

[33] Carroll, N. *The Philosophy of Horror*, (London: Routledge,1990) p.95

[34] Choi, J. 'Leaving It Up to the Imagination: POV Shots and Imagining from the Inside' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63:1 (2005) 21

character's perceptual experience.[35] The mistake here, I suggest, is to think of central imagining as a 'burden' that must be shouldered in the interests of an epistemic goal. An alternative way of seeing it would rather claim that the epistemic effort of comprehending the narrative is done to further the imaginative goal. The distinction which is overlooked by the redundancy objection might be put like this: the goal of subjective imagining is not to find out what a character's state of mind *is*, but to find out what it is *like*.

Part of what motivates the redundancy objection is a conflation of distinct modes of imagining. Kieran's description of Gradgrind is a collection of propositional statements. If imagining from the inside is construed as imagining propositions that describe the inner states of a character ('Imagining that Gradgrind is cruel') then indeed it might seem unnecessary to imagine beyond what the work gives us (directly and by implication). Choi regards central imagining as necessary where there are knowledge gaps that need to be filled in, and it follows that the more gaps there are the more we have to imagine. But, as I argued in relation to constructive imagining in the last chapter, what we will imagine in order to reconstruct an elliptical narrative are sets of propositions - imagining *that* X is such and such, not imagining being X. In fact, it might be argued that central imagining becomes more difficult in proportion to the absence of any information on which to base the imagining. Imagining from the inside conceived as a sort of dramatic rehearsal, on the other hand, does not involve imagining propositions as inferences from the narrative. Imagining *that* Gradgrind is harsh and austere is not the same thing as imagining Gradgrind's harshness and austerity; imagining *that* Christopher is disillusioned and alienated is not the same thing as imagining his disillusionment and alienation.

The fourth response we might call the naturalistic argument. Alvin Goldman points out that simulating, or imagining into the perspective of a person or a character, is not something that we *need* to do, but is something that we do nonetheless. If simulation as a theory of mind is correct, simulation is a mental mechanism that has evolved for understanding people in the actual world, and since most narrative fictions have (fictional) people at their centre it would be very surprising if we had developed a new and different way of engaging with them and not just applied our existing faculty to the fictional world. Simulating or centrally imagining fictional characters therefore, is not a *sui generis* practice, but an extension into the fictional realm of an existing psychological mechanism.

---

[35] Cf. Gaut, B., 2010, p.264 for this objection to Choi.

2. Imagining Objective Perspectives

The objective perspective on and in fiction is, in some ways, an even more slippery notion that that of the subjective. What does 'objectivity' refer to in this context? There are difficulties which may arise from the word's ordinary use; what constitutes an objective point of view might, for example, be run together with ideas of *fairness* or *impartiality*, or *truth*. It is, perhaps, an idea which is implicit in the divisions between emotional engagement and a critical stance, or sympathetic and detached narratives, or Hollywood movies and European art films. The first thing to say is that I am not using the word to refer to any quality of the film, as it might be applied to a documentary (and by extension, the quality of the attitude of the filmmaker). Neither need it refer to any fairness or impartiality in the attitude of the viewer.

Objective imagining is the alternative mode of imagining to the subjective, imagining a perspective within the world of the fiction that is independent from that of the character - in Wollheim's terms, *acentral* imagining.[36] There ought to be a clear distinction made, therefore, between imagining an objective perspective in the minimal sense of imagining how things are in the world of the fiction independent from the subjective perspective of any particular character, and the additional idea that this perspective has a greater ethical value.[37] The objective imagining may, and may often, give rise to an objective ethical judgement, but they are not the same thing. On the other hand, the more ethically neutral distinctions like central/acentral imagining which might seem to map directly onto the subjective and objective one, do not quite capture the full complexity of works like *The Sopranos* or, as we will see in later chapters, Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*, where the difference does have an ethical significance. It should be borne in mind that in the rest of this chapter I shall (unless indicated otherwise) be using 'objective' in a neutral sense, to refer to a mode of imagining and not the ethical quality of a judgement.

2.1 The Observer View

The alternative to the 'participant' view, holds that our engagement with fiction is not best understood in terms of imagining from the inside, but rather in terms of a more detached response. When we engage with fictions, according to those such as Carroll and Kieran,

---

[36] Wollheim, R. 1984, p.74

[37] I shall discuss the ethical sense of objectivity, and in particular the highly influential version associated with Thomas Nagel, in more detail in chapter four.

we do not imaginatively adopt a position within the fiction and have thoughts and attitudes and emotions which replicate or simulate those of characters, we don't 'identify' with them; instead, we take up the position of an external observer of the scene - call this the 'observer' view. That is not to say that we do not become emotionally involved, just that the involvement is of a different type; put crudely, we feel *for* characters, not *with* characters.

There is, Carroll argues, an asymmetry between the emotions of fictional characters, and the emotions that we the audience have in response to characters, that proves fatal for any theory of identification, or empathic engagement, that claims that we share the same kind of states. According to Carroll, watching the opening scene of *Jaws*, the emotions of fear and anxiety that we feel as we watch the girl swimming are entirely different to her emotions of delight. We respond to Oedipus with pity, we do not replicate his emotions of shame and guilt. According to Carroll, we sympathise, we do not empathise. The emotions that we feel as viewers are different to the emotions that characters feel both in their kind and in their objects; in fact, under a cognitivist view of emotions, they differ in kind *because* they differ in their intentional content. The intentional asymmetry is twofold: first, the emotions of characters are directed towards objects that they believe to be real, whereas our emotions are directed towards objects that we know to be imaginary. Secondly, as Carroll puts it, '...the audience's response to the protagonist will be involved with concern for another person (or person-type), while the protagonist beset by a monster is concerned for himself.'[38]

But this second point forgets that what is at issue is an imaginative rehearsal of the character's perspective. If I am imagining the situation of the character from the inside then the object of my imagined concern will be not myself in the actual world, but the character in the fictional world whose mental states I am imaginatively rehearsing. The attitude is therefore not other-directed, but (imaginarily) self-directed. But, according to Carroll's first point, the girl's (eventual) fear is rooted in her *belief* that she is in danger; so even if I am imaginatively playing a role, imagining being the girl, my fear is based not on a belief, but on an imagining. According to Carroll's own theory, however, the rationality of fiction directed emotions does not depend on a belief that their objects actually exist. As Berys Gaut has argued: '...[the real/imaginary asymmetry] does not show that the fear is not shared, since, as [Carroll] has himself argued, the object of fear

---

[38] Carroll, N. 1990, p.91

is a thought content, whether or not it is asserted, and the thought contents are the same in both cases.'[39]

Carroll's objections do not, therefore, rule out the possibility that we are in some sense imaginatively taking on the perspective of the character. But it does seem to be an obvious fact of the experience of watching *Jaws* that the emotions that I feel are not what I would expect to feel were I actually in a situation where I was in danger of being killed by an enormous shark. Most obviously, my emotions differ in terms of their intensity; actually being attacked by a shark would be utterly terrifying, but watching *Jaws* elicits, at most, an acute anxiety. But the difference is not to be explained by the difference in intentional objects, as the emotion that I feel mimics the intentional structure of the girl's - it is about the shark and the danger it presents to the girl/me. I imagine having the thoughts that she does; depending on the degree to which I enter into it, I might imagine the thought of something brushing my leg, the shock of the first bite, and so on. Rather, the difference must be explained in terms of the internal/external distinction discussed in the last chapter. We imagine the girl's thoughts and feelings from her point of view, but within the fictive stance; we imaginatively enact her role in the imagination but within the framework of an awareness of its fictionality. So, it is not exactly that my feelings exactly replicate those of the girl who is attacked, but more likely the (imagined) feelings of the actress who is playing the girl who is attacked. The feelings that I have sitting in the audience still reflect the affective qualities and the intentional structure of the girl's, but because they are played out within the fictive stance they do not lead me to actually fear for my life. Carroll's overly strong construal of identification seems to require this.

Kieran's first objection to simulation theory, discussed above, was that simulation is not necessary for an understanding of characters. His second objection is that simulation may even be an impediment to a proper appreciation of them. It is crucial, according to Kieran, for a proper understanding of some characters that we do not simply replicate their mental states: 'At least in certain kinds of cases, it is important not to simulate. For simulating a character's states may not only be unnecessary, but may actively distort our understanding of them.'[40] If engaging with self-deceptive or unconsciously motivated characters were simulating the emotions that they feel and the beliefs that they express, we would be imagining their own false picture of themselves. And this would be a failure to appreciate their true nature; a simulation of the mental states of Hamlet,

---

[39] Gaut, B. 2010, p. 262, *n*25

[40] Kieran, 2003, p.73

Kieran suggests, would involve replicating the limits and misconceptions of what he knows about himself. A simulationist could reply, according to Kieran, that when we simulate the conscious thoughts and emotions of Hamlet we also simulate the unconscious drives. Olivier plays the role of Hamlet in a way that is informed by an awareness of the Freudian theme: 'And, the thought goes, just as we can make sense of someone acting out the part of someone so unconsciously motivated so we too can simulate such unconscious motivation.'[41] The asymmetry here is epistemic - we often know more about the character's 'real' motivations than they know themselves - it is not in the content of what we simulate. But, now Kieran objects that were one to simulate these self-deceptive states or unconscious drives *too* successfully, it would be an impediment to appreciating the work. *Too* accurate an imaginative replication of Andreas' mental breakdown, for example, would prevent us from being able to attend to the work; an exact simulation of Christopher's drunken confusion would inhibit our understanding of the scene. With self-deceptive characters, which in varying degrees describes almost all of the characters in *The Sopranos*, the imaginative simulation of those self-deceptive mental states would blind us to their actual nature, and therefore blind us to the intentions of the work. If engaging with the characters of *The Sopranos* did consist in too successful a simulation of their false beliefs, sentimental emotions, and self-serving rationalisations, we would be unable to recognise the theme of self-deception that is central to the series.

This is true. But it is unclear what Kieran means by 'too successful'. His standard of imaginative fullness or success seems to come very close to a state of belief, but no simulationist would suggest that the goal is to generate an illusion of reality which occludes any other attitude. Daniel Day-Lewis' famously immersive method acting prevented him, according to Kieran, from being able to play the role of Hamlet because he imagined Hamlet's motivational paralysis too successfully. But, this is an example of a state which precludes experiencing anything else, and one which seems extraordinarily rooted in a blurring of the division between imagining and believing. Kieran recounts Olivier's 'acid remark' to Dustin Hoffman, whose difficulty 'getting into the skin' of his character was holding up the shooting of *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976), 'Well my dear boy, you could always try acting.'[42] But this, as Alessandro Giovanelli points out, is an example of a failure of imagination, not a success.[43] Kieran takes the acting analogy from

---

[41] Ibid, p.73

[42] Kieran, 2003, p.74

[43] Giovanelli, A. 'In and Out: The Dynamics of Imagination in the Engagement with Narratives' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66:1(2008) 13

Wollheim; the performance is important instrumentally, as what allows the actor to give the best possible rendition of the character, just as the imagining of the audience is important to achieve the best understanding of the character. It could, I think, be used to argue for the opposite position. For a modern audience raised on the method acting of Hoffman and Day-Lewis, the mannered acting style of Olivier can seem, at times, a little artificial, self-conscious, *unconvincing*. It could be used to illustrate that sometimes not enough imaginative involvement results in a flawed representation of the character. These extreme examples of method acting seem to draw us back to Noël Carroll's construal of 'identification' as a self-imposed cognitive-affective illusion. But there is no reason to think that the immersive 'method' contradicts, or cannot coexist with, an awareness of fictionality; in fact without this greater imaginative involvement the experience of fiction might be poorer.

If we engaged with *The Sopranos* entirely from Tony's or Christopher's, or any particular character's, point of view we would have a radically defective understanding of the intentions of the series. But on the other hand adopting an entirely detached acentral perspective would be a failure to respond in the way that the series prescribes - it would, in that respect, constitute a failure of understanding. It is essential to the ethical challenge that the series presents that we do take up, or 'enter into', the highly flawed moral perspective of the characters. It is also vital that we come to care for them. We are entitled to resist this sort of engagement, but that would be refusing to play according to the rules of the particular game to which we have been invited. What Carroll's and Kieran's objections assume is that the participation theorist is claiming that engagement is both *exclusively* a matter of imaginative reenactment of the mental states of characters, and a total replication of those states. And this seems very close to an illusion theory. But I am not aware of anyone who would make such a strong claim. In fact, one of the most prominent simulation theorists, Gregory Currie, argues that it is not even the primary response. It is my claim that engaging with characters involves imagining *both* subjective and objective points of view; imagining the events and situations of the fiction both from a character's point of view and also imagining how things are independently of the way that a character experiences them. We subjectively imagine Tony's delusions, and at the same time we imagine the external perspective that shows them to be delusions.

2.2 Subjective to Objective Transitions

We are drawn in to a character's perspective by formal aspects of the film: PoV shots, editing structures, subjective inflections, and so on. And, as Smith has argued, there are more global narrational features of a film that 'align' us with a character; we tend to take up the perspective of the characters who feature most prominently in the narrative, that is, with whom we spend the most time. As I will argue in more detail in chapter four in relation to *My Night with Maud*, there are also structural narrative means of alignment; the protagonist is torn between two women, a choice which is reflected in the symmetrical distribution of their scenes in the narrative. A particular psychological stance, or, rather, a background condition which informs his attitudes, is therefore built into the narrational structure of the film. But what is it that draws us *out* of this internal subjective perspective? How do films detach us from a character's point of view? If features like the PoV shot and subjective inflections of impersonal shots are textual prompts to subjective imagining, what are the corresponding textual markers that bring us out of this perspective? Wilson claims that the default perspective of classical narrative films is one of 'transparency', within which there are subjective episodes; and in the absence of any formal indications to imagine otherwise, the viewer is to imagine that what is represented is an objective view of the fictional world available to all of its characters. But how do we recognise where a subjective episode ends, and the objective perspective resumes? Is there, for example, such a thing as an objective shot?

The Sopranos frequently represents Tony's dreams, memories, fantasies or hallucinations in what Wilson calls 'subjectively saturated' shots and sequences - sequences which represent (without necessarily using PoV structures or subjective inflections) a character's private experience, which could not be shared by any other characters.[44] At the beginning of the sixth series the narrative moves in and out of the same subjectively saturated sequence across three episodes. After being shot by Uncle Junior (Dominic Chianese), Tony wakes up at the beginning of 'Join the Club' in a nondescript hotel room, confused, and mistaken for a businessman, Kevin Finnerty. The sequence is not signalled as a subjectively saturated one by any formal visual features, there are no distortions of the image, and so on. Instead it reveals itself by the gradual accumulation of little narrative incongruities; he calls home and hears a cheery group 'You've reached the Sopranos' message, he seems to be speaking in a mid-western accent,

---

[44] Wilson, G. 2011, p.150

and so forth. The transition back into the actual (fictional) world, call this W^1, is marked by the intrusion or the overlap of one element from W^1 into the dream world, call this W^2. Tony/Kevin (in W^2) has been in the hotel bar and has picked up a businesswoman. As they stand in the parking lot they are illuminated by the searchlight of a helicopter buzzing overhead. The noise gets louder and louder, and the light brighter and brighter, and the sequence switches to a PoV structure, cutting between Tony and his PoV of the blinding searchlight. Suddenly, with an electrical clunk, it cuts from a PoV shot of the searchlight to a shot of the hospital light from the same perspective.

In the transition from Tony's dream (W^2) back into the hospital room (W^1), the scene moves out of the subjectively saturated sequence, and to emphasise the shift, ends with what might be considered the opposite of the subjective PoV shot, an overhead shot. If the PoV shot is not necessarily subjective, is there any reason to consider this necessarily objective?

As Smith argues that there is a certain intuitive plausibility about the PoV-subjective connection, so too there seems to be about an overhead-objective one. Perhaps what makes it a paradigm objective shot is that not only is it not from any character's visual perspective, but it is from a spatial perspective that it seems very unlikely that any (human) character *could* occupy. However, the reason that the overhead shot is not the opposite equivalent to the PoV shot is that it is frequently (though probably not here) used to represent an 'out of body experience', that is out of the character's body, but not out of the character's subjective state - an experience which is part of a dream or hallucination,

and therefore while it may appear to be a paradigm objective shot it can often be an example of what Wilson calls a subjectively-saturated one.

In 'Walk Like a Man' what signals the transition from Christopher's drunken state, back into the objective world? The shift back to a normal tempo, a more naturalistic sound environment, and a more neutral visual style are all immediate cues. But the transition out of Christopher's subjective perspective is also achieved with the same pattern of shots that we saw in the transition between Tony's dream (W^2) and the hospital (W^1). In both transitions the cut is first from a PoV shot, to an objective (or impersonal) shot, and then to emphasise the move it cuts to an even more objective shot. But what makes one shot more impersonal or objective than another?

What makes these shots impersonal is the increasing spatial detachment from the subject; the pattern goes from a close-up, to a medium shot and finally a long shot. That is not to say that this replicates any natural qualities of human vision, but rather that it operates in the same sort of metaphorical way as Currie's example from *En Passion*, and Wilson's from *Vertigo*; it is a visual analogue of the linguistic metaphor of emotional/spatial detachment, just as Currie's example is of mental/image disintegration, and Wilson's is of psychological/spatial confinement. Note, however, that the metaphor operates not in the visual qualities of the image, but in the editing pattern of the shots.

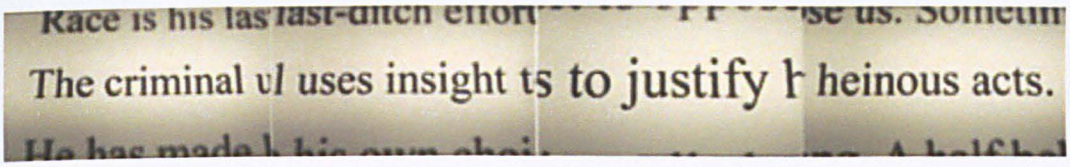
But we need to distinguish this shift out of a character's perceptual and experiential point of view from the more ethically significant transition; the transcendence of a character's general point of view, where this includes his moral beliefs, his attitudes towards others, his conception of himself, and so on. In dramas of self-deception like *The Sopranos* and Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*, it is this last transition which is ethically crucial. What marks the transition from imagining the world according to Tony's point of view,

and imagining the world - including Tony - as it really (fictionally) is? This will be taken up in more detail in the chapters on Rohmer's series, but a few remarks might prepare the ground for what follows.

One way that we are led to imagine Tony in a different - less charming, more sinister - aspect, is through the adoption of Christopher's point of view. The subjective inflections of the scene in the Bada Bing are at odds with the way that Tony sees himself. In his (*de facto*) paternal relationship with Christopher, in his family troubles, in his sessions with Dr Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), he represents himself, as much to himself as to others, as a man who values loyalty, tough but compassionate, generous, sensitive, misunderstood. But the way that he appears in Christopher's subjectively inflected PoV sequence, is quite different - a cruel, savage embodiment of the chaotic antithesis of his code of honour and family. There is a contradiction between the aesthetic features of the representation (the bestial visual characterisation), and elements of the narrative (Tony's self characterisation). This is a view of Tony that is external to Tony's, but it is not a view, as Thomas Nagel puts it, 'from nowhere' - it is Christopher's view. This doesn't necessarily tell us anything about how Tony really is, just how Christopher has come to think Tony is. Is there another perspective that is more objective, one that is not from any particular point of view at all?

The way that we are brought to a more objective awareness of Tony's subjective view of himself is through an awareness of the dissonance between the version of Tony that is presented by Tony, and the version of Tony that we infer from what we see him do (or the version that is presented by the events of the narrative). But the detachment from Tony's perspective comes not in the incongruities of the decent family man who also murders rivals, the loving father who while on a tour of prospective universities with his daughter Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler) strangles an FBI informant, it is in the occasions when he betrays his own moral code. His relationship with his childhood friend Artie Bucco (John Ventimiglia), for example, is one of affection and loyalty, but there are times when we (and Artie) suspect Tony's motives to be less altruistic and more exploitative than he would admit. And for all the emotional assertions of his special paternal bond with Christopher, when the opportunity arises Tony disposes of him as an impediment to his own interests. The narrative makes salient the gap between what he says and what he does and invites the viewer to step back from a subjective to an objective perspective. If any character in the series can be said to act as a kind of proxy for the viewer it is Dr Melfi, whose attitude to Tony hovers uneasily between fascination, fear, moral disgust,

attraction, admiration, care and affection. Towards the end of the series she eventually comes to feel that she has been duped by his charm, suspicions that are ironically echoed in the conversation of her colleagues at a dinner party. And to emphasise that the viewer should come to the same conclusion, we are shown in close-up the text of an academic, scientific study of the manipulative skills of sociopathic criminals in therapy that she is led to consult. Dr Melfi's visual PoV seems to express, or transmit, the objective authorial point of view.



While it is embedded in a character's subjective point of view, this is a rare, and relatively explicit, authorial intervention which offers an objective perspective on another character in a very similar way that in *Le Genou de Claire* Rohmer presents us with an authorial caution in the form of a fresco of Don Quixote. But while that functions to establish at the outset a context of scepticism within which to frame our responses to the protagonist Jerome, Dr Melfi's PoV shot comes at the end of the series as part of the narrative's resolution of its ambivalence about Tony. It is a final underlining of the series' cautions to resist its own invitations to adopt - or endorse - the subjective point of view.

3. Imagining Subjective *and* Objective Perspectives

As I will argue in later chapters, it is a crucial ethical aspect of fiction that we imaginatively transcend a character's point of view in order to attain a more objective perspective. What then, happens to that subjective point of view that we leave behind? If the objective point of view provides a more 'truthful' picture of the way things 'really' are in the world of the fiction, what use is left for the subjective point of view which the objective view has revealed to be defective?

In defence of his observer theory Carroll argues that we 'assimilate' the perspectives of characters within a general impersonally imagined attitude. This involves having, he says, '... a sense of a character's internal understanding of the situation...'[45] I take 'a sense' to mean a set of propositions which describe what a character believes, feels, wants, and so on. Taking this information into account, we assimilate it with information that is external to the character's perspective, and we adopt a single objective imaginative/emotional response. But at no stage is any simulating, identifying, or any metaphysical mind-fusion involved. Those theorists who defend some version of the participant view of engagement tend to do so by asserting the role of central imagining as a constitutive part of an overarching acentral attitude. In Currie's simulation theory, for example, what he calls 'empathic reenactment' or 'secondary imagining' is very much subordinate to primary imagining and is engaged in only to the extent that it is necessary for an understanding of the work.[46] For Currie, when we simulate the mental states of characters, we simulate in order to further our understanding of the narrative. It is secondary, therefore, both in terms of frequency and in terms of importance.

Murray Smith gives central imagining a much more significant role than does Currie, arguing that it has intrinsic and not merely instrumental value. Nevertheless, our 'global response' must be acentral, because there is typically an epistemic gap between the viewer and the character; the film gives us either an expanded or a restricted range of knowledge relative to the knowledge of the characters. According to Smith, we centrally imagine the cop in *Homicide* (David Mamet, 1991) while he is cursing a family, until the point when one of it members is revealed to us (but not to him) to be present.[47] We are detached from his point of view by knowing more about his situation than he does. Conversely, in *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1996) we are prevented from centrally imagining Matthew Poncelet's (Sean Penn) perspective because our doubts about his guilt or innocence and what he really believes constitute a lack of knowledge. When we do imagine from the inside, therefore, it is always 'partial, tentative, and temporary', and our imaginative response is a combination of both subjective and objective perspectives. Our imaginings of the self-deceptive characters of *The Sopranos*, and as I shall argue in chapters five and six Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*, are similarly structured because we have an external awareness of their motives that they do not have themselves.

---

[45] Carroll, N. 1990, p.95

[46] Cf. Currie, G. *Image and Mind. Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1995), pp.144 – 168

[47] Smith, M. 'Imagining from the Inside' in Smith, M. and Allen, R. (eds.) *Film Theory and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p.419

We imagine the subjective perspective of Hamlet not *Hamlet*. We can identify with Tony or Christopher, but what would it mean to identify with *The Sopranos*? Subjective imagining therefore, cannot account for our overall attitude towards a film. But neither, I have argued, can the more detached 'observer' view be the whole story. It is crucial to the narrative intentions of *The Sopranos* that we get caught up in an uneasy emotional complicity with its characters; the particular power of the series is contained in this tension between subjective and objective perspectives. As Smith says, '...responding appropriately to ... fictions involves both central and acentral imagining, interwoven with one another.'[48] This is true, but it risks conflating a distinction - between the idea that imagining films is a matter of switching between two modes of imagining (now imagining centrally, now imagining acentrally), and the idea that we imagine subjective and objective perspectives simultaneously. I shall argue for the latter, because a model in which the subjective point of view is completely superseded does not seem to fully account for cases like *Homicide* or *The Sopranos* or *Les Contes Moreaux* which are characterised by a dramatic irony.

Towards the end of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1975) Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) has fought the psychopathic killer Michael Myers, and she thinks that she has finally defeated him. As she slumps exhausted against the door frame we share in her sense of relief. However, the shot is divided into two separate focal planes - Laurie in the foreground and Myers lying in the background - and as Laurie has her back to the room in which Myers is lying she cannot see, as we can, that Myers is not dead, but is slowly sitting up.

[48] Smith, 1997, p.424

Our sense of relief is suddenly and sharply transformed into horror and fear, and therefore diverges from the emotions that Laurie is feeling. In a similar way to the scene from *Homicide*, there is an epistemic asymmetry, and the character's ignorance is a central, and perhaps defining, element of the viewer's response. The particularly excruciating character of the fear arises not just from knowing that the killer is not dead, but knowing that Laurie does not know it and is therefore in even greater danger. This seems like a prime example of what Carroll and Kieran mean by the asymmetry in the mental states of characters and the mental states of viewers; we know she is in danger but she does not, and as a result of this we are feeling fear and anxiety but Laurie is feeling relief. The epistemic asymmetry therefore gives rise to an emotional asymmetry. The imagined perspective seems therefore to be an acentral, external one; I am a witness to the situation and not a participant.

The fear that we feel arises from imagining a perspective beyond that of Laurie's. But is there not a possibility that this fear has its roots in the thought of being in that situation (or more precisely, being Laurie in that situation), that is, being in a situation where one is in terrible danger and one does not know it? The fear in this example seems to be characterised not just by a concern for her safety, because that would be the same kind of concern (though perhaps different in degree) whether she knew the danger she is in or not. The specific quality of the feeling comes from imagining being in a position of vulnerable ignorance - what is particularly frightening is not just imagining being in danger, but imagining *not knowing* that you are in danger. This act of imagination seems to involve imagining *both* an objective and a subjective point of view, and the fatal epistemic gap between them. Without preserving the subjective perspective in imagining the objective it seems more difficult to explain why the end of *Halloween* is frightening in its own especially nasty way.

Smith's example from *Homicide* seems to involve a similarly doubled imaginative response. It is true that the appearance of the sister provides an objective perspective on the situation, but the character of my response seems best described as a kind of sympathetic embarrassment, which itself depends on the centrally imagined thought of what he *would* feel if he knew that she was there - it involves imagining being aware and also being unaware of her presence. In fact, it seems very likely that many of the emotions that we feel are rooted in a single act of imagining that has a similarly dual structure. Embarrassment, self-consciousness, shame, are all self-directed emotions, but they also involve an imaginative projection into a position that is external to myself -

imagining how I appear from a more objective point of view. An essential aspect of the pain of jealousy, perhaps, comes from being forced to imagine oneself from a perspective in which one is less central than one had hitherto thought. It is, I think, a mistake to see acts of imagination as conducted exclusively from either a subjective or an objective point of view, central or acentral; it is more likely that imaginings are often structured as a complex of both. Richard Moran writes:

> ...it is internal to the nature of specific aesthetically relevant forms of emotional imagination that there is a perceived difference between what is true in the world imagined and the state of mind one is imaginatively participating in. We can see this, for instance, in the imagination involved in the experience of tragic irony, which requires both the participation in the unknowing state of mind of the hero as he declares that he is searching for the slayer of Laius, and our appreciation in the audience of the disharmony between his sense of his situation and what his situation really is... In a single act of imagination one imagines a certain state of mind, and a certain state of the world, and a crucial distance or lack of fit between them.[49]

The tragic irony that Moran describes is constituted by a dual perspective; we simultaneously imagine the world of the fiction both from the perspective of Oedipus and at the same time from a more objective perspective. The tragic irony of *Oedipus Rex*, the horror irony of *Halloween* and the embarrassment irony of *Homicide* all depend on a gap between a subjectively and an objectively imagined perspective, and this imagining has an epistemic character; we imagine knowing *and* not knowing in a single act of imagining. A similar ironic structure can be found in *The Sopranos* - simultaneously imagining from a point of view both internal and external to Tony's. This imagining has an emotional (and an ethical) character; we adopt a stance at once both sympathetic *and* detached. The ironic force is generated in the tension between perspectives contained in a single thought.

In 'Walk Like a Man', humiliated and desperate, Christopher flees the Bada Bing and goes to the apartment of his friend/victim J.T. Dolan (Tim Daly), where he tearfully vents his feelings of betrayal, alienation and isolation. Perhaps due to a residual emotional effect from the last scene, perhaps due to the power of the performance, the viewer is drawn in to his emotional tirade, and as it reaches a peak of intensity, he says, '...my friends have abandoned me. I've been totally fucking ostrafied.' The malapropism introduces an incongruously comic dimension and snaps the viewer out of Christopher's point of view. As he lists his grievances, J.T. provides a more sceptical interpretation of each one. The viewer, with J.T. functioning as a sceptical proxy, is drawn out of Christopher's perspective and brought to a more objective view. Christopher's

---

[49] Moran, R., 1994, p.90/1

malapropism, and J.T.'s interjections seem to undermine the force of Christopher's emotional outburst, or at least temper it with an awareness of the possibility of a self-serving basis of the emotion.

This is a narrational strategy that is used frequently in the series; the audience is drawn in to an emotional response which is then tempered by an element of the narrative which casts doubt on the genuineness or the real nature of the emotion to which we are responding. One of the most emotionally affecting story-lines of the final series is A.J.'s descent into depression, his suicide attempt, and Tony's despair at his powerlessness to prevent it. At moments of emotional intensity, outpourings of his sadness and desperation, it is difficult to remain unmoved by A.J.'s suffering. For example, when Tony has been shot and the family are anxiously waiting, A.J. seethes and trembles with fear and thoughts of revenge on Uncle Junior. Christopher tries to dissuade him, pointing out the impenetrable FBI security surrounding Junior, to which A.J. replies, 'Difficult. Not impossible.' rehearsing a line from *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). As his depression deepens and darkens, he expresses his unhappiness in platitudes and pseudo-psychological jargon. The incongruity of the language with which he express his unhappiness, plants a seed of uncertainty about his feelings which is the basis for a more objective point of view. In both cases our emotional response is tempered by a more objective external evaluation of the situation, but in neither case does that mean that we do not also sympathise with what the character is feeling.

What is the difference between this and Carroll's 'assimilation'? Carroll's claim that we 'have a sense of a character's internal understanding of a situation' is not sufficient to account for *The Sopranos* narrative strategy of emotional misdirection, which depends first on generating an emotional response that is congruent with the character's, and then subverting it with an alternative perspective that reveals its defects. Carroll is correct that we can understand, for example, that Christopher feels alienated, and betrayed, and 'ostrafied', without imagining it 'from the inside', but because this is also an external view it will not be contradicted by another external view, and it is unable to generate the narrative force that the strategy aims for. In order for the strategy of emotional subversion to be possible, there needs to be something to subvert. So I am claiming that subjective imagining is important for the narrative not because an empathetic response makes it more vivid or personally significant or enjoyable (although all these are also true, and important), but because without it certain narrational strategies would not work. I am now in danger of encroaching on the territory of chapter four, but

before I move on I will sum up this point by saying just that if one of the ethical functions of art is to show us the value of transcending the limits of a subjective point of view, and it does that by providing us with the means to imaginatively enact that transcendence, we must first of all be located within the subjective point of view that is to be transcended.

Carroll speculates that what motivates participant theories that give empathy or central imagining an important role in engaging with fictions is an odd sort of egoism; imagining what happens to other people cannot really matter until we imagine it happening *to us*. It could be argued that whether we find this an uncomfortable thought or not, it might be an irreducible fact of human psychology; it might just be how we are. Alternatively, and more optimistically, we could respond by saying that it assumes an overly strong form of the 'in his shoes' version of subjective imagining that I argued against at the beginning. When I subjectively or dramatically imagine the perspective of another, I am not imagining anything about myself. I *could* imagine what it would mean for me to experience the same or similar things, but that, as I suggested, is a different kind of imagining. This is a centrally important issue, and as such it will be the subject of chapter four in which I discuss the ethical value of subjective and objective imagining.

3

Films and 'Thick' Ethical Concepts

The previous two chapters have been concerned with the question of the nature of our imaginative involvement with fiction film. This chapter and the one that follows will ask whether, and to what extent, this imaginative involvement has an ethical function. As I mentioned at the beginning of the last chapter, one way that imagining fictions has been seen as having an ethical dimension is in the imagining of the points of view of characters. The ethical value of imagining 'what it's like' will be the subject of the next chapter. The present chapter will examine the more traditional view of the ethical role of fiction, providing instruction or guidance, as cautionary tales, allegories of good and evil, biblical parables, and so forth. From *The Iliad* to *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940) to *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening, 1989-), narrative fiction has ordinarily been taken as a rich source of moral insight and knowledge. This chapter will ask what becomes of this idea in the face of recent doubts about the general philosophical capacities of film. How can we derive moral knowledge from fictional narratives that do not consist in arguments, or offer justifications, or give evidence for their claims? Indeed, when they depend on interpretation, how can we be certain what their claims are? On the other hand, can it be just *false* that narrative fiction is a source of moral knowledge?

Even if it can be shown that narrative fictions can have a morally educative function - and simple morality tales and biblical parables seem like obvious cases that do have this primary purpose - the problem is whether we can claim a serious ethical function for works of art in a way that finds a role for the features which make them valuable *qua* art. How can we reconcile moral education with aesthetic appreciation? The view which sees works as mere vehicles for the transmission of moral rules and principles, fatally ignores the aesthetic dimension. *Othello*, for example, *could* be seen as a cautionary tale about jealousy, but so reductive a description seems both to drastically undervalue and misdescribe the work itself, and also to misunderstand the nature of our relation to it. An important task of this chapter, then, is to outline an account which finds a central and necessary role for the aesthetic features specific to film in the production of its ethical content.

1. Films as Thought Experiments

The claim that fiction contributes in a very important way to how we think about moral issues, is often defended in terms of its ability to produce new moral knowledge through valid forms of argument, or through other philosophically respectable means. Noël Carroll has argued that one way that films can generate knowledge is in the manner of thought

experiments.[1] It is, he says, a central and accepted philosophical method to either advocate or question some theory by playing out in the imagination a fictional narrative. And since fiction films consist in fictional narratives, if this is a legitimate mode of philosophical enquiry it should also be accepted as a way that films can be genuine sources of philosophical insight. Narrative fictions, Carroll argues, can operate as thought experiments which 'clarify' our 'stock' of moral knowledge.

Moral philosophy, it could be argued, has a particular affinity with this method. Bernard Williams, for example, argues against utilitarianism with the story of Jim and the Indians. Jim arrives in a South American town where twenty innocent people are about to be shot as an example to an unruly populace. As an honoured visitor, Jim is given a choice: he can personally execute one person and the other nineteen will be set free, or he can refuse, but then all twenty will face the firing squad. What should he do?[2] Williams' story is a means of thinking through the consequences of what the moral theory of utilitarianism entails. It puts before us a hypothetical situation in which the maximisation of the general good involves a conflict with personal moral principles.[3] According to Carroll, just as thought experiments can be used to bring us to reconfigure or 'clarify' our 'stock' of moral knowledge; films can bring us to reevaluate our conceptual knowledge of what constitutes virtue. Carroll argues that understanding some works of fiction as thought experiments addresses the three main objections to the idea that fictions can be bearers of moral knowledge and education: the 'banality argument', the 'no-evidence argument' and the 'no-argument argument'.

1.1 The Banality, No-Evidence and No-Argument Arguments

The 'banality argument' is, roughly, that the moral lessons that fiction putatively offers, are nothing more than truisms. The moral lesson of *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) for example, might be taken as offering the advice that in certain circumstances one ought to set aside one's personal selfish desires in the interests of a greater cause. This, according to the banality objection, is not very interesting new moral knowledge. The argument grants that fictions can transmit propositions, and propositions of a moral nature, but since the purpose of education is to teach us things we do not already know, the truisms offered by

---

1 Carroll, N. 'The Wheel of Virtue' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60:1 (2002)

2 Williams. B. 'A Critique of Utilitarianism' in Williams and J.J.C. Smart, *Utilitarianism For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) p.98

3 It is more complicated than this suggests, but I will come back to this point later.

fiction cannot be educative. Moreover, it is a condition of being able to understand the moral nature of the situations represented in fiction that we are already in possession of certain sets of moral concepts and beliefs. Judging that at the end of *Casablanca* Rick's act is a noble one, requires that we already recognise and understand (even if we do not believe) the moral proposition that sometimes we ought to act against our own selfish interests. Narrative comprehension requires the employment of those very moral concepts which it is often claimed that the fictions hope to teach us. Carroll argues, however, that philosophical thought experiments also rely on us already having a set of beliefs and assumptions in order for them to be intelligible. The story of Jim and the Indians, for example, relies not just on believing that one should not kill, but also on the utilitarian belief that overall it is worse that twenty people are killed than one is. The thought experiment operates by setting one belief against another with which it conflicts. By asking how and why the two moral beliefs conflict the theory or the concept is clarified and refined. And it is, according to Carroll, this reorganisation of our existing beliefs which is a good candidate for the moral education offered by fiction.

The 'no-evidence argument' holds that fictions can offer hypotheses, and speculations, and opinions, but none of these can count as substantial contributions to knowledge, because they do not offer any evidence to support their claims. Fiction, it might be argued, offers us assertions about human nature, and what people are and are not disposed to do in certain situations, but unlike the social sciences, psychology, and so on, they offer no empirical evidence to justify these claims. As Bruce Russell argues: 'No-one can establish on the basis of, for instance, *A Simple Plan* [Sam Raimi, 1998] that people will probably get caught or their lives will be made miserable if they commit a heinous deed...A film might remind us of the evidence we know of already, but it cannot supply the relevant evidence itself. Imaginary situations cannot supply real data.'[4] The conclusions of psychology are drawn from the statistical evidence of a large range of actual cases; whereas not only is art concerned with individual cases, but they are also 'made up'. When a work does offer us moral truths, it is designed towards illustrating that truth; so a work of art cannot perform the role of independent evidence for the moral hypothesis of its creator. According to Carroll, however, this sort of empirically established fact is not the only kind of legitimate knowledge to be had, and it is not the kind that fiction films aim for. Thought experiments do not claim to discover new facts about the world, but rather produce new

---

[4] Russell, B. 'The Philosophical Limits of Film' in Carroll, N. and Choi, J. (eds.) *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) p. 390

knowledge by leading us to reconsider our existing beliefs and presuppositions. Films do not 'supply real data', but they can be a means of conceptual clarification. The story of Jim and the Indians is not meant to tell us anything about the actual possible outcomes of such situations, but rather to bring us to a clearer picture of how objective moral demands and personal integrity might conflict. It presents a fictional example in order to question the utilitarian injunction to always maximise the general good; or rather, it provides a scenario which enables us to follow out in imagination, to think through, what a utilitarian view of morality entails.

The no-evidence objection can also be made in relation to a great deal of moral philosophy, of course. But whereas philosophical papers often do not (but sometimes do) offer empirical evidence for the theories that they propose, they do offer *arguments*. Films, according to the no-argument argument, do not. As Carroll describes it, this objection has two parts: the first is that assuming that works of fiction can and do make assertions, they do not offer any supporting argument. The second is that it is not part of the critical response to a work that we debate the truth or falsity of a work's putative assertions. *Casablanca*, for example, might be understood as asserting the moral principle that the general good outweighs the personal demands of self-interest, but it does not reach this conclusion by arguing from premisses. According to Carroll, however, neither do thought experiments follow a pattern of deductive inference from explicitly stated premisses, yet they are arguments nonetheless. They depend on the reader having certain unspoken assumptions, and it is these which constitute the implicit premisses of the argument. Narrative fictions operate in the same way; the viewer or reader supplements what is given either explicitly or by implication in the text with sets of background assumptions.

The second part of the no-argument argument objects that the question of the truth value of this moral principle does not feature among the things that we are likely to say when discussing the film. We might refer to it in describing Rick's motivations and conflicts, but it is not relevant to an appreciation of the work to ask whether its assertions are true or false. As Lamarque and Olsen (L&O) put it: 'The issues of literary criticism concern aspects of literary works, and among these issues will be their handling of certain types of themes and concepts, but there is no accepted place for debate about the truth or falsity of general statements about human life or the human condition.'[5] It is an important part of aesthetic criticism to identify the *way* that these propositions are expressed, but not whether they are true. Discussion of a work of art differs in this respect from discussion of

---

[5] Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, p. 332

a work of philosophy; in the case of a philosophical argument it is not the manner of the expression of a proposition but its truth value that counts. Perhaps the point can be seen most sharply in the case of religious works of art. It is quite possible for an atheist to appreciate and respond to Dante's *Divine Comedy* or *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) without also reflecting on whether the religious sentiments contained therein are true.

David Davies objects to L&O's 'no truth theory' of fiction by arguing that aesthetic appreciation includes identifying the content of an implied proposition: '... an interest in how a film articulates its content surely presupposes some grasp of what that content *is*.'[6] But as L&O argue, questions about the content of implied general propositions in works of fiction must be distinguished from questions about the truth of those propositions. In describing works we can and must say what these propositions are, and also make judgements about their intelligibility which involves asking about their truth-*conditions*, but in going beyond these sorts of statements to ones about truth-*value*, L&O argue, we go beyond aesthetic appreciation. As they put it: 'The critic is free to join this debate, of course, but when he does he has moved on from literary appreciation...'[7] L&O maintain, using Monroe Beardsley's terminology, that the proper role of aesthetic criticism is to identify and describe a theme, it is not to then go on to debate that theme as a thesis. What is the difference between identifying a theme and extracting a moral thesis from a film? Theme and thesis have different objects. A theme is a description of the film and is therefore specific to that film. Identifying a theme in a film is recommending a certain way of looking at it; pointing out connections, formal patterns, recurring motifs, resonant symmetries, and so on, all lead us to view the work in a particular aspect. Identifying a theme is an operation of what Moran calls 'imaginativeness', and in section three of this chapter I shall describe *Five Easy Pieces* in this way. The function that the theme performs is primarily as an interpretive schema for the film, not a truth claim about the world. A thesis, on the other hand, is detachable from the particular qualities of the film from which it is derived. It refers not to the film, but to the actual world.

Certainly judgements of truth and falsity do not play the same kind of role in fiction as they do in philosophy or history or science, but does L&O's no-truth theory risk cutting fiction off from an important source of value? L&O are not claiming that the thematic content of works of fiction bears no relation to the world and to issues of human concern, and they are not saying that fiction does not contribute to our moral lives in some

---

[6] Davies, D. 'Can Film be a Philosophical Medium?' *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*,5:2, (2008) 5

[7] Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, p. 336

important way. They claim merely that considerations about the truth of those moral assertions are not part of *aesthetic* appreciation. But I wonder whether ethical and aesthetic properties of a work are as separable as L&O seem to suggest. Someone who is a Catholic, for example, might derive from Dante's *Divine Comedy* or *The Exorcist* an emotionally richer and more powerful experience than someone who is not. The set of beliefs that a person holds can often provide an extra dimension to the overall emotional, imaginative and aesthetic appreciation of a work. Moreover, even if truth judgments play no role in literary criticism, such judgements nevertheless seem to be an important feature of our ordinary discourse about films and other narrative fictions. The nature and the quality of the viewpoint that is expressed in what works imply seem to matter. And if a work expresses attitudes, and particularly moral attitudes, about the world which we consider to be false, or mistaken, or simplistic, or dishonest, we are likely to form a less favourable overall opinion of it for those reasons.

A full and adequate understanding of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, for example, might have to include a recognition of its sentimental pastoralism, its valorisation of a Nordic racial ideal and its consequent fear and suspicion of the 'Eastern hordes'. The ethical and political attitudes which the work implies do not, as L&O's no-truth theory suggests, seem to be irrelevant in understanding the work, and neither does it seem something that is not a part of what we might ordinarily be inclined to say about it. Whether or not one agrees with this interpretation of the novels (and the film adaptations) the question of their attitude to racial politics seems to be central to a full appreciation. The question of the validity or falsity of those racial attitudes is not explicitly broached in literary criticism, but the moral validity of such views is surely implicit in the question of whether the works express them. In asking whether the novels and films imply a sentimental view of 'Englishness', or even an anti-semitic attitude, we do not take a morally neutral position on the legitimacy of such views. In fact, as L&O themselves argue, a judgement of sentimentality can be one of those factors that determines the nature of our internal imaginative and emotional engagement: '...certain kinds of representations - sensational, sentimental, exploitative kinds, for example - do not merit our emotional involvement.'[8] And if sentimentality (at least in the way that L&O are using the term) is an ethically saturated concept, then judgements of ethical value and the aesthetic value of the work are inextricably bound up with each other. By using words like 'sentimental' or

[8] Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, p. 156

'exploitative' to describe the nature of a representation L&O employ ethical concepts to describe aesthetic entities.

1.2 Disanalogies between Films and Thought Experiments

There are, however, some significant differences between thought experiments and works of fiction; they differ (1) in their narrative qualities, (2) in their functions and the ends to which they are put, and (3) in their degree of dependence on an accompanying context of argument in which they are to be understood. The question now is whether these differences are enough to undermine the usefulness of Carroll's analogy.

As Murray Smith has argued, although both are fictional, and both are narrative, philosophical thought experiments differ fundamentally from artistic fictions because the former are significantly lacking in the rich detail that we find in the latter. The question of *narrative* detail should be distinguished, however, from the question of *formal* or *aesthetic* detail; *what* events are represented from *how* those events are represented. Films, and other artistic fictions, differ from thought experiments in both respects; they give us both more information about characters and events than is strictly required to make a philosophical point, and they do so through a greater concern with the manner of the transmission of that information. Whereas thought experiments are bare, schematic and brief, artistic fictions are centrally concerned with the particularities of characters and events. Moreover, an artistic fiction is valued precisely *because* of the richness of those details. Thought experiments, on the other hand, are more effective and philosophically useful to the extent that they are stripped of these details. Williams' story about Jim, for example, is unusual in its inclusion of certain literary flourishes, the 'captain's sweat soaked shirt' for example. But the difference is that these are incidental; the story would serve its purpose even if these were removed - it is not important that Jim is Jim, rather than Fred, or even X, or that it takes place in South America, or that there are twenty Indians and not thirty, or that they are South American Indians and not Russian or Chinese. The same cannot be said of a literary fiction or a film, however. It is one of the things that we value about works of fiction that they represent characters and events that are richly developed, and fully realised, and who are (from the internal perspective) particular persons.

Drawing on Richard Moran's distinction between hypothetical and dramatic imagining, Smith argues that the greater detail of artistic fictions involves us to a much greater extent in dramatic imagining. Thought experiments, on the other hand, involve a much 'thinner' *hypothetical* imaginative experience - imagining what follows from certain

premisses without the additional emotional engagement. The greater detail of fiction serves to promote the richer imaginative experience, and the relative lack of detail of the thought experiment serves to facilitate a clearer elucidation of the hypothesis to be imagined. Davies argues, however, that the distinction between hypothetical and dramatic imagining actually draws films and thought experiments closer together. Like films, thought experiments involve us in an imaginative project, not just entertaining a hypothesis, but following out the implications of the scenario. The philosophical thought experiment encourages us to dramatically imagine the consequences and implications of certain situations, just as do films. It is true that thought experiments can involve or invite a large measure of imaginative involvement - Williams' story of Jim and the Indians, for example, involves not just imagining the contradiction of the utilitarian thesis, but imaginatively entering into thoughts of what living by it would mean. Moreover, moral thought experiments often rely on imagining with an uncomfortable emotional aspect; imagine how it would *feel* to be forced by a moral obligation to execute someone. But the difference is that in the thought experiment the dramatic imagining has an instrumental value, whereas Smith would argue, I think, that in the artistic fiction this sort of dramatic imaginative rehearsal is valued in and for itself, it has *intrinsic* value.[9] And this brings us to the next objection.

The second important disanalogy between films and thought experiments is that whereas thought experiments have a single function, to advance, illustrate or bring into question a thesis, films do many things, and if being morally instructive is one of them it need not be even the principal one. As Smith argues, most narrative fiction films, are primarily concerned not with our moral education, but with our entertainment. Philosophical thought experiments can also be amusing, of course, but when they do aim to be funny or entertaining, this goal is secondary to the primary business of elucidating or questioning a thesis.

It might be tempting here to draw the traditional, and rather fuzzy, distinction between commercial movies and 'art' cinema, and from this to argue that the difference in goals applies only to the more 'mainstream' commercial film. But 'art' cinema, such as Bergman or Antonioni for example, also aims to do more than convince the viewer of a proposition. Taken sufficiently broadly, 'entertain' can encompass a formal appreciation and varieties of emotional responses, all of which apply to art cinema, just as they do to Hollywood. This, of course, is also related to the distinction between narrative and formal

---

9 The issue of the ethical value of dramatic, or subjective, imagining will be taken up in the next chapter.

detail mentioned above. One function of the greater formal or aesthetic detail of an artistic fiction is to provide another layer of information about the characters and events of the narrative, but another is to be appreciated for its own sake.

The point, however, is not that entertainment *precludes* education, or *vice versa*, but that the two are ranked differently in terms of priority by art and by philosophy. This is a difference not just between films and thought experiments, but as Iris Murdoch pointed out, between art and philosophy more generally. Whereas art, and specifically narrative fiction, employs a variety of formal means and has a variety of aims and functions, philosophy is employed towards a single aim, to arrive at what is true.[10] Of course, even if film, and fiction more broadly, has a greater range of goals, that does not mean that one of those goals cannot be a philosophical one. Many forms of comedy, in particular, aim at being funny and also at saying something that is true, and it is not clear that these two goals are entirely separable. Fully understanding the philosophical point often requires getting the joke. In the next chapter I will describe just such a case in Miloš Forman's *A Blonde in Love* (1965), where the philosophical point seems to be inextricably bound up with a certain register of melancholy humour. Smith's point, however, is that the difference between films and thought experiments is in their relative hierarchical organisation of goals.

Lastly, when thought experiments are used by philosophers they are generally deployed as part of a more general abstract argument, they do not constitute the argument itself. Therefore the analogy with films can show only that films can be used to illustrate or question pre-exiting theories, it does not show that they can do the argumentative work on their own. Carroll disputes the idea that thought experiments need to be accompanied by explicit linguistic argumentation: 'Literally speaking, this is not really true. Many of Wittgenstein's thought experiments in his *Philosophical Investigations* are not followed by arguments...'[11] Certainly they are not explained, but they are to be understood within and according to a wider context of a general argument - including, according to Wittgenstein, his earlier work the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*.[12] The example of the beetle in a box (*PI*, §293), for instance, occurs within the context of his private language argument, and is introduced and summarised with abstract generalised commentary. Moreover, Wittgenstein's elliptical style is notoriously open to conflicting interpretations - from P.M.S Hacker's to Stanley Cavell's to Saul Kripke's (or 'Kripkenstein') - so it could perhaps be

---

[10] Her point was made in a television interview with the philosopher Brian McGee: *Men of Ideas*, BBC 2, (1978) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wdc7DQv3RA&feature=related)

[11] Carroll, N. in Carroll and Choi, 2006, p. 382

[12] cf. Preface to *Philosophical Investigations*, x[e]: '...the [*PI*] could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking.'

argued that the *Philosophical Investigations* requires not just Wittgenstein's argumentation, but also that of his commentators.

Could Williams' story of Jim and the Indians do the philosophical work alone? Taken in isolation from the surrounding argument, the story could easily be taken as a simple deontological counter-example to refute the utilitarian thesis. It might be understood as proposing the argument that under utilitarianism Jim ought to kill the Indian, killing the Indian would be wrong, therefore utilitarianism is false. But this is exactly what Williams explains that it is not - indeed, he grants that utilitarianism might in fact lead Jim to make the right decision in this case.[13] But the story is part of his wider argument that the doctrine of impersonality of consequentialist moral theories fails to take into account the importance of personal agency - it matters that one's actions and projects are one's own. The thought experiment is one aspect of his 'integrity objection', and although it is highly schematic and economical with extrinsic literary flourishes, it is nevertheless sufficiently ambiguous that it cannot carry the theoretical burden itself and alone.

Carroll's response to the no-argument objection was to claim that fictions can be considered arguments because the reader/viewer fills in the missing but implied premisses. While this is probably true of Aesop's fables or the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, the further we move along a scale of complexity, the more uncertain become our inferences from the text, and the more space opens up which needs to be filled with explicit linguistic argumentation. If films *are* to be seen as thought experiments, then they are in need of a generalising explanatory commentary and must play this role within, and as part of, a larger argument. It seems that we are left with something of a dilemma. If we want to maintain the analogy of films as philosophical thought experiments we must give up on independence. On the other hand, if we claim that films can do the philosophical job on their own, they begin to seem less like what we ordinarily take to be thought experiments.

1.3 The 'Insoluble Problem of Paraphrase'

This leads us to what Paisley Livingston calls the 'insoluble problem of paraphrase'; the objection that films cannot stand alone as philosophy because unlike linguistically rendered works of philosophy they cannot make determinate claims independently of an

---

[13] Williams, B.,1973, p. 117 '...if (as I suppose) the utilitarian is right in this case...'

interpretation. The 'insoluble problem of paraphrase' arises from what Livingston calls the 'bold thesis of film as philosophy': '... namely, the idea that some films can make historically innovative and independent contributions to philosophy by means exclusive to the cinematic medium or art form.'[14] It rests on a set of conditions which Livingston divides into 'means' and 'results'. The 'means' condition refers to the exclusively cinematic manner in which the philosophical content is transmitted. The 'results' condition refers to the nature and the status of the putative philosophical content - its originality, its independence, and its significance. Put crudely, for the bold thesis to succeed it must show that the knowledge that films impart is philosophical, but also that they impart that knowledge in a way that is cinematic. The 'insoluble problem of paraphrase', however, means that it cannot. It takes the form of a dilemma. Either the philosophical content of a film can and must be articulated verbally, in which case it fails to satisfy the innovation and independence conditions; or, it cannot be paraphrased, in which case we have reason to doubt that it really exists.

As an example of a cinematic argument, Aaron Smuts describes the 'God and Country' sequence in Eisenstein's *October/Oktyabr* (1928). The conjunction of shots of Christian religious iconography in a montage structure with shots of the deities of 'primitive' pagan religions, by association, suggests the conclusion that Christianity is no less primitive a superstition than the others. The sequence is philosophical, Smuts argues, because it is a valid argument form, and it is cinematic because it is conducted through montage. Moreover, it is not undermined by the problem of paraphrase because its argument does not rely on a verbal transcription and it is not replaceable with one: '...although we can express the ultimate philosophical contribution in language, this does not mean that the engine of the philosophical work is necessarily linguistic. In the case of *October*, the engine is clearly montage.'[15]

However, in giving a verbal account of the philosophical implications of the sequence, Livingston objects, we rely on the background knowledge and assumptions of the

---

[14] Livingston, P., 2009, p.20

[15] Smuts, A. 'Film as Philosophy: In Defence of a Bold Thesis' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67:4 (2009) 417

spectator. The sequence in *October* derives its meaning from the audience being already versed in a Marxist theory of the nature of religion, but in the absence of that theory the sequence is essentially ambiguous. The sequence would be, and is, ambiguous to anyone who does not already understand the intellectual framework within which Eisenstein makes his assertions. Considered in isolation, this sequence is open to all sorts of alternative interpretations. One could, for example, understand the alternation of Christian and other imagery as some sort of affirmation of universal spiritual harmony, or as a meditation on the human drive to create art, or an enquiry into the nature of the concept of beauty. Or it could be taken as claiming not that Christianity is as primitive as Buddhism, but that Buddhism is as civilised as Christianity. Or, as Livingston argues, it could, in another context, be understood not as an analogical argument, but one that employs the obvious dissimilarities in the various images to suggest the difference of Christianity. The meaning of the sequence depends on its place in a larger discursive context, which is indicated by the pair of inter-titles - 'Of God...', '...and Country' - which frame the sequence, directing the viewer's interpretive activity.

Livingston is able to make this objection to Smuts' point because in the example the alternating *images* bear no necessary relation to each other. The analogy breaks down because there is not the same sort of relation of reference between the images in a montage sequence as there is between the terms of a linguistically rendered argument, as there is, for example, in a syllogism. We can associate one image with another, but they do not explicitly refer to each other. The fact of resemblance between the two sets of images does not automatically imply the conclusion that Eisenstein intended or that Smuts claims. This, according to Livingston, means that whatever philosophical contribution the film makes, it cannot be an independent one because it necessarily relies on a pre-existing structure of beliefs and set of assumptions. In the same way, Carroll's thought experiment analogy is vulnerable to the same problem; the thought experiment is *correctly* understood only when it is seen in relation to a wider argument - we approach Wittgenstein's beetle in a box example within the framework of his private language argument, or Williams' story in terms of his 'integrity objection' to utilitarianism. Films can perform this philosophical role only when they are placed within the relevant explanatory context by an accompanying linguistic description.

1.4 Films as Counter-arguments

Livingston's condition that philosophical films must be innovative is meant to rule out the weaker possibility in which films can be 'mere' illustrations of pre-existing philosophical texts. In order for film to make a philosophical contribution it must be possible for it to express an idea that has not already been asserted, otherwise films could only be philosophical in a derivative way, they could not themselves make any original contribution. Carroll would respond to this objection by saying that there is an important distinction to be made between a film as a 'mere' illustration of philosophical theory or moral principle, and a film as a response to one. Even if films cannot build their own sophisticated and independent moral theses, they might be able to provide reasons to doubt those of others; and this, according to Carroll, should count as a legitimate philosophical contribution to knowledge. He uses the example of *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949) to make this point. The film, he argues, could very plausibly be understood as a response to E.M. Forster's maxim 'When loyalty to a friend conflicts with loyalty to a cause, one ought to choose in favour of the friend.'[16] The story of Holly Martin's (Joseph Cotten) discovery of the crimes committed by Harry Lime (Orson Welles), and his acceptance of a moral duty to assist in Harry's capture, provides a counter-example that disputes the maxim.

As thought experiments, it is no doubt true that films can provide hypothetical counter-examples to existing moral theories. But, first, this sort of role only seems to be available as a response to blanket universal moral prescriptions. The narrative of *The Third Man* could only be a counter-example to the moral principle that it is always and necessarily right to value loyalty to friends over loyalty to community. But would anyone seriously suggest that loyalty to friends is *always* required in every situation? If not, then the film is a counter-example to something of a straw man. On the other hand, if the principle admits of exceptions, the film could equally be seen as an illustration of one of these exceptional situations, not as an argument against the principle. Secondly, claiming that films can be counter-examples to existing philosophical and moral theories significantly weakens the notion of films as independent works of philosophy. This brings us back to Livingston's originality condition (which is not, admittedly, a part of Carroll's argument), that in order for the bold claims for the philosophical potential of film to be supportable, it must be shown that films can make their own innovative contributions to

---

[16] Carroll, N., 2002, p.10

the corpus of knowledge. Films as thought experiments which are employed to raise doubts about existing theories seem then to count neither as independent, nor as innovative.

But there is a further objection to be made here. Enlisting *The Third Man* as a counter-example to Forster's maxim seems to implicate the film in a more simplistic world-view than it seems actually to display. Carroll's interpretation, for example, ignores the fact that Holly initially agrees to help with Harry's capture not from a sense of moral duty, but as payment for Callaghan's (Trevor Howard) promise to help Anna (Alida Valli), Harry's former lover and the woman whom Holly has himself fallen in love with, escape Vienna. The moral obligation sways him only later, after Anna has refused his help. Even if *The Third Man* can be taken as a counter-example to Forster's maxim, it is in no way a straightforward one. There is a significant moral ambivalence in the film which seems to cut against the use which Carroll finds for it. Unlike Eisenstein's *October* the film seems to be *intentionally* ambiguous about the moral 'message', or the absence, or the practical implications of one. In other words, Carroll's employment of *The Third Man* in the role of a thought experiment not only fails to account for the particular narrative details, but in order for it to function it must misdescribe them.

At the end, the allies have caught and killed Harry, and the film ends as it began, with his funeral. The final sequence of the film is an extended shot in which Anna walks towards the camera, past and away from Holly, without even a glance. Holly's (eventual) conversion to the cause of the allies, to duty, and to the moral necessity of betraying a friend, earns him neither love nor admiration, but Anna's contempt. If there is a moral 'message' here it might be that the reward of right action can often be difficult to identify but we should be moral nevertheless. On the other hand, the bleakness of the ending might carry a hint of Harry's cynicism which pervades the film, a post-war, post-traumatic moral scepticism. Or it might even be taken, *pace* Carroll, as lending a tentative support to Forster's maxim. The most appealing character in it is Anna, and she is appealing largely because she adheres to the moral value of loyalty. That is why the final scene, in which she walks past him as if he has ceased to exist, is such a devastating ending - even though she thinks his motives more self-serving than they eventually were, the film makes room for the possibility that she is *justified* in ignoring him nevertheless. How does this coexist with the obviousness of Holly's moral duty?

The film could, I suggest, be given an interpretation which brings it very close to an aspect of Williams' critique of what he calls the 'peculiar institution' of morality. It could be seen as a situation in which two separate moral obligations, loyalty to a friend and a duty to prevent harm, find themselves in conflict. Roughly, it is a foundational principle of the 'morality system', as Williams calls it, that 'ought implies can', and if it is not *possible* to do something then one is released from the obligation to do it. From this it follows that when one obligation makes another one impossible to satisfy, one of them must be abandoned. Therefore, according to Williams, under the morality system there can be no such thing as a moral conflict because one obligation rules out the other; when it seems that they conflict, it must be that one of them is not *really* an obligation. However, Williams argues, this theoretical systematisation fails to recognise that in real life we often do face conflicting moral obligations. The story of Jim and the Indians is one example when the moral system of consequentialism results in such a conflict, and it could be argued that *The Third Man* presents us with another.[17]

---

[17] For a highly influential discussion of the ancient Greek attitude towards conflicting moral duties expressed in tragedy, see Martha Nussbaum's *Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) esp. ch.1.

There are two aspects of the film which generate this conflict. The first makes it very clear that Harry is indeed every bit as evil as Callaghan says - on this point the film is quite unambiguous. How does it remove the doubt? Callaghan cements Holly's cooperation by leading him on a tour of a hospital ward in which he is shown the children who are the victims of Harry's penicillin racket. The consequences of Harry's business are rammed home (not very subtly) with a shot of an abandoned teddy-bear whose owner, we are led to assume, has died.

In a way similar to the obviousness of Jim's duty to execute the Indian, the film establishes the obviousness of Holly's moral duty to assist in the capture of his friend and to put an end to the evil and destructive effects of his business. But the unfolding of Holly's realisation of his moral duty is set against a parallel realisation of the contempt that it earns him in Anna's eyes. The idea that in betraying a friend Holly is doing something necessary, but at the same time something unavoidably immoral, is expressed in the juxtaposition of representations of the two conflicting demands; the evidence of Harry's evil trade and Anna's ethical standard of personal loyalty.

Under the 'morality system' Holly faces no dilemma, and should therefore feel no remorse, because his duty to stop Harry 'trumps' any other duties of loyalty or friendship. But the end of the film conveys no sense of a celebration of an unequivocal or uncomplicated moral achievement. Just as Williams says that the utilitarian course of action is right in Jim's case, Holly is right to help capture Harry, but the point is that in neither case is it *obvious* that they are right. Rather, there is a very powerful impression, in the long empty road and the dead leaves announcing winter, of something irretrievably lost. If this 'reading' is correct then the film is not, as Carroll suggests, an illustration of the primacy of one moral duty over another, but an example of a situation which casts doubt on the basic principle of the morality system which assumes that in such a conflict of obligations it is *obvious* that one should eliminate the other.

Of course, in questioning the *content* of Carroll's interpretation of *The Third Man*, I am not disputing, but confirming his assertion of films as (in some way) akin to thought experiments. I am not, however, arguing that the film can operate as a thought experiment in the absence of an explanatory commentary, and therefore that films can be entirely *independent* contributions to philosophy. And neither can it be guaranteed that the theme which I have described is not a projection onto the film of my own concerns, and is not therefore still vulnerable to some form of the problem of paraphrase. The film can be given any number of competing interpretations, some more plausible than others, but in order to determine the most plausible one it is necessary to give the sort of description that Carroll does, and that I have outlined above. Even as staunch a defender of the philosophical powers of fiction as Martha Nussbaum does not claim that works of literature can do the philosophical work without the assistance of a more explicit generalising commentary. In her discussion of Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*, she says: 'The text itself displays, and is, a high kind of moral activity. But, I think, it does not itself, self-sufficiently, set itself beside other conceptions of moral attention and explain its differences from them...' The philosophical criticism, according to Nussbaum, acts as an '...ally of the literary text, sketching out its relation to other forms of moral writing.'[18] The more controversial part of Nussbaum's claim is that the dependency relation is symmetrical; philosophy can give only a partial account of the ethical life unaided by literature - some aspects of moral understanding can *only* be transmitted in the form of narrative fiction. I shall come back to this question in the next chapter.

1.5 Ambiguity: Philosophical Vice and Aesthetic Virtue

The *epistemic* problem of the philosophical potential of art, which is the problem of interpretation - that we cannot know with certainty what a film's assertion is - has an important *aesthetic* dimension. Unlike *The Third Man*, many works of fiction leave little room for doubt about the 'moral of the story'. But works in which the moral assertions are unequivocal and unambiguous are precisely those works that fail to meet the aesthetic criteria of complexity and subtlety. It is those works, like *The Third Man*, that seem the most resistant to simple paraphrase that we value more highly. Philosophical thought experiments and works of fiction are judged by different standards of success; a thought experiment is more effective if it removes complicating factors of particular circumstances.

---

[18] Nussbaum, M. *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) p. 161

A film, however, is aesthetically successful to the extent that it resists being reduced to a simple paraphrase. It is not that films cannot be paraphrased with varying degrees of certainty, rather that the ones that can are the ones that we *least* value as art. The problem of paraphrase is, to some extent, a manifestation of the incommensurability of the respective aims and objectives of philosophy and art. Philosophy (at least in the analytic tradition) aims at truth by removing the possibility of misunderstanding, by closing down or blocking possible sources of confusion; art thrives on a degree of uncertainty. As Smith says, 'Few criticisms are more apt to strike terror into the heart of a philosopher than the assertion that such and such a proposition is ambiguous.'[19] Ambiguity can be a virtue in art, but in philosophy it is usually a vice.

But we need to treat this idea of ambiguity with caution. The way that I have put it, it might be taken to suggest that ambiguity is a formal strategy which conceals the absence of content. It *can* play this role in art, but it can also perform this role in philosophy. Moreover, the idea that ambiguity is a virtue in art risks obscuring the fact that, certainly in film, many formal devices are aesthetic strategies for *minimising* ambiguity, not generating it. Artistic fictions are, unlike thought experiments, open ended and relatively indeterminate, and they allow for a wider range of possible interpretations, but we are not free to imagine anything that we like. Fictional works license some imaginings, and not others. In the last chapter I mentioned how the editing patterns of the PoV shot structure function, to a large degree, to remove the essential ambiguity of facial expressions. André Bazin's realist criticisms of montage were rooted in his view that the Eisensteinian collision of images imposed an epistemic determinacy on a film which fails to represent truthfully the *in*determinacy of life. Harry Lime is represented as unambiguously evil by a visual association with the results of his crimes. This element of the narrative must be represented unambiguously, because it forms a part of the wider thematic moral ambiguity. We need to accept Harry's evil as fact in order that the uneasy tensions of loyalty and betrayal which shape the narrative more globally can be effective. If there were any doubt about Harry's evil, the uncomfortable thoughts that the film hints at - the thought that there is not a simple, or even rational, connection between loyalty and the deserving of loyalty, or that there is no direct connection between acting right and being happy, or, according to the Williams interpretation, that moral obligations can come into irresolvable conflict - would have their force undermined.

---

[19] Smith, M. 'Film Art, Argument and Ambiguity' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art History*, 64:1 (2006) p.40

Smith argues that, '...while we can imagine finding [properties like complexity, ingenuity, inventiveness, density, ambiguity, and profundity] in works of philosophy, it is not clear that we would value them in just the same way in works of philosophy as in a work of art.'[20] But I wonder if we do not in fact value them in a very similar way. Like art, we value philosophical works precisely because they are complex and subtle and nuanced, and because they are therefore better able to give a fuller account of the complexity of life. The criticisms that we could make of the *October* sequence are just the kind of criticisms that we might make of works of bad philosophy; imprecision, vagueness, dubious premisses, obviousness and a lack of subtly issuing in a reductive and simplistic conclusion. That is not to say that art and philosophy are identical, or that one is a subspecies of the other, but rather that they can often be valued in similar terms. When we criticise a philosophical work for its obscurity it is, sometimes, because that obscurity masks the real complexities of its subject and makes things seem simpler than they really are. Art - or at least the forms of art which aim at truthful accounts of reality - is not obscure in this sense. It is not ambiguous in order to *disguise* how the world is, but to bring into view the complexities and complications and contradictions that, according to Williams, the theoretical oversimplifications of the 'peculiar institution' of morality seeks to erase.

2. Films as Examples of 'Thick' Ethical Concepts

The objections to the cognitive potential of art have been rooted in the doubt that art can or should generate new knowledge. L&O, for example, differentiate the practices of art and philosophy because the latter aims at asserting propositions which are true. Carroll's response is to claim that films generate knowledge in the manner of philosophical thought experiments. But there are traditions of skepticism about the truth status of *any* moral propositions. Moral statements, according to this view, are about *values*, which are not the kind of entities that can be true or false determined in virtue of their correspondence to facts. One such tradition is relativism; moral propositions that are 'true' in one culture or in one historical era, may not be 'true' in another. Another tradition is the emotivism of A.J Ayer, for whom there is no such thing as moral knowledge; when we use words like 'good' and 'ought' we are not describing facts about how the world is, but expressing (not describing) our feelings. According to Ayer, to say 'one ought to be generous' is nothing more than to say 'Hooray for generosity.' If this is correct, then there could not, even in

---

[20] Ibid, p.40

principle, be films which transmit moral knowledge if knowledge is understood, as it usually is, as justified true belief, because there are no moral facts which one could be justified in believing.

Words like 'good', 'ought', 'right', 'wrong', are, according to Bernard Williams, 'thin' ethical concepts. They refer to to concepts which are relatively empty of particular descriptive content. On the other hand, there are concepts which are constituted by a much more specific and detailed descriptive component. Words '... such as *treachery* and *promise* and *brutality* and *courage...*' which seem to be descriptions of how the world is, are at the same time evaluations of the things, states, behaviours, situations, described, words '...which express a union of fact and value.'[21] These, according to Williams, are 'thick ethical concepts' (TECs). This is a gross simplification, but Williams argues that it is with 'thick' concepts, rather than 'thin', that we stand the best chance of arriving at stable ethical judgements, or ethical knowledge. Why? How can there be true statements about moral concepts? How can there be facts about, for example, generosity, or cowardice, or loyalty? Briefly, to know what the TEC 'loyalty' means is to know in what situations the word is applicable. If we know this much, then we are also in a position to make either true or false statements about the TEC and the circumstances of its correct application. This is not to say that there is never any possibility of disagreement about TECs; they can be rightly or wrongly applied, and there can be disagreement over their applicability to new situations. But their use is determined by facts about the world, and using them guides our actions. TECs function, within a particular culture and era, as both action-guiding (prescriptive), and as items of ethical knowledge. The question is, how do we come to agree on the meanings of TECs?

2.1 Fictional Scenarios and Thick Ethical Concepts

How do we arrive at an implicit collective agreement that 'loyalty' is correctly applicable to situation A, and not to situation B? The first occasion is a child's introduction to ethical language in the telling of stories. It is a commonplace that fairy tales can be understood as performing a didactic function in this respect. But before the learning of moral *principles*, which is a relatively high-level theoretical understanding of general, abstract, 'thin' concepts, I suggest that children are first introduced to exemplary scenarios of TECs. Before children learn the moral rules about, for example, the *rightness* of sharing, they

---

[21] Williams, B. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Fontana, 1985, p.129

accumulate a repertoire of situations in which people feel angry, or afraid, or display qualities like bravery or generosity, and in this way come to know what these concepts mean by knowing when they are and are not applicable. This form of ethical knowledge does not (at least not yet) involve learning sets of moral principles; it is more like acquiring through experience an ability, or a quality of judgement. Moreover, the greater, and the more various, their repertoire of scenarios, the sharper their understanding of a TEC becomes. Fictional examples of situations in which such concepts are applicable constitute a contribution to ethical knowledge of those concepts. The idea fits with more recent interpretations of the Aristotelian notion of *Katharsis*; not a purging, but, according to Martha Nussbaum[22] and Jonathan Lear[23] for example, a clarification of emotions - learning when and to what degree a particular emotional response is appropriate. The notion also finds support in Ronald de Sousa's theory of 'paradigm scenarios'; roughly, the idea is that emotion concepts derive their meaning from their association with a set of paradigmatic narrative scenarios.[24] We understand the meaning of 'anger' or 'fear', for example, not in terms of sets of necessary and sufficient conditions of the concepts, but in terms of exemplary micro-fictions.

It also brings us back, of course, to Carroll's idea of films as thought experiments which 'clarify' or reconfigure our 'stock' of conceptual knowledge. But where Carroll's thought experiments and my TEC examples differ is that Carroll blurs the distinction between thought experiments as recommending or questioning moral rules and principles, and films as exemplifying ethical concepts. Carroll's notion of a 'virtue wheel', a fictional structure in which contrasting virtues and vices are represented by characters, seems to suggest that fictions refine concepts by presenting sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. As he says: 'Literary fictions then can afford knowledge of concepts, such as concepts of virtue, by stimulating the reader to an awareness, through reflective self-analysis, of the conditions, rules, and criteria, for said concepts.'[25] At first glance this seems quite similar to the idea of fictions as exemplary of TECs, but I think there is a significant difference. In Carroll's version the fictional example is considered in relation to how closely it corresponds to a pre-existing set of conditions which define a concept. In my version, on the other hand, the concept is constituted not by sets of abstract theoretical conditions but

---

22 Nussbaum, M. 'Tragedy and Self-sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity' in Rorty, A.O. (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p. 282

23 Lear, J. 'Katharsis' in *Phronesis*, 33:3 (1988) 297-326

24 de Sousa, R. *The Rationality of Emotion*, MIT Press, 1987, *passim*

25 Carroll, N. 2002, p.14

(partially) by the fictional examples themselves, so with the addition of more heterogeneous examples the understanding of the concept is expanded. For this reason I have not referred to films as 'illustrations' or 'representations' of ethical concepts as distinct abstract entities, but rather as 'examples' or 'instances' of the concepts. The difference between Carroll's approach and my own is between *generalisation* and *universalisation*. As a description a generalisation is a project of classification; it is a fundamentally scientific form of grasping reality, bringing the greatest possible number of phenomena under the umbrella of the fewest possible number of explanatory laws and ontological distinctions - 'All men are thus.' The distillation of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions to define a virtue involves stripping away contingent details in order to arrive at a model which is applicable across a broad range of cases. In generalising we are interested only in the set of features which all the cases have in common, and the fewer their number the sharper the definition of the concept. To universalise, on the other hand, proceeds in the opposite direction; it takes an example, a person in a situation, and takes that to represent a particular possibility for a life - 'This is one way that a life can be'. In Nussbaum's Aristotelian view, fiction adds to our general ethical knowledge, not through classifications and general descriptions but from universalisations.[26] Fiction can have an ethically educative function not by adding up its characters and themes and situations into neat categories and from that general data formulating moral principles, but by presenting things that might or could happen which help to modify our existing viewpoints. These hypothetical examples, in virtue of their specificity and detail, refine and clarify our existing ethical viewpoint - in virtue of their differences as much as their similarities.

Fictions as exemplary TEC scenarios need not be promoting any particular moral rule, but rather adding to a general pool of conceptual knowledge about what constitutes an ethical concept. In fact, seeing films as thought experiments which promote a determinate moral rule, or obligation, runs contrary to Williams' rejection of the morality system. And it also leads us to miss a possible connection with the powerful intuition expressed by L&O that works of fiction, or at least good works of fiction, are not involved in the promotion of moral rules. The thought reminds me of a remark of Milan Kundera's: 'What does Cervantes' great novel mean? Much has been written on the question. Some see in it a rationalist critique of Don Quixote's hazy idealism. Others see it as a celebration of that same idealism. Both interpretations are mistaken because they

---

[26] Nussbaum, M. 1990, p.38

both seek at the novel's core not an inquiry, but a moral position...'[27] One of the assumptions in the film as philosophy debate is that for a film to be philosophical it must make determinate assertions, and by extension to count as moral philosophy it must argue for normative principles. But when we look to works of art for moral directions we are bound to be frustrated, and if we find them we ought to be suspicious.

This leads me back to my reason for adopting Williams' distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' ethical concepts, and not just ethical concepts. One of the objections to the idea of films as thought experiments notes a fundamental difference; thought experiments are bare and schematic whereas fiction films are richly detailed. For a thought experiment to be effective as a narrative representation of a situation in which moral obligations conflict it need include none of the 'extra' detail that characterises artistic fiction. Five people are on one railway track, for example, and one on another, and it is in my power to throw a switch to save the five by actively killing one. What *ought* I to do? On the other hand, all the detail of artistic fiction is aesthetically crucial (according to one view) but ethically superfluous, and it therefore has no essentially ethical function. The ethical concepts involved in the thought experiment are 'thin', that is, they are emptied of any particularising descriptive details. The philosophical thought experiment does not have to include any details because it is concerned with the prescriptive aspect of an ethical concept and not the descriptive. Artistic fictions, however, are less concerned with the 'ought' element of an ethical situation than with its individuating descriptive features - the 'is'.

Recasting the idea of 'films as thought experiments', as 'films as examples of 'thick' ethical concepts' provides a possible answer to the problem of detail that Smith raises. Recall that for Smith the difference in the degree of detail in artistic fictions suggests a difference in the kind of function which they perform. But if what is important in differentiating one TEC from another is not the 'ought' component but the 'is', the descriptive content of a TEC, then the greater fullness of a fictional description serves more effectively to 'flesh out' the concept. Or, to risk a photographic analogy; just as an image comes into sharper focus with the accumulation of fine detail and greater resolution, a thick ethical concept becomes more sharply defined in a work of narrative fiction with the greater accumulation of particular details of character and circumstance.[28] Talk of 'sharpening' a 'thick' ethical concept might seem like an

---

[27] Kundera, M. *The Art of the Novel*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1986) p.7

[28] I emphasise that it is just an analogy, and nothing to do with the photographic nature of film.

awkwardly mixed metaphor, but it is not the 'sharpening' of a knife - the shaving away of extraneous material to define an edge, but the sharpening of an image, the *adding* of material to bring something into focus. As I mentioned above, the more, and more varied, the TEC examples of a child's repertoire, the more refined and sophisticated will be their understanding of the concept. In the same way, the particularising details of a range of fictional examples of the same TEC differentiate each from the others and expands and enriches the understanding of the concept.

The question of the relation between aesthetic particularity and ethical value resonates in an interesting way with the debate in philosophy about whether in thick concepts the descriptive and prescriptive elements are separable. One view, held by Williams for example, claims that the 'is' part of a TEC cannot be separated from the 'ought'. One of the conditions of an adequate theory of the ethical function of art is that there should be a strong, even an internal, connection between the aesthetic merit of particularity, and its value and function as an ethical claim. If, as Williams argues, the prescriptive and the descriptive elements of a TEC are not separable, then it might explain why a work which exemplifies a TEC *needs* all that detail. And that, in turn, would explain why it would be not just an aesthetically inferior work without the detail, but also an *ethically* inferior one in virtue of a lack of the descriptive substance which partly defines the concept. Therefore, an aesthetic flaw becomes a central component of an ethical flaw, and an aesthetic merit is also a central component of ethical merit. In other words, and to answer Smith's question, 'Just what is all that detail doing there?!'[29], artistic thought experiments, must include all that detail because the ethical concepts with which they are concerned tend to be 'thick' and not 'thin'.

None of this proves, of course, that films can be *independent* philosophical contributions, because in order to function as explorations of TECs they must still rely on a generalising commentary. The concept needs to be identified through a philosophically-oriented critical analysis. But that does not mean that they cannot contribute to ethical knowledge, it just means that they cannot do so alone. In fact, if we see films as individual contributions to a general, culturally shared TEC, this means that not only are films not independent of a generalising commentary, they are not independent of other works which are complementary elucidations of the same TEC. In this respect Carroll's reference to Wittgenstein's method is apposite. Wittgenstein saw his use of thought experiments, epigrams, maxims, and so on, as a kind of gradual accretion of examples which lead us

---

[29] Smith, M. 2006, p. 35

towards a more and more perspicuous understanding of the nature of concepts. As he put it in the *Philosophical Investigations*, 'The work of a philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.' (§127) In isolation, the bafflingly enigmatic pronouncements, such as 'If a lion could talk we could not understand him' (*PI*, II, xi) are indeed mysterious. But if they are understood within the wider context they might (perhaps) become a little less opaque. In this sense, the condition of the bold thesis that Livingston posits, that philosophical films must be independent, is too demanding.

2.2 The Problem of Particularity

The particularity of characters and events in fictions is, for those like Nussbaum, a measure of both aesthetic and ethical value. There is, however, an important, and perhaps instructive, exception to this. The richly individuating details of realist fiction are specifically not valued in certain traditions; it was a goal of Eisenstein, for example, to represent not individuals, but *types*. This anti-individualist strategy had, first of all, an ideological basis in representing a collectivist ideal, but also, and more relevantly for this discussion, the function of the films was explicitly didactic. In the same way as a thought experiment, the minimisation of particularising detail helps to generalise the moral import - *Strike* is not a story about these particular workers, but *all* workers. In order for its moral lesson to be widely applicable, the story in which it is expressed must be free of parochial specificities of character psychology or circumstance.

A large part of what we value about works of *realist* fiction, however, and the characters and events that they represent is their particularity. It is a centrally important aesthetic feature of characters like Tony Soprano, for example, that they could not be substituted with broadly similar ones without something being lost. The greater the range and depth of these particularising details, the greater the degree of aesthetic value which we confer on the work. However, a moral rule or principle is more useful to the degree that it is free of particularising details, and to the extent that it is applicable across as wide a range of cases as possible. If we are to learn anything from films, what they teach us must be applicable beyond the particular characters and events that they depict. This seems to lead us to a problem of the compatibility of the relative objectives and methods of realist films and morally didactic narratives; a problem which I will call the *problem of particularity*. How can I learn, derive *ethical* value, from a fictional situation which derives its *aesthetic* value from the fact that it is unlike any other situation?

We seem to end up with a dilemma: either the description of the moral content of the film is general enough to be universally useful, in which case it is inadequate as an aesthetic account of the film. Or, the moral content has a direct, necessary and internal connection to the fictional characters and situation, in which case it becomes less useful as a universal moral rule. There seems, therefore, to be a conflict, or at least a tension, between aesthetic and moral value understood in these terms. The details of artistic fictions therefore, are not just unnecessary for, but actively hinder, the operation of the work as a moral lesson. If films are seen, however, not as recommending any normative moral rules or principles, but rather as exemplifying one possible manifestation of a thick ethical concept, then the particularity of artistic fictions becomes not a hindrance, but an active component of the work's ethical value.

2.3 The Thick Concept of Sentimentality

A particularly interesting example of a thick concept in the context of this argument is the one employed by Lamarque and Olsen mentioned earlier - 'sentimentality'. It is interesting because it seems to be a point of contact between a thick *ethical* concept and a thick *aesthetic* concept.[30] Just as ethical terms like 'courageous' contain both a description and an evaluation, so do terms which we use to describe works of art. To say that a novel is 'elegant' or that a film is 'formulaic' is both a description and also an aesthetic value judgement. These terms differ from either the purely descriptive ('The painting is mostly blue') or the purely evaluative ('The painting is beautiful'). When we use the word 'sentimental', however, to describe a work it seems to imply not just a description and an aesthetic judgement, but also an *ethical* judgement, and in a way that is not true of more morally neutral thick aesthetic concepts like 'complex' or 'delicate' or 'formulaic'. Calling a work 'formulaic' describes how it is and also implies that there is something aesthetically wrong with it, but calling it 'sentimental' implies both an aesthetic and an additional ethical failing. 'Sentimental' can describe either an aesthetic quality of a work, or a quality of a person's attitude, and often the quality of a person's attitude towards a work. In what follows I shall explore how *Five Easy Pieces* exemplifies one possible variety of the TEC of sentimentality - not by itself being sentimental, but by representing various forms of sentimentality in the actions and attitudes of its characters and in their responses to music.

---

30 For a discussion and a defence of the view that there *are* such things as thick aesthetic concepts see Bonzon, R. 'Thick Aesthetic Concepts' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67:2 (2009) 191-9 I will assume that there are.

In the terms outlined in chapter one, it is sentimentality manifest in the *internal* dimension, not in the *external.*

It might be objected at this point, however, that I am assuming first of all that 'sentimental' is an evaluative term, and furthermore that it is a *negatively* evaluative term. According to Ira Newman, for example, there is a quite legitimate sense of the word 'sentimental' that does not imply any moral censure. This sense of the word is old-fashioned perhaps, and maybe even a kind of etymological atavism, a throwback to the earlier sense of sentimentality as the expression of '...tender emotions of sympathy and affection.' This, according to Newman, is a usage that is descriptive but not evaluative, '... the term sentimentality can be understood in a purely descriptive way, as simply ascribing certain properties to a subject, without expressing any evaluation of the worth of the subject.'[31] It is, I suggest, highly questionable whether 'sentimental' is ordinarily predicated of something or someone without it also being evaluative.[32] Whether positively or negatively, it always implies a value judgement. Even in the eighteenth century when the word had a more positive meaning, it was still partly constituted by a value judgement, albeit the opposite of what it has become. In modern ordinary usage, however, the term is usually, though in varying degrees of seriousness, a negatively evaluative one. We need to distinguish between the feeling of *sentiment* in a broad (and archaic) sense, and *sentimentality* in a narrower, ethically laden sense.[33] It is no part of what follows to denigrate the experience of genuine emotion in response to art or anything else. The trouble is, of course, how we tell genuine emotion and sentimental emotion apart - and it is exactly this problem which is at the heart of *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970). How can we be sure that what we feel is not self-deceptive emotion? What are the consequences of being mistaken? The contested nature of the meaning of the word makes the film particularly useful as a reflection on the nature of the TEC of sentimentality, especially since the variety of emotional experience which it represents is not immediately obvious *as* sentimentality. The instantiation of an atypical variation of the TEC expands and deepens an understanding of the concept.

---

31 Newman, I.'The Alleged Unwholesomeness of Sentimentality' in Neil, A. and Ridley, A. (eds.) *Arguing About Art* (London: Routledge, 2008) p.343

32 I am not talking about more specialised uses of related terms, such as the moral-philosophical *sentimentalism* associated with, for example, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume and Adam Smith.

33 Cf. Plantinga, C. 2009, p. 192

3. *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970)

Robert Eroica Dupea (Jack Nicholson), is a fugitive from his wealthy and stultifying background, working on an oil rig in Texas. He has established, awkwardly (if at all), a life with his waitress girlfriend Rayette (Karen Black) within a working-class world of bowling nights, trailer parks and country music. At the news of his father's terminal illness he reluctantly returns to his family home in the cold, damp Pacific Northwest. His family are somewhat eccentric, marooned together 'on the island' in an ivory tower of music and mildew. Partita (Lois Smith), his sister, is a pianist (modelled on Glenn Gould in her unconscious ticks and mannerisms) who nurses her father and tries to hold the family together. Carl (Ralph Waite), his brother, is the neck brace wearing ping-pong enthusiast who is *de facto* head of the family and tutor (and suitor) to Catherine (Susan Anspach), a beautiful young pianist with whom Robert antagonistically flirts.

3.1 Music Lessons from the *Internal* Point of View

In chapter one I argued that we take up a dual stance towards fictions; an internal imaginative one, and an external reflective one. Music has an instructive function in *Five Easy Pieces* that straddles both of these dimensions. It is an internally imagined element of the story that the characters use music both to generate a certain emotional state for themselves, and also to foster it in others. Rayette, for example, uses the Tammy Wynette song 'D.I.V.O.R.C.E' both as a means of communicating her sadness to Robert, and also as a means of creating and sustaining that emotional state for herself. The central musical episode, however, is one in which Robert fools Catherine into an emotional response to Chopin, and then, so to speak, pulls the rug away. It functions *within* the narrative as a lesson to Catherine in the seductive dangers of emotional indulgence, and at the same time as a feature *of* the narrative which guides the viewer's interpretation of the pattern of associations of musical register and emotional (in)authenticity.

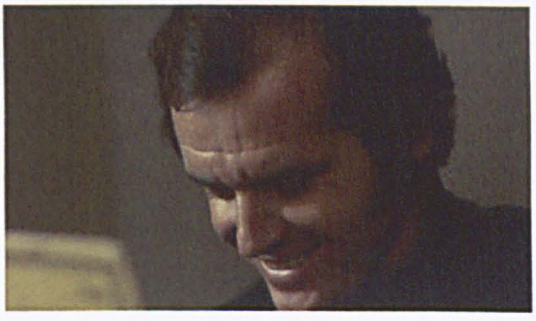
One afternoon, alone together in the piano room, Catherine asks Robert to play for her. He doesn't reply. She closes the door and asks again, softly, 'Will you?' He holds her gaze for a moment, then moves silently to the piano. He begins to play, Chopin's Prelude in E-Minor, and the camera moves from a close up on his face to his hands at the keys. As the music descends softly in minor chords the camera moves slowly to the left, lingering on the surfaces of the piano, the rich patina of the wood, the sheet music, a violin, like an exploration of a still life painting. It finds Catherine's hand and moves slowly

up to her face, listening with rapturous attention. The music continues as the camera moves on, past an arrangement of flowers, to the wall behind her, hung with faded family photographs. The camera returns to Catherine's face, transfigured by the depth of her aesthetic feeling, as Robert brings the piece to its close on a deep, gentle, sombre note.

Catherine pauses a respectful beat before she says, 'That was beautiful Robert, I'm surprised.' 'Thank you.' he replies. She continues, 'I was really very moved by ...' and before she can finish, she is interrupted by a little snort of mockery that Robert can no longer suppress. 'What's wrong?' she asks. 'Nothing' he says, smiling defiantly, 'It's just that I picked the easiest piece that I could think of. I first played it at eight years old and I played it better then.' Shocked, she says, 'Can't you understand that it was the feeling I was affected by?'

'I didn't have any.'

'Well then, I must have been supplying it.'



Just as Rayette uses Tammy Winette as a means of demonstrating her emotional state to Robert, Robert elicits and then undermines an emotional response from Catherine in order to demonstrate his accusation of its falsity. Robert's trick is, from the internal perspective, a practical demonstration to Catherine of the deceptive potential of one's own emotions. The disorienting force of this scene comes from the way that the viewer is swept up into Catherine's emotional orbit and then, with Robert's snort of derision, dropped. On one hand we enter into Catherine's sense of humiliation and of being duped, and on the other we have the suspicion that Robert is right, that she lays claim to a depth of feeling to which she is not entitled, that, in Oscar Wilde's terms, she has acquired her emotion too cheaply. That is, her serene declaration that 'I was really very moved...' is really an expression of sentimentality, in which we have been unwittingly implicated.

3.2 Music Lessons from the *External* Point of View

In chapter one I described what George Wilson calls 'rhetorical figures of narrational instruction' - formal devices which provide an explanatory key to understanding the film. Wilson's example is from *You Only Live Once* (Fritz Lang, 1937) in which the possibility of a more accurate view of the events of the narrative is raised through a practical demonstration of the potential for misdirection: '...it signals the possibility of manipulating our perception.' [34] In the same way, the scene described above indicates how we should understand the instructive role that music plays in the overall narrative scheme. It is a lesson to the viewer in how to understand the connection between music and emotion in the film, a recognition of which leads us to understand how the other musical scenes contribute to the theme of emotional insincerity, sentimentality and self-deception. Robert's manipulation of Catherine's emotional response, and with it an implicit accusation of its hollowness and superficiality, demonstrates the possibility of music acting as a cover and a conduit for emotional inauthenticity. Robert's trick reminds us of the possibility that what seems like a certain emotional experience, of a certain type and directed towards a certain object, may not in fact be of the type or directed towards what we think or pretend that it is. With this hermeneutic principle established, we can go back to reconsider aspects of the narrative and ask, for example, how should we take the opening scene in which Robert drives home from work at the oil field?

As the opening credits roll we see Bobby alone driving home from work, and on the soundtrack we hear the sentimental country song 'Stand by Your Man'. This sequence now seems to establish not just the protagonist of the film, but also an interpretive context within which he should be seen. When he arrives home, the fuller quality of the non-diegetic sound subtly modulates to a thinner more attenuated sound. He walks through the house into the bedroom where we see a record player playing the song. The song straddles the boundary between the diegetic space of the story-world, and the non-diegetic dimension in an interesting way. When Robert is alone in his car the music is non-diegetic, and is associated with him with a certain narrational authority. At home the same song becomes diegetic, and is now associated with Rayette's emotional self-indulgence. Later on at dinner with the family, Robert is embarrassed by Rayette and storms off to sit alone in a local bar. As the film cuts from the family to Robert, the country song 'Don't Touch Me' (again Tammy Wynette) begins, and there is a similar diegetic/non-diegetic ambiguity.

---

[34] Wilson, G. 1986, p.18

The scenes where Robert has fled the family to be alone with his thoughts are accompanied by music with a particular emotional register. For example, after the dinner where Robert upsets Carl with his one-man impersonation of a Las Vegas review, he retires to the drawing room and sinks into a large leather armchair by a flickering fire and listens to Mozart's Fantasy in D minor. The effect is one of dark and melancholy brooding, but brooding of an unmistakably warm and comforting sort. Emotional inauthenticity is not confined to the syrupy country music, but is also associated with Mozart and Chopin. The question is why does the film insistently associate these sentimental songs with Robert?

There are two alternative strands of explanatory commentary on Robert's behaviour and motivations available to the viewer. There is, first of all, the account that is given by himself; in his actions and in his more or less explicit expressions of frustration, accusations of hypocrisy, and his general rejection of his family's bourgeois values. On the other hand, there is also the account that is expressed in the way that the film repeatedly associates him with sentimental music, emotional self-indulgence and eruptions of unfocussed self-pitying anger. The latter account is, I suggest, the more reliable because it emerges from the explanatory strand with greater narrational authority. Just as Robert uses music to demonstrate to Catherine the true nature of her feelings, so too does the film use music to indicate to the viewer the true nature, and the true *object*, of Robert's emotional state.

3.3 Sentimentality as a Form of Self-deception

Each of the main characters of *Five Easy Pieces* seem to display a particular variety of the emotional life; they vary according to the strength or lack of feeling, and a quality of emotional (in)authenticity. From the affectionate and childlike openness of Partita, to the stiffness of Carl, to the comical emotional insincerity of Rayette. When Robert tells Rayette that he is returning to his family home, for example, Rayette takes to her bed and plays Tammy Winette to accompany and amplify her misery. When Robert relents, or submits, she brightens as if someone had flicked a switch. But where does Robert fit in?

'Sentimental' seems, at first glance, to be an odd way to describe the nature of Robert's condition. One of the criticisms of him that is repeated by various characters throughout the course of the film is his *lack* of feeling, not that he feels too much. His friend Elton (Billy 'Green' Bush), for example, criticises him for his callousness towards Rayette, and the central scene, as I have argued, on which the narrative turns is when he confronts Catherine with the emotional emptiness of his performance of Chopin, and the falsity of her response. How then, can his flaw be described as sentimentality?

But as I claimed at the beginning of this section, sentimentality should not be conflated with *sentiment*, and neither should it be understood as feeling too much, or too often, or too deeply. The ethical flaw of sentimentality is in the imaginative construction of a false picture of how the world is in order to satisfy an antecedent emotional desire. As Mary Midgely says, 'To put it flatly - the central offence lies in self-deception, in distorting reality to get a pretext for indulging in any feeling.'[35] This false view of the world is one that is created and sustained in order to support certain beliefs that in turn are necessary to have certain emotions. But what is it that is misrepresented in a sentimental attitude?There are two possibilities. The first is Midgely's; that the object of our emotion does not in fact have the qualities that we say it does; for example, the sentimental idealisation of children as pure and innocent, animals as noble and loyal, and so forth. The second possible object of misrepresentation is that we are mistaken not just about the qualities of the object, but about the *identity* of the object itself. According to Midgely, we are sentimental if we represent to ourselves the object, children say, as being different, better, purer or more innocent, than they actually are. But I would rather claim that an attitude is sentimental when we think that the object of our emotion is the children, but in fact its real object is oneself.

The cause and the object of an emotion need not be identical, and it is this confusion of emotional cause and object that is at the heart of what it means to be sentimental. What devalues a sentimental emotional response, what makes it 'fake', is that it no longer has a basis in the work itself, or in anything external to the self. Catherine's response is caused by the Prelude, but this is more in the way of it being occasioned by it rather than the stronger sense of being produced or motivated by it. It is the *object* of her emotion rather than the cause that Catherine

misunderstands. Whereas she would, no doubt, identify the work itself as the object of her deep emotions, it is in fact herself that she directs them towards. In this way I agree with

---

[35] Midgely, M. 'Brutality and Sentimentality' *Philosophy*, 54:209 (1979) 386

Midgely that sentimentality, or its psychological root, is self-deception; although I disagree as to what it is that the sentimental are deceiving themselves about. Misrepresenting aspects of the world is a means to the end of misrepresenting oneself to oneself.

Milan Kundera famously describes kitsch (which I take to be synonymous with sentimentality) in the following way:

> Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass!
> The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!
> It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.[36]

Unlike the first, the second tear has, as its object, not the children running on the grass, but the quality and the fact of its own feeling. Catherine's tears are of the second kind, they are tears of self-congratulation – 'how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by Chopin's Prelude.' Sentimental pity, for example, is the enjoyment of pity, partly constituted by the reassurance that I am the kind of person who is morally sensitive enough to feel pity. This is the basis of Robert's accusation, the charge of emotional fakery, that what Catherine takes as being moved to sadness by beautiful music is really her congratulating herself on her sensitivity. Her emotion is fake to the extent that it is not about what she thinks it is about. It ought to be noted, however, that this is not a condemnation of emotion *tout court*. It is quite possible, under these terms, to have the first tear without the second.

Sentimentality involves a particular kind of emotional self-deception, that is deceiving oneself as to the true object of one's emotion. Sadness or pity, for example, may be described as sentimental when the object that it is directed towards, and the thought that sustains it, is not in fact the melancholy beauty of a piece of music, but is in fact a conception of oneself constructed in the imagination. This image of oneself is an idealisation, a gratifying fiction that allows us to appreciate ourselves as morally sensitive and possessed of the finer feelings. In order for this self-image to be supported the external world needs to be represented, or misrepresented, in a way that provides support for this conception of the self. If one is to see oneself as sensitive to the noble sufferings of the pure in heart then one needs to establish a view of things, fiction or life, that represents the pure in heart suffering nobly. The truth or falsity of this representation of the world is, in this respect, immaterial. This is the reason we can call Robert sentimental; his righteous anger and dissatisfaction is generated as a means of sustaining a gratifying view of himself.

---

[36] Kundera, M. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984) p.251

Robert, understands his dissatisfaction with life as that of an honest man surrounded by falsity and hypocrisy; he longs for authenticity and condemns its absence in others, and all the while misrepresents to himself the true nature of his own condition. He tells the local salon of pompous pseudo-intellectuals, 'You're all full of shit.' He rages against the pretence and emotional fakery around him, seeing himself as uniquely authentic, yet is blind to the self-absorbed and narcissistic quality of his own unhappiness.

Robert is thus blind to the fact that he shares in those very attitudes that he rails against. During the evening of the salon, Samia (Irene Daily), an overbearing intellectual blowhard, is holding forth. Rayette interrupts her with an anecdote about how her kitten was 'squashed flatter than a tortilla outside their [friends'] mobile home.' Samia seizes on her comment and insultingly dissects it, for its childlike imagery and naively vivid expressiveness, while ignoring Rayette's distress at the memory. Robert stands up and confronts Samia: 'Where the hell do you get the ass to tell anybody anything about class, or who the hell's got it, or what she typifies? You shouldn't even be in the same room as her you pompous celibate.' The point of Samia's argument is not made clear, but Robert's criticism seems to be directed at what he imagines that she has said rather than what she has actually said. As Derek Nystrom remarks: '...thus, his vituperative attack on Samia seems directed as much at himself as at her.'[37] Robert's outburst is prompted by Samia's condescension towards Rayette, but its force is generated by his own embarrassment at Rayette's lack of social graces.

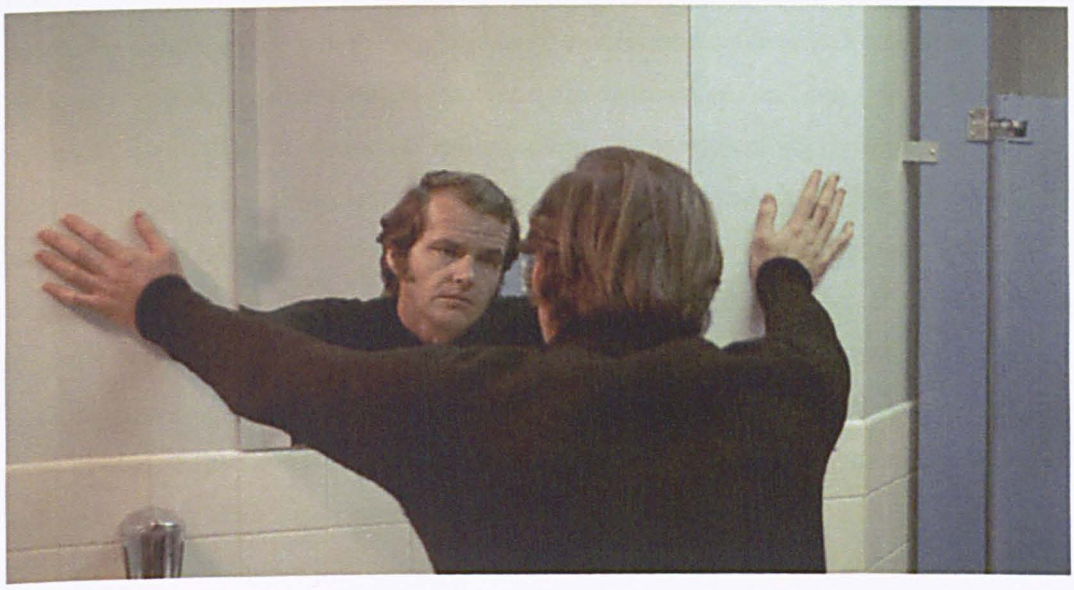
Robert sees himself as standing in heroic opposition to falsity and hypocrisy, or at least, to be able to recognise it in others when they are blind to it themselves. Much of his frustration with Rayette arises from what he sees as her sentimental wallowing in emotion. But what he cannot see is the way that his own selfish and limited view of the world contributes to his mistreatment of others. Robert's cruelty is a function of his self-pity; it is a sentimental subversion of non-sentimental other-directed pity, a self-deceptive redirection of the concern for others into a morbid and narcissistic self-obsession. This egoism, this exclusive inhabiting of one's own point of view, precludes the adoption of the point of view of others, and consequently the interests of others carry little weight in comparison to one's own.

The solipsistic nature of Robert's condition is emphasised at the end of the film, just before he abandons Rayette at the gas station - the act of cruelty which is the

---

[37] Nystrom, D. 'Hard Hats and Movie Brats: Auteurism and the Class Politics of the New Hollywood' *Cinema Journal* 43:3 (2004) 33

culmination of the course of his self-obsession. While Rayette is inside buying coffee, he goes to the bathroom, hangs his coat on the door and stands staring at himself in the mirror.



At one level we might see the way that he hands his wallet to Rayette, and the way that he hitches a ride north leaving his coat behind, as a kind of nihilistic self-effacement, shedding the clinging debris of his life to start afresh. But, this odd combination of rebirth and self-imposed alienation is an act of narcissistic other-blindness reflected in his lingering scrutiny of his own image. Robert's concern for himself eclipses any concern for others, and leads him to treat Rayette as a trapping of his unwanted life not very different from his coat and wallet.

4. The Ethical Function of 'Imaginativeness'

Even if it can be argued that films sometimes express or represent an ethical point of view, it is yet to be shown that we recognise it in a way that involves the imagination. How, then, is the imagination involved in this example? To identify a theme, ethical or otherwise, is to adopt an external perspective on the film. Making connections, seeing patterns, pointing out recurring motifs and symmetries all belong to a view of the work, as it were, from outside. But, recall from chapter one that Richard Moran argues that this sort of critical reflection involves what he calls 'imaginativeness', or what I referred to, after David Hume, as the *constructive* imagination. For Moran, it is: '...the ability to make connections between

various things, to notice and respond to the network of associations that make up the mood or emotional tone of a work.'[38] In *Five Easy Pieces* identifying the ethical theme involves the imaginative association of formal aspects of the work. It involves noticing (from an external point of view) the pattern of associations of music and characters, noticing a particular significant form in the repetition and emphasis of musical and emotional tone. It requires a certain creative effort in making these connections, and this will perhaps leave open the doubt that the theme of self-deception and sentimentality belongs more to my own imaginative projection on to the work, than to the work itself. But, as Livingston argues, this can only be determined in relation to how closely the description 'meshes' with what we see on screen.[39] The constructive, critical, reflective imagination then, can also be an aspect of the ethical imagination. It could also be argued that the pivotal scene which I have described in which the viewer is drawn in to Catherine's emotional involvement and then disabused, involves what I called in the last chapter *subjective* imagining. But this issue will be taken up in the next chapter.

The imagination is involved not only in identifying the ethical theme, but features also as part of the content of that theme. That is, Robert's destructively circumscribed vision, his self-absorbed inability to see beyond his own parochial concerns is an example of the failure of imagination, and a failure of the ethical imagination. According to Thomas Nagel the imaginative move towards greater objectivity is '...the driving force of ethics...It enables us to develop new motives when we occupy a standpoint detached from that of our purely personal desires and interests...'[40] The primary ethical task of the imagination, Nagel argues, is to escape the distorting influence of the subjective and achieve a more objective view of ourselves in relation to others. This imaginative shift is at the root of what Nagel calls the fundamental moral argument - 'How would you like it if someone did that to you?' - a prompt to imagining out of our own perspective. To have a sentimental response is to take up an attitude, to adopt a stance towards the world - albeit a false one. It is to imaginatively construct a version of the world, and a version of oneself, that conforms more closely to one's desires than does the actual world. The dishonesty consists in the avoidance of reality. But confronting the possibility that this attitude might be sentimental, confronting one's own point of view, is also an imaginative act – it is the adoption of an alternative perspective on oneself. Asking the question of oneself, doubting oneself, is an act of the moral imagination.

---

[38] Moran, R. 1996, p.86

[39] Livingston, P., 2009, p.99

[40] Nagel, T. *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p.8

The film presents us with an example of the ethical consequences of the failure to imagine a view of how things are beyond oneself. The central theme which is reiterated and rehearsed in variations across Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*, is the ethical task of the imagination that is at the centre of *Five Easy Pieces*; the importance, the difficulty, and in each film the failure, of imagining how things are from a perspective external to my own. It is the gap between the protagonist's view of himself, his desires and his motives - the view from within his elaborately woven network of reasons - and how he appears from another, external, point of view, which re-appears at the centre of each film. The same ethical theme is an essential element of *The Sopranos*. Each of the characters display their own variation of the TEC of self-deception. A clear view of themselves and their actions is blocked or constrained by sentimental, self-serving rationalisations.

4.1 The Return of the Banality Objection

Recognising the sentimental and self-regarding root of Robert's dissatisfaction depends on *not* adopting his perspective in imagination. Being able to see his cruelty as a result of his morbidly solipsistic unhappiness, depends on stepping beyond his point of view to a more objective one from where his faults become clear, as they are not to him. But my interpretation of the film depends on adopting an external perspective in other ways. First of all, it relies on a certain view of the way that music is used in the film; the interpretation depends on the characterisation of Robert and his motives and faults, and the way that this is indicated is by his association with a certain register of sentimental music. But my interpretation of the film also relies, it may be objected, on a pre-existing ethical attitude. Isn't the argument therefore vulnerable to the banality objection discussed earlier? In order to recognise a fiction as an example of the TEC of sentimentality we need to already be in possession of a certain understanding of the TEC and the possible situations in which the term is applicable. If I am using the concept of sentimentality in order to identify the ethical theme of the film, how can I also claim that the film is teaching me anything about the same concept?

The objection assumes that we start with a certain concept and apply it to the film, but I would suggest that the process operates in the opposite direction. Identifying the broad ethical theme of sentimentality in *Five Easy Pieces* involves asking and answering questions about why Robert does the things that he does. Specifically, what description of his motives gives the best explanation of his attitude towards Rayette, alternating between cruelty and tenderness? The educative process is not didactic, but something more like the

Socratic one of posing questions to elicit a certain response, a response which leads us to a new perspective on what we thought we knew. The film depends, as I argued above, on a pre-existing understanding of what we mean by 'sentimental', and in its employment of the piano scene as a 'rhetorical figure of narrational instruction' it also depends on a certain conception of *aesthetic* sentimentality. But it is this minimal and schematic understanding of the concept that provides a foundation on which a richer and fuller understanding can be based.

The connection between sentimentality and cruelty is a familiar, but also a rather nebulous one. It tends to be given form in examples in which the concept appears in a concentrated and unambiguous form; the commandant of a concentration camp, for example, who presides over mass murder during the day and in the evening weeps at Beethoven's String Quartets. The value of *Five Easy Pieces* as a contribution to the TEC of sentimentality, however, is not as a central and unmistakeable example of the concept from which we might extract a list of all its necessary and sufficient conditions. Its value is rather as an *atypical* example which provides an expanded awareness of the possible extent of its reach into ordinary life. A drama in which the character wept at the death of Little Nell in Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* and then proceeded to beat his children, for example, would tell us something about the concept, but it would tell us nothing that is not already a part of the paradigm example. It is true that in order to recognise Robert's motivations as rooted in sentimentality we must apply an antecedently held understanding of the same concept, but that does not mean that in doing so we do not thereby extend our understanding of the range of possible applications of that concept. Moreover, in arriving at an explanatory account of Robert's emotions, beliefs, and motivations, we thereby arrive at a conception of the concept of sentimentality that places it within a pattern of connections to other TECs - like self-deception, self-pity, and so forth - to which it is closely related, and from which it is not always easily distinguished.

4.2 The Conflict of Ethical and Aesthetic Description

One of the reasons for Livingston's doubts about the project of the philosophical interpretation of films is a practical one. Leaving aside the questions of whether or not such interpretations are philosophically interesting, or whether they correspond with the intentions of the filmmakers, the problem is that they tend not to result in very rich or illuminating accounts of the films. As he says: 'Some philosophical raids on movies' philosophical contents have the otherwise undesirable characteristic of being very poor

instances of critical appreciation.'[41] Elucidating the philosophical content, the 'thematic "what"', by focussing attention on the formal means, the 'stylistic "how"', runs into the difficulty of pursuing two distinct aims. The first is concerned with giving an account of a film's artistic value, its value as a film, and the second with describing the nature of its philosophical assertions. One does not logically exclude the other, but because each aim pulls in a different direction from the other the resulting accounts are thinly stretched.

But I wonder if the two goals are quite as distinct as Livingston suggests. It is true, as L&O argue, that debating the truth or falsity of the philosophical claims that are part of the thematic content of a fiction must be distinguished from identifying the content of those themes. But if, as seems likely, films suggest or imply a certain view of the world, and that view is an ethical point of view, it must surely be relevant to our appreciation of the work that we ask about the quality - the truth or the falsity - of that view of life. The principle motivation for this sharp separation of epistemological and aesthetic accounts of fictions is that the philosophical/ethical interpretation somehow detracts from the aesthetic appreciation. But given that many films do display ethical concerns, a critical appreciation which excluded mention of them would be incomplete.

The idea that films convey moral messages, seems to run the risk that once the message has been extracted the film has served its purpose. It seems to suggest that the film is valuable to the extent that it can be mined for the propositions that it contains, and once the seam is exhausted so too is our interest in the film. This is another aspect of the problem of paraphrase. If what is really valuable in a work of art is the proposition that can be distilled from it, it seems that another work from which we could derive the same proposition would do just as well. So the work itself becomes dispensable. I have claimed, for example, that Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux* and *Five Easy Pieces* share the theme of self-blindness and a failure to achieve an external view of oneself. Does this mean that each of the films are interchangeable? If the work is seen as merely a vessel to contain a moral message, it might begin to seem that it does not much matter what shape the vessel is.

One aspect of Carroll's model of fictions as thought experiments seems to run this risk. Understanding *The Third Man* as a refutation of Forster's maxim, risks suggesting that it is interchangeable with any other film that asserts the same proposition. There is a crucial distinction to be made here. Films as thought experiments which are used to illustrate or question moral principles, let alone promote any normative propositions, are indeed open to the charge that their specific formal qualities are secondary and incidental

---

[41] Livingston, P., 2009, p.37

to the 'real' business of advocating a moral position. The 'thinner' the ethical concepts involved, the less the descriptive content of the work matters. On the other hand, if we understand the ethical content of a film in terms of 'thick' concepts there is an internal logical connection between the 'aesthetic' dimension of a work, the particular descriptive details, and the ethical. Seeing the philosophical role of works of fiction as constituent parts of a TEC preserves the connection between the particular form of the work and its ethical content. The differences between works that engage with the same TEC are important in an ethical dimension because the differences are what constitute variations within the concept, and the variations are what constitute the fullness of an understanding of that concept.

Much of this chapter has been concerned with what Livingston calls the 'propriety objection'. Aside from the question of whether or not art *can* transmit knowledge, philosophical, moral or otherwise, the propriety objection holds that to use art in this way is to make it serve illegitimate non-artistic ends. G.W.F. Hegel argues, according to Livingston, that art should not be valued instrumentally, as a means to an external end, but rather for its intrinsic value, in and for itself.[42] As Livingston points out, however, the distinction between instrumental and intrinsic value of art is by no means clear. A strong response would claim that all artistic value is instrumental in the sense that we always engage with art for some purpose. More moderately, Livingston argues that even if there are intrinsic artistic values, there are also instrumental ones such as the emotional experiences that artists often aim at producing. And if we can value works of art for the emotional experience which they generate, then why not also value them for their cognitive benefits? Hegel's argument assumes an overly restrictive notion of what is to be included as properly artistic value; it assumes that artistic value does not include cognitive value. This results, I think, in the danger of consigning art to a separate realm in which it is detached from its bearing on life.

The question of whether films 'do' philosophy, and whether films 'do' moral philosophy, should be considered in the light of Williams' distinction between *morality* and *ethics* which I noted in the introduction - between the construction of a system of principles, rules and obligations, and the asking of Socrates' question 'How should one live?' Narrative fictions *can* be assimilated with the form and practice of moral philosophy, for example, in terms of patterns of syllogistic argument, inference from premisses to a

---

[42] Livingston, P. 2009, p.39

conclusion, and so forth, as Smut's claims for Eisenstein's *October*. They can also be seen in terms of thought experiments, as Carroll argues, which perform the same argumentative role in theory building and the construction or questioning of moral principles. But in each case there is an awkwardness of fit which is generated by the attempt to make the broad and expansive ethical ambitions of art conform to the narrower field of morality. Works of narrative fiction, or at least the ones with which I am concerned here, are not the theoretical untangling of duties and obligations towards the assertion of a clear moral principle. Rather, they are enquiries into what is involved in the pursuit of a life well-lived; what can promote, and what might obstruct, a flourishing life.

4

Skeptical Sympathy and an Ethical Stance

As I argued in the last chapter, one of the ethical roles of fiction is to represent various configurations of characters and situations, and by reflecting on these scenarios we expand and enrich our ethical knowledge, and sharpen our judgement. The constructive imagination is centrally involved in connecting formal aspects of works and revealing patterns of associations through which we identify an ethical theme. Children's stories, fairy tales, biblical parables, philosophers' thought experiments, or realist fictions which elucidate 'thick' ethical concepts, differ greatly in their degree of detail and complexity, but in each case we arrive at an ethical interpretation by adopting a similar mode of imagination. They each require that we stand back to an external point of view, to a perspective from where we can discern the shape and the nature of the ethical theme. There is, however, another, highly influential, view that the ethical benefit of fiction is not confined to this detached and reflective perspective. It has been argued, by Martha Nussbaum for example, that what fiction is particularly well-suited to is not the clarification of ethical concepts, but bringing us to an awareness of the experiences of others. According to this view, the ethical role of fiction is not primarily in imagining the outcomes of hypothetical situations, but in the dramatic re-enactment in imagination of the subjective 'feel' of other points of view - not just imagining what an ethical situation is, but imagining 'what it's like'. What fiction can do, and do in a way like no other form of discourse, is give us direct access to the consciousnesses of other persons, albeit fictional ones.

There are, however, serious objections to the idea. Lamarque and Olsen call this the 'Subjective Knowledge Theory of Cognitive Value' (hereafter SKT), and while it is very appealing, they argue, there are compelling reasons why it cannot ultimately be defended.[1] One of which is an epistemological problem; knowing 'what it is like' is not really *knowing* at all. And as I mentioned in chapter two, Matthew Kieran also raises doubts which are based, first of all, on the question of whether we actually do subjectively imagine the points of view of characters.[2] But even if we did, he argues, such imagining would block any ethical benefit, not contribute to it. In *Five Easy Pieces*, for example, entering into Robert's perspective *too* deeply would, according to Kieran's view, prevent us from appreciating his faults and would therefore undermine the ethical point of the film. This may seem even more problematic in relation to *The Sopranos*. Too effectively imagining into

---

[1] Lamarque, and Olsen, 1994, p.371

[2] Kieran, M. 2003, p.70

Tony's point of view would not just undermine the ethical benefit, but might actively lead us astray.

In this chapter I want to defend the idea of the ethical benefit of subjective imagining, but in a modified form. I shall argue that its ethical function should be understood in relation to other modes of imagining. That is, the value is to be found not just in imagining into a perspective, but also in imagining out of one. The ethical value of fiction-directed imagining is to be located in the tension between them. This chapter will be in three parts. The first will discuss the ethical benefits of imagining 'from the inside'. The second part will be concerned with stepping outside of a point of view, from a subjectively to an objectively imagined position. In the third section I shall describe an ethical stance; an attitude which is internally connected to the dual structure of our imaginative and reflective engagement with fiction which I described in chapters one and two. This stance consists in a certain combination, or balance, of subjective and objective attitudes - imaginative and emotional engagement, and critical and reflective detachment.

1. The Ethical Value of Subjective Imagining

Imaginatively projecting oneself into a fictional 'world' might have ethical value in a number of ways, which we might divide into two groups, each of which can be further divided into two possible forms. The first group (1) is the broad notion that fiction grants us an expanded field of experience, or a kind of virtual experience, which we can draw on in the same way that we draw on actual experience. The distinction to be made in (1) is between two forms of the extension of experience; first, an expanded range of *personal* experience (1a), imagining how *I* would act in a particular set of circumstances, and secondly the idea that fiction gives us special access to the subjective states of *others* (1b). Through coming to know what another person is thinking and feeling, we are better able to act morally in virtue of having more information upon which to base our decisions. Recall the distinction that I outlined in chapter two, between 'in his shoes' imagining and an imaginative rehearsal of another's experience. The difference is between (1a) knowing how *I* would feel in a certain situation, and coming to know how *X* would feel in that situation (1b). We can group these together as the 'extension of experience'. The second group (2) is what we might call the 'exercise of empathy'. The two senses of 'exercise', noun and verb, are both relevant to the distinction within this group; 'exercise' first as a form of training or development, and secondly as an occasion of something's use. The first possible form of group two (2a) is the Aristotelian notion of being trained by works of

fiction to respond in the appropriate way to similar actual situations - being trained to feel the right thing to the right degree in the right circumstances. The second (2b), is the idea that empathising with fictional characters is itself an ethical act. I shall take each group, and the distinctions within them, in turn.

1.1 The Extension of Experience

What can we learn from a film like *Moolaadé* (Ousmane Sembene, 2004), for example, that we cannot from a detailed UN report on the prevalence and the damage of the practice of female circumcision? Isn't the UN report both more comprehensive and more objective, and because it deals in *facts*, a better and more reliable source of moral knowledge? There is a famous thought experiment in the philosophy of mind which describes a scientist called Mary who is the world's leading expert on colour perception.[3] Mary knows everything there is to know about colour and the way that we perceive it, frequencies of light, neurological mechanisms, and so on, but from birth has been confined to a monochrome room and has never experienced colour herself. The question is whether, on her release from the room and her first experience of the colour red, she learns something new? What Mary learns on her release is not knowledge of a propositional kind (knowing that), but knowledge of an experiential kind - knowing 'what it is like', or subjective knowledge. One can be in possession of all the relevant propositional data, and yet without experiential subjective knowledge, one's understanding of a situation will be incomplete. What Mary's theoretical knowledge is lacking, and what the UN report leaves out, and what a work of narrative fiction is especially well-suited to providing, is the sense of 'what it is like'.

1.1.1 Imagining 'what it's like'

In Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the protagonist Tomas remarks:

> We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives, nor perfect it in our lives to come.
> Was it better to be with Tereza, or to remain alone?
> There is no means of testing which decision is better because there is no basis for comparison.We live everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold.[4]

---

3 'Mary's Room' was first discussed by Frank Jackson in 'Epiphenomenal Qualia', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, 1982, 127–36

4 Kundera, M. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Faber, 1984, p.8

In a life lived only once, and lived in only one direction, how can we know what is the best course of action without any alternative outcomes against which to measure the consequences of our decisions? Real life is an imperfect guide to living because in it we have only brief access to a very narrow slice of reality; engaging imaginatively with works of narrative fiction, it is argued, extends our basis for comparison by giving us access to more slices.

Even those who lead the fullest and most adventurous of lives can only experience a fraction of what is available in the breadth and variety of narrative fiction. Most of us, if we are lucky, will never know first-hand what it would be like to be shot at, for example, or lose a child, or be falsely (or rightly) imprisoned, and we will never have to face decisions which these situations would demand. In projecting ourselves into fictional worlds, we experience situations in imagination that we never would, or in some cases never *could*, experience in the course of ordinary life. But it is not only such extreme examples which perform the role of surrogate experiences. Much of the ethical value of realist fiction lies in presenting us with scenarios which might occur in our own lives. According to this view, fiction contributes to our ethical development not by transmitting moral principles, but by presenting moral possibilities which we live through in imagination. We develop as ethical beings in life by learning from experience, and fiction contributes to that development by expanding the experience beyond the limits of one's own life. We need fiction because, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, '...we have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling.'[5]

If the imagined experience that we have in engaging with fiction is to function as an eduction which guides us in *actual* experience, then the two must bear some significant resemblance to each other. But how close is an imagined fictional experience of the kind that we have been discussing, to its real life actual counterpart? It could be argued that the imagined experience is a very pale shadow indeed. Imagining what it would be like to be in the trenches on the first day of the Somme, for example, is really nothing at all like the actual experience. Moreover, if the imagining *were*, very few of us would voluntarily choose to go through it. It is not just the more extreme end of the scale that this objection applies to; the end of a love affair is often a messy and miserable experience which involves emotions of a deeply unpleasant sort. Yet not only do we not avoid experiencing

---

[5] Nussbaum, M., 1990, p. 47

these scenarios in fiction, but we tend to take pleasure in imaginatively and emotionally engaging with them. If imagining fictional scenarios were imagining 'what it's *really* like', it would be hard to account for the pleasure. At this point our debate touches on a cluster of issues we can group together as 'the paradoxes of fiction', but a solution to these is not within my present scope.[6] The point here is just that if the fictional and the actual experience are very different experiences, then it becomes difficult to argue that the fictional experience can act as any sort of lesson for life.

The kinds of experiences from which we might learn the most are the kind which we would not *want* to have. Unlike theoretical learning, learning from experience sometimes exacts a heavy price for its lessons. Fiction, according to Gregory Currie, offers us an arena in which we can work through the costs and consequences of a variety of situations and courses of action, and do so in a way that does not involve the possibility of real harm.[7] Like a pilot training in a flight simulator, fiction allows us to see what can go wrong and to learn from a repetition and variation that is not possible in reality. For Currie, the imaginary dry-runs of fictions can be morally beneficial because they help us to become better at planning our lives. The advantage of doing this in fiction is two-fold; the first arising from the *fictionality* of the experience, and the second from the greater pool of possible experiences from which fiction draws. First, in our emotional responses to works of fiction we are led to experience the same kind of response that we would have to a similar actual situation, and yet because it is *fiction* we can avoid the potentially heavy price that the same experience would involve in real life. Secondly, using a work of narrative fiction as a cognitive scaffold helps to support an act of imagination that would otherwise be much too elaborate and complex for most of us to achieve. Unless we are novelists or filmmakers, the kind of richly detailed scenarios which we engage with in fiction are beyond the kind of imagined projection which we could achieve on our own.

The idea that works of fiction can act as episodes of surrogate, or virtual, experience seems to run into another problem. Most works of fiction are *un*like real life not just in terms of the *intensity* of the experience, but also in terms of the *nature* of the experience. Situations in fiction and situations in life are sufficiently unlike each other that to rely on works of fiction for moral guidance in this way would risk potentially disastrous

---

[6] Very roughly, the 'paradox of fiction' is the question of why, if emotions require beliefs, we have emotional responses to fictions which we do not believe exist. Related to this, and first explicitly formulated by David Hume (Cf. 'Of Tragedy'), is the 'paradox of *tragedy*'; if these emotions are 'disagreeable', why should we *want* to have them at all?

[7] Currie, G. 'Realism of Character and the value of Fiction' in Levinson, J. (Ed.) *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 164

consequences. Someone who got their moral education from Bond movies, or romantic comedies, or soap operas would be drastically ill-equipped to confront reality. This is related to what Carl Plantinga calls 'hyper-coherence'; the usual mainstream movie, '...compresses life events by leaving out the dull bits and including only those that are most dramatic or meaningful.'[8] This is probably more true of genre films than realist ones, but even the putatively more complex 'art' movie shows only some aspects of a situation and not others. Even a paradigm example of ethically beneficial fiction like the late work of Henry James is a kind of *directed experience* which makes certain ethical features of a situation salient in a way that the ethical aspects of a similar experience in life would not be. There is, even in the kind of fiction most committed to verisimilitude, a necessary and artificial simplicity which makes it unreliable as a means of guidance in real life. According to this objection, therefore, fiction tells us nothing about how to negotiate our way through the real ethical situations that we face; fiction teaches us only how to deal with fiction.

The objection is that fiction cannot be a substitute for the experiences of actual life because in actual life the situations where we are in need of guidance are not 'sign-posted' as they are in fiction. But this fails to take into account the *ostensive* nature of certain types of instruction. Teaching often involves pointing things out, making connections, and so forth, which involves directing someone's attention to certain aspects of a phenomenon, and not others. Nussbaum, for example, argues that there two ways in which fiction extends our experience. First, in giving us a greater range and diversity of cases, and secondly, in providing a greater clarity and focus than is available to us in our everyday lives. Like a telescope or a microscope, fiction allows us to see more, but it also allows us to see more clearly. From within the real experiences of life we are often unable to make out their salient features, but works of fiction offer us the opportunity to imaginarily experience the same sorts of events, only this time with those salient features pointed out to us. Imagining worlds of fiction does not just replicate more experience of the same type; it does not supplement reality with more of the same stuff, it is a form of virtual experience that is sharpened towards a particular point. As Currie says: 'Literature, exactly by not reproducing the rich confusion of life, offers us idealised scenarios within which we can focus our attention on distinguishable traits and outcomes, seeing how we respond in imagination to them alone, or at least in manageably small combinations.'[9]

---

[8] Plantinga, C., 2009, p. 185

[9] Currie, G. 1998, p.176

The idea that one of the ethical roles of fiction is to offer us an extended range of virtual experience on which to base our everyday judgement seems to imply a model in which specific cases are logged in a kind of mental database, to be retrieved later when we are faced with a similar dilemma. Murray Smith quotes Steven Pinker as putting forward something like this when he likens fiction to the case-based reasoning in research on artificial intelligence: 'Fictional narratives supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face someday and the outcome of strategies we could deploy in them. What are the options if I were to suspect that my uncle killed my father, took his position, and married my mother?'[10] But this seems a highly implausible account of the ethical benefits of watching the plays of Shakespeare. No-one, surely, sees *Hamlet* as a practical guide to intra-familial murder and revenge, to be mentally filed away just in case one day one's uncle kills one's father and marries one's mother. As Smith points out, Pinker's example is not a helpful one - we might resist the idea that a work like *Hamlet* performs essentially the same function as the 'in case of emergency' leaflet on a plane. But the problem arises not just from *Hamlet's* status as 'great art'. Do we really approach *any* works of fiction in this purposeful way?

Smith replaces *Hamlet* with the film *United 93*, and asks: '...is it really such a stretch to say that the film helps us imagine what being on that flight was like for its passengers?'[11] This sort of imagining has a limited practical utility in our ordinary lives, if we were to find ourselves in a similar situation, it is unlikely that we would draw on that datum in reasoning how, or if, to act. It also seems unlikely that, as Pinker seems to imply, it is something to be stored 'just in case'. But ethical knowledge is not only valuable to the extent that it is consciously employed to guide our actions. A vivid imagining of how it felt might shape our attitudes and behaviour in multiple ways, most of which we are unaware. It might, for example, contribute to a greater degree of patience and politeness the next time one is passing through airport security, even though the film is not at the forefront of one's mind. It may have more negative effects too, but I'll come back to that later.

Alternatively, we could say that it is not that works of fiction are added to a database of moral knowledge, but rather that the work of attending to the details of fiction develops our ability to recognise the complexities (and not necessarily corresponding complexities) of moral situations in life. There are two possible directions in which the experiential knowledge which we accrue from fictions might be applied in daily life. The

---

[10] Pinker, S. quoted in Smith, M. 'Empathy and the Extended Mind' in Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. (eds.) *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 99

[11] Smith, M. p. 110

first is towards the future; the knowledge might be action-guiding in possible future situations. The second, and I suggest the much more common direction, is towards the past. When the content of a fiction has a direct bearing on one's own experience it is often as a kind of illuminating perspective on the memory of a situation. Fictions can be guides to life not as sets of normative principles to be drawn on in the future, but as supplementary points of reference to which we refer when we reflect on our own lives. The metaphorical language of computers and databases in which Pinker's theory is couched gives the impression that the process is one of information storage and retrieval, matching a present event to a past experience. Age and experience enable us to see more of the complexity in the situations of ordinary life, but not because we face each one by comparing it to events from our past. But neither does it seem very easy to say just what it is that age and experience has taught us, other than a better quality of judgement. This is getting to the kind of particularist view held by Martha Nussbaum and Iris Murdoch, of which I will say more later. First I shall turn to the question of imagining an alternative subjective experience.

1.1.2 Imagining 'what it's like' for Others

It is a familiar enough idea - even a truism - that imagining into the perspectives of others is a fundamental part of moral thinking. Atticus Finch's advice to his daughter Scout, 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... Until you climb into his skin. Walk around in it' may be one of the first moral arguments which children encounter. There is also, however, a major tradition of moral philosophy in which the well-spring of moral judgment and right action is not only, as it was for Kant, in the exercise of reason, but in the influence of the emotions, or 'sentiments', which are communicated between people through the mechanisms of sympathy and imaginative projection.[12] For Adam Smith, when we adopt another's perspective: 'By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation.....we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person...'[13] David Hume famously claimed that '...the minds of men are mirrors to one another...'[14] (I shall return to Hume later). More recently, R.M. Hare emphasised the importance of '...the distinction between knowing that something is

---

[12] A note on terminology: 'sympathy', for Hume and Smith, was much closer to what today we would call 'empathy'.

[13] Smith, A. *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002/1759) p. 12

[14] Hume, D. *Treatise*, p.365

happening to someone, and knowing *what it is like for him.*'[15], arguing that the latter is vitally important in moral deliberations. As I discussed in chapter two, the notion of 'identification' with characters, imagining into their perspective, is commonly held to be central to the experience of fiction. It seems very likely, therefore, that if engaging with fiction has any ethical value, one strong candidate for the source of this value is to be found in this mode of dramatic imagination in which engaging with real people and fictional ones both share. In what ways are the perspective taking of ethical reasoning and the subjective imagining of fiction related?

As I claimed in chapter two, within the internal, imagined perspective, there is a dual structure in the differing points of view on the characters - a subjective and an objective perspective. To adopt a subjective point of view is to imagine into the perspective of a character, to 'try on' in imagination the particular quality of the way in which they experience things. But recall that I also made the distinction between imagining being a character, and imagining being myself 'in that character's shoes'. Now that we are discussing the potential for the ethical benefit of such imagining, the difference becomes particularly important. Imagining how *I* would act and feel in a situation brings different ethical benefits than imagining how other people would act and feel. The first kind derives from learning about the possibilities of a contingently unexperienced situation, the second arises from learning about the possibilities of a type of subjective experience that is necessarily unavailable.

Is there, as I have claimed, a real distinction between imagining how I would feel in a situation and imagining how that same situation is for another? The sort of subjective imagining that we have so far been discussing is to do with placing myself in the situation of someone else, and asking how the same set of circumstances and conditions which influence his attitudes and actions would influence my own. Martha Nussbaum offers this example: '...the stories of Mahasweta Devi give us lots of information about the lives of poor women in India, but we could get that information in many other ways. What the novel does is to activate our imagination and urge us to inhabit for a time the position of such a woman. And that is a type of education that is not reducible to mere information'[16] This sort of imagining might tell us something about the kind of considerations that we should take into account in asking why the women hold the beliefs that they do. But the imaginative act will be influenced by my own set of beliefs and attitudes which I import

---

[15] Hare, R.M. 1981, p.91-2 (quoted in Goldman, A. 2006, p. 295) emphasis in the original.

[16] Nussbaum, M. An interview in *The Dualist*, Autumn, 2004, p.68

into the imagined equation. It could be argued that in Nussbaum's example, imagining myself in the position of one of these women will tell me relatively little, because there are highly significant differences in our attitudes, beliefs and values. Without leaving my own culturally and historically conditioned attitudes about gender equality behind, for example, I might find certain aspects of these women's experience highly puzzling. Without taking these into consideration, the act of imagining gives me information only about myself in a hypothetical situation, not about women like them in a real situation. And it is the latter sort of information which it is claimed is important in moral reasoning. In this respect the basic moral argument 'put yourself in his shoes, how would *you* feel?' fails to capture what it is that we actually try to do in an ethical operation of subjective imagining; the point is rather to ask how the *other* person feels.

For this reason we should keep a sharp distinction between 'in his shoes' imagining, and the sort of subjective imagining which I described in chapter two, the dramatic rehearsal of another's mental state. Otherwise, the notion of an ethical benefit for subjective imagining is open to the objection that it falsely assumes an essential similarity between different groups of people, and fails to accommodate the real differences in cultures and values. If my own imagining is to be any sort of guide to the experience of another then I must presume that we are alike in crucial ways. On some very basic level no doubt our psychological features and emotional dispositions are the same; we become angry at witnessing injustice, we become afraid at the thought of danger, and so on. But these basic psychological mechanisms that we share are informed by, and get their content from, higher-level culturally determined factors; we both become angry at injustice, for example, but we might have very different ideas about what constitutes injustice. In Bernard Williams' terms, 'justice' is a relatively 'thin' ethical concept which is filled out by culturally and historically determined factors. If I take my own (culturally conditioned) response for how a character would respond, then I am failing to learn anything about that character, and by extension about the kind of person whom he or she represents.

1.1.3 The Subjective Knowledge Theory

Lamarque and Olsen do not distinguish between knowing what it's like and knowing what it's like for others, but instead refer to the more general 'Subjective Knowledge Theory of Cognitive Value' (SKT). They do not doubt that the kind of subjective imagining which is offered by fiction is a common experience and one which we value; the problem, according to them, arises when we move from imagining what it's like, to the claim that

fictions allow us to *know* what it is like. The kind of experiential knowledge which it is claimed fiction offers, is not really *knowledge* at all. Fictions, they argue, can and do offer us imaginative experiences from which we come to learn something about other forms of life. As they say: 'In the literary case, we might say that as a result of reading the novel - and imaginatively engaging with its content - we now know better what it is like to be in a situation of a particular kind.'[17] But this knowledge, according to L&O, arises from reflecting on the imaginative experience, it is not in the experience itself.

L&O's objections to the SKT are made, therefore, on epistemological grounds; the imaginative projection into a character's perspective cannot count as knowledge in the absence of objective criteria to distinguish between genuine and merely putative knowledge, between what is true and what is false. Let me come back to the example of Mary's room. When Mary is outside her monochrome room and experiences colour for the first time, does she now know something that she did not know before? It seems likely that the answer is yes, that some item of knowledge has been added to the sum of what she knows about the world. But can we say that this new item of knowledge, Mary's knowing 'what the experience of red is like', is either true or false? Mary's knowing 'what red is like' does not come from reflecting on the experience, because that was part of the conceptual knowledge which she already had inside her room. If we accept that Mary's understanding of the concept of red has been increased with experience, and also that this new knowledge is not in the form of propositions which can be true or false, then there are kinds of (non-propositional) knowledge that are not assessable in terms of truth value. Mary's richer understanding of the concept of 'red' is not a form of knowledge that is assessable in terms of its truth or falsity, it is not, in other words, a form of propositional knowledge - *knowing that* something is the case. Rather, it is a kind of experiential knowledge. Just as we can say that someone *knows how* to ride a bicycle, we can say that someone knows *what it is like*. Both are forms of knowledge but neither can be said to be true or false. And if there are kinds of knowledge to which truth or falsity does not apply, then L&O's objection to SKT seems to be undermined. Wittgenstein gives an example of this kind of experiential knowledge:

> Compare *knowing* and *saying*:
>
> how many feet high Mont Blanc is -
>
> how the word game is used -
>
> how a clarinet sounds.

---

[17] Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, p.373

> If you are surprised that one can know something and not be able to say it, you are perhaps thinking of a case like the first. Certainly not of one like the third.[18]

The kinds of imagined experience which we value in engaging with fiction, imagining the subjective 'feel' of fictional perspectives, constitutes a kind of experiential knowledge, an internal understanding of one possible mode of life.

L&O's principle objection to the subjective knowledge theory is in fact similar to their objection to the general cognitive/philosophical value of art which I discussed in the last chapter. The theory, they argue, fails to account for why we engage with works of narrative fiction, and what we expect from the experience. As they put it: 'Can the idea of subjective knowledge illuminate what makes works of literature valuable in a culture?'[19] It seems very likely that the notion of the extension of experience - either of alternative experiences or of alternative subjective states - might be one very central reason that we value works of fiction of the kind that foster it. Most of us have, at some point or another, and with varying degrees of acuteness, a sense of the partiality and finitude of our own existence. It does not seem very implausible that for many of us one of the reasons that we value fiction so highly, and give it such a prominent role in our lives, is that it enables us to live in imagination beyond the limits set by our circumstances. One of the motivations might be simple escapism, of course. It is often (to the point of a cliché, perhaps) noted that the glittering spectacles of films of the 1930's were catering to the escapist fantasies of an audience ravaged by the Great Depression. This is not exactly an ethical benefit of subjective imagining, but not an especially *un*ethical operation of the imagination either. Is there any *ethical* value in imagining the subjective point of view of a fictional character? Or, to put it a different way, is there any ethical value in *empathising* with fictional characters?

1.2 The Exercise of Empathy

Engaging with characters in works of narrative fiction, it can be argued, provides not just information, but a sort of training in the same imaginative and emotional capacities which we use in or ordinary dealings with actual people. Rather than, as we have just seen, providing an expanded field of information on which to base moral judgements, fictions, according to this view, provide opportunities for the exercise of an imaginative capability. We become, through engaging with fiction, better empathisers. Murray Smith has argued

---

[18] Wittgenstein, L. *PI*, I, §78

[19] Lamarque and Olsen, 1998, p.374

that empathy is an important aspect of what has become known as the 'extended mind thesis', the idea that we utilise external features of the world as 'cognitive prostheses'. First of all, in the sense which was discussed in the previous section, empathy is a mechanism through which we incorporate the visible emotional states of others in order to augment our own experience. But secondly, empathy can also be seen as one of the psychological capacities which are themselves extended in engaging with fiction. Works of narrative fiction act as a framework upon which we exercise the faculty of empathy, they are, in other words, a jungle gym for the moral imagination.

1.2.1 Fictions as the Training of Empathy

Is empathising the kind of thing we can become more expert at doing? Is it not something that people, in varying degrees, are naturally disposed to do? One of the reasons that Kant rejected the 'sentimentalist' moral theory of David Hume was that in locating the source of moral judgement in the emotions and in sympathy, Hume locates morality in a faculty given by nature, and a capacity of which some are more generously favoured than others. For Kant, such a basis for morality was unacceptable because it meant that the distribution of moral judgement among people would be entirely a matter of chance. Recent discussions of 'mirror neurons' which seem to provide a biological basis for empathy, might seem to contribute to Kant's worry. Briefly, mirror neurons are structures in the brain which are activated not just when we carry out a particular action, but also when we see the action being carried out. It has been claimed that people with a dysfunction in the mirror neuron system, like people with autism for example, tend to also lack empathic imagination. If we are each biologically 'hard-wired' to feel empathy to a particular extent, is there much that engaging with fictions can do to change it?

But empathy is not, of course, an entirely automatic and unconscious psychological mechanism. There are processes, like affective mimicry and emotional contagion, that work at an unconscious level; to a certain extent we cannot help but 'catch' the emotions of those around us. That's why films are usually funnier or scarier when we are part of a cinema audience than when we watch them at home alone. But for the most part we empathise with others on the basis of a belief about what emotions they are feeling. Not, let me emphasise, on the basis of judgements about the *value* of the other's emotions, but beliefs about what they are. Amy Coplan makes a threefold distinction

between pseudo-empathy, emotional contagion and empathy proper.[20] The first, pseudo-empathy, is the sort of 'in his shoes' imagining that I have already mentioned. Emotional contagion is the unconscious 'catching' of others' emotion. Empathy is 'empathy proper', according to Coplan, if, and only if, A imaginatively replicates the emotional states of B, and also knows or *understands* what those states are.

Christopher Hamilton has argued: 'There is among theorists, a strong tendency to exaggerate - perhaps *malgré eux* - the explicitness and clarity of whatever it is that we learn from art...'[21] How does fiction *change* our ethical outlook? There are two quite distinct possibilities. The first is the mode of learning that was discussed in the last chapter. We reflect on the ethical concepts which we take from interpretations of the film. This mode is cognitive, rational, critical - we change our ethical outlook because we recognise good reasons for doing so. The second is non-cognitive; learning not sets of beliefs or concepts, but cultivating a disposition to respond to the world in a certain way. The second option captures more effectively, I think, the powerful intuition that people generally do not become more moral by rationally deciding to adopt a set of principles. It is often described by those who advocate this approach as the acquiring of a skill or an ability, but I would rather describe it as acquiring a *habit*. Subjective imagining in response to fiction cultivates a habit of empathy.

But that is not to say that films cannot refine our 'stock' of conceptual knowledge, just that it is not the only, and perhaps not the primary mode in which films have an ethical influence. Our ethical outlook *can* be influenced by rational deliberation, but it may not be the only or the most significant factor. I want to suggest that ethical learning through fiction is partly the acquisition of a form of procedural memory. The analogy is often made between this form of the acquisition of knowledge and learning how to ride a bicycle. Currie, for example, (echoing the remark from Wittgenstein above) says: 'Just as my inability to offer you a theory of bicycle riding is no objection to the claim that I know how to ride a bicycle, so my inarticulateness in the face of the question "What did you learn from *Middlemarch*?" is no refutation of the claim that I did, indeed, learn something from it.'[22] But how can learning a quality of ethical judgement be anything like acquiring a physical skill? A recent article by the neuroscientist David Eagleman argues that it is not just physical movements that are developed by the non-conscious aspect of learning, it is

---

[20] Coplan, A. 'Will the Real Empathy Please Stand Up? A Case for a Narrow Conceptualization' *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 49, Spindel Supplement (2011) 40-65

[21] Hamilton, C. 'Art and Moral Education' in Bermudez, J.L. and Gardner, S. (eds.) *Art and Morality* (London: Routledge, 2003) p.43

[22] Currie, G. in Levinson, 1998, p.164

also what we ordinarily consider the higher level cognitive, perceptual and reasoning abilities.[23] Eagleman tells a story of the plane spotters in WWII who were highly valuable to the British in identifying approaching enemy aircraft. Charged with training more spotters, however, they found it impossible to articulate, and therefore teach, the criteria for the very fine-grained distinctions which were involved - they knew the difference between friendly and enemy aircraft but they didn't know *how* they knew. The only way to train more spotters was by showing them examples and saying 'yes' or 'no' to their guesses. In time, the recruits acquired the ability to discriminate between planes as a form of non-conscious procedural memory. The sort of ethical ability which can be acquired from works like *Middlemarch* might be understood as the developing through the repetition and variation of fictional narrative scenarios a quality of judgement as a set of habitual responses.

This sort of non-conscious learning by repeated exposure, a sort of Pavlovian ethical conditioning, seems very much like the kind of psychological process for which film has more usually been criticised. In academic film studies discussion of ethics or morality has traditionally been concerned not with how films can act as instruments of moral improvement, but with their usually hidden function as ideological tools of subjective construction and reinforcement. Rather than having an ethically beneficial effect, the repeated exposure to particular forms of representation inculcates a narrow and politically saturated way of seeing the world. Films have a potential to shape our attitudes in ways of which we are usually unaware. But just as it would be a mistake to claim that engaging with fiction film has a necessarily positive effect on our ethical outlook, it is also a mistake to claim that it has an inherently negative one. The notion that in engaging with fiction we reinforce a habit of empathetic response may be the other, more positive, side of the ideological coin, so to speak.

But doesn't this argument fail to account for the fact that the ethical dimension of life requires rational and reflective involvement with moral problems? It is not enough to develop a 'habit of empathy' if it is not supported by a critical reflection on the reasons for acting one way rather than another. It is not enough in ethics, as it may be in plane spotting, to say 'I don't know *how* I know, I just know'. The same kind of thought can be used to support various irrational prejudices and provide justification for the perpetuation of inequalities. The same thought is behind the politics of disgust; as Nussbaum reminds us: 'Leon R. Kass, chairman of President Bush's Council on Bioethics, wrote in "The

---

[23] http://discovermagazine.com/2011/sep/18-your-brain-knows-lot-more-than-you-realize

Wisdom of Repugnance" (1997) that our responses of disgust embody a wise aversion to evil that can steer us reliably in times of social change.'[24] It might be invoked by opponents of gay rights, for example, or have been advanced by supporters of the Jim Crow laws who found blacks and whites sharing drinking fountains disgusting. Even if it can be shown that engaging with narrative fiction does somehow expand or strengthen our natural empathetic capacities, it might not, to put it bluntly, be a good thing.

Jesse Prinz has recently argued against the idea that empathy has any particular ethical value.[25] In fact, he says, it may even have the opposite effect; becoming more empathetic might even have a detrimental effect on us as ethical beings. First of all the intensity of the emotional reaction it can summon might interfere with our rational judgement. This is a traditional criticism of the emotions, but it still carries some force. Recall Smith's example of the film *United 93*, and now imagine that you are a juror in a trial of someone accused of a terrorist crime. If the film happened to be showing on television the night before the start of the trial, you might be strictly directed by the presiding judge not to watch it because of the likelihood that its emotional force would prejudice your judgement. Additionally, rather than allowing us to act more morally, the essential partiality of empathy may distort our moral judgements in relation to groups of people who are more distant - racially, culturally, socially - from ourselves. As Prinz notes, the partisan nature of empathy was described (as sympathy) by Hume: 'Sympathy, we shall allow, is much fainter than our concern for ourselves, and sympathy with persons remote from us much fainter than that with persons near and contiguous.'[26] Seeing empathy as a basis for moral judgements, according to Prinz, risks blinding us to the interests of those who are not part of our own 'in-group'. The three factors which Hume identifies as determining the strength of empathy are the associative principles of resemblance, contiguity and causation. Thus sympathy flows more naturally between us and our friends and family than between ourselves and strangers, and more effectively between strangers who belong to the same culture than those who do not: 'The stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person...' For Hume the extent of the accuracy of this process of

---

[24] Nussbaum, M. 'Danger to Human Dignity: the Revival of Disgust and Shame in the Law' *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50:48 (2004) pB6-B9

[25] Prinz, J. 'Against Empathy' in *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 49, Spindel Supplement (2011), 214–33

[26] Hume, D. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (ed.) Selby-Bigge and Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975[1777]), p.229.

sympathy relies on the resemblance and contiguity of the other to myself. Although by contiguity Hume is referring to physical proximity, we might expand the notion to mean a form of cultural similarity. In other words, the closer the other person is to myself, both in terms of physical and cultural distance, the greater my sympathy will be. Therefore it follows that the operation of sympathy is hindered by significant differences, '...The sentiments of others have little influence, when far remov'd from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely.'[27]

Empathy with one group of people can, as Prinz argues, lead to a corresponding lack of empathy with another group. The partiality of emotional allegiance can be seen most keenly in war films, which are often produced partly with this explicit purpose. The fostering of these emotions in response to one set of people, requires the blocking of a similar engagement with other types of people to whom they are opposed. *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), for example, has an ostensibly respectable liberal anti-war moral 'message', but in proposing this, some might say rather banal, proposition, the film also seems to embody a distinctly *illiberal* attitude towards people who are not American. Moreover, the anti-war 'message' is partly conveyed by means of the narrative's implicitly racist one. The narrative concentrates on a small group of characters, Nicky, Michael and Stephen (Christopher Walken, Robert De Niro and John Savage), who we come to empathise with very strongly. For a Western Anglo-Saxon audience these characters are more closely related to them than the others in virtue of a cultural resemblance. Moreover, these characters are played by actors with whom we are already very familiar, or in other words, persons with whom there is already a strong degree of contiguity. The strength of the emotional response to this small group, therefore, tends both to occlude any similar response to other characters, but is also intensified by the severing of any similar relation with the characters to whom they are opposed. We are swept up into their suffering partly through a natural empathetic response, but also through the corresponding antipathetic response to their tormentors, the Vietcong captors grinning like beasts, the prostitute whose coldness disgusts Nicky, the dissolute and cynical Frenchman, and so forth.

One of the objections to the ethical criticism of art that is made from an aestheticist perspective is that the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of a work are independent of each other. But in *The Deer Hunter* we can see an example where they intersect. The reinforcement of national and racial stereotypes is an ethical flaw in the film, and this ethical flaw is generated by the superficial and cartoonish representations of

---

[27] Hume, D. *Treatise*, p.318

its non-American characters - and this is an example of a feature that we would normally consider an aesthetic flaw. There is a kind of Kantian flavour to this thought. Kant famously argued that the correct moral treatment of persons is not as a means to an end, but as ends themselves; people are not instruments towards a greater good. Likewise, an aesthetic standard for fictional characters is not as cyphers or narrative devices to make a point, but as independent entities with their own sort of depth. The sadistic Vietcong captors are figures which have a single purpose, to amplify the quality of the main characters' suffering. The seedy, sweaty Frenchman, with his greasy suit and oily hair, and the prostitute whose lack of tender feeling drives Nicky out to the street (where he finds a toy elephant which he seizes on like an antidote to their venality), are both figures designed with a single function, to be a background against which Nicky's purity and innocence can be more clearly defined.

The Deer Hunter can certainly be seen to support a shallow, blinkered and parochial view of the world, but reading the novel by Bảo Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, however, could equally open one's eyes to the other perspective. It is not, therefore, empathy itself which has a distorting influence on morality, but the qualities and the aims of the works in which it is generated. In our everyday lives most of us encounter a relatively limited variety of nationalities and cultures, so our opportunities to adopt the perspective of those who are significantly different to ourselves is limited. One of the ethical benefits of an empathetic engagement with fictional characters might be that it brings us, in Hume's terms, into a more *contiguous* relation with others. This greater contiguity might bring with it a greater recognition of *resemblance*. Nussbaum's remark that literature helps '...us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling' points to this 'fostering of contiguity' function of art. While an empathic engagement with fiction *can* reinforce a partial viewpoint, it can just as easily be used to extend an empathetic response to groups of people who otherwise would remain alien. So one way in which empathy is developed by the engagement with fiction is in the expansion of the set of people to whom it can apply.

It could also be the case, however, that certain films are morally pernicious, not because they fail to foster empathy with 'out-groups', but because they actively put our emotional and imaginative responses to immoral ends. Our moral emotions, our finer feelings of care and compassion, when yoked to their fellow moral emotions of anger and indignation, can sometimes be used as tools to motivate us to acts not of kindness, but of cruelty. Much of the racist emotional momentum which *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith,

1915) aims to generate, for example, is in the feelings of anger at the lascivious savagery of its black characters - which is a product of empathy for the white characters who suffer at their hands. As Carl Plantinga reminds us: '...we must not rule out the possibility that movies do offer a sentimental education that is decidedly bad.'[28] Films can be used to reinforce prejudices, support or confirm erroneous presuppositions, give us reasons to persist in our flawed ethical views. Sympathetic emotions and subjective imagining can be mobilised towards evil ends just as effectively as they can be used to promote the good.

Another reason to doubt the ethical value of subjective imagining alone was suggested by Matthew Kieran in chapter two. Many, perhaps most, fictional characters are deluded in some way, ethically flawed, mendacious, self-serving, self-deceiving, and so on. Or at least the more interesting ones are. How can subjective imagining have any ethical benefit if, in order to successfully achieve it, we must imaginatively replicate those same ethical flaws? Too successful an act of subjective imagination in response to *Five Easy Pieces* would blind us to Robert's faults rather than reveal them. Moreover, we are often led to 'identify' with characters who are not just selfish and self-deceptive, but who commit grossly immoral acts, and we are led to identify with them not despite, but in virtue of, the commission of those acts. This is an issue that has been identified by Murray Smith as the 'puzzle of perverse allegiance' and it is usually approached as the question of how it is possible, given that we are moral beings, to identify with such characters. But I would rather ask, given that we do identify with them, or sympathise with, or care for, them, do these cases undermine the possibility of the ethical value of subjective imagining? How can fiction have an ethical benefit if subjective imagining leads us to respond sympathetically to immoral people and approvingly of their immoral acts? Recall the example from *The Sopranos*, 'The Ride', which I mentioned in chapter two. Tony and Christopher are driving back from a deal when they come across a biker gang robbing a restaurant.

The scene is designed with the single purpose of leading the viewer to share in the sense of pure enjoyment which Tony and Christopher have in committing the crime. The PoV structure and the fast-paced rhythm of the editing, echoed by the pounding rhythm of the

---

28 Plantinga, C., 2009, p.203

music which forms an affective thread linking the sequence of shots, are, in George Wilson's terminology and as I mentioned in chapter two, the 'subjective inflections' which carry us along. How can this example of subjective imagining have any sort of ethical value?

It might be argued that entering into the feelings which Tony and Christopher have provides a sense of what is often unacknowledged in ethical discussions, an honest appreciation of the reality that committing a crime might be fun. Knowing what it is like to transgress moral norms may be just as valuable, or perhaps more valuable, than knowing what it is like to be virtuous. As Tanner argues, it is one of the most important ethical functions of the imagination to give us access to moral attitudes which are unlike our own. That does not mean, however, that the subjective imagination is ethically valuable alone. In order for it to have this sort of value, the imagining of an alternative point of view must be conducted within a broader objective context from which it derives its ethical value. Getting swept up into the fun of the robbery can have little ethical benefit in our own lives unless it forms part of either a more reflective consideration of concepts, or a more self-directed reflection on the nature of my own ethical attitudes. It is important to bear in mind Hume's answer to the problem that Prinz raises about the partiality of empathy. It is possible to construe some of Hume's more provocative statements, like 'morality is more properly felt than judg'd of'[29] as a naive valuing of emotional ethical intuition. But as Hume recognises, the partiality of empathy, and its dependence on resemblance and contiguity, makes it highly unsuitable as a final standard for moral judgement. The passions which are communicated between people, must therefore be tempered by a more detached sort of attitude. The mere replication of another's emotional state is dangerously unfocussed without the qualification of a more objective perspective, or what Hume called, the 'steady and general point of view'.[30]

This is where the two forms of the imagination which I have referred to in earlier chapters exert an influence on each other. The dramatic, empathetic imagining (which Hume calls sympathy) is usefully constrained by the constructive and associative form, what Moran calls 'imaginativeness'. For Hume, a moral judgement involves a complex interaction of empathy, imagination and reason. The passions, communicated between persons by empathy, only become moral when they are made impersonal by the imagination, that is, when they are generalised and objectified. When, for example, we see

---

[29] Hume, D. *Treatise*, p.470

[30] Ibid, p.581

a straight stick protruding from a body of water it appears to bend in a way that we know it does not. In this case an initial sense-impression is corrected by means of prior experience, reason and the imagination, and, according to Hume, it is just this kind of process that we use to correct the initial impressions of the passions that are communicated to us by empathy. In both cases we are removed by means of the imagination from our immediate point of view, and we consider the same phenomenon from a corrected perspective, a view that we *would* see if we were able to occupy an optimal perspective. As Hume says: '...the imagination adheres to the general view of things, and distinguishes betwixt the feelings they produce, and those which arise from our particular and momentary situation.'[31]

Hume's argument is important in relation to what Nussbaum refers to as the 'empathetic torturer' objection. According to this view, imagining 'what it is like' does not necessarily issue in more moral action because the mere replication of another's mental and emotional states could serve just as usefully as information on which to base more effective cruelty rather than more kindness. For Hume, the psychological mechanism of empathy is itself morally neutral. And neither is it itself an emotion, there is no distinct *quale* for empathy as there is for anger or sadness or joy; instead we feel empathetic anger or empathetic sadness or empathetic joy. The passions that empathy communicates can be either good or not, benevolent or malicious, admirable or base; therefore in order for it to have a moral function the moral sentiments communicated by empathy must be corrected by reason and by the constructive imagination.

In this example, we can see perhaps, the utility of adopting the concept of 'sympathy' in its modern sense. Empathy, as an imaginative replication or simulation of another's emotional states, may indeed be useful to the sadist as a source of information about the effectiveness of his cruelty, the quality of his victim's suffering, and as an indication of how that suffering might be intensified. Were the same sadist to feel *sympathy*, on the other hand, it is unlikely that it would be much use to him. Sympathy involves the additional elements of compassion, concern, and a desire that its object does not suffer, so sympathy would *inhibit* cruelty not assist it. Sympathy is distinct from empathy, but it nevertheless contains an empathic component. It is both an imaginative feeling *with* and an additional element of concern *for* the well-being of its object.

---

[31] Ibid, p.587

1.2.2. Fictions as Occasions of Sympathy

All of the possible applications of subjective imagining which we have discussed so far have understood its ethical value as an instrumental value. It is useful as either an expanded and enriched stock of data on which to base moral judgements and actions, or as a kind of 'jungle gym' for the moral imagination. Nussbaum, however, has argued that the act of empathising or, rather, sympathising with fictional characters should itself be counted as an intrinsically ethical act. As she says: '...the activities of imagination and emotion that the involved reader performs during the time of reading are not just instrumental to moral conduct, they are also examples of moral conduct, in the sense that they are examples of the type of emotional and imaginative activity that good ethical conduct involves. It is by being examples of moral conduct that they strengthen the propensity so to conduct oneself in other instances.'[32] Learning to parallel park a car, for example, involves acquiring capabilities, skills, and a refinement of perception and judgement, and the way that it is achieved is by engaging in doing the very act that is to be improved. So it is with the refinement of moral perception and judgement that is offered by certain works of narrative fiction - we sharpen our moral capabilities by sympathetic engagement with their characters.

But how can sympathising be an intrinsically ethical act, if, as I discussed in the last section, it can be manipulated towards immoral ends, or if sympathising with one set of people means that we cannot sympathise with another? As Nussbaum insists, the ethical value of fiction is not just in imagining what it's like, but also in the refinement of the cognitive judgements within which this form of imagining becomes an ethical act. As she says: 'The importance of these novels, as I repeatedly stress, is cognitive: they shape, in their reader, certain evaluative judgments that lie at the heart of certain emotions. We may of course refuse the invitation to be so shaped, but if we fulfil responsively the role of the "implied reader," we will form those evaluative judgments.'[33] Developing a habit of sympathising therefore involves a refinement of our judgement of when such a response is warranted. And this judgement involves also adopting a more detached a critical perspective, or as I put it in the last chapter it involves reflecting on the 'thick ethical concepts' which works of narrative fiction exemplify.

---

[32] Nussbaum, M. 'Exactly and Responsibly: A Defence of Ethical Criticism' *Philosophy and Literature* 22:2 (1998) 355

[33] Ibid, p.353

There are reasons to doubt, then, that subjective imagining alone, and in the absence of a guiding and qualifying objective attitude, is either an intrinsically or instrumentally ethical act; empathy is not an emotion, and not necessarily moral or immoral. First, as the empathic sadist argument suggests, imaginatively replicating the mental and/or emotional states of another person is not in itself any guarantee that we will treat that person with greater kindness. The reply was that empathy is not enough to motivate or guarantee moral conduct without the additional element of concern and compassion which are contained in the broader (modern) concept of sympathy. But as we have seen, although sympathy can be considered a moral attitude, it too can be manipulated in the service of less than moral purposes. Therefore sympathy is not sufficient for an ethical attitude in the absence of rational judgements about when it is or is not warranted. Secondly, it is just as easy, and just as common, that we empathise with fictional characters who are themselves ethically flawed in varying degrees of seriousness. It brings no ethical benefit to exactly replicate the mental states of Robert Dupea or Tony Soprano, if that replication also includes their own failures in recognising their ethical flaws. In this case we merely repeat, in imagination, their mistakes, we do not learn from them. Subjective imagining is not, therefore, sufficient on its own as an account of the ethical benefit of engaging with narrative fiction. So let us turn now to objective imagining.

2. The Ethical Value of Objective Imagining

Although there is a strong sentimentalist tradition in moral philosophy, by far the more dominant view is the one that connects moral judgement with objective detachment, and which locates moral authority in a source external to any single personal perspective. For Kant the objective authority was reason, for utilitarians the maximisation of happiness, and for Hume the truly moral viewpoint is the 'general' one, sympathy *corrected* by imagination and reason. More recently, John Rawls argued that justice involves imaginatively projecting oneself into the 'original position', hypothetically stripped of contingent features of wealth, class, background, race, and from behind this 'veil of ignorance' our natural bias of personal interest is turned against itself, put to work for the general good.[34] The goal of objectivity in this sense is not to project oneself into the position of any particular person, but to transcend the influence of *any* perspective.

---

[34] Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971)

So far we have been considering the notion that there is ethical value in imagining *into* the perspectives of fictional characters, what I have called *subjective* imagining. The alternative is what I have called *objective* imagining. There is a distinction to be made, however, between two forms of objective imagining. The first possibility is imagining how things are from a perspective detached from that of a character; imagining the flaws in the views of Robert Dupea, for example, not imaginatively replicating those flaws. From this more objective perspective we arrive at an improved understanding of the ethically relevant aspects of the character. The second possibility, and my focus in what immediately follows, is that by reflecting on the quality and the nature of our own imaginative and emotional responses to flawed characters, we can be led to a more objective understanding of the deficiencies of our own ethical views. The difference is therefore between the objects of the more detached perspective; in the first case the object is the character, and in the second it is oneself. Or in the terms of chapter one, the first form of objective imagining is an *internal* one - a more objective perspective is adopted, but from within the work. The second form, on the other hand, is a detached perspective on oneself which is generated by the unsettling force of the realisation of the ethical implications of one's internal involvement.

In the first part of this section I will concentrate on the way that engaging with characters can prompt a more objective perspective on oneself, and I will argue that this is a product of a subjective to objective shift in the nature of our imaginative attitudes to them. In the second part I will turn to a view that was famously and influentially proposed by Iris Murdoch. In this mode of the objective moral imagination, the ethical value of fiction is to be found not in a more objective view of characters, and not in a more objective view of oneself, but in offering us a glimpse of how things really are, a glimpse undistorted by the force of our personal attachments and desires. According to Murdoch art offers us a training in a 'just mode of vision', which is a view from no particular perspective at all. Murdoch's view of the ethical potential of art as an ideal imaginative attitude to fiction will return us to the traditional objectivising ambitions of moral theories that I mentioned at the start of this section.

2.1 The Objective Point of View

Dan Flory argues that in *Do the Right Thing* (1984) Spike Lee confronts the film's white audience with the hitherto unacknowledged possibility of their own partial and ethically defective viewpoint on the world. Sal (Danny Aiello) is the Italian-American owner of a

pizzeria in a predominately African-American neighbourhood of Brooklyn, New York. Sal seems initially to be an island of reason and tolerance surrounded by a boiling sea of racial tension, bigotry and mutual hostility. He treats his customers equally, his employee Mookie (Spike Lee) with fairness and a paternal sort of affection. At the same time he despairs of his own son Pino's (John Turturro) racist attitude, attempting, gently and sadly, to point out to him the flaws in his views. Tension builds in the neighbourhood, until one day Sal is confronted in his restaurant by a furious Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) and Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn). Radio Raheem raises the volume on his radio until Sal explodes in stream of racist anger, grabs a baseball bat and smashes the radio to pieces. In the character of Sal, we are presented with what Flory calls a 'sympathetic racist', and in allying ourselves with Sal we form an allegiance which is eventually destabilised by the eruption of racist terms in his outburst. According to Flory, Lee confronts white members of his audience with an external, more objective, view of themselves; the film '... challenges white viewers to inspect their own presumptions about how they see themselves and others.'[35] The film presents me with the possibility that, like Sal, even though I think of myself as a good and fair person, there may lie within me an unrecognised potential for primitive, violent prejudice - a possibility that lies deeper than I can see, but closer to the surface than I realise.

In the previous section I suggested that imagining what it's like for others who are socially, racially or culturally removed from our own circumstances might be more problematic than is often allowed. According to Flory this imaginative limitation is overcome by providing the white viewer with a view of how he appears from the other perspective. John Sayles' *Brother From Another Planet* (1984) adopts the same kind of distancing strategy, to present a white audience with a critical view of itself, but perhaps in a more explicit manner. Two visiting white midwestern academics, Ed and Phil (Chip Mitchell and David Babcock), in New York for a conference on 'self-actualisation', get lost in Harlem and find themselves in a bar trying to convince themselves as much as the customers of their liberal credentials. Ed asserts both his affinity with African-Americans by saying: 'I didn't want to be *like* Ernie Banks. I wanted to *be* Ernie Banks...'[36] and also the race-blindness which he assumes is a virtue: '...and it never really dawned on me that he was black.' The representation of Ed and Phil's fear, guilt, and guilt about their fear, make some general assertions about white liberal attitudes towards issues of race.

---

[35] Flory, D. 'Spike Lee and the Sympathetic racist' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art History,* 64:1(2006) 68

[36] For those, like myself, unfamiliar with US sporting history, Ernie Banks was an African-American baseball player.

As they get drunker and drunker, they become more and more oblivious to the fact that the conversation which they see as a model of interracial communication and understanding, is really a one-sided projection of their own liberal concerns and attitudes. What they do not realise is that the man whom they befriend at the bar, the titular 'brother' (Joe Morton), is really an alien fugitive who is mute, and has understood little of what they have been saying to him. A point which is underlined when, as they are leaving, Ed holds out his hand and says 'Give me five, brother', a gesture which is met with bafflement. They leave with the idealistic misconception that boundaries have been crossed and bonds have been forged, when in fact they have no idea how alien *they* appear from the customers' point of view. Ed and Phil understand their seeing beyond the issue of race as an ethical achievement, whereas it might be seen alternatively as a failure. Recognising some similarity between himself and the two professors the white liberal viewer is led to an acknowledgement that his own views might be seen in the same way. The audience, or at least the part of it that will have been white and liberal, see a comic reflection of their own neuroses, and a practical demonstration of the partiality of the ethical viewpoint which they take to be simply and obviously true.

In the previous chapter I discussed how in *Five Easy Pieces* the central scene in which Robert tricks Catherine into an emotional response to Chopin acts as a rhetorical figure of narrational instruction by revealing a pattern of association between musical episodes and the question of emotional authenticity. The way that the scene functions as instruction is through generating in the viewer a particular emotional/imaginative trajectory. We are led to an awareness of the possibility of the falsity of an emotional response, by being forcibly removed from a subjective to an objective imaginative attitude. Initially we are drawn in to Catherine's point of view by the combination of the music and the imagery of the scene, the close-ups of the violin, the piano, the flowers, and most of all the family portraits.

Robert's cynical little snort of derision, however, snaps the viewer out of this subjective attitude to a more objective one. And from this more objective perspective it becomes clearer that the qualities of the imagery which led to our initial involvement are marked by a distinctly sentimental, clichéd visual tone. This scene, therefore, operates on one (external) level as a guide to a formal pattern across the narrative which indicates a thematic concern, it shows us a way of 'reading' the film. And on another (the internal) level it is able to function in this instructive way in virtue of an imaginative shift between subjective and objective points of view. Without the internal imaginative component, the external reflective and critical one would be more difficult, even impossible, to discern.

This is the same pattern of imaginative involvement and detachment which forms a central pillar of the 'push-me, pull-you' rhetorical structure of *The Sopranos*. We are continually drawn in to a subjectively imagined attitude, 'alignment' and 'allegiance', with its characters. We are drawn in by formal qualities of narration and style, that is by features that we recognise more clearly from an external perspective. But we are also drawn in by qualities of character, which are features of an internally imagined perspective - not aesthetic features of characters, but psychological features of *persons*. Many, perhaps most, of these are *ethical* qualities; principle among which is the quality of loyalty. But we are then jolted out of our subjective attachment by moments in which the characters' actions reveal the instability of our attitude's foundations. The final series is largely concerned with lifting Tony's veil of charm, and the revelation of the hollowness of his self-consoling fantasy of the sanctity of friendship. It follows out this theme in each episode in a systematically repeated pattern of disillusionment.

In 'Chasing It' (Season 6, Episode 16), Hesh (Jerry Adler), one of Tony's oldest and dearest friends, is beginning to be worried by Tony's reluctance to pay his debts, as he says, 'At what point does it become cheaper for him to settle things another way?' Their estrangement builds and the veneer of civility wears thinner, when Hesh's girlfriend Renata (Lanette Ware) suddenly dies. The viewer expects Hesh's grief to be a catalyst of reconciliation between them, but instead when Tony visits he brings a bag of money, drops it on a table, and leaves with a cold platitude, 'Sorry for your loss.' The scene emphasises Tony's coldness in the way that it intensifies the viewer's sympathy for Hesh. It cuts directly

from the scene in which Hesh finds Renata, to a medium long shot of him sitting alone, not dressed, in a darkened room.

It detaches us further from Tony's point of view, by drawing us in to a sympathetic alignment with Hesh - and this is underlined by Hesh's reaction. The viewer's attitude towards Tony shifts back and forth, and throughout most of the first five series the scales of care and distance have tended to weigh in favour of the former, but in the sixth series the balance shifts towards the latter. Eventually, the moments in which Tony alienates himself from our sympathies accumulate to the point - where he kills Christopher - at which the bond snaps.

The ethical/imaginative mechanism shared by *Do the Right Thing, Brother from Another Planet, Five Easy Pieces,* and *The Sopranos*, depends on a reflective distance between a subjective and an objective point of view. First of all, an imaginative detachment from an engagement with their characters. But also, and as a function of this, they each lead us to a more objective perspective on ourselves. According to Flory, *Do the Right Thing* leads a (sufficiently perceptive and self-critical) viewer to an awareness of the possible flaws in his own attitudes: 'By self consciously presenting white viewers with the fact that they may form positive allegiances with characters whose racist bigotry is revealed as the story unfolds, Lee provokes his viewers to consider a far more complex view of what it means to think of oneself as "white"...'[37] In a similar way, *The Sopranos*, by an incremental revelation of Tony's true character, leads us to step back and reflect on the nature and the appropriateness of the sympathy that we feel for him. In the terms of Plantinga's model of emotional response which I mentioned in chapter one, this process is a function of the interaction of one's sympathetic emotion and the *meta*-emotion which has that sympathy as its object. The viewer is led to feel the meta-emotion of, if not quite guilt, a certain *uneasiness* when brought to an awareness of the ethically questionable basis of his sympathy. What sort of person have I been rooting for all along? If our feelings are often a more reliable guide to our true attitudes than our conscious reason, what do my emotional

---

[37] Flory, D. 'Spike Lee and the Sympathetic Racist' in The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 64:1, Winter 2006, p. 67

responses to Tony indicate about the kinds of acts and qualities that I *really* find admirable? The viewer is brought out of the confines of his own subjective point of view, to a more objective and critical understanding of himself as an ethical being. One of the popular criticisms of *The Sopranos* is that in its invitations to enter into Tony's subjective perspective it offers us a dangerous fantasy of power, glamour and wealth. But the ethical aspect of the series is not in the reinforcement, but in the gradual *dismantling* of the illusion; the journey to a more objective view of Tony, to a more objective view of one's responses to Tony, and therefore a more objective view of oneself.

2.2 Iris Murdoch and the 'Just Mode of Vision'

Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum are often classed together as 'moral vision theorists', for whom the development of one's ethical nature consists in the refinement of the quality of our powers of discrimination and judgement, in the faculty of moral perception. But I think there is an important difference to be noted between them which is salient in this chapter.[38] For Nussbaum moral perception is refined by the imaginative and emotional engagement with characters - imagining into a subjective view. Works such as the late novels of Henry James provide a moral education by putting before us cases of exemplary behaviour, but also by extending and exercising our moral capacity of sympathy. For Murdoch, on the other hand, an improved moral perspective, or as she puts it, acquiring a 'just mode of vision', consists in stepping back - imagining out of one's own subjective perspective and into an objective point of view.

For Murdoch, progress in ethical life can only be made by coming to a greater awareness of the factors which prevent us from achieving it. In her view the principle impediment to the pursuit of goodness is a failure to see with clarity, and to see with honesty, the true nature of reality as it is independent from oneself. As she says: 'The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one.'[39] There are two ideas here which are central in Murdoch's view. The first is the ethical doctrine, that goodness is achieved by transcending the local interests, motives and desires of the self. The second is the consequent idea that whatever prevents this transcendence must therefore be an impediment to goodness. For Murdoch, the principle arena of human practice in which we can see both the possibility of

---

[38] It is not the *only* difference between them, however, but just the one which is most relevant here.

[39] Murdoch, I. 1970, p.59

transcendence, but also, and more usually, the self-consoling reinforcement of a comforting subjective construction, is the engagement with art.

According to Murdoch, works of art which promote an expansion of the moral imagination beyond oneself are an exceptional minority. In reality most works of fiction offer us self-consoling fantasies: '...art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed, in this respect, a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else... We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world.' [40] The best art, according to Murdoch, takes us beyond our personal concerns to a perspective which transcends them. The fantasies which constitute most fiction, on the other hand, encourage not transcendence but a kind of comforting 'just-so' story of the self. There is a resonance with Nussbaum's claim that the act of responsive reading is itself a moral act, but for Murdoch it goes, so to speak, in the other direction. What is moral in the engagement with art is not the act of sympathetic attachment to a character, but the act of an imaginative effacement of the ego, or what she calls 'unselfing'.[41]

Flory invokes Murdoch's notion of the anti-egoistic value of art in his analysis of *Do the Right Thing*. There is, however, an important difference between his notion of an objective perspective, and Murdoch's 'unselfing'. For Flory, the ethical value in the objective perspective is instrumental; it allows us to step back to a position from which we can achieve a more complete and more truthful picture of ourselves. For Murdoch, on the other hand, it is the imaginative effacement of the self that is an intrinsically moral act. In our everyday lives we are hostages to the will, held within the confines imposed by our contingent desires, motivations, and delusions, but in the act of an unselfish imaginative and emotional engagement with art we are released. Objectivity for Flory is an improved mode of personal scrutiny, we step outside of the self in order to better concentrate our attention, sharpen our focus, on that same object. For Murdoch, however, art allows us to transcend the personal point of view towards a view of the world in which one's own ego plays no special or privileged part. The ethical value of art, for Murdoch, is in the *outward* direction of one's consciousness that it fosters, rather than introspective self-analysis.

In this sense, 'losing oneself' in a Fred Astaire musical, or a screwball comedy, would be, for Murdoch, a *more* ethical act than the kind of unselfing which Flory assigns to

---

[40] Ibid, 1970, p.59

[41] Murdoch was introduced to Buddhism by her friend and biographer Peter Conradi, and its deep influence (along with Schopenhauer) in her notion of 'unselfing' should not be underestimated.

Do the Right Thing, because in the latter case there is always the possibility that the 'improved' awareness of one's own possibilities might itself be a self-consoling fantasy offering false comfort. As Murdoch says: 'It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates. Close scrutiny of the mechanism often merely strengthens its power. '"Self-knowledge", in the sense of a minute understanding of one's own machinery, seems to me, except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion.'[42] There is therefore a distinction between two forms of objectivity. The first is that described by Flory, an objectivity on oneself achieved by means of the self-reflection occasioned by a more objective assessment of a character - an alternative way of seeing Sal, a more detached perspective on Tony, leading to a more impartial view of oneself. The second, Murdoch's version, is an objectivity *on* the world achieved *through* an engagement with the work. It could be argued that Murdoch's view that engaging with fiction is ideally a kind of transcendence of 'what it is like to be me', is entirely compatible with what I have called subjective imagining, imagining 'what it is like to be someone else'. But, although this possibility is not explicitly broached, I doubt that Murdoch would find the adoption of a single alternative perspective *inherently* moral merely in virtue of the fact that it is not one's own. For Murdoch, a perspective on the world only becomes moral when it is from no point of view at all. As she puts it: 'Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision.'[43]

Matthew Kieran criticises Murdoch for her particularism, the rejection of moral rules and principles in favour of an attention to context-specific details of circumstances.[44] Without at least some rules or principles, he argues, there is nothing which guides our actions. But, as Murdoch would argue, it is not that fiction encourages a blindly intuitive ethics of pure feeling unconstrained by any limits at all, but that actual life requires a kind of flexibility and responsiveness which dogmatic moral theory is unsuited for, and which is essential to the clarity of vision which she claims is cultivated by responding to good art. As Nussbaum has argued, however, there may be a more difficult objection to answer from a slightly different angle. Murdoch's neo-Platonism leads her to ignore morally relevant details of place and time, and while she argues that the proper direction of moral attention is 'outward', she in fact displays no interest in issues of public morality. According to

---

[42] Murdoch, I. 1970, p.67

[43] Ibid, p.86

[44] Kieran, M. 'Art, Imagination, and the Cultivation of Morals' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 54:4 (1996), 340

Nussbaum, Murdoch's 'unselfing' is, in fact, a rather paradoxically egoistic form of moral self-improvement.[45]

The objection that Murdoch is too mystical or unworldly, might be put another way. Are Murdoch's ethical and aesthetic standards just too austere, too demanding, too unconnected with actual life? After all, as she herself admits, people cannot bear too much reality. Earlier I mentioned that one of the principle reasons that we imaginatively project ourselves into fictional worlds, is that in doing so we are able to project ourselves out of our own. In imagination we can exchange, temporarily, bus queues and gas bills and the washing up, for cocktails with Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn. Murdoch could be understood, however, as disapproving of this sort of use of the imagination, as it would amount to a self-consoling fantasy. But I think we need to be careful in unpacking this idea, otherwise Murdoch might begin to seem more puritanical, more otherworldly, than she really is. Murdoch would not claim that there is no value in this sort of imaginative projection, just that it is not a form of value with any special relevance for morality. Action movies, romantic comedies, gangster movies, adaptations of Jane Austen, it could be argued, all encourage us to imaginatively enter into a false and comforting version of the world. But they are fantasies in varying degrees of moral seriousness, partly because we often indulge in the fantasy in the knowledge that it *is* a fantasy.

For Murdoch, art is, *par excellence*, the arena of human practice in which the natural and overwhelming need for consolation coexists with an equal and opposite desire to transcend it. The kind of fantasy which, for Murdoch, has a more destructive influence is the kind that reinforces our illusions about the world, and does so in order to reinforce our illusions about ourselves. In this sense *The Deer Hunter* would qualify as a self-consoling fantasy; getting swept up in the exotic and picturesque suffering of the main characters, blinds us both to the real causes of that suffering - that is, who is to *blame* for it - and also the possibility of the reality of suffering for others. Moreover, the indulgence in an aestheticised enactment of suffering is a form of sentimentality which reinforces one's comforting view of oneself as sensitive to the suffering of others. In *Five Easy Pieces*, Robert's derisive practical demonstration of the sentimentality of Catherine's response to Chopin, whether or not it is justified, is carried out in a very Murdochian spirit - to demonstrate its true function as a self-consoling fantasy of refined emotional sensitivity and aesthetic sensibility. The ethical danger lies in passing off what is a comforting fantasy for

---

[45] Nussbaum, M. 'When She Was Good. A review of Iris Murdoch: A Life by Peter J. Conradi' in The New Republic, Dec. 31, 2001, http://www.tnr.com/article/when-she-was-good

a truthful representation of reality.[46] For Murdoch, then, achieving a just mode of vision is a process of a gradual outward detachment from the limits of the subjective point of view, towards an ideal state of objectivity.

This brings me back to my reason for adopting the terminology that I have. Rather than central/acentral, or imagining from the inside and from the outside, I have spoken of the distinction between subjective and objective imagining. In a certain context the evaluative connotations which are associated with both of these terms would introduce unhelpful complexities, and would perhaps distort the debate. In the context of a discussion of the ethical role of the fictional imagination, however, these terms for separate modes of imagining capture more effectively the ethical component in that imagining. Subjective imagining implies not just imagining how things are from a certain perspective, but also imagining with an element of approval or complicity, or what Smith refers to as 'allegiance'. Objective imagining, on the other hand, is not merely imagining from no point of view, but imagining *impartially*, imagining with *fairness*. To recall Bernard Williams' distinction which I discussed in the last chapter, subjective and objective imagining are 'thicker' concepts than central and acentral imagining. Both sets of terms are descriptive of a mental act, but only the former are constituted by a descriptive and an evaluative component.

3. The Ethical Stance

In the first section of this chapter I claimed that subjective imagining is not itself sufficient to account for the ethical value of narrative fiction. First of all because subjective imagining alone would blind us to the faults of ethically flawed characters. Secondly, because the sympathetic emotions that we often feel towards characters can have a detrimental effect on our real-world ethical views just as effectively as they can improve them. And thirdly because they can be manipulated to evil ends just as effectively as to the good. On the other hand, it could be argued that an entirely detached and objective perspective on characters fails to capture the actual phenomenology of the experience of engaging with fiction, and that subjective imagining is a central part of what we value about the experience. I have argued that our engagement with works of narrative fiction and also with the characters which populate fictions can be seen according to an internal/

---

[46] Leaving aside relativistic concerns about whether there could ever be a truthful representation of reality. For the present argument we need only assume that there are representations of reality that are more or less truthful than others.

external (works) and a subjective/objective (characters) schema. Stepping between and combining internal and external perspectives characterises the structure of the viewer's imaginative engagement with film (or any fiction). A dual perspective is an essential feature of the way that we engage with fiction, and it is also, I shall argue, what constitutes an ethical stance. In the rest of this chapter I will suggest, through an account of Miloš Forman's *A Blonde in Love*, that the ethical stance is an attitude, or a view of life, shared by a certain type of realist fiction, and a view which resonates in interesting ways with an issue famously discussed by Thomas Nagel.

3.1 Thomas Nagel and 'The View from Nowhere'

According to Nagel, a dual perspective is an essential feature of the way that we engage with the world. There is, he argues, a fundamental division in thought between a subjective and an objective point of view. In objectivity, we aspire to transcend a personal and subjective standpoint and achieve a view of things as they are independent from the way that they appear to any particular perspective. The difference isn't a binary opposition, but more of a continuum, or as Nagel describes it, a set of concentric spheres, which expand outwards beyond a personal point of view; history is more objective than poetry, for example, but less objective than physics. Each new perspective reveals the last as the product of contingencies of location, and is a move in the direction of what he calls 'the view from nowhere'.[47]

This imaginative move from a subjective to a more objective perspective is, for Nagel, the creative force in science; think of the Copernican shift from seeing the sun moving around the earth to seeing the same thing as the earth moving around the sun - and it is also the driving force of ethics. Achieving a more objective view is an advance in knowledge that consists in re-conceiving the nature of our relation to the world. The primary ethical task of the imagination is to escape the distorting influence of the subjective and achieve a more objective, and therefore more truthful, view of our own interests, desires and motives. It is a view that, by a gradual detachment from the confines of the personal point of view, reduces the importance of the difference between our own interests and those of others. This imaginative shift is at the root of what Nagel calls the fundamental moral argument - 'How would you like it if someone did that to you?' - a prompt to imagining out of our own perspective. The ultimate aim of objectivity is not,

---

[47] Nagel, T. *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)

however, imagining out of our own and into another particular perspective, but towards a view that is not from any perspective at all. The difference is in the grammar of ethical language; between the subjective 'what should I do', and the objective 'what should be done'.

However, the problem that this subjective/objective structure seems to generate is, in the move to a more objective viewpoint, what do we do with the original perspective that we have transcended? The tendency is to eliminate the subjective perspective, either by revealing it to be a mere illusion, or by reducing it to an objective description. But, as Nagel puts it, '..while transcendence of one's own point of view is the most important creative force in ethics... the good, like the true, includes irreducibly subjective elements.'[48] Following Bernard Williams, Nagel argues that a central flaw of systematic moral philosophies is the failure to acknowledge that life must be lived from within a particular perspective. As a result consequentialist moral theories like utilitarianism, for example, impose unreasonable demands in virtue of their inability to accommodate this personal point of view. The challenge, in ethics as in other domains of thought, is how to combine these two points of view - the subjective view from inside the world, and the objective view of that same world - in such a way that the latter includes the former.

The ideal of objectivity which Nagel describes is echoed in Murdoch's condition for good art: '...something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness...it reveals to us aspects of our world which our ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see. Art pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance...'[49] For Murdoch good art removes us from our own subjective point of view, towards a more objective, disinterested, and in Nagel's terms 'agent-neutral' perspective on the world, detached from our local concerns, desires and motives. For Murdoch good art can reveal how things truly are, and not as they appear to any particular perspective, and this clarity of moral perception which is a prerequisite for moral action, is cultivated by objective imagining: 'Of course virtue is good habit and dutiful action. But the background condition of such habit and such action, in human beings, is a just mode of vision, and a good quality of consciousness. It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is.'[50] But, as Nagel says, a completely detached perspective is necessarily incomplete because there is always an aspect of reality that an objective vision leaves out, and that is the

---

[48] Nagel, T. 1986, p.8

[49] Murdoch, 1970, p.88

[50] Ibid, p.91

subjective point of view. The further we are detached from any particular desires or motives, the less there seem to be any reasons for action at all. Things always matter *to* someone.

The notion of the importance of the coexistence of the subjective and the objective points of view is a thread which can be followed through the centre of the work of Nagel, Nussbaum and also Iris Murdoch. For Nagel the principle question of philosophy is how to reconcile these two perspectives in and on the world; an objective description of reality is one that aims at truth, but without an account of the subjective point of view is one which is necessarily incomplete. For Nussbaum (like Nagel, deeply influenced by Bernard Williams), the traditional theory building of moral philosophy is insufficient as an account of the ethical life without the particularising detail of art as an 'ally'. Philosophy, which aims at the general, the abstract, the objective, is unable to provide a complete account of the ethical life, without art, which aims at representing the subjective. For Nussbaum, an Aristotelian ethics of perception and virtue, is incomplete without works of narrative fiction to give it content. For Murdoch too, art provides access to a truth independent of any individual personal experience, and in a way that finds room for the view from within a personal individual perspective.

There is an interesting, and perhaps productive, tension at the heart of Murdoch's view. On the one hand, her commitment to a form of particularism leads her to a rejection (or at least a suspicion) of moral rules and principles. But on the other hand, she argues that the ethical function of art is to remove us from our particular circumstances to a more objective view more able to discern universal truths - moral facts which are true because they are universal. Being moral consists in an attention to the detail and variety of particular circumstances, but 'The Good' is something abstract and universal. This means that while she can value '... the smell of the Paris metro, or what it feels like to hold a mouse in one's hand...'[51], she can also hold that art is valuable because it provides access to '...a reality which lies beyond appearance.'[52] There is, at once, the novelist's recognition of the experiential texture of the subjective here and now, and at the same time a neo-platonic yearning for an objective realm of pure ideas. As Nussbaum argues: '[Murdoch's] Platonism leads in the direction of the big abstract entity, but her moral instincts - I am tempted to call them Aristotelian - lead in the direction of the variegated world of surprising humanity. This tension is never fully resolved in the essays, where it simply sits

---

[51] Quoted in Nussbaum, M. 'When She Was Good. A review of Iris Murdoch: A Life by Peter J. Conradi' in The New Republic, Dec. 31, 2001, http://www.tnr.com/article/when-she-was-good

[52] Murdoch, 1970, p.88

there generating difficulty...'[53] It is a tension generated by the coexistence of opposing subjective and objective perspectives on the world. But the reason I call this a *productive* tension is that this contradictory quality, the yearning for the universal from within the limits of the specific, is itself a crucial and irreducible feature of the more complete account of how things are that is offered by (good) art. As Murdoch says: 'Art shows us the only sense in which the permanent and the incorruptible is compatible with the transient...'[54]

We imagine characters from a dual perspective, and conceive of their projects, cares and anxieties at once from inside as if they were our own, and also from the more objective perspective that sees them as one set among many. We see, in a single act of attention, the two opposed viewpoints together. In subjective imagining we enter into an internal understanding of the importance of the transient details of life, but in objective imagining we place this perspective in a context of universality. It is not imagining into a particular character's point of view, imagining 'what it's like', that is itself ethically valuable, but the simultaneous adoption of subjective and objective perspectives, which embodies and exemplifies an ethical ideal. The ethical stance consists in a certain balance of imaginative engagement and detachment. As Nagel puts it: 'It is better to be simultaneously engaged and detached, and therefore absurd, for this is the opposite of self-denial and the result of full awareness.'[55] An ideal ethical stance in response to fiction therefore bears a structural resemblance to the ideal ethical stance which Nagel claims is difficult to achieve in life. Art can accommodate the tension that Nagel describes by fostering simultaneous subjective and objective imagining. The act of imaginative engagement - *both* dramatically from the character's point of view and at the same time from a perspective external to that - is in some sense analogous to the absurd position which Nagel asserts is inescapable. It is an enactment of the simultaneous engagement with, and detachment from, life.

3.2 *A Blonde in Love/Lásky Jedné Plavovlásky* (Miloš Forman, 1965)

But if, as I have argued in earlier chapters, a dual perspective is a structural feature of our imaginative engagement that applies to all fictions, does that mean that *all* films, and all narrative fictions, have this ethical aspect? I want to suggest that the ethical stance is

---

[53] Nussbaum, M. 'When She Was Good', 2001

[54] Murdoch, 1970, p.88

[55] Nagel, 1986, p.223

connected to a particular form of realism in which this dual perspective is made structurally and thematically salient, and in which this ethical ideal is aspired to in a complex of the internal and the external, subjective and objective, in a balance of engagement with detachment. It is a mode of realism that is essentially ironic. Miloš Forman's *A Blonde in Love* is a close cousin to Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux* in its stance of simultaneous engagement and detachment, its skeptical sympathy for its characters. *A Blonde in Love*, I shall argue, is structured according to a subjective/objective division; a view from within the characters' points of view, and a simultaneous view from the external perspective. Murdoch sums up this form of realism: 'The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice.'[56]

In a sleepy factory town in provincial Czechoslovakia, the mayor is concerned that the young female population outnumbers the male by sixteen to one, and because, as he explains to the local commander 'Youth needs what you used to need, Comrade Major', he persuades the army to garrison troops in his town. When they arrive however, the bored and lonely factory girls are disappointed to see disembarking from the train not the handsome young men they had been hoping for, but overweight, balding, middle-aged reservists.

The film opens with Andula (Hana Brejchová) lying in bed with her friend, showing off a ring given to her by a boy. The scene switches between close-ups of the two girls, PoV shots of the ring on the friend's finger and a photo of the boy held up to Andula's face ('A little higher, he's half a head taller'). At one point a shot takes in the hand of another girl sleeping in the dormitory, dangling over the edge of her bed. The stillness and silence of the room, the closeness of the framing of the girls whispering softly, the tactile focus on hands and fingers picked out in a shallow depth of field, the way that Andula turns the ring on her friend's finger, and runs the edge of the boy's picture across her lips, are all elements of the scene which together establish a tone of intimacy, of privacy, of sharing secrets in the dark, and which draw the viewer in to a very close imaginary and emotional proximity.

---

[56] Murdoch, I. 1970, p.87

From the warm shadows of the interior, the film cuts to an exterior shot of a birch forest, white with snow, and a man's tie tied around a tree, as a kind of emblem of frustrated romantic hopes. As Andula goes to retrieve it, she is confronted by a policeman who scolds her for the recklessness of her adornment of the forest which risks upsetting the wildlife: 'A deer could be going by and get scared. Have you ever seen a startled deer?' Gradually the policeman's bureaucratic nagging morphs into an awkward attempt, involving deer impressions, to invite her out.

The film then cuts back to an intimate close-up of the two girls in bed, and Andula describing how romantic the moment was, elaborating on a theme of love and nature. In the juxtaposition of the interior and the exterior parts of this opening sequence - in the gap between the event and the telling of the event - we are given both a subjective and an objective perspective on Andula's romantic fantasy which establishes the ironic mode of narration as a stance from within which to see the film.

The mayor organises a dance in order for the girls and the soldiers to meet. The sequence starts with a collection of oblique, fragmentary shots of the dancers, moving from one to another without settling on any particular character, which builds up a general impression of the scene. Within this collection of brief shots we notice Andula sitting with two friends, and across the room, a group of three soldiers. Gradually the sequence becomes more specific, excluding the other dancers, and it settles on these two groups. The editing pattern of this sequence picks out these characters from the crowd, and as their increasing temporal and visual prominence in the sequence gradually reveals them as individuals, there is a narrowing of the range of the viewer's attention from an overview of

the scene to a concentration on one particular part. There is, in other words, an objective to subjective direction of attention.

The subjective/objective rhetorical structure operates throughout the film in the way that the narrative switches between intimate scenes of the private moments of individual characters, and an expansive *cinema verité* style which takes in, with an anthropological kind of fascination, the curious mating rituals of this society. But here in the dance scene it is also in the way that one conversation is juxtaposed with the other - the soldiers nervously talking themselves into, and out of, approaching the girls, and the girls talking about the unwelcome possibility of being approached by the soldiers. Each conversation is illuminated, for the viewer, by the other, revealing the limits of what they know, and the illusion of what they expect. In the dramatic irony of this scene the viewer is located epistemologically in a perspective external to either of the two groups, and yet at the same time we are also drawn in to a local sympathy with them. We know that the soldiers will get a chillier reception than they hope for, but we also sympathise with their anxieties. We know that Andula and her friends will not escape the attention of the soldiers, but at the same time we enter into their nervously ambivalent hope that they do. We see, as Andula and her friends do not (or at least do not admit), how affronted they will be if their fears are *not* realised - something confirmed when the wine that the soldiers eventually send, is mistakenly delivered to another table. We see also the anxiety, timidity and self-doubt in the soldier's affected nonchalance, and the adolescent clumsiness in their attempts at seduction - confirmed when they bluntly rectify their mistake by getting the waiter to take the wine away from the wrong, and now deeply insulted, table of girls.

The scene is played out within a framework of the objective detachment of comedy, but it is a form of comedy which depends for its effectiveness on the preservation within itself of a subjective engagement with the characters. It also depends, however, on the preservation of a reflective, critical awareness of what I described in chapter one as the external aesthetic perspective on the work. When the soldiers eventually steel themselves to approach, one of them suddenly realises that he is still wearing a wedding ring. In his fumbling attempt to take it off, it falls and rolls across the dance-floor where, to retrieve it, he is forced to crawl between the legs of the girls he has just insulted.

In the soldier's struggle to remove his wedding ring there is a comic reflection of the earlier scene in which Andula turns the ring on her friend's finger - a kind of symmetrical 'before and after' representation of youthful romantic fantasy and middle-aged matrimonial reality. Without recognising the echo of the motif in the narrative structure, we would not be in a position to recognise the joke. It would still be funny as a slapstick routine of embarrassment, and still ironic in the knowledge that he is forced to crawl at the feet of the insulted girls, but we would not see the important aspect of melancholy in the quality of the humour. A reflective attention to the formal surface of the work, an external perspective, allows us to see more than is initially apparent. As I mentioned in the last chapter, the philosophical point of this sequence is inextricably bound up with its comedy. Without getting the joke we would fail to fully understand the attitude that it expresses.

Andula leaves her friends and is drawn to the pianist of the band, Milda (Vladimír Pucholt), and after some coaxing, she agrees to spend the night with him. Whereas for Milda the night is a relatively insignificant, but nevertheless tender, diversion, for Andula it takes on a romantic importance inflated by her vivid imagination. The night intensifies her dissatisfaction with provincial life, so she leaves and turns up unexpectedly at the flat in Prague where Milda lives with his parents. Her arrival causes much confusion and embarrassment because Milda has never mentioned her and is out with another girl. When he returns, he is surprised but also glad to see her. As she lies in Milda's arms, her head resting in his lap, he gently strokes her cheek, following the shape of her mouth with

his thumb; and she strokes his hand in the same way, mimicking his movements. As she looks up at him, and he down at her, Milda tells her one little lie after another; his father said nothing, Milda's glad that she came, he never had time to write.

From this the film cuts to Milda's parents, also in bed, a comic mirror image of the young couple; Andula's gentle questioning is reflected in the mother's nagging, Milda's attentiveness and casual mendacity in his father's attempt to evade interrogation by feigning sleep. The reflection of the two parts is like the one at the beginning, between the ring on Andula's finger and the soldiers's wedding ring rolling across the dance floor; youth confronted with age, hope with compromise, romanticism with reality, fantasy with realism.

The film cuts back to Andula asking where he's been that night, to which he softly, evasively, answers: 'Out with the guys'. His mother snaps open the door to interrupt, barging in with embarrassed bluster, saying: 'This is terrible. This won't do at all.' She drags Milda back to his parents' room, where he is forced to share their bed. There follows a long sequence where the family tussle and quarrel and elbow each other in a slapstick Laurel and Hardy routine, all witnessed by Andula at the keyhole silently crying. In its tone, the scene seems to participate in Andula's fragile romantic fantasy, but at the same time it does so within the context of the thought that what Milda tells her isn't true, and also that Andula knows that it isn't true. Their awkward reunion, its pain and romanticism, takes place against a background of the comic and the mundane.

Why is the emotional tone of this scene not diminished by the introduction of a comic element that seems utterly opposed to its romantic theme? The view that shows the gap between Andula's fantasy and reality does not, as might be expected, undermine the romanticism, but seems to reinforce it. The skepticism doesn't detract from the sympathy, but adds to it. Its ethical stance is revealed in its embrace of complexity and contradiction, in the coexistence of two different ways of seeing the same thing; in the natural and

necessary coexistence of love and pain and comedy, in the necessity and the kindness of lying, and the necessity of pretending to believe a lie. The film then cuts to a close-up of Andula back home in bed with her friend whispering intimately of her romantic success, the friendliness of Milda's family, and of how she will, of course, now be spending much more time in Prague. The film ends with a reiteration of the scene with which it began; Andula consoling herself in the dark with the telling of a comforting fiction. In the mirroring of the beginning and the end the film's melancholic romantic fatalism, an hermetic cycle of hope and disappointment, is essentially connected to the circular, self-enclosed structure of the narrative.

The step back from Andula's perspective is an advance in the direction of objectivity, a step back to a revised perspective, to a view that is more truthful in virtue of its independence from the limitations of the subjective. But if it is to be more truthful, why does the more objective perspective not just replace the subjective? That is, in the step back to a point of view where we can see Andula's romantic fantasy *as* a fantasy, or see the true shape of Robert's or Tony's delusion, why isn't the original perspective then just superseded by a better and more objective one? Why, in other words, do we need to preserve the subjectively imagined point of view?

The question assumes that the new objective view, detached from any one perspective, must be a better or more complete account of how things are than the old subjective one. And it resonates clearly with Nagel's description of the objective ideal (in ethics, aesthetics, science and philosophy) as a way of describing reality that is true in virtue of its independence from the distorting force of a subjective point of view. But, as Nagel also reminds us, there are some aspects of reality that are not better accounted for by a maximally objective view - namely, the subjective point of view. As he puts it: 'Appearance and perspective are important parts of what there is, and in some respects they are best understood from a less detached standpoint.'[57] The closer a view gets to the *sub specie aeternitatis*, the more difficulty it has in seeing why the details of any particular perspective should matter at all. There is therefore a distinction to be drawn between an objectivity that erases those details, and an ethical perspective that becomes more objective by expanding to incorporate the particularities of personal points of view. Where the objectivity of art, and particularly narrative fiction, differs from the objectivity of

---

[57] Nagel, 1986, p.4

science is in its ability to re-integrate within an objective picture the subjective point of view.

In chapters one and two I drew a distinction between two levels of the subjective/objective schema. The first was between internal and external perspectives on the work, or an imagined and a reflective stance. The second was between subjective and objective imagining of characters. There is a corresponding distinction between two variations on the ethical stance. What I have been describing in *A Blond in Love* is a form of the ethical stance that corresponds to the subjective/objective imaginative perspective of/on the character. Imagining simultaneously into and apart from the perspective of Andula, is an imaginative enactment of the subjective/objective split *within* the work. The form that I am deriving from Murdoch, however, is connected to the distinction discussed in chapter one, between the imagined and the reflective stances. For Murdoch it is the knowledge of a work's fictionality that attends our imaginative engagement with art, that echoes the thought in life, the ever-present shadow of awareness, that our deepest and most pressing concerns and preoccupations, seen from a sufficiently detached perspective, are ultimately insignificant. The external point of view *on* a work of art, the aesthetic perspective, mirrors the external point of view on our own lives.

There is an irreducibly and inescapably paradoxical character to the way that we apprehend reality that is captured in the title of Nagel's major work, *The View From Nowhere*, a quality which is echoed in Murdoch's enigmatic claim, that the narrative arts:

> ...show us the absolute pointlessness of virtue, while exhibiting its supreme importance...the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue. The pointlessness of art is not the pointlessness of a game; it is the pointlessness of human life itself, and form in art is properly the simulation of the self-contained aimlessness of the universe. Good art reveals what we are usually too selfish and too timid to recognise, the minute and absolutely random detail of the world, and reveals it together with a sense of unity and form. [58]

This is an expression of the ethical dimension of the external/aesthetic stance which I described rather more prosaically in the first chapter. The understanding that a work is fictional, the external perspective, is not, according to this view, something which makes our imaginative and emotional engagement more puzzling, but something which constitutes part of the structure of its ethical dimension. This is why I think Nussbaum is correct to identify the tension in Murdoch's work between a yearning for the universal and a novelistic appreciation of the particular, but also why I think her criticism misses just what the tension is doing there.

---

[58] Murdoch, 1970, p.86

Isn't ethics about questions like whether we ought to act out of duty, or act in view of consequences? Or the meaning of words like 'ought', 'justice', or 'good', and so forth? As I have described it the ethical stance in film is not philosophical, it is not an item of moral knowledge, and it is not an ethical argument; it might rather be thought of as a practical guiding attitude within which to approach ethical arguments. It is practical because it embodies a willingness to tolerate the contradiction, the ambiguity, and the personal point of view that is eliminated in the objective ideal of systematic moral philosophy - in what Bernard Williams called the 'purity of morality'.[59] The ethical lesson of these films is not in the moral principles that might be derived from them, but in a model for an enriched and expanded perspective that accommodates multiple and conflicting ways of seeing the world. I do not want to say that this ethical attitude is a *replacement* for moral rules or principles, but just that in its absence - in the absence of a responsiveness to the particularity of circumstances - the interpretation and application of those rules might be more difficult.

But even if we grant the ethical character of this stance, there may still be a more difficult problem in the claim that its ethical value consists in its role as an example or a lesson. One of the ethical functions of certain kinds of fiction, according to Nussbaum, is to provide a training in the moral sensitivity and perceptiveness that is required for the conduct of an ethical life. But the problem is that in order to recognise the lesson (which she finds in the novels of Henry James, for example) we must already be in possession of a high degree of moral sensitivity and perceptiveness. How can art provide an education in moral perception when that very ability is what is required in order to recognise and accept the lesson? This is a variation on a problem noted by Noël Carroll which I mentioned in the last chapter: being able to understand the moral situations represented in fiction requires the employment of those very moral concepts which it is often claimed that the fictions hope to teach us. The objection seems like more of a problem for Nussbaum than it is in Carroll's version, however. A fiction may rely on simple moral propositions like 'murder is wrong' in order to be intelligible, while at the same time hoping to teach us other, more complex, moral propositions, or to cast doubt on those simple antecedent ones. The simple propositions that we use can be steps in the formulation of different and more sophisticated ones. The qualities, or abilities, of moral perceptiveness and sensitivity that Nussbaum requires for her readings of Henry James, however, are not means employed towards a different end, but are the end themselves. Put crudely, if one is

---

[59] Williams, B. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* Fontana, 1985, p. 195

sensitive and perceptive enough to be able to see the particular ethical value of these works, there is little left in this respect for these works to teach us.

This objection could be made against Flory's interpretation of *Do the Right Thing*. Flory's interpretation is subtle, complex, sophisticated, and no doubt also the one which Lee intended. But the trouble is that in order to be brought to realise that Sal is a racist after all, one must already be disposed to see him that way. Whether Sal is or is not a racist is a matter of interpretation, and those whose attitudes towards 'whiteness' are most in need of the objective point of view are also those who are least likely to interpret the film accordingly. The same objection of paradox might be levelled at what I have described as the ethical stance. In order to see that it is an attitude that is worth adopting, I must think that it has a greater ethical value than the attitude that I have now. But the attitude that I have now is already one that enables me to discern and value the ethical stance manifested in the film. If I did not already see the world in this way, I would be unable to see that this is a worthwhile way of seeing the world.

It seems to me quite possible, however, that one could appreciate the value of the ethical stance, and be able to recognise its appearance in a work of fiction, and yet be in need of reminders of the value of its application to one's actual life. A lesson can be useful for reminding us of things that we already know but which are not always at the forefront of our thinking, as well as for providing new information. We can be already disposed to see the world in this particular way, and still benefit from fictions which provide occasions to exercise this disposition. As both Nussbaum and Murdoch argue, the artificial salience of the ethical features of situations in the rhetorical design of fictions helps to reveal what, in ordinary life, is obscured by other concerns. In art, Murdoch says, 'We are presented with a truthful image of the human condition in a form which can be steadily contemplated; and indeed this is the only context in which many of us are capable of contemplating it at all.'[60] Nussbaum echoes the thought: 'A novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favourable for perception, and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life.'[61] Both of these remarks remind me of Smith's description of films as '...cognitive prostheses...like the telescope or the microscope, [are] perceptual prostheses...', devices which allow us to overcome the limitations imposed by our circumstances.[62] And if a certain quality of ethical perception is to be cultivated, as I put it

---

[60] Murdoch, 1970, p. 87

[61] Nussbaum, 1990, p. 162

[62] Smith, M. 'Empathy, Expansionism and the Extended Mind' in Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. (Eds.) *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.109

earlier, as a *habit*, it must be reinforced through the repetition and variation of scenarios in which the ethical aspect in its object is made perceptible. As Murdoch put it: 'Art...is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*.'[63] In this respect it is not that fiction is a poor educational substitute for life, but that life is a poor substitute for fiction.

[63] Murdoch, I. 1970, p.88

5

Les Contes Moreaux Part One

Rhymes, Symmetries and Variations on an Ethical Theme

In the final two chapters, this one and the next, I hope to ground some of the more abstract arguments with which I have so far been concerned in a more concrete look at Eric Rohmer's series of films, *The Moral Tales/Les Contes Moreaux.* The next chapter will discuss the films in relation to chapters two and four, subjective and objective imagining and its ethical value. This chapter will focus on *My Night with Maud/Ma Nuit Chez Maud* (1969) in order to explore some of the concerns of the first and the third chapters. How does the external, aesthetic perspective contribute to our imagining of the internal fictional 'world', and thereby allow us to infer ethical content? How does the film exhibit the difference between what I have called the *didactic* and the *exploratory* modes of ethical fiction? How does it, and the series of which it is a part, contribute to our understanding of what Bernard Williams calls a 'thick ethical concept'? By asking these questions I hope to shed some light on why some other interpretations of the film seem to me to be unconvincing.

Eric Rohmer's films are often described (not always approvingly) as philosophical. But how is this so? *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* is usually approached as a vehicle for Rohmer's thoughts on Pascal's *Pensées*, and as such is found to be an explicit theological discourse on free will and determinism, on faith, grace and personal morality, articulated in the dialogue of the characters. But this, I shall argue, misidentifies the participants in the debate, and therefore falsely attributes to the film just the superficial and sophistical limitations in ethical thought that the series seeks to reveal. The central theme which is returned to and rehearsed in variations across Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*, is the ethical task of the imagination that Thomas Nagel describes; the importance and the difficulty of transcending the subjective point of view - the task of imagining how things are from a perspective external to one's own. I will argue, as I did in relation to *The Sopranos* and *Five Easy Pieces*, that the more reliable account of characters' motivations is to be found not in the stories that they tell about themselves, but in the narrational authority offered by formal features of the work. The first section of this chapter will argue that ethical/philosophical concerns of the film ought not to be looked for in the topic of the conversations between the characters, but in a productive tension between the imagined content and the aesthetic form - between the internal and the external perspectives.

In chapter three I argued that the ethical function of (some) films is not in discussing philosophical theories, and it is not in presenting rigorous arguments for theories. Neither is the 'lesson' of such films in setting out clear and determinate moral rules or principles (as it is in a parable like *The Good Samaritan* or Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*).

Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux* do not address any particular contemporary moral controversy, they do not argue for any principles, let alone a theory, according to which we might make correct moral judgements. *Ma Nuit Chez Maud*, filmed in 1969, does not, for example, even mention those moral and political issues that paralysed France in May 1968 (something that was taken for political apathy, if not a sign of Rohmer's supposedly reactionary politics). The *Contes Moreaux* are concerned not with the morality of one choice or another, but with the nature of the conditions under which we must make moral decisions.

To recall Williams' distinction, Rohmer is more concerned with 'thick' ethical concepts than 'thin', with the *descriptive* part of ethical concepts rather than the *prescriptive* - with the *is* rather than with the *ought*. In the terms which I used in chapter three, they are films about ethics not in a *didactic*, but in an *exploratory* mode. They are concerned with how the limits and constraints of a certain view of the world and of oneself in relation to it, can have a distorting effect on the choices that we make. Rohmer's *Moral Tales/Contes Moreaux*, are not tales with a moral. As a 'moraliste', Rohmer should not be seen as 'moraliser', but rather as following in the tradition of Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, writers who are concerned with an observation of the inner life, and a reflection on human traits and flaws and how they lead us to act in the world. Rohmer's series should be seen in the light of Milan Kundera's claim, which I referred to in chapter three, that the ethical role of fiction is not to take up a position, but to conduct an inquiry.[1]

Seen as explorations of a thick ethical concept (TEC) it becomes significant that Rohmer's films are part of a series, one which returns again and again to the same theme, and uses recursive patterns of narrative structure and character relationships. This is why, as I shall argue in the final section, the series should be seen as a set of variations on an ethical theme - the thick ethical concept (TEC) of self-deception. The rehearsal of different permutations of the concept expands its descriptive range, and enriches our understanding of it.

1. *Ma Nuit Chez Maud*: Formal Rhymes and Ethical Reasons

After the two short films *La Boulangère de Monceau* and *Le Carrière de Suzanne* (both 1963), *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* (1969) is the third in Rohmer's series.[2] It takes place, apart from the 'epilogue', in the provincial industrial town of Clermont-Ferrand in winter, and is

---

[1] Kundera, M. *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber,1986) p.7

[2] In order of production, however, it is the fourth. The filming of *Maud* (1969) was delayed until after *La Collectionneuse* (1967) because *Maud's* lead actor, Jean-Louis Trintignant, was unavailable.

concerned with the romantic vacillations of its protagonist, J-L (Jean-Louis Trintignant),[3] an engineer who until recently has been working in South America. J-L lives a faintly ascetic life, spending his time re-reading Pascal, dabbling in mathematics, and attending church. Pascal disappoints him, not as a mathematician, but in what J-L sees as his empty and calculating form of religious faith, which he claims differs in this respect from his own Catholicism. It is at church that J-L sees Françoise (Marie-Christine Barrault), a girl whom he has never met, but who satisfies certain preconditions, and whom he decides that he will marry. To this end he follows her around town in his car, browses in her local bookshops, sits in her neighbourhood cafes, until eventually they meet 'by chance'. Before then, however, on one visit to a cafe, J-L runs into Vidal (Antoine Vitez), an old friend, and a marxist philosophy lecturer. J-L and Vidal sit and talk - about Pascal's wager, about J-L's faith and Vidal's lack of faith (in anything) - and together they attend first a Mozart concert, and then midnight mass. The next night Vidal takes J-L to pay a visit to his friend and occasional lover, Maud (Françoise Fabian). Maud is a doctor, a divorcée with a child, and as Vidal puts it, 'very beautiful.' The long central section of the film is taken up with J-L and Maud's conversation, in which she teases and questions him, in a kind of playful, seductive analysis of his beliefs and opinions. J-L resists temptation, and the next day engineers his meeting with Françoise. The last third of the film, J-L's chaste seduction of Françoise, is structured as a re-enactment, or a reflection, of the scenes with Maude.

1.1 Formal Rhymes

In chapter one I discussed George Wilson's argument that *The Searchers* is structured by a complicated pattern of rhyme and variation. According to Wilson, the explanatory key to the film is in the comparison between Ethan and Scar. To an even greater extent than *The Searchers*, Rohmer's film is structured symmetrically, and by a division of scenes with Maud and scenes with Françoise. J-L is caught between two women; between his natural attraction to the beautiful and free-spirited Maud, and Françoise who embodies an ideal of purity as an extension of his Catholic faith. The symmetry is further emphasised by the echo in each narrative strand of the visual design of shots, and the movements, gestures and behaviour of the characters. The salience of this structure invites the viewer to frame an understanding of the film in terms of this opposition between the two women. Moreover, we are invited to frame our understanding of J-L in terms of what each of them

[3] In the film he is not given a name, but to avoid the theoretical complications which may arise from using the term 'the narrator', I shall refer to him as J-L.

represent, and the qualities of each which he is both attracted to and which he, in the case of Maud, rejects. Just as the symmetry of *The Searchers* provides a clue to the reason behind Ethan's demented loathing of the Comanche, so in *Ma Nuit Chez Maud*, the symmetry of the narrative indicates a possible means of understanding J-L's beliefs and motivations that is more reliable, more *authoritative*, than that which is represented by his conversations with other characters.

In order to see how the formal structure expresses this view of J-L we need to make a distinction between narrative *symmetry* and *rhyme*. Symmetry, as a property of the structure of the narrative, establishes the comparison between Maud and Françoise. Rhyme, however, provides the content of the comparison - a comparison between formal elements which are similar but not exactly alike. In the visual design of shots, the echoes of speech and gesture, the similarities and dissimilarities are highly significant. Recall that in *The Searchers* Ethan and Martin are likened by the symmetrical pattern of pairings of visually similar shots, but the comparison operates in the subtle differences between them. Their shared outsider status is established by the symmetry, but the possibility of Martin's reintegration into society is suggested by the warm light and the open doorway.

In *Maud* the symmetry operates in a similar way; the formal feature of the work is given a heightened salience in order to direct us to make the comparison. In Wilson's terms, the emphasised symmetry is, '...a stressed configuration of audio-visual elements which adumbrates features of the way in which the global narration is to be read.'[4] From within this revised interpretive framework - or according to the guidance of this revised way of seeing the film - differences in the tone and qualities of each part become newly apparent. The formal structural feature of symmetry is employed as a kind of ostensive device - 'Look at it *this* way' - and in virtue of its narrational authority (recall the discussion of experiential inflections in chapter two), the particular quality of the rhyme takes on a kind of semantic significance. This is a form of ethical instruction which, according to Martha

[4] Wilson, G., 1986, p. 49

Nussbaum, is distinctive of fiction. As she says: 'Progress comes not from the teaching of an abstract law but by leading the child, or friend, or loved one - by a word, by a story, by an image, - to see some new aspect of the concrete case at hand, to see it as this or that.'[5]

It is not just the comparison of Maud and Françoise, but rather the comparison of [J-L *with* Maud] with [J-L *with* Françoise], a comparison of the character of each relationship, which is, I think, a fruitful one. And in order to make the comparison clearer I want to look a little more closely at a pair of scenes that seem to illuminate each other, and which, placed side by side, seem to reflect - and reflect on - each other. The first occurs on the evening following the titular 'night', after a day trip to the mountain, in which J-L and Maud cook dinner together at her apartment. In the second J-L makes tea in Françoise's room.

Maud (off-screen, to the right) is on the telephone to her ex-husband while J-L stands at the counter chopping. He reaches up and puts out a cigarette in an ashtray above him on a shelf. The camera follows him, panning to the right, as he crosses the room for a towel. It stops to include Maud in the doorway in the frame as J-L dries his hands, and smiles at her joke. Now, as J-L moves off-screen to the left, the camera lingers on Maud as she hangs up, and it follows her back the other way, panning left, as she crosses the room to J-L. The symmetry of this camera movement announces the domestic choreography - or the choreographed domesticity - of this scene, an 'exclusively cinematic' means of expressing the reciprocity and equality that has quickly grown between them. The movement of the camera evokes the rhythm of a good conversation - the graceful swing back-and-forth seems to echo the easy register of Maud's joke with her ex-husband, that his old pyjamas might prove useful. As J-L continues to chop, Maud reaches around him for her glass of wine, drains her glass, and turns to the stove. She reaches over him to put out her cigarette in the ashtray, then she switches their positions by turning J-L gracefully with a gentle touch on his arm.

[5] Nussbaum, M. 1990, p.160

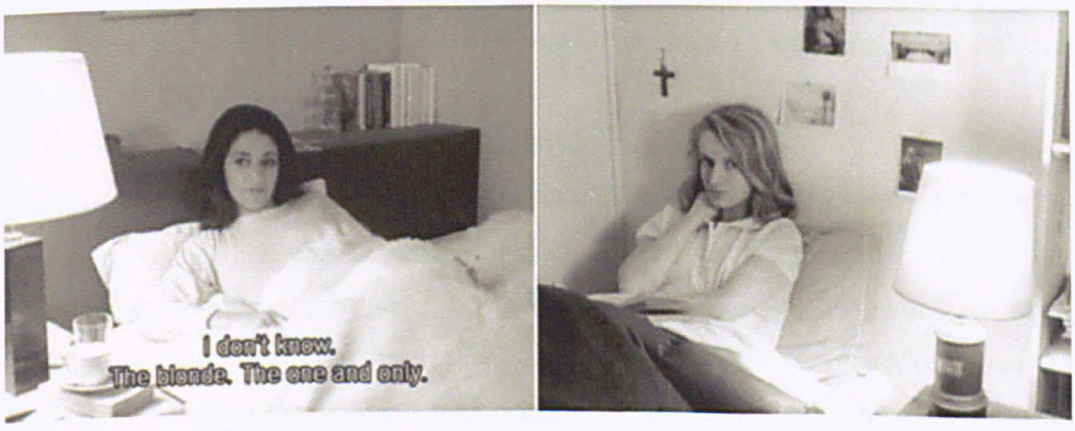
There is a significance in the way that they are physically with, and move around, each other which constitutes another sort of dialogue. They are in sympathy with each other in the way that they anticipate and respond to each other's movements. Indeed, this is a routine (or a performance), which represents the possibility of an ideal of the routine (or the domestic). It reminds me of those ephemeral moments in Laurel and Hardy films where, amid the chaos, they suddenly, and accidentally, fall into step. And then fall out again. J-L is the one to break the rhythm when he steps back and says 'One should love one girl and no other. Not even platonically.' Maud replies, '*Especially* not platonically' as she leaves the room - a gentle rebuke for his superficial seriousness.

The scene in Maud's kitchen is echoed by a similar one in Françoise's, and the comparison is underlined when on the way to her flat J-L asks Françoise if she wants to be a doctor (like Maud). At one point in Françoise's room J-L says 'It's nice here. It feels homey.' A polite comment that seems contradicted by his movements and gestures, and by his position in the frame, standing in the corner of the room wearing his coat. In fact, for a large part of the conversation J-L is absent from the frame; the camera holds a medium shot on Françoise and we hear J-L's voice from off screen (giving her an account of his domestic life at odds with the one we have already heard him give Vidal). This separation of the two characters in a shot/reverse shot structure, exaggerated by the dialogue uncoordinated with the image, is in contrast to the camera movement of the scene with Maud; holding them apart in editing heightens the impression of the relative difficulty of the conversation. Françoise brings an end to the conversation by saying 'The water's boiling' and it cuts back to J-L in the corner holding the pot of tea. He awkwardly makes the tea as if it's a performance (but now a solo, not, as with Maud, a duet) drawing attention to the ritual of warming the pot, weakly joking with a quasi-scientific rationale to the process ('It's crucial to let it brew for seven minutes'). The prickliness of her manner, the formality and awkwardness of the exchange, and the tension in the lack of understanding between them are a dramatic counterpoint to the graceful ease of Maud's kitchen. To evoke Laurel and Hardy again, it is as if the brief harmonious moment passes - the rhythm is lost - and people once again collide. Rohmer's films are often described as verbose, and this is held to count against them as 'cinematic', but it is interesting that here what is *not* spoken is at least as important as what is.

Across these corresponding scenes, there are gestures and movements and actions that echo each other; for example, J-L wrapping himself in a blanket across his knees in

Maud's apartment, and in Françoise's room his coat. In each scene a domestic ritual is enacted; at Maud's making dinner, at Françoise's making tea. The actions are similar but it is their differences that reflect the true nature and qualities of each relationship. J-L frequently needs a light for his cigarette in both scenes; at Maud's it is offered before he asks, but at Françoise's he needs to search for it. Finding no matches, J-L decides to disturb Françoise, and before tentatively knocking on her door he hesitates in the darkness between their rooms. Françoise is sitting up in bed with a harsh bright light bleaching the room of shadow, her arms folded tightly across her chest with her right hand to her throat, framed by a crucifix and a halo of faded postcards. She casts a suspicious look at J-L as, off-screen, he asks again for matches; 'They're on the mantelpiece. Keep them.' she says, pointedly denying him an excuse to come back. J-L withdraws and tiptoes back to his room.

Compare this with the corresponding scenes at Maud's where, like Françoise, Maud talks to J-L from her bed. In these corresponding scenes there is a pair of shots which directly mirror each other, and the explicitness of the comparison (Maud even refers to 'the blond, the one') serves to emphasise the overall differences of the two scenes in which they are embedded.



Françoise retreats into a corner suspiciously, arms folded, a crucifix over her right shoulder, and a glaring bedside lamp to her left, dominating the space between her and J-L. At Maud's a large part of the conversation is conducted from her bed, she leans forward, openly, invitingly, reflecting the honest and unguarded quality of their conversation. As Maud confides in J-L more and more openly and personally her position changes in the frame, the camera moves in more tightly in proportion to the degree of the seriousness and intimacy of what she says.

The characterisation of the opposition between Maud and Françoise raises the question of why J-L chooses as he does. The symmetrical comparison of the two women and the qualities and tone of their representations seem to be directing us towards the conclusion that J-L *should* prefer Maud. Which woman J-L ought to find the more attractive is not, in this case, a frivolous question; the answer to it pulls us in the direction of one or the other opposing viewpoints on life. Consider this particular echo: when Maud invites J-L to dinner he says, 'I have to leave by ten', to which she replies, '9.30. I need my sleep.' She responds to his neurotic prissiness with playfulness and tact. Now compare this with the morning after J-L has slept in Françoise's spare room. He is woken in his single bed by a sharp rapping on the door, and Françoise's disembodied voice barking 'It's 9.30'. The impression of being in a youth hostel or a particularly spartan guest-house is compounded by her awkward attempt at humour - 'Have you forgotten your rendezvous? With a girl. At church.'

Towards the end of each scene, at Maud's and at Françoise's, as J-L prepares to leave, there are short exchanges of dialogue that echo each other. J-L seems to begin his attempt to seduce Françoise by rehearsing Maud's words from their earlier conversation. In both exchanges the question of happiness is raised. J-L says to Maud: 'I'm happy around you.' and she replies 'And around others?' He says to Françoise: 'You seem the cheerful type.' But whereas Maud responds by finding and pursuing the ambiguity in his reply, Françoise seems puzzled by the question. She does not say 'I am. Are you?', but 'I am. Aren't you?', surprised at the suggestion that one might not be a 'cheerful type'. The

rest of the conversation is a strained attempt to repeat the earlier conversation with Maud, but which now seems awkward and artificial. When he continues the line - that he is not really cheerful, that his feelings run deeper, that they are dependent on her, and so on - Françoise laughs and smiles back at him blankly.

The differences in the character of each relationship seems to be expressed in the differences between their positions in the frame. J-L and Maud are represented in a medium close-up two-shot, each in equal halves of the frame, face to face, looking squarely into each other's eyes. J-L confines Françoise against the door, and she turns away in a gesture that is repeated in their other scenes together. Rebuffed, J-L tries to salvage the moment by serving Françoise's 'Don't say that' back to her, an invitation to play to lighten the embarrassment he has burdened her with. She smiles, moves his arm out of her way, opens the door and leaves.

Each scene is ended with a kiss. Maud makes a move to kiss J-L, hesitates for a beat halfway between her lips and his, then completes the movement, laughing, diverted to an affectionate and friendly kiss on both cheeks. The gesture is ambiguous; either a misunderstanding elegantly averted, or Maud is teasing him with a playful and self-deprecating reference to last night's rejected advances. J-L also moves in to kiss Françoise. He traps her against the door and leans in, but she turns away, putting her hand on his arm in an equally ambiguous gesture; either to console him, or to remove it as a barrier to her escape. The contrast of these rhyming scenes illustrates the difference between irony and ambiguity; Maud seems to be in creative control of the range of possible meanings that her actions might have, whereas Françoise's gesture seems accidental and indeterminate. Irony is a certain attitude towards the world that acknowledges and accepts, even celebrates, its complexity - it is a willingness to look its essential relativity and uncertainty squarely in the eye. Even if a life with Maud were impossible, she represents a

viewpoint on the world - spontaneous, sensual, honest, questioning - which he claims to value, and yet from which he turns away.

1.2 Self-deceptive Reasons

In my discussion of *Five Easy Pieces* in chapter three I argued that there are two alternative strands of explanatory commentary on the behaviour and motivations of Robert. There is the one offered by himself, and there is the one that is contained in the associations of musical register and emotional experience in the narrative. The theme of self-deception as sentimental self-pity emerges from the conflict between the two. There is a similar, and perhaps more explicit, internal and external narrative dialectic at play in *Ma Nuit Chez Maud.* There is, at the internal level, the sophisticated and lengthy conversations of the characters, in which J-L expresses his beliefs, his values, and his opposition to the asceticism he finds in Pascal. At the external level, there is a differing account of J-L's desires and motivations implied by the aesthetic features of the film. Everything that he claims to find disappointing in Pascal - austerity, rigidity, an inattentiveness to 'what is good' - is given perceptible form in the scenes with Françoise.

It is by attending to these externally recognised formal qualities that we can answer some puzzling questions about J-L's actions. Why, for example, does J-L show a curious lack of interest in Françoise, the woman whom he claims to love, and has decided to marry? As he roots through boxes and draws in Françoise's flat looking for matches, he seems to be intruding on her privacy, yet he shows an odd lack of curiosity, even when he comes across personal letters and a wedding photograph of a bride and groom which he discards without a second look. Now, it may seem odd to criticise J-L for not snooping, but what is strange is that he displays no indication of the very natural temptation to do so. There is no hesitation or pause; there doesn't seem to be any ethical consideration at all, but rather it seems more an attitude of expressing a lack of interest. There is an open sketchbook of, we assume, Françoise's drawings, yet he passes over them without a glance, lifting it just enough to look underneath. The impression is quietly asserted by the rhythm of the sequence; when he leaves the desk to search another part of the room the camera lingers for a moment too long on the open and ignored sketchbook.

Françoise is a far less fully realised character than the others in the film; not exactly mysterious, but incomplete. J-L, Maud and Vidal are given a sort of reality in their conversations, we hear their opinions and their opinions of each other, but from the moment that we see Françoise in the church we learn very little more about her. But

throughout the film there are moments when her personal history promises, or threatens, to reveal itself. Yet at every such moment J-L seems indifferent. In their conversation in her room J-L and Françoise begin to talk of the role of luck in love, and how what seemed for him a misfortune in fact turned out to be lucky. Françoise raises the objection that he has not had to face difficult choices, and in doing so she hints at her own past experience. The sudden and subtle shift in her tone, and the seriousness with which she makes the point, suggests that it is more than hypothetical, but J-L misses the implication and takes it as a objection to his theoretical argument. Françoise falls silent and looks down at the table, absent-mindedly playing with the cup, for a few moments until she brings herself back from the reverie, smiles and says, 'It's getting late, isn't it? I'll show you to your room.'

Later on, J-L and Françoise are walking through the town at night, when they run into Vidal. J-L is surprised at their familiarity and says 'You know each other?' at which they both respond, after a slight hesitation, 'Yes'. The camera holds on Vidal wryly looking at Françoise, who averts her eyes, but she then looks back to gauge his intentions. Now, J-L notices something is amiss, and after they part company with Vidal and he and Françoise are in a bookshop he timidly questions her to which she is evasive and gives obviously incoherent replies. The film cuts to J-L and Françoise in a snowy landscape with the town in the background. Françoise is upset and J-L is trying to comfort her. It is the companion scene to that between J-L and Maud on the mountain. He says, 'I feel like I've always known you, that you've always been a part of my life,' which is a clear echo of what he says to Maud, '...we haven't even spent a full 24 hours together, yet I feel like I've known you for ages. Don't you?' Françoise replies, 'Feelings can be deceptive.' J-L replies, 'So what if they are. Besides, I know I'm not wrong.' Françoise now tells him a (rather cursory) version of her story, and J-L gallantly embellishes his night with Maud to make them even, or to give her something to hold against him - 'I'd just left a girl's place. I'd slept with her.' In this scene, on a grey windy hilltop in the snow, J-L and Françoise establish the principle of secrecy, or silence, under which their life together is to be lived. J-L offers up his false confession, and Françoise turns her back to him as the scene slowly fades to black: 'OK? Let's never talk about it again.' What might initially be claimed as a tactful respect for another's privacy begins to look like an avoidance of something.

J-L *decides* to love Françoise because he imagines her to be the kind of woman whom he ought to love; she is, in a sense, incidental. Perhaps this is why he shows a lack of curiosity about her; in order for this to be possible, the unknown must be preserved as unknown. A more detailed knowledge of the real Françoise would complicate the matter, she would no longer be a blank screen on which J-L can project a conception of himself. In Françoise's room, for example, he manages to find an object, *True and False Conversion: Atheism Debated,* which he seizes upon because it reflects back to him his own private preoccupations. But to say that Françoise is a mere prop in J-L's imaginative rehearsal of his life seems rather harsh. Rather, she is necessary as the point on which his idea of himself turns.

Just as we might doubt the premise of Pascal's wager that it is so easy to decide to believe in God, we might also doubt J-L's assumption that it is possible to will oneself to fall in love. J-L himself questions one of the premisses of Pascal's highly dubious argument, and echoes Bernard Williams observation (originally raised by Voltaire) that God '...might not, for instance, much favour those who came to believe in him by such strategies.'[6] He condemns it as cynical - 'What I don't like about Pascal's wager is the calculated exchange.' - yet he follows just the same strategy, not in theology but in love. Not in deciding to believe in God, but in deciding to love Françoise. As Maud puts it, 'I don't much care for this business of love with conditions attached ... I mean your way of calculating, planning ahead, classifying.' At dinner with Maud and Vidal, J-L argues that Pascal's form of religious faith is fatally lacking in appreciation for the small but vitally important earthly pleasures of life. Pascal's 'mournful Jansenism' blinds him to the value of what is most apparent, like, for example, the local Chanturge wine. J-L declares himself disappointed in Pascal because of the chilly asceticism and detachment from the sensuous minutiae of life - 'I say not to acknowledge what's good is evil!' - yet he chooses the very austerity and asceticism for which he criticises Pascal. He declares that he loves Françoise, yet he refuses each opportunity to find out more about her. As we have seen, he seems oddly incurious about the actual woman present to him, and much more interested in her

---

[6] Williams, B. *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p.98

when she is an abstract set of conditions (blonde, Catholic) for a wife that he discusses with Maud. And it is in the symmetrical comparison and the rhyming of the visual tone, of gestures, conversations, and so on, that the nature of his choice is made apparent. With Maud there is conversation, warmth, honesty, equality, and frankness; with Françoise there is austerity, politeness, pretence, and secrecy.

Thus we arrive at a fuller understanding of J-L by attending to the formal, aesthetic features of the work - from the *external* perspective. As I claimed, following Wilson, in chapter one, in *The Searchers* we arrive at a deeper understanding of Ethan's nature both from the internal imagining of a history implied by events in the narrative, but also from the recognition of the symmetrical structure of the narrative and patterns of repetition of visual motifs. We imagine his history with Martha from their actions, but we also recognise his kinship with Martin and Scar from the echoing of aesthetic patterns, and this recognition is a product of what I have called the *associative* or *constructive* imagination. Formal, aesthetic features of the film, recognised from an external perspective, feed back in to an internally imagined understanding of the characters and the events. Or in other words, information derived from a critical reflection on formal aspects of the work, provides the basis, or the raw material, for the internal imagining. Moreover, the account of the characters' nature and motivations which is implied in the formal features of the work has a narrational authority which can contradict the account which is given by the characters themselves. I have argued that it is *this* contrast, between J-L's understanding of himself and the one implied by the formal qualities of the film, that is the more instructive.

The view of Rohmer's films as the mere recording of clever conversations, arises from not recognising that there are multiple levels of a philosophical dialogue that speak with and against each other throughout the film. There is an explicit discussion of Pascal conducted by the characters, and there is an ethical perspective inherent in the form or the fabric of the work - we cannot separate *what* is said from *how* it is said. This is related to a point made by Martha Nussbaum in her discussion of the late work of Henry James; the act of choosing the right words, just *these* words and not any others, is a form of moral activity. As she puts it: 'Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters.'[7] The ethical aspect of Rohmer's series is in the interplay between the internally imagined content and the externally recognised aesthetic features of the work - just this shot, this balance of elements, this soft light. The view of Rohmer as a reactionary

---

[7] Nussbaum, M., 1990, p. 3

moraliser arises from only hearing one side of the conversation. Seeing the philosophical content of the film as just an illustration of the *pensées* of Pascal leads to a misunderstanding of the role of philosophy in the film. In the next section I shall discuss one such interpretation. It is not what they say, but what the characters do that reveals the philosophical core of the film; or rather, it is the conflict between what they say and what we see, between word and deed, word and image.

2. Moral Positions and Ethical Inquiries

In chapter three I discussed Noel Carroll's theory of films as thought experiments, and I suggested that by extracting a simple moral principle from a complex work of narrative fiction like *The Third Man,* the theory risks both misdescribing the work and also trivialising the principle. Jerry Goodenough gives a philosophical 'reading' of *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* which I think falls into a similar trap. As he sums it up: 'All the issues are clear, as ultimately there are no grey areas for Pascal: either you bet or you do not. The narrator seeks to escape from the artificial - Maud - to the natural - Françoise... There is a Catholic reading of values here... Rohmer presents a reversal of the values that we have become used to in the modern world...He teases us with the possibility that free will may not exist, and with the certainty that, like our hero, we must believe in it anyway.'[8] This is a version of the conventional 'reading' of Rohmer's films as conservative, reactionary, and perversely anachronistic - swimming upstream against the flow of contemporary radical politics. Goodenough's interpretation of the film seems to me unconvincing, however, partly because it does not seem to cohere with the evidence on screen. For example, Goodenough says that Vidal has '... a strong belief in the rationality of history', whereas in the first discussion of Pascal's wager it is Vidal who says that his commitment to the meaningfulness (which suggests rationality) of history is a Pascalian wager: 'Personally, I profoundly doubt that history has any meaning.' Vidal certainly does not see history as rational, but sees this as the only possible response to the threat of meaninglessness - he recognises that it is a necessary irrationality.

Goodenough bases his interpretation of *Maud* partly in binary oppositions; between the two main female characters Maud and Françoise, Vidal and Maud, reason and faith, determinism and free will. Now, while I am also arguing for the centrality of this kind of structural comparison in making sense of a film, I have a quite different stance on

---

[8] Goodenough, J. 'A Philosopher Goes to the Movies' in Goodenough and Read (Eds.) *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 9

the content of the terms in these equations. According to Goodenough the opposition can be summed up thus: '...black and white...Outside and inside...The white glare of the snow, the cosy darkness of the interiors, particularly the church. Maud the brunette and Françoise the blonde. Maud lives in the middle of town, Françoise up in the purity of the mountains. Maud is really only happy at night, Françoise is a day person, comfortable outside.'[9] The list seems to suggest that Maud is to be associated with the night and with darkness, which themselves are associated with urbanity and artificiality, and opposed to Françoise who is aligned with light and nature and purity. The trouble is that the interpretation depends on some rather questionable assumptions; first that there *is* such a relation between concepts like darkness and artificiality, and secondly that this division is uncomplicated by the film. The long conversation in Maud's apartment takes place at night, but in a brightly lit white apartment, whereas Françoise is encountered in the dark street or the dark interior of J-L's car. Maud and J-L's day trip to the mountain is seemingly far removed from the town of Clermont-Ferrand, her fur hat framed by a glaring expanse of crisp white snow. But the corresponding sequence with Françoise takes place against the grey background of an overcast sky, drizzle and urban sprawl. In fact, for a large part of the film Françoise is only seen as J-L follows her in his car through the streets, she seems to belong within a view of the town which J-L sees through his car window. If the oppositions between light and dark and town and nature are relevant then they might just as well point in the other direction.

Both Goodenough and Carroll suggest a model in which films can function as thought experiments which propose moral principles or maxims. In Milan Kundera's terms, they are looking not for an inquiry but a moral *position*. I argued in chapter three that one of the risks of this approach, which is apparent in Carroll's analysis of *The Third Man*, is that

---

9 Goodenough, J. 2005, p.9

in the process of the distillation of a work of fiction into a moral principle, the messy and ambiguous narrative details of the work may be misdescribed. Seeing *The Third Man* as a refutation of Forster's maxim that, 'When loyalty to a friend conflicts with loyalty to a cause, one ought to choose in favour of the friend.'[10], leads Carroll to ignore those features of the work that hint at a more ambivalent morality. I suggest that Goodenough is making a similar kind of mistake. The philosophical subject of the characters' conversations, Pascals's wager, is taken to be the subject of the film, and Goodenough looks for a position on the question that it raises. The film is interpreted in a way that meets the conditions set by the theoretical framework; there is what we might call a *film-to-theory direction of fit.* Rather than seeing what theories or principles might emerge from a description of the film, the description of the film is tailored to be consistent with the theory. Therefore, if one starts with a moral principle or maxim that is independent of the work and proceeds by interpreting the film as a source of evidence for the principle, the risk is that the description of the film will consequently be lacking or distorted. And this, of course, is one of the objections to the philosophically-oriented interpretation of films that is held, in various permutations, by Lamarque and Olsen, Livingston, and others. Searching for a philosophical or moral position in a film, blinds us to its qualities as a work of art.

The differences between Goodenough's and my own approaches to the film illustrate a difference between two senses of the project of interpretation of fictions. Goodenough's project is one of decoding the film according to a certain theoretical heuristic. The film is about, is even *recommending*, a certain set of values and ethical religious principles, and this can be determined in light of extrinsic sources of information, like Rohmer's putative Catholicism, which provide the 'key' to understanding his films. From this process of decoding what features of the film 'stand for' the film is translated into a philosophical *thesis*. In my own version, however, the interpretation is more along the lines of an explication of the significance of events and of formal patterns. From this description an ethical *theme* emerges. Both forms of interpretation aim at a description of what the film is 'about' in some loose sense, but they do so, as it were, from different directions.

But isn't all this talk of ethical inquiries and exploratory modes of ethical fiction just a little vague? Surely, if Rohmer's series is in some sense about self-deception and its effects and consequences, isn't there a moral position implied in the very choice of that theme? Put rather crudely, could we not sum up the position as 'one ought not deceive

---

[10] Carroll, N. 'The Wheel of Virtue' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60:1 (2002) 10

oneself?' The question, of course, rests on the much larger issue of interpretation and what grounds the inferences that we make, and I have no space to tackle that problem here. But there is a distinction between raising an ethical question, and taking up a position on that question. *Maud* is a good example of the former, and in fact displays a remarkable degree of ambivalence. At the heart of Kundera's remark that the ethical role of the novel is (or ought to be) not to take up a position but to conduct an enquiry, is an assertion of the (ideal) moral neutrality of works of narrative fiction. They are not in the business of telling us what to do, but rather in exploring possible permutations of ethical situations. That does not mean, however, that fiction therefore has no ethically instructive role. In order to contribute to our development as ethical beings, fictions need not - and perhaps had better not - operate in a didactic mode. This point might help to explain why it is that if *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* is 'about' self-deception and the dangers of a circumscribed ethical perspective, the ending in which J-L reaffirms his and Françoise's principal of secrecy on the beach seems an incongruously sunny one.

The ending could just as easily be taken as a simple endorsement of J-L's Pascalian strategy. There seems nothing to suggest that his self-deception has led to unhappiness. On the contrary, it seems to have paid off. Goodenough reads the ending of the film as an endorsement of JL's decision to choose Françoise. He sees, in the expanse and light of the beach, a symbolic representation of his decision to accept grace and '...escape from the artificial - Maud - to the natural - Françoise ... and this theme of the triumph of nature is emphasized in ... the final move of our hero away from Maud and down towards Françoise, the sea and the light.'[11] The ending seems to me, however, not an unequivocal triumph of purity and nature, but a much more ironic and ambivalent conclusion about the conflicts and compromises of ethics, self-knowledge and the practical demands of life. Goodenough's conclusion misses the fact that within the happy ending the film reminds us of the symmetries, echoes and oppositions which have structured the narrative, and have provided an explanatory clue to J-L's actual beliefs and motivations. The ending should therefore be understood not in the literary sense of an *epilogue* which tells us about what the characters did after the main story, but in the musical sense of a *coda* which returns to and reprises aspects of the main body of the work as a way of confirming them. The ending continues, and in putting them together in the same space, acknowledges, the comparison between Maud and Françoise. But more importantly, the ending of the film re-enacts and re-confirms the characters of the relationships which have been established throughout the

---

[11] Goodenough, J. 2005, p.9

rest of the film - both in the way that they act and in the formal qualities of their representation.

JL and Maud take up the conversation where they left it. Or rather, they return to their respective roles in their conversation; JL evasive, Maud challenging and direct. J-L refers to their 'evening' together, and Maud quickly replies, 'Evening? Our *night* you mean.' She points out not that he is *lying* exactly, but the peculiarly sophistical and lawyerly quality of his protestations of the truth. She catches him trying to smuggle in a deception under cover of an ostensibly trivial semantic distinction. Maud does not so much confront JL with his secrecy, as she shows it to him. In coaxing JL to a more truthful view of himself - 'You're just as secretive as ever.' - she extends a last invitation to frankness.

Maud carries on up the dune, and J-L runs down to rejoin Françoise and their son. As he relates the conversation with Maud, the camera holds on Françoise as she looks down at the sand and we hear him off-screen, first talking to her and then in voice-over. The realization dawns that she had been Maud's husband's lover, and JL repeats his story that Maud had been his last fling. So the final scene recapitulates the preceding one in the snow. JL finally interprets his own reluctance to look at 'what I might find out about her' as an act of kindness, sparing Françoise's embarrassment, rather than as an avoidance. The moment of threat passes, and Françoise repeats and reaffirms their principle of secrecy - 'We said we'd never speak of it again' - and they all join hands and run together towards the sea.

Would J-L have been happier with Maud? Probably not. When Maud tells J-L that she has remarried, he offers his congratulations and Maud says, 'Thanks, but none called for. It's not going well.' I imagine Maud's unseen husband as a sort of counterfactual ghost of how things might have been for J-L with Maud. Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that the film is asserting one thing but really means another; that J-L seems happy but is in

fact miserable, or that his happiness is transient, or unfounded, or precarious because it is founded on illusion. The fact that he really *is* happy suggests the more uncomfortable thought that it is often self-deception and not a clear moral view which is rewarded with happiness. Life might very well be easier lived from within a veil of self-delusion and comforting self-directed fantasy; as I quoted Iris Murdoch in chapter four, 'It is a *task* to come to see the world as it is.'[12] To claim that the sunniness of the end of the film is deceptive is not quite correct; if his happiness with Françoise *were* superficial or fragile or temporary, that would be to suggest that the life that he might have had with Maud, that is, the more difficult and demanding one, would really have been the happier. The film offers no opinion on what he *ought* to have done, but leaves us with one of the central ethical problems, the possibility that the good life and the ethical life may sometimes be incompatible. The difference between, in Kundera's terms, adopting a moral *position* and conducting a moral *inquiry* is the difference that I mentioned at the start of this chapter, the difference between a 'moraliser' and a '*moraliste*'.

3. Variations on an Ethical Theme

Whereas Goodenough sees the film as an endorsement of one particular response to Pascal's wager - one ought to take the leap of faith - I have argued that the wager is used as a rhetorical means of exploring the way that a self-directed attention can have a distorting effect on one's beliefs, desires and actions. My interpretation of *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* is the product of both an internal imagining of the events and an external view of the aesthetic strategies of the film. But it is also grounded in a still more external view, that is, of connections and patterns of repetition *across the series as a whole*. My 'reading' is supported by placing the film within a certain context, not the moral/theological context of Rohmer's catholicism, but an aesthetic/thematic context. In isolation, *Maud* could (perhaps) be seen as an endorsement of a Pascalian strategy, but when we see it as one part of a series which returns again and again to a similar subject and scenario, the theme of self-deception comes more clearly into view.

Rohmer described the structure of his series in these terms: '...I conceived of my *Moral Tales* as six symphonic variations. Like a musician, I vary the initial motif, I slow it down or speed it up, stretch it or shrink it, add to it or purify it.'[13] There are two ways of understanding this musical metaphor. First, as variations in the actions and events of the

---

[12] Murdoch, I.,1970, p.91

[13] Rohmer, E. *The Taste for Beauty*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 81

story, each of which takes the same basic premise - a man who is attached to one woman but attracted to another - and explores its own permutation. But more significantly, and more closely related to the musical root of the analogy, it could be understood as variations on an ethical *theme*. The theme of self-deception and a circumscribed perspective appears in *Le Carrière de Suzanne* (1963) and *La Boulangère de Monceau* (1963) as a lack of understanding, or a boy's inability to imagine another (female) point of view. In *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* (1969), it reappears as J-L's perversely rational (Pascalian) objectification of the will. In *La Collectionneuse* (1967), it returns as Adrien's narcissistic self-absorption, and his languid, solipsistic cruelty. In *Le Genou de Claire* (1970) it manifests as Jérôme's rationalisation of his desires in a cerebral, creative, self-deceptive, self-directed hermeneutics. And finally, in *L'Amour L'Après-midi* (1972) the theme reappears as Frédéric's vision turned inwards, a moral blindfold obscuring a clear view of others.

3.1 Recursive Structures

The ethical theme is, however, directly connected to recurring aesthetic themes; the reiteration of formal motifs, structural patterns, and reoccurring configurations of character relationships. Foremost among these reoccurring configurations is the situation of the protagonist in relation to different women, each of which performs a distinct role in his life; in each film he is caught between one, usually absent, woman who supports his carefully constructed understanding of himself, and another who acts as an interlocutor, challenging him to a clearer view of how things are. In *La Collectionneuse*, while his girlfriend is modelling in London, Adrien (Patrick Bauchau) pursues Haydée (Haydée Politoff), whose enigmatic indifference is punctuated with perceptive and critical remarks. In *Le Genou de Claire*, while Jerome (Jean-Claude Brialy) lusts after Claire (Laurence de Monaghan), the youngest daughter of the house, Laura (Béatrice Romand), looks on with a kind of benign indulgence, occasionally wrong-footing him with her truthfulness and sincerity. In *L'Amour L'Après-midi*, Chloé's (Zouzou) teasing is an invitation to Frédéric (Bernard Verley) to imagine how the world is from a point of view detached from how he sees it. Chloé's teasing is an attempt to bring Frédéric to an awareness of the reality of the independent experience of others. It is an attempt to nudge him out of his solipsistic dream-life.

In *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* J-L's interlocutor is Maud. After their dinner together, thinking of his resistance to temptation as a moral victory, J-L says (not seriously, but not entirely jokingly either), 'Thanks to you, I've taken a step on the path to sainthood... women aid my moral progress.' Maud responds, 'Even in the whorehouses of Vera Cruz?' He shoots back a denial with a sudden shift to a serious tone, as if to the questions of a policeman. Maud continues to reel him in, 'It might have done you good, both physically and morally.' J-L frowns, 'You think so?' Maud laughs, and let's him off the hook 'You idiot.' His seriousness, his inability to recognise and respond to a joke, indicates, to Maud, a more problematic failing, 'What bothers me is your lack of spontaneity.' J-L replies, strangely, seeming to misunderstand the nature of the attack, 'I've laid my heart bare. What more do you want?' It is not his sincerity she questions, but his solipsistic inability to respond to a joke - his lack of spontaneity is a lack of humour.

He also fails to see, in the lightness of its delivery, the gravity of the accusation. For Maud a lack of humour is a serious defect in the quality of his ethical outlook. He cannot see that it is a serious criticism because, lacking humour, he has no way of understanding that serious things can be said in unserious ways. But why should a lack of humour be a moral failing? Better, it is the lack of a virtue - or an ability. J-L's lack of humour prevents him from seeing the irony in his own declaration, that women aid his moral progress; he cannot see that a woman is trying to give him a lesson in morality even as he speaks. He rejects the woman from whom he could learn the most, and instead chooses the woman who makes obvious and rehearsed jokes, and who reinforces his conception of himself. The two women represent two alternative ways of seeing the world, and two ways of placing oneself in relation to it; they represent the tension between self-deceptive rule, and what Nussbaum, Iris Murdoch and others, refer to as a clarity of perception, or in Murdoch's words a 'just mode of vision', that is a prerequisite for moral action.

There are recurring patterns of actions and relationships across the series, a man caught between two women for example, and these might be taken to constitute a kind of structural narrative motif. But the ethical theme of self-deception arises from the reiteration of the conflict between points of view. First between the perspective of the protagonist and that of the woman who questions it. But also between the account of his

beliefs and desires constructed by the protagonist, and that which is implied by the formal features of the films.

3.2 Variations of a 'Thick' Ethical Concept

In chapter three I discussed the question of whether films can play a morally educative role, and the initially attractive idea that one way in which they do is in the manner of thought experiments. As Smith points out, however, it seems difficult to maintain this argument when we recognise the dramatic differences in richness and detail between narrative fictions and philosophical thought experiments (such as Williams' 'Jim and the Indians'). Moreover, the difference seems to be not just a contingent one, but rather an indication of an essential difference between the form and the function of each. Philosophical thought experiments strip away 'extra' detail primarily because it is not relevant, but also because introducing a range of complicating factors might in fact obscure the general philosophical point which is at issue. It is a central criterion of the aesthetic value of realist narrative fictions, on the other hand, that they do not aim at the general, but show us richly individuated characters and scenarios.

In contrast, I argued that (some) films and other works of narrative fiction should be seen not as thought experiments which recommend general moral principles, but rather as contributions to our understanding of 'thick' ethical concepts (TECs). This, I claimed, finds a role for all that 'extra' detail. Its role, however, is not as an embellishment which merely makes the fiction more affecting or memorable, but which could, in principle, be removed without any significant impact on the nature of the moral principle or concept which it expresses. Rather, the particularising detail is an intrinsic and necessary element of the ethical content of the work - the concept is partly constituted *by* the detail. Seen in this way, the *descriptive* 'is' part of the fictional TEC is not separable from the *prescriptive* 'ought' part. A separation of 'is' and 'ought', or rather a boiling down of the 'is' to extract the 'ought', is what Noel Carroll is doing in his analysis of *The Third Man*, and also what Goodenough is doing with *Maud*, and in both cases it leads to a rather unconvincing account of the film.

As I also argued in chapter three, a child's earliest exposure to moral concepts is not through learning higher order moral theories ('It is wrong to steal') but through the acquisition of a repertoire of narrative scenarios in which situations, consequences and emotional responses are associated. It seems highly likely that one reason that the voracious consumption of fictions is such a large part of childhood is that it plays a central

role in this process. Works of narrative fiction contribute to this repertoire by providing more scenarios, and also by providing them in a focussed and directed way, drawing attention to the most salient aspects. It also seems likely that this process does not end with childhood. Ethical progress is furthered not just by providing more descriptions of a greater range of subjects and issues, but by returning again and again to the same basic situations and describing them in new ways, revealing new aspects. The recursive nature of this form of ethical inquiry, rehearsals of varieties of ethical situations, is the organising principle at the heart of Rohmer's series. A simple injunction that one ought not to deceive oneself can be achieved in a single proposition, but a more perspicuous understanding of the variegated nature of the concept requires the reiteration of scenarios. For this reason the series should not be seen as a collection of moral thought experiments, which all argue in various ways for a single principle. They are not concerned with what one ought to do in a difficult situation, or when faced with a moral dilemma, so much as they are with delineating and describing the possible features of the situation. As Rohmer put it: 'Within my self-imposed limits, I present different possibilities for human types, for both women and men.'[14]

The variations in the particular details of circumstance are important for two reasons. First, as I have already claimed, the variations among cases of a similar type are what help to define the concept more fully. If a TEC is defined by the conjunction of its descriptive and prescriptive components, then the greater the range in the content of the descriptive component the richer the understanding of the concept. The particular narrative details, which as Smith argues, are incidental to moral philosophical thought experiments, are essential in the enrichment of a thick ethical concept in fiction. Our understanding of the nature of self-deception, for example, is furthered not primarily by asking in what situations it is *not* applicable, but by asking in what ways the concept extends into new situations, and how it is related to and overlaps with other ethical concepts. Both J-L in *Maud* and Adrien in *La Collectionneuse* delude themselves, but their self-deceptions differ in their sources, their manifestation and results. J-L is blinded by his adherence to a puritanical form of rationalism, whereas Adrien is cut off from others within the boundaries drawn by his narcissism. *Les Contes Moreaux* are not reiterations of a theory, or cautionary tales in support of a single moral principle. The ethical situations that we find ourselves in, and those that we encounter in art, are not reducible to general descriptions and resist assimilation to general principles. The variations of character and

---

[14] Rohmer, E. 1989, p. 81

circumstance across Rohmer's series are not what we need to *see beyond* in order to see what all of these situations have in common, but are themselves what constitute the thick ethical concept.

But in talking of variations on an ethical theme, have I not been talking about what Rohmer's films all have in common? And as most of the films with which I have been concerned have been 'about' self-deception in some way, am I not fundamentally involved in identifying a common ethical-thematic thread that runs through them all? At one level, of course, all of the films of the series have features which we use to group them together, similarities of plot, of fictional situations, of character relationships, and so forth. Moreover, the films of Rohmer's series also have aesthetic and thematic aspects in common with *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Sopranos*, and with *A Blonde in Love*, and to a large extent I have grouped these works together as exemplifying a form of ironic realism based on things which they have in common. It is no part of my argument, however, to suggest that identifying shared features plays no part in the formation of a TEC. Without *some* basic commonalities there would be no basis for comparison. *Ma Nuit Chez Maud*, *Five Easy Pieces* and *A Blonde in Love*, I have argued, all share at least one important feature - a self-deceptive and deluded protagonist. My claim, however, is not that it is the activity of grouping together these thematically similar films that clarifies our understanding of the concept of self-deception. Rather, it is that once we have done so, we are in a better position to see how each manifestation of the concept is alike and yet is different from the others in important ways. Robert Dupea, J-L and Andula can all be called self-deceptive, but they each manifest their own particular version of this trait, in different forms, in different circumstances, and with different results. The concept is enriched by expanding the field of its application to differing scenarios; bare concepts like 'self-deception' or 'sentimentality', reduced to sets of necessary and sufficient conditions, are relatively empty of content until they are given substance by imagining their possible varieties - and one of the principal arenas in which we are invited to imagine in this way is in fiction. Ethical concepts are fuzzy. To once more employ my photographic analogy from chapter three, works of narrative fiction sharpen our ethical concepts not in the sense of honing them like a knife, by shaving away extraneous details as Carroll's model suggests, but in the sense of focussing a picture, increasing its resolution through the addition of fine detail.

One of the objections to the idea that film, or any fiction, can be a means of producing moral knowledge, is that such an instrumentalist view relegates art to the status of a mere

vehicle for the transmission of moral propositions. Therefore, the aesthetic qualities of the work become incidental to the real business of making a philosophical point. This objection is the core of plausibility in the criticism of films as 'mere illustrations' of philosophical ideas, or as I put it in section two of this chapter, a *film-to-principle direction of fit.* The problem is not that illustrating a thesis is an inherently unworthy or illegitimate use for art, but that it fails to find a substantial role in this ethical project for the features that define a work as artistic fiction. In my discussion of *Ma Nuit Chez Maud,* and in my description of Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux* series as a set of variations on an ethical theme, I have proposed two ways in which the aesthetic qualities of these fictional works are indispensable to their ethical project: in their particular formal qualities, and in the variations of narrative details.

The ethical theme of self-deception becomes apparent in the conflicting strands of commentary on the attitudes of the protagonists; in a dissonance between the attitudes expressed in conversation and those implied by their actions. But more importantly, the *external* critical reflection on aesthetic formal details of the work provides an alternative point of view on the characters and events of the fiction imagined from the internal perspective. For example, the appreciation of the sensuous texture of experience which J-L claims to value is exemplified in the sequences with Maud in their positions in the frame, in the softness of the lighting, and in the graceful fluidity of movement and editing. Whereas the austerity for which he criticises Pascal, but which he pursues with Françoise, is expressed in the awkwardness and formality of shot framing, in the division of the spaces of her flat between harsh light and complete darkness, and in the editing which struggles to find a rhythm. The voice which contradicts or questions the protagonist's rationally constructed and self-comforting structure of illusions is the voice of narrational commentary expressed through formal patterns of associations, visual rhymes and narrative structural symmetries. The foregrounding of these formal qualities of a film, in *Maud* in the assertive symmetry, constitutes a cinematic equivalent for the ethical *activity* that Martha Nussbaum, for example, finds in the rhythm and cadence of a novelist's prose. The ethical content is counterfactually dependent on the aesthetic form.

The ethical activity conducted by means of this formal commentary is not, however, the prescription of moral rules or principles. What I have called the *exploratory* mode of ethical fiction asks us to consider possible variations and manifestations of an ethical concept, or a TEC. It depends crucially on two factors which are much less important, and perhaps even antithetical, to the *didactic* mode. First, because it aims at an

expanded understanding of an ethical concept which is based on the particularity of agents and situations, it has a closer connection to the particularities and details of their aesthetic representations. It operates through a process of descriptive fullness; both in terms of individual scenarios and in terms of their contribution to a broader picture. Secondly, in the multiplication of these particular details of characters and circumstances, simple and generalised moral rules become increasingly difficult to maintain. Let me emphasise, however, that I am not arguing that fiction is (or ought to be) *opposed* to any sort of formation of moral principles, just that its ethical contribution is to provide a fuller, richer and more nuanced context of thought as a better position from which to understand and revise such principles.

In the next chapter I shall turn to another form of the internal/external division in our engagement with fiction; subjective attachment and objective detachment from characters. I shall explore how the subjective to objective direction in our imagining of fictional scenarios resonates with Thomas Nagel's account of the subjective to objective direction of ethical thought. I shall describe how this is also dramatised in the situations of the protagonists of the *Moral Tales* series. Finally, I want to suggest that the imaginative structure of our engagement and the predicaments of the characters mirror not just the drive towards increasing objectivity, but also its limits.

6

Les Contes Moreaux Part Two

Subjective Imagining and the Limits of Objectivity

The heroes of a story are always blindfolded. Otherwise, they wouldn't do anything. It doesn't matter, since everyone has a blindfold. Or at least blinders.

Aurora, *Le Genou de Claire*

In the last chapter I argued that the ethical content of *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* can only be recognised with the simultaneous adoption of both an *internal* imagined attitude and an *external* appreciation of the formal devices and strategies which determine and shape the 'world' of the fiction. The recognition of patterns of repetition, visual symmetries and comparisons of the qualities of the representation of characters feeds back in to our imaginative construction of the fictional world and what is (fictionally) true therein. Moreover, the recognition depends on the adoption of a still more external perspective which takes in the film in relation to its place as part of a series, and as part of a wider system of patterns and variations. This juxtaposition of internal and external sources of information reveals the circumscribed nature of J-L's viewpoint on the world, and on himself.

In this chapter I shall turn to the distinction between subjective and objective imagining, and what I described in chapter four as the ethical stance - the simultaneous imagining of the fictional world from within the perspective of a character, and how things are independently from the way that he or she experiences it. The main focus will be the last film in Rohmer's series, *L'Amour L'Après-midi/Love in the Afternoon* (1972), but I will also refer to the two other main films, *La Collectionneuse/The Collector* (1969) and *Le Genou de Claire/Claire's Knee* (1970) along the way. I shall try to bring together the two major sets of distinctions which I have discussed; the internal/external distinction between imagined space and awareness of aesthetic form, and the subjective/objective distinction between imagining the fictional world from a character's perspective and independently of it. In part three I will suggest that there is an ethical significance in the connection between these two sets of distinctions, that the imaginative rehearsal of a transcendence of a subjective perspective towards a more objective one is informed and constrained by a still more objective perspective which is contained in the external perspective on the work. In this way the direction of our imaginative engagement follows the concentric outward structure and the limits of objectivity which Thomas Nagel describes. There is something irreducibly paradoxical about our drive towards an ideal of objectivity and a simultaneous recognition of its ultimate hopelessness, which is captured both in the situation which faces the film's protagonist, Frédéric, and also in the structure of our imaginative engagement.

1 Imagining 'what it's like'

The protagonist of *L'Amour L'Après-midi* is Frédéric (Bernard Verley), a *bourgeois* office-worker who lives with his wife (Françoise Verley) and baby daughter Ariane in the Paris suburbs. He commutes by train to his office in the city, dividing his attention between the imaginary landscapes offered by literature, and fleeting fantasies about the women he sees on his journeys. His afternoons are similarly taken up with little erotic reveries, as he spends his lunch hour walking the streets, or shopping, or sitting in cafes; he is a *flâneur* for whom passing strangers are a source of fantasy. One afternoon he is surprised in his office by the return of an old friend who has been away for six years. Chloé (Zouzou) is working in a nightclub, but is somewhat adrift and asks Frédéric for a job. Frédéric is not very happy to see her, but despite his chilly reception they rekindle a tentative friendship. They meet in the afternoons for coffee, and gradually, through the openness and frankness of their conversations, an intimacy grows between them which tests his faithfulness to Hélène.

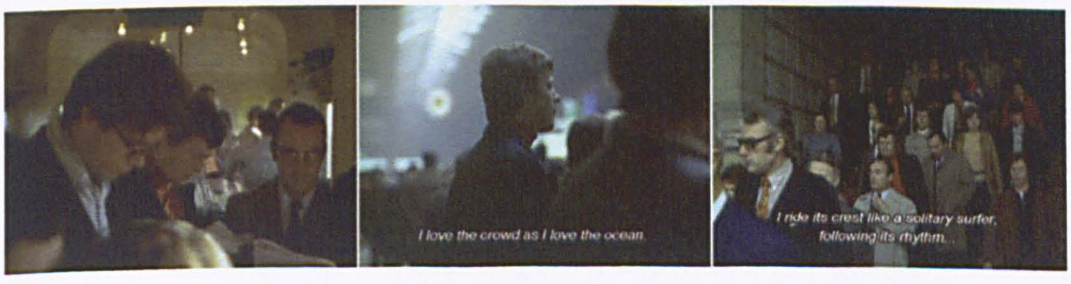
1.1 First and Third Person Shots, Voice-over Narration

L'Amour L'Après-midi fosters subjective imagining to a much greater extent than any of the other films in the series, and it does so in a variety of ways. We are drawn in to Frédéric's perspective through shots which approximate his field of vision, through shots which show Frédéric in relation to his environment, and most significantly through the voice-over narration (VoN) in which he gives expression to his thoughts. None of these factors on its own provides a 'direct line' into Frédéric's consciousness, but together they give a powerful impression of his view of the world.

The film begins with Frédéric leaving for work, his journey on the train, and his arrival in Paris. The sequence alternates between PoV structures which (roughly) show us what he sees, and objective third-personal shots which show us Frédéric from a position that replicates the perspective of an observer in the same space. To be more precise, the PoV structures show us not exactly what he sees, but what he is looking at from a spatial position which roughly approximates his. As he looks at one young woman, he reflects on his relation to women in general, and he wonders (in VoN) about how life might have been different had he met her and not Hélène. The object of his perceptual attention is shown in the shot, but the direction of his thoughts - from his reflections about women in general to his speculations about this *particular* woman - is represented through the progressively tighter framing. It is therefore not just the shots themselves which represent the objects of

his thoughts, but also the way that they are organised through editing. The progression of his thoughts from the general to the specific is reflected in the progression in the framing of the shots, tighter and tighter, from medium to close-up.

The third-personal shots, on the other hand, have the quality of the vision of an observer following Frédéric. This sense is generated by the position of the camera at Frédéric's eye-level, the spatial interjections of other figures between Frédéric and the camera, and also by the way that he recedes into the crowd forcing the viewer to actively search for him. But if these third-personal shots give a sense of an external observer of Frédéric's actions, how can it be that they also locate us within his point of view? Rather than imagining Frédéric's perspective, these third-personal shots give the strong impression of being a detective following him incognito, or a companion trying to keep up, or as he leaves the station, someone waiting for him.



But each of these shots is accompanied on the soundtrack by Frédéric's voice expressing his thoughts, and the muted sounds of the city rushing by. As he leaves the station emerging on a wave of people we hear him say (or think): 'I love the crowd as I love the ocean. I ride its crest like a solitary surfer, following its rhythm.' There is a correspondence between the content of the film image and the spoken words that brings the image closer to the role of an illustration of Frédéric's thoughts. The sense of being projected 'inside' Frédéric's subjectivity while seeing him from a 'third person' visual perspective, means that we share in his reflections that themselves have an objective, self-directed character. We hear his thoughts, we are presented with his reflections and emotional reactions to what he sees. As he makes his way through the crowd the contrast between his mental and our visual

experience, in fact represents the reflective and reflexive nature of his thoughts. The intense self-scrutiny which has been a characteristic of all of the protagonists of the *Contes Moreaux*, is, here in the final film, manifested in the formal structure of the film; in the combination of PoV shot structures, editing patterns, the VoN and the objective third-personal shots.

1.2 Objects of Association

Voice over narration and PoV shot structures encourage subjective imagining in a relatively direct way; hearing Frédéric's thoughts and seeing (roughly) what he sees, it is natural that we (in personally varying degrees) then engage in an imaginative rehearsal - dramatic imagining, in Richard Moran's phrase - of his subjective state. But there are other, more indirect, means of fostering this imagining, involving what Moran refers to as 'imaginativeness'. David Hume made the observation, in his discussion of sympathy, that emotions can be communicated between people not just through a face-to-face, in modern terms, 'contagion', but also through the sight of objects which carry with them sets of associations. Sympathy, according to Hume, consists in the ability to become aware of the emotional states of others, and then to reproduce those mental states in one's own mind. In his resonant analogy: 'As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature.'[1]

The transmission of this emotional state can be effected, however, even in the absence of an actual person; it can arise from the mere contemplation of another's emotional state whether that person is before us or not (or indeed is actual or not). All it needs is for something, some emotional cue, to give rise to the impression: 'Were I present at any of the more terrible operations of surgery, 'tis certain that even before it began, the preparation of the instruments, the laying of the bandages in order, the heating of the irons, with all the signs of anxiety and concern in the patients and assistants, wou'd have a great effect upon my mind, and excite the strongest sentiments of pity and terror.'[2] For Hume, sympathy (or empathy, in modern terms) arises not from the unmediated transmission of emotion from one person to another, but from an inference that we make about their mental state either from the direct observation of behaviour or from the context that we take to shape and cause those mental states.

---

[1] Hume, D. *Treatise,* p.576

[2] *Ibid.* p.576

Just as we can imagine the fear and anxiety of a patient undergoing an operation from the sight of objects which are associated with the experience, we can imaginatively project ourselves into the more general perspective of a person by means of such an association with an object. On Frédéric's commute, along with the subjective shots and VoN, there is a shot of the book which Frédéric is carrying, Antoine de Bougainville's *Voyage Autour du Monde.* He reflects on how he prefers a book to a newspaper because it has a greater power to '... lift me from the present.' *Voyage Autour du Monde,* an account of Bougainville's time in Tahiti, was famously influential (upon Rousseau for example) for its evocation of an alternative mode of human life, far removed from European bourgeois morality. The book performs a similar role to the instruments in Hume's operating theatre; it acts as a basis for the imaginative reenactment of Frédéric's dreams and fantasies. It is an element of the film which functions as a point on which our alignment with his perspective is anchored.

1.3 *La Collectionneuse* and Subjective Inflections

In chapter two I argued, following George Wilson, that one of the principal means by which we are granted access to a character's subjective state is through subjective inflections. There is an important distinction to be made, however, between different forms, or levels, of subjective inflection - between what we might call *occurrent* and *dispositional* levels of subjective inflection. There is, first, that which operates at an occurrent level; blurred focussing, tilted camera angles, heightened shadows, sounds picked out, and so on, which indicate the subjective quality of a characters experience at a certain moment. On the other hand, there is a more global tonal correspondence between the nature of a character's personality, disposition, or way of seeing the world, and the visual register of the film as a whole. And of course, local subjectively inflected shots and sequences occur within, and contribute to the overall tone of a film. Recall the example from *A Serious Man* in chapter two. Larry's marijuana experience is represented through the bleary image and altered soundtrack, but his general sense of alienation and despair is

reflected in the consistent visual style of the film; extreme close-ups of faces, the flatness and emptiness of suburban streets exaggerated in widescreen, the chilly blueish tone of the colour-grading, and so forth. To continue the musical metaphors of the last chapter, the visual (and sonic) texture of the film constitutes a particular 'key'. Between *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* and *La Collectionneuse* there is a dramatic shift in visual tone - or 'key' change - which reflects the respective qualities in the points of view of their protagonists.

In *La Collectionneuse*, Adrien (Patrick Bauchau) is a dilettantish antique dealer; an aesthete, stylish, metropolitan, a dandy, a libertine. While his girlfriend is in London modelling, he goes to the house of a friend on the Riviera, to devote himself to a period of complete inactivity. Another of the house-guests is his friend Daniel (Daniel Pommereulle), an artist with a similarly diffident approach to work. Adrien and Daniel spend their days in pursuit of idleness, relaxing in the shade, sleeping, smoking, and theorising about the effort of doing nothing. Their stasis is disrupted by the arrival of the third guest, Haydée, (Haydée Politoff). Haydée is, at first, an unwelcome and irritating presence to Adrien and Daniel, but before long she becomes the enigmatic centre of their attention. The two men are both intrigued by and contemptuous of Haydée's promiscuity, and they bully and flirt with her by turns. Eventually Haydée and Daniel fall into a casual affair, which distracts Adrien from his inactivity.

After the visual austerity of *Maud*, the monochrome gloom and provincial greyness, *La Collectionneuse* is played out in open spaces, heat and light. Whereas J-L shadows the unknown Francoise through dark and dreary streets, Adrien calls Haydée away from the bar to point out to her the beauty of St Tropez harbour in the dying light of sunset. J-L's asceticism and Pascalian blindness to the sensuous value of the world that is before him is given perceptible form in the austerity of the mise-en-scène of the scenes with Françoise. In the libertine view of Adrien in *La Collectionneuse*, on the other hand, a luxuriance in the surface and the texture of the world blooms.

The film begins with prologues for each of the main characters, primarily as a way of placing them within a certain context; Haydée is shown walking back and forth on a beach with the water lapping at her feet, Daniel is discussing a piece of his sculpture with a critic/ collector, and Adrien is shown in conversation with friends. But at the same time these prologues also signal the film's concern with sensuous experience, and they establish a formal strategy with which the film grants us access to subjective states of the characters. In Haydée's prologue the sound of the water dominates, as her steps splash through the shallow surf. In Daniel's the work they are discussing is a paint can, stuck with razor blades, on which the critic cuts himself. In Adrien's prologue he leaves the warm evening outside to wander through the house, and into a room where he picks up a brass statuette of a nude female figure which he turns in his hands, following its smooth contours.

The subjective quality of experience - in philosophical jargon, *qualia* - is evoked by *La Collectionneuse* in a rich tactile sensuousness; in close-ups of tanned flesh glowing, the electric hum of cicadas, water lapping on a shingle beach, bare feet stepping from dry grass to hot stones to a soft red towel, and in the way that Adrien runs a salty wet shell across his lips. The emphasis on the *feel* of things, the invitation to imagine a sensory experience, foregrounded in shots which isolate and draw attention to the tactile experience, is a means of, in Murray Smith's terminology, *aligning* us with the characters more generally.[3]

[3] cf. Smith, M., 1995, esp. Ch.5

This method of imaginative alignment relies on a certain basis of experiential knowledge - because we know what it feels like to walk barefoot on grass, we can use that sense memory as a kind of bridge to an imaginative enactment of aspects of Adrien's experience. The representation of these sensory experiences acts as a kind of shortcut to the imaginative adoption of the perspective of the characters.

Haydée's prologue may strike a modern audience as problematic in the way that it seems to separate and isolate parts of her body, a kind of de-personalising visual dismemberment. But it should be understood as performing two functions; first, establishing Haydée in a context of unconstrained nature, and secondly as establishing the point of view of the film from the perspective of the male characters, and specifically Adrien. As Eric Rohmer put it: '...things must be shown with all the luxury and precision of images ... [they] must be made perceptible in order to understand the attraction [they] exert on the narrator.'[4]

1.3 A Subjectively Saturated Sequence

L'Amour L'Après-midi is the only one of the *Contes Moreaux* to use what George Wilson calls a 'subjectively saturated' sequence. Sitting in a cafe one afternoon, Frédéric indulges in a fantasy that he possesses a device which emits a 'magnetic fluid' in order to exert a hypnotic power over the will of passing women. The transition from the objective world of the fiction, to the internal dimension of Frédéric's dream is signalled first by the slow camera movement in to a close-up of his eyes, and then a cut to a shot of the amulet around his neck, and then to a shot of him in the street. In a similar way to the scenes which combine Frédéric's visual perspective with his thoughts in VoN, this subjectively saturated sequence is a function of changes in visual aspects of the image and changes in the qualities of sound.

---

[4] Rohmer, E., 1989, p.83

From the amulet the film cuts to a shot in which he is isolated in the centre of the frame as it zooms in to a medium close-up. He stands motionless, and is picked out against the busy Paris street both by the contrast between his stillness and the movement around him, and by the very shallow depth-of-field of the image which increases with the length of the zoom. At the same time the sound changes from the ambient noise of the busy cafe in which he is sitting, and is replaced with an eery electronic hum. The shift into Frédéric's subjective 'space' is marked both by a change in the quality of the sound, and also by an *absence* of sound. As he talks to each of the women in turn, the electronic sound evaporates and the background noise of the city is replaced by silence. The subjective quality of this sequence therefore depends on the foregrounding of the characters through a detachment from their spatial context, through the effacement of the city background both visually and aurally.

This scene acts as a coda to the *Contes Moreaux* series as a whole, because the anonymous women on whom Frédéric uses the amulet are the women who have featured in the previous films - Francoise Fabian (Maud), Marie-Christine Barrault (Francoise), Haydée Politoff (Haydée), Aurora Cornu (Aurora), Laurence de Monaghan (Claire), and Beatrice Romand (Laura). In his dream, Frédéric has the intuitive access to the thoughts and desires of the women, and a consequent influence, which each of the heroes of the films has either wanted or thought that they have. It is only Laura who resists his magic. The sequence of magical seductions ends with a failure - Frédéric's reverie is cut short by the intrusion of reality. Tongue-tied and awkward, Laura runs off, leaving Frédéric puzzled as

to how his magical amulet could have malfunctioned, and how his own fantasy could have suddenly turned against him.

In chapter four, I argued that one of the ethical benefits of subjective imagining is the opportunity that fictions give us to imagine 'what it's like'. One function of such imagining might be to imagine the unfamiliar position of a person who is a victim of injustice, like the actual counterparts of the characters in *Moolaadé*, or a person who is culturally or socially distant from ourselves and whose voice, like the women in the stories of Mahasweta Devi that Martha Nussbaum mentions, might not ordinarily be heard.[5] Adrien and Frédéric however, do not seem to belong in either group. Adrien is a member of a cosmopolitan European elite, drifting elegantly through a world of art and beauty, sex and conversation. Frédéric is a comfortable *bourgeois* with a loving wife and children. What ethical benefit is there in adopting either perspective?

One of the ethical functions of subjective imagining I referred to in chapter four was the 'extension of experience' - an imagined consideration of the quality of alternative points of view as a basis on which to form more complete and more nuanced judgements. Imagining an ethical situation from the inside can be valuable as a projection into the position of a victim of injustice, but it can be just as valuable as a projection into the perspective of someone who is themselves ethically flawed. In both cases there is a kind of epistemological benefit; in the former, imagining what the consequences of a situation might feel like, in the latter, coming to an internal understanding of the conditions that might lead one to act in a certain way. The latter sort of imagining, I argued, is an important feature of *The Sopranos*, and it is an important feature of *La Collectionneuse* - we are invited to imagine the point of view which is an impediment to ethical action *from the inside*. Neither form of subjective imagining, it should be remembered, is ethically beneficial because it involves imagining what *I* would do in a certain situation. The value is in the imaginative enactment of a form of life which differs from my own either in terms of cultural distance, or in the case of *La Collectionneuse* or *The Sopranos*, in terms of a moral distance. The important thing is to imagine how the world appears from within X's perspective, not to imagine how X's world appears from my own perspective. Moreover, as I also argued in chapter four, the ethical benefit is not exclusively in the subjectively imagined position, but rather in the simultaneous adoption of both subjective and objective perspectives.

---

5 Nussbaum, M. An interview in *The Dualist*, Autumn, 2004, p.68

2. The Objective Point of View

In order to be able to see that the subjective point of view is one that is limited one needs to be able to step beyond its boundaries. Imagining from the inside gives us an enriched understanding of the causes and conditions that have a bearing on actions, but without the more objective perspective we are unable to recognise the ways in which the subjective perspective is flawed. *La Collectionneuse* aligns us with Adrien, for example, in its evocations of the quality of his experience, but the film also leads us to recognise the ways that he interprets the actions and motivations of others in a way that places himself as their sole cause and object. Regarding Haydée, for example, he says: 'One might argue that her entire behaviour, ever since we met, including her affair with Daniel, had been the surest way to arouse my interest in her.' Haydée puzzles him because her actions seem to contradict this account: 'Why would such an easy girl waste time going after me in such a roundabout way, when my rashness had left her a direct route?' He explains her indifference as in fact a highly convoluted and artful strategy for his seduction. Without being able to step beyond his perspective, we would be unable to see that Adrien's view of the world is shaped by his narcissism.

2.1 *Le Genou de Claire* and Authorial Commentary

In *Le Genou de Claire,* Jerôme (Jean-Claude Brialy), a diplomat stumbling backwards into middle-age, has returned to his family villa by lake Annecy in order to sell it. And, as it is high summer, to take the opportunity for a holiday – his last one here alone since he is about to marry his fiancée Lucinde. By chance he meets an old friend, Aurora (Aurora Cornu), a writer who is staying with a neighbouring family, Madame Walter and her two daughters, Claire (Laurence de Monaghan) and Laura (Béatrice Romand). Jerôme putters back and forth across the jade-green lake in his rather elegant launch, and takes to passing the days in relaxed conversation with Aurora and the Walters in the shade of their garden. His relationship with Aurora is renewed and restored to its former intimacy, but he also finds himself drawn to Laura, with whom he soon strikes up an easy and affectionate friendship. Much of the film is taken up by the conversation between Jerôme and Aurora, in which they discuss Jerôme's flirtation with Laura as a literary experiment. Jerôme takes on the role of the hero of Aurora's fiction, and as they discuss his motivations and possible courses of action they elaborate an explanatory commentary on the segments in-between

in which we see the development of Jerôme's relationships, first with Laura and then with Claire.

One afternoon, on a tour through his empty, neglected, beautiful summer-house Jerôme and Aurora come to a room decorated with faded frescoes. 'Recognise him?' he asks. 'Don Quixote de la Mancha' she replies. The film cuts to the fresco as Jerôme says, 'With Sancho. He's on a wooden horse, but thinks he's flying. The bellows give the illusion of wind and the torch...of sun.' Aurora remarks that in the fresco Don Quixote and Sancho Panza have been blindfolded. The camera slowly moves in to the fresco to concentrate on the blindfolded pair, and Aurora says, 'The heroes of a story are always blindfolded. Otherwise they wouldn't do anything. It doesn't matter since everyone has a blindfold. Or at least blinders.' Aurora's reference to Don Quixote ambiguously straddles the border between a general observation about people and their motives, and a specific observation about something she detects in Jerome. She hints at a certain parallel between Jerome and the deluded knight, a comparison which is later reinforced when she casts Jerome as the hero of her own literary experiment.

The association of Jerome with Don Quixote is confirmed at a narrative level when they move into another room and Aurora spots a photograph of Jerôme's absent fiancee, Lucinde. 'Did you recognise her?' he asks.[6] The second question echoes the first, and just as Aurora hints at the comparison of Jerome and Don Quixote, it seems that the film confirms it by introducing the second parallel between Jerome's absent Lucinde and Don Quixote's absent Dulcinea. There is a comparison between Jerome and Don Quixote, then, on two levels; the first is Aurora's, *internal* to the diegesis, and the second is *external* to the diegesis, at the level of the film.

---

[6] As can be seen in the illustration, this is an occasion when subtitles can miss an important nuance in language.

There are literary ghosts that attend each of the *Contes Moreaux*; in *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* it is Pascal, Rousseau in *La Collectionneuse*, Bougainville in *L'Amour*, and it is Cervantes in *Le Genou de Claire*. Not literary influences on Rohmer, as Proust might be, but figures who are enlisted as intertextual devices to provide an extra perspectival dimension to the narrative. The figure makes an appearance, a sort of Hitchcockian cameo, in each with a recurring close-up of a book, or a painting, which announces its presence. Whereas Bougainville's *Voyage Autour du Monde* is an object of association which acts as a prompt to subjectively imagine Frédéric's internal landscape, in *Le Genou de Claire*, a literary reference is put to the opposite purpose. By associating him with Don Quixote, the most famously deluded character in literature, the film invites us (or directs us) to understand Jerôme's story in terms of self-delusion, and therefore *distances* us from his perspective. The literary allusion gives us at the outset a framework on which to build the story and a context in which to understand the characters and their motivations. We are cautioned to accept Jerôme's version of himself with no more credulity than we would accept Don Quixote's.

2.2 The Dissonance of Words and Actions

Each of the films in the series has a protagonist who gives a self-analytical commentary on his own reasons for acting, but they are divided between those in which this commentary is conducted within the story as a part of the action and those in which they are temporally and spatially displaced. Whereas in *La Collectionneuse* and *L'Amour L'Apres-midi* the explanatory commentary is given in voice-over narration, in *Le Genou de Claire* Jerôme's analysis of his own thoughts and actions is conducted in his lengthy conversations with Aurora. During their first conversation Jerôme says, 'I've come to realise that other women don't interest me', and this statement is systematically undermined by the action of the film.

One afternoon Jerome and Laura go walking in the mountains. Up until now their relationship has been characterised by Laura's minor infatuation and Jerôme's affectionate but reserved flirtation. He has hesitated to encourage Laura's feelings, yet at the same time he has not discouraged them either. Hand in hand they sprint to the top of a slope where they stop. Jerôme draws her closer in an embrace, and as she looks downwards he gently moves the hair from her face. She looks up, and he brings his hands to either side of her face to kiss her. Laura breaks free, 'Let me go!', and darts a few steps ahead. 'You don't want to play?' he says. Jerôme, the man of the world, the diplomat, has been momentarily caught off-balance, but quickly finds his feet and recovers the situation with a hastily

improvised deflationary comment. The awkward moment passes and they return to their relaxed and intimate conversation. The scene ends as Jerôme moves into the empty frame vacated by Laura, and pauses. He looks down in a pensive movement – it seems that the camera has caught him in a private thought.

Later in the film, Jerôme and Aurora are sitting on a bench engaged in their conversation as they watch Laura and her friend Vincent (Fabrice Luchini) boating on the lake. He tells her, as a prelude to his story, that 'the only thing able to arouse me is curiosity.' He tells her how, in order to satisfy that curiosity, he kissed Laura. As he says, 'I wanted to know if she was making fun of me, according to your script.' He describes it as a kind of intellectual experiment; passionless, cerebral, rational. 'I had to force myself.' he says, 'When I took her hand, not as I'd take an old friend's or a child's, I thought about the pleasure of touching it. And it embarrassed me. We were walking hand in hand, and it weighed on me. Not like guilt, but because it was unnecessary. Interested in another girl, I don't betray Lucinde, I just do something unnecessary. Lucinde is everything. Nothing can be added.' Aurora looks at him wryly and seems less than convinced, 'Why this test, then?' she asks. 'To please you. I obeyed you. And to see it fail.' Jerôme describes the kiss as a part of their game, their literary experiment. In representing the kiss to Aurora as a kind of experiment Jerôme achieves two things; first he retrospectively ameliorates his rejection, and secondly he absolves himself of responsibility. Just as Adrien's commentary imposes a certain interpretation on the actions of others which explains their motivations, Jerôme has retrospectively constructed an explanatory hypothesis that provides a rational and understandable basis for his own conduct. It is not enough to say that the kiss could have been an impulse, or a whim, it must be *explained.* As Martha Nussbaum says of Marcel in Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*: '... not only the content of the intellectual account but the very fact of engaging in intellectual self-scrutiny is, here, a distorting source of comfort and distance.'[7] And so it is with Jerôme; his intellectualisation is a mode of evasion.

I have argued that the ethical theme of Rohmer's series, which each film is a variation on, is the circumscribed vision of the protagonist - a failure to see how things really are. The means of this delusion is an elaborate and sustained self-analysis. In J-L's case it takes the form of philosophical discussions about Pascal and the sources of his beliefs. For Adrien, it is expressed in his interior commentary on the shifting dynamics of the relationships between him, Daniel and Haydée. Jerôme's moral blindfold is supported by his ostensibly open and honest conversations with Aurora, in which he explains to her

---

[7] Nussbaum, M. 1990, p.264

his reasons for acting in the ways that he does. But in describing his reasons to Aurore he *creates* those reasons. The object of Jerôme's self-deception is not only the nature of his relation to others, but also the nature of his own attitudes and motivations. So, in addition to deceiving himself about the nature of the external world, call this a first order delusion, he is also deceiving himself about the nature of how he represents it to himself. This second order delusion is rationalisation. Rather like the man who buys a car telling himself that it is a bargain, the first order delusion is that the car is a bargain and the second order delusion is that this is the reason for buying it. So, the distinctive thing about rationalisation is that it is a species of self-deception that is directed towards one's own decision making processes. As Stephen Darwall describes it: 'Thoughts are represented to oneself as the result of rational judgement, as supported by reasons, when in fact that representation's very purpose is to defend oneself against honest critical thought.'[8] Whereas Don Quixote deceives himself into believing that the nature of the external world is other than it is, Jerôme turns this deception inward; he deceives himself into believing that his own desires and reasons for acting are other than they are. In separating the character that he is 'playing' from his real self, Jerôme constructs a fictional version of himself and dresses up his real desire for Laura and Claire as part of his and Aurora's literary game. Rationalisation is a matter of creating flattering fictions to explain oneself to oneself.

3. The Ethical Stance

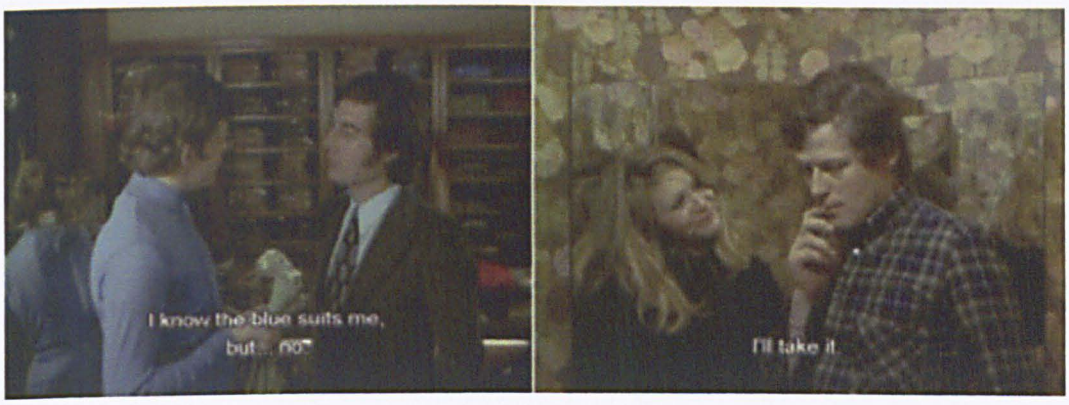
Rohmer's work might, perhaps, be considered a paradigm of a cinema of objectivity - a cool, detached and analytical scrutiny of the characters, their illusions and their rationalising strategies. But such a view would leave out of consideration the centrally important component of subjective imagining in our response. In chapter four I described an ethical stance towards works of narrative fiction which is a function of the simultaneous adoption of subjective and objective perspectives. The form it takes in *A Blonde in Love* is a kind of judicious sympathy, appreciating at once both the nature and the value of the subjective perspective, and the moderating influence of the more detached view that takes in its flaws and delusions. There is a similar duality of subjective and objective perspectives at work (in varying degrees) in Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*; there is, in Iris Murdoch's phrase, a 'breath of tolerance'.

---

[8] Darwall, S. in McLaughlin, B. and Rorty, A. (Eds.) *Perspectives on Self-deception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) p. 413

As I have already described, *L'Amour L'Après-midi* begins with an extended prologue which aligns us with Frédéric's perspective. But the prologue also establishes a pattern of subjective attachment and objective detachment which is repeated throughout the film. Frédéric arrives in Paris and walks from the station to his office, and as he walks up the stairs his narration ends. He sits down at his secretary, Fabienne's (Malvina Penne), desk and begins typing. When Fabienne arrives the phone rings, he answers it, turns to her and says, 'Its for you.' She takes the receiver and begins a personal conversation untangling the cord awkwardly from about Frédéric's neck. When he asks her to take the call in the other room, she brushes him off saying that it'll only take a minute. As she continues, he sits in her chair arms folded with a look of impotent and resigned frustration. He seems to have taken on her role in the office, and she his.

In these first scenes of the film we are offered two different (though not necessarily contradictory) perspectives on Frédéric, subjective and objective; first his own reflections on himself and then the film's ironic commentary as expressed through a comic role-reversal with Fabienne. In the comedy of the latter scene the film detaches us from the subjective perspective which it has already established. Each perspective colours and qualifies the other. Frédéric's fantasy sequence in which he exercises a magical influence on passing women is preceded by a scene in which he goes shopping. In the first shop he curtly dismisses the male assistant's suggestions of a sweater which suits him; in the second shop with an attractive woman he is talked into buying a shirt he doesn't like. In reality he is subject to the erotic force of persuasion which in fantasy he dreams of exerting over others.



But, in a similar way to *A Blonde in Love*, the transition to a more objective point of view on the character does not thereby transcend the subjective completely, but rather incorporates it into a simultaneously subjective and objective dual perspective. We imagine Frédéric's polite frustration 'from the inside' and at the same time we can see it as faintly ridiculous; the particular quality of the humour is generated by the tension between these two perspectives.[9] There is a constant tension between entering into Frédéric's view of the world, and at the same time being given a more objective perspective.

At the beginning of this chapter I said that in the opening sequence of *L'Amour L'Après-midi* the images come close to playing the role of an illustration of Frédéric's thoughts. They are not, however, illustrative in any straightforward sense. Even when the images seem to be directly representing what Frédéric is saying there is still a certain tension between the view which Frédéric expresses, and the view which we see on screen. For example, as he leaves the station, he describes how he moves through the crowd with a kind of expert grace; he says, 'I love the crowd as I love the ocean. Not to be engulfed or lost in it, I ride its crest like a solitary surfer, following its rhythm...' But just as he utters the final phrase the image track shows him making his way through the crowd, awkwardly, rushing, looking for an opening to get through, and at each attempt finding his path blocked.

As I argued in chapter four, the ethical value in the dual stance that we adopt is the opportunity that the imaginative engagement with fiction offers us to imagine at once from 'inside' the perspective of a fictional character, and have access to their thoughts, their emotions, and at the same time adopt the more objective perspective which places these local concerns in a wider context. The objective point of view is not sufficient on its own because, as Thomas Nagel argues, a maximally objective point of view fails to account for

---

[9] In a similar way, as I discussed in chapter two, that the particular quality of the fear in *Halloween* is a function of adopting both subjective and objective perspectives.

the irreducibly subjective character of experience. As Nagel puts it: 'It is better to be simultaneously engaged and detached ... for this is the opposite of self-denial and the result of full awareness.'[10] Fiction, and especially the kind of ironic realist fiction which Rohmer's series exemplifies, is peculiarly well-suited to accommodating these two perspectives.

In the final section of this chapter I shall try to bring together the two major distinctions between imaginative attitudes which I have been discussing - the internal/external stance, and subjective/objective imagining. I shall describe how the external recognition of aesthetic features of *L'Amour L'Après-midi* shapes the internally imagined subjective and objective engagement with Frédéric. There is, I shall claim, a subjective to objective shift in perspective within the internal imagined space of the film, but there is also a second objective transcendence of Frédéric's perspective which arises from adopting an external aesthetic stance towards the film.

3.1 Subjective Perspectives and the Limits of Objectivity

One of the defining characteristics of each of the heroes of *Les Contes Moreaux* is their inability or unwillingness to adopt a perspective on the world alternative to their own. In *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* J-L is intentionally incurious about the inner life of Francoise. In *La Collectionneuse*, Adrien interprets the actions of others according to a self-centred explanatory principle. In *Le Genou de Claire*, Jerôme constructs a pleasing version of himself based on a set of wilful misperceptions. And in this they are close cousins to Robert Dupea and Tony Soprano, sharing in their self-absorption and other-blindness. It seems, however, that Rohmer's series concludes with a protagonist who successfully achieves a view of the world, himself and his own actions that approximates the ideal which Thomas Nagel calls the driving force of ethics - 'Put yourself in his shoes, how would you feel?'

Like the protagonists of all of the *Contes Moreaux*, Frédéric exists within a web of self-consoling fantasy and illusions. The ethical task which he faces is to achieve a view of things detached from his own parochial perspective, to imagine how things are and how he appears from a more objective point of view. The achievement of this more objective point of view is represented in two forms, both of which consist in an instructive pattern of symmetry and reflection. But each of these patterns operate at different levels; the first at

---

[10] Nagel, 1986, p.223

the internal imaginative, and the second at the external formal level. It is the latter, I shall argue, which is the more reliable. As I argued in the last chapter, in *Ma Nuit Chez Maud* we are given an alternative account of J-L's true motivations and desires in the qualities of the rhyming parts of the narrative. The beliefs and desires which he expresses in conversation are contradicted by the tone of the corresponding sequences with Maud and with Francoise. The symmetrical structure sets up the comparison, but the *content* of the comparison is in the rhyme. In *L'Amour L'Après-midi* (1972), however, the explanatory clue to Frédéric's situation is provided in the symmetrical structure of the narrative itself.

3.1.1 Internal Reflections

The second part of the film begins with the arrival of Frédéric and Hélène's new baby Alexandre, and with Chloé's return after a few days' disappearance. She returns in a sharp new suit and with the playfully expressed intention to seduce Frédéric. From this scene, with her declaration still resonating, the film cuts to a shot of Alexandre in his cot and Hélène with her older child Ariane on her knee. We hear Frédéric repeat Alexandre's name and Hélène and Ariane look out of the frame to their right, towards him standing in the doorway with his jumper pulled up over his head. He repeats, 'Alexandre', pulling peek-a-boo faces, making funny noises and flapping the neck of his jumper, playing the friendly monster for Ariane. The English au-pair enters the room and smiles, along with Frédéric's family, giving him an affectionate audience; it is a spontaneous and tender scene of domestic happiness in which he is regarded with love and trust.

Towards the end of the film Frédéric's gesture, pulling the jumper over his head, is repeated as a kind of morally resonant echo. In each of his meetings with Chloé his faithful resolve has been gradually eroded to the point where now he is on the verge of succumbing to her persistent efforts at seduction. He arrives at Chloé's flat so that they can spend the afternoon together. He lets himself in and she is in the shower. From behind the curtain she asks him to hand her a towel, and she steps out and stands close to him, close enough to drip water on his shoes. 'You can kiss me' she says 'water doesn't stain', teasing him about his feelings of guilt. She puts her arms around his neck and tells him to dry her. To his hesitant efforts she says, 'Do it right. Really dry me' and he unwraps the towel so that she is naked against him. It seems that what had been up to now a chaste affair will now cross the line. He kisses her and she moves into the bedroom, and with a happy smile lies on the bed waiting for him to follow. Frédéric begins to undress, and as he pulls his jumper over his head he looks into her bathroom mirror. He stops, and smiles, recollecting

the last time that he did this, the comedy monster gesture evoking a fond family memory. But, remembering where he is, and what he is about to do, the fond memory no longer causes him pleasure, but pain. The conjunction, the collision, of the two spheres of his life is suddenly unbearable, and he grabs his coat and flees from Chloé's room.

The 'step back' to an objective perspective is what is vital for a moral awareness both of situations beyond oneself, directed towards others, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, for a moral self-awareness, an objectivity directed towards one's own actions and character. When Frédéric sees himself in the mirror with his jumper over his head he cannot help but be reminded of how his wife saw him, that is, he projects himself out of his own position into Hélène's perspective - detached from his own immediate interests and desires, and imaginatively aligned with hers - and consequently he feels an intense and painful shame. Indeed, it could be argued that that is what shame is - imagining oneself into the position of another who is making an unfavourable moral evaluation of oneself, and consequently feeling pain. Frédéric is suddenly brought to a moral awareness of himself by transcending his own subjectivity and adopting in imagination the point of view of his wife. He feels the pain, or the ghost of it, that she would feel if she were able to observe this scene.

There is a very similar structure in a pairing of scenes in *The Sopranos*. In 'Johnny Cakes', after Tony's shooting, and a subsequent reconciliation with his wife Carmella (Edie Falco), Tony feels well enough to resume his philandering with real-estate agent Julianna Skiff (Julianna Margulies). At her apartment, she begins to unbutton his shirt, when Tony suddenly stops, and in flashback recalls an earlier scene where Carmella performs the same gesture. The resonance between them forces Tony to a kind of objective ethical awareness of his actions. In both examples the hero sees his present situation illuminated by the memory of the earlier domestic one, and by extension from the perspective of the

wife whom he is about to betray. Later on, however, in one of his sessions with Dr Melfi, Tony congratulates himself on his new-found restraint, and presents it as evidence of his moral growth - thus adding another layer to his already complicated form of narcissism. He converts a sympathetic concern for the feelings of his wife into a feeling of righteous pride directed towards himself.

3.1.2 External Reflections

It seems that Frédéric's act of the imagination which brings him to an awareness of his actions is an act of the moral imagination which provides a conclusion to the series. Of all the protagonists of the films, he is the one who manages, in imagining his wife's perspective on his own actions, to achieve a more objective view of himself. Therefore the echo of gestures which precipitates this revelation might be seen as the explanatory element which is crucial to understanding the series. However, there is a second reflection which provides a more reliable account of how things are in the fictional world, how things are independently of the way that Frédéric perceives them, and it is a reflection which reveals Frédéric's point of view to be limited.

At the beginning of the film we see Frédéric leaving for work, and before he leaves he goes in to the bathroom to kiss Hélène goodbye. She is naked and drying herself after her bath, and as he leans in to kiss her she says, 'Look out, you'll get wet.' He replies, 'It's OK, I'm wearing a raincoat.' This scene foreshadows the one at the end in which Frédérick goes to kiss Chloé after her shower. She says, 'You can kiss me. Water doesn't stain.'

The symmetry of these two scenes is a different sort of symmetry, or echo, than the one that Frédéric himself notices when he pulls his sweater over his head. In the uncomfortable resonance between his gestures in the domestic space and in Chloé's flat, the mirroring is a feature of the internal perspective, it is something that Frédéric sees, and something that we imagine to be so. The symmetry between the scenes in the bathroom with Hélène and with Chloé (FH and FC), on the other hand, is one that operates at a formal or aesthetic level, as a feature of the structure of the narrative, and which is noticed from the external perspective on the work. It works, in George Wilson's terminology, as a 'rhetorical figure of narrational instruction' - as I described in chapter one, an aesthetic feature of the work which, through a 'stressed configuration of audio-visual elements', provides a key to its own interpretation.[11] And as such it casts some light on the end of the film which hints at something unspoken by Hélène, and unrecognised by Frédéric.

Wilson argues that the beginning of *The Searchers* is reflected in the end, and the visual similarity of the shots constitutes an enclosed, or symmetrical narrative structure. The symmetry of the narrative instructs us to look for an explanation for Ethan's obsessive hatred in formal patterns of rhyme throughout the film. It is, he claims, this symmetry which suggests an explanation for the film's strangely unresolved ending. When we recognise the pattern of rhyming, likening Ethan to the Comanche whom he hates, we see that the central issue of the film is Ethan's true kinship with Scar. We can see, therefore, that the act which culminates his search is not the return of Debbie, but the scalping of Scar. There is, I suggest, a similar kind of rhetorical instruction at work in the narrative symmetry of *L'Amour L'Après-midi*. And in the same way it might provide a clue to the film's ambiguous ending. Shamed by his epiphany in Chloé's bathroom, Frédéric runs home to Hélène, and embraces her in an emotional and remorseful declaration of love. The odd thing is that rather than being surprised by his outburst and curious about its reasons,

---

11 Wilson, G. 1986, p.49

Hélène embraces Frédéric in the same way. We understand the cause of Frédéric's emotion, but the unexpected strength of Hélène's reaction is initially mysterious.

The comparison between FH and FC, is made salient by its overarching location, encompassing the beginning and the end of the narrative, which invites us to see the comparison as a frame within which the narrative is to be understood. With this comparison established in the closing of the narrative, we are invited to revisit elements of the story, and to see them in a new light. For example, the teasing suggestions which Chloé repeats throughout the film, that Hélène might be spending her afternoons in a way which parallels Frédéric's. As she says, 'It struck me that if when we were out walking, and you are so nervous, we'd seen her flirting with X or Y, that would be rather comic.' Chloé tells Frédéric that she has, in fact, seen Hélène with another man. But Frédéric brushes it aside, saying that it was probably just a friend or colleague, and he has no doubts about her faithfulness. Chloé points out to Frédéric that Hélène could be leading a life which is a kind of mirror image of his own. And this observation is emphasised at a formal level in a pattern of narrative symmetry and rhyme. When Frédéric arrives home after an afternoon shopping trip he notes that Hélène had also been shopping at the same time, and remarks how strange it is that they never run into each other.

With the possibility of Hélène's affair raised by the narrative symmetry, we recognise echoes of Frédéric's thoughts in Hélène's words. When he returns home at the end, for example, she says 'I work better when you're here', echoing Frédéric's voice-over narration at the beginning, 'I couldn't read if I were alone...I need a physical presence by me.' As he says this, moreover, he gazes at Hélène, deep in thought. Now, with the comparison in mind we recognise how Hélène gazes back at him in exactly the same way, holding a book, lost in thought, as we hear Frédéric's thoughts on the soundtrack as if they were hers. The effect is one of a strange sort of identification, and it lingers as the film cuts to Frédéric on the commuter train fantasising about other women.

The FH-FC symmetry as a rhetorical figure of narrational instruction illuminates other transitions which, in what the juxtaposition implies, seem newly significant. One day Frédéric visits Chloé in a shop where she is working. She suggests, not entirely seriously, that they have a baby together. It need not be a problem for his wife, she says, because Frédéric would never be sure if were really the father anyway. From this it cuts directly to a shot of Frédéric's new baby, Alexandre, and their friends discussing whom the child resembles - '*This* one looks like his mother.' At dinner Frédéric seems preoccupied, distracted with thoughts of Chloé, while around him polite conversation flows. He is also

oblivious to a brief and subtle, yet telling, glance which Hélène directs at him while talking to her colleague, as if to gauge his reaction. It is a look, moreover, which it is easy for the viewer to miss without first having been made responsive to such cues by the FC-FH symmetry.

In chapter three I discussed how films are considered to be essentially, and for their philosophical potential *problematically*, ambiguous. Hélène's glance might seem a prime example where a certain attitude or 'reading' is imposed onto a film. Why not understand Hélène's look, rather than one tinged with guilt, rather as one of concern for her husband? I think this is a good example of my claim in the second section of chapter three that the formal features of a film can often be mobilised not to increase, but to *reduce* the ambiguity of facial expressions and ordinary behaviour. First of all, at a global level, the question of Hélène's fidelity is raised by the narrative symmetry. But at a local level, the possibility of infidelity and the question of paternity is implied in the transitions between sequences. Primarily in the juxtaposition of Chloé's remark and the shot of Alexandre that precedes this moment, but also in the way that the film cuts away from Hélène, furtively, in mid-glance. This is an example of an occasion when the reflective attention to external formal features of the work feeds back in to an internal imaginative understanding of the nature of the fictional events and the beliefs and motivations of the characters.

The thought that Hélène might have been having her own affair seems to open up another possible dimension of the narrative, a parallel *fabula*, and this might suggest that there is always a still more objective view to be achieved. In the first, internally imagined, reflection Frédéric achieves a more objective view by imagining his present situation and actions as they might appear from Hélène's perspective. He achieves a view of things detached from his own perspective. In the second, externally recognised, reflection, the film suggests the possibility that there are still more things of which Frédéric is unaware. From the consideration of formal properties of the film's structure Frédéric's initial more objective view is itself revealed to be limited and partial. There is an outward direction of the objective shift in imagination - each new objective point of view may itself be

transcended by a still more objective one. The real task for Frédéric is not to imagine his wife's view of himself, but to imagine a version of his wife's perspective on the world in which he plays no privileged, special, central role. The task of the imagination represented by the first reflection, the one he sees in the mirror, is illusory because it is a more objective view which nevertheless has himself as its object. The much more difficult task of the imagination, the one which Chloé attempts to nudge him towards, and the one which Iris Murdoch calls a 'just mode of vision', is the one in which one's self does not figure at all.

Frédéric sees his bathroom epiphany as a moral achievement because he transcends the confines of his own interests. But from the external point of view, from the perspective given in the formal structural features of the work we can see the true limits of his ostensibly expanded perspective. And of course, the latter is a view which is necessarily unavailable to Frédéric. In *Le Genou de Claire* when Aurora, the novelist, says 'The heroes of a story are always blindfolded' she voices a more general, and traditional, sceptical doubt about the ultimate possibility of knowledge and truth and certainty.[12] The skeptical view that she expresses, is one that can be followed like a thread back through the history of philosophy. But, of course, her observation - that true objectivity is rare and perhaps impossible - is itself an attempt, in Bernard Williams phrase, to 're-occupy the transcendental standpoint'.[13] The doubt that objective truth is possible is an attempt to say something objectively true. There is, not a paradox, but a tension between on the one hand recognising, from within, that there is a limit to how much of reality it is possible for us to see, and on the other, stepping far enough outside of that circumscribed perspective to be able to delineate its boundaries.

The fact that it is a view expressed by Aurora, an artist, also indicates a view, similarly persistent, that it is through art that we have the opportunity to achieve that objective view that is an impossible ideal in life. Jerôme replies to Aurora's comment by saying, 'Except you. Because you write.' and Aurora agrees, 'Yes, when I write I must keep my eyes open.' The idea that art offers us a more objective view is expressed in two ways. It is explicitly discussed in *Le Genou de Claire* by Aurora and Jerôme. But it is returned to and confirmed in *L'Amour L'Après-midi* in the formal structure of the film. Frédéric's transcendence of his point of view is dramatised in his recognition of the resonance between his physical actions and the context in which they are performed, what I called the

---

[12] It is in this sense that Rohmer should be understood as a traditionalist; not as politically reactionary, but as concerned with the same questions which have been troubling philosophy since Plato.

[13] Williams, B. 1985, p.138. He uses the phrase to describe the post-modern skepticism of Richard Rorty and others about scientific 'discourse'.

internal reflection. This leads him to adopt in imagination the perspective of his wife Hélène, and to imagine how she would feel were she a witness to the infidelity which he almost succumbs. What I called the *external reflection*, however, is a revealing pattern of narrative symmetry that is recognised by the viewer. And it is the perspective which is transmitted by means of aesthetic form that suggests that there is a still more objective view of the situation, and one that, in virtue of the dimension in which it exists, is necessarily unavailable to Frédéric 'from the inside'. There is, therefore, in the structure of our imaginative engagement with works of ironic realist narrative fiction an enactment of the ideal of omniscience which is ordinarily impossible for us to achieve. It is the view at the heart of Iris Murdoch's claim that: 'Good art shows us how difficult it is to be objective, by showing us how differently the world looks to an objective vision.'[14] Art gives us the opportunity to temporarily occupy the transcendental standpoint, and from this perspective it allows us to see the true extent of our captivity.

In the last chapter, I mentioned that the paradox which Nussbaum finds in Murdoch's concern with the particular, and simultaneous striving for the universal, is better understood as a recognition and acknowledgement of a tension between two ways of seeing things - in Nagel's terms, between the subjective and the objective perspectives. According to Nagel, the concerns, interests, reasons, desires, which populate the view from inside a particular person's life, have an importance which seems to evaporate the closer one gets to what he calls the 'view from nowhere'. From the subjective perspective it matters a great deal how we live and what we do, but following the objective impulse too far we can arrive at a kind of nihilism. Murdoch's notion of 'unselfing' might seem, at first, to be recommending an extreme form of objectivity, one that leaves the worldly substance of the personal standpoint behind and ends with the annihilation of the will. But for Murdoch, art has a peculiar ability to encompass both of these two poles - the view from inside to which things matter, and what Henry Sidgwick called 'the point of view of the universe.'[15] As Murdoch says: 'The representational arts...show us the peculiar sense in which the concept of virtue is tied on to the human condition. They show us the absolute pointlessness of virtue while exhibiting its supreme importance.'[16] This perspective, which is constituted by a tension between the view from inside and the view from outside, is one that art is peculiarly well-suited to capture. The special ability of art, therefore is not to offer us a 'God's eye view' of reality, in the manner of the abstractions of physics, but one

---

[14] Murdoch, I. 1970, p.86

[15] Sidgwick, H. *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan,1907) p.382

[16] Ibid, p.86

which exceeds what is ordinarily available to us by encompassing both the subjective and the objective perspectives.



Conclusion

In my closing remarks I shall recapitulate some of the major claims of the thesis, and I shall also try to bring the connections between them more clearly into focus. But before that I want to briefly mention a few of the many issues which are closely related to my topic, but which the limits of space have forced me to leave unexplored. Hopefully, I will also be able to show how the arguments that I *have* put forward, and the general schema of internal and external perspectives, might provide a useful basis from which to answer these related questions.

The first is an issue which is hovering in the background in many of my claims, but one which I have not broached explicitly. It is one aspect of the broader question of the nature of the relation of art to ethics; do, or should, the *moral* flaws or merits of a work of art contribute to an *aesthetic* evaluation? *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1938) might be a morally evil work of art, but does that make it an aesthetically bad one? There are three main positions (each of which comes in different strengths). The 'autonomist'[1] reply might be summed up (with only a little simplification), in Oscar Wilde's remark that 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.'[2] This is a rather blunt form of the more measured formalism espoused by Lamarque and Olsen which I discussed in chapter three. But is it so easy to separate moral and aesthetic evaluation? The 'immoralist' holds, on the contrary, that there is indeed a connection between moral and aesthetic values, because sometimes we value a work of art not *despite* its transgressions, but precisely *because* it questions or undermines prevailing standards of morality. The aesthetic value of Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963), for example, partly consists in its opposition to bourgeois morality. But although immoralism nicely accommodates *Scorpio Rising*, and also captures an intuition about the transgressive value of outrageous jokes, how does it deal with *Triumph of the Will*? Finally, the 'moralist' or 'ethicist' position claims that the moral content of a work of art, positive or negative, *is* relevant in its aesthetic evaluation. An extreme form of moralism would hold that the aesthetic value of a work of art is identified with its moral value (the later Tolstoy held such a view). A more 'moderate moralism', however, claims just that ethical flaws can *sometimes* be aesthetic defects, and ethical virtues can sometimes be aesthetic merits.[3]

A central part of my argument has been that works of narrative fiction film can and do explore ethical concepts, and moreover by engaging with films in this mode we can

---

[1] Cf. Gaut, B. 'Art and Ethics' in Gaut and McIver-Lopez, D. *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2001) p. 341, for a useful summary of the three main positions.

[2] Wilde, O. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006/1891) Preface.

[3] Cf. Carroll, N. 'Moderate Moralism' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36:3, 1996, 223-238

see them as sources of ethical education. But it does not necessarily follow from this that the ethical qualities of films are also aesthetic qualities. We can learn all manner of things from films - historical, cultural sociological facts - but being good sources of knowledge in these respects do not make films better as works of art. Why should ethical knowledge be any different? The difference is that one can learn about, for example, social structures in feudal Japan from many *Jidaigeki*[4] films in a way that is independent from the formal representation of that knowledge. On the other hand, it would be impossible to separate the ethical content of *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) from the form and the manner of its representation - the claims that it makes about relativity and truth are inseparable from its reiterative narrative structure. And of course the same is true in the other direction; the immorality of *Triumph of the Will* is conveyed in, and amplified by, its aesthetic virtuosity.[5] There is a logical connection between the ethical aspects of the work and the aesthetic form. This is a crucial part of my claim that films can be ethically educative; the ethical knowledge is transmitted in and through an appreciation of aesthetic form. As I argued in chapter five, without the recognition of formal patterns of narrative symmetry, rhymes, and variations, in Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*, one would be unable to appreciate the overarching ethical theme of self-deception and other-blindness.

The ethicist needs to show that there is a direct connection between the moral qualities of a work and its aesthetic features. The narrative structure of *Rashomon*, and the symmetries and reflections of *Les Contes Moreaux* are examples of one way in which this is the case because the ethical content is counterfactually dependent on the aesthetic form. The second possibility relates to the claim that I made in chapter three, that films can be seen as examples of 'thick ethical concepts' (TECs) - concepts (like jealousy or cowardice) which are characterised by both *descriptive* and *prescriptive* components. The idea of films as thought experiments from which we can distill moral rules or principles is open to the objection that is a problem for the ethicist - that the moral content (the 'ought') and the aesthetic form (the 'is') are separable. Noël Carroll implies the possibility of this kind of separation in a hypothetical example: '...suppose that Jane Austen's sister wrote an alternative version of *Emma* that told the same story in the same elegant prose, but which did not address our moral understanding at all.'[6] The extreme difficulty of imagining this hypothetical novel which preserves the original's aesthetic form and yet has none of its

---

[4] Period drama set mostly in the Edo period.

[5] Cf. Devereaux, M. 'Beauty and Evil: the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*' in Levinson, J. (ed) *Aesthetics and Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.227

[6] Carroll, N. 1996, p.236

moral content, suggests that there is something problematic in this context about the form/ content distinction. However, re-conceiving of films as examples of TECs avoids this problem. The richly particularised details of character and situation which are central aesthetic merits of (at least some kinds of) works, are also to be taken as constituting the descriptive aspect of TECs. Just as the particular details of the narrative are what give it substance *qua* artwork, those same details are what makes the work more effective as an example of a TEC. It follows, therefore, that the work would be less effective as a TEC to the extent that it is denuded of those narrative details. To recall my photographic analogy from chapter three; the more detail is included the sharper the picture becomes, conversely the more detail is left out the fuzzier it begins to look.

The second issue which I have hinted at but not tackled directly is closely related to the first; it is a problem, first raised in one form by David Hume and recently taken up by Kendall Walton and others, which has become known as the 'puzzle of imaginative resistance'.[7] Briefly, imagining moral attitudes that differ significantly from our own presents a difficulty that we do not encounter when trying to imagine implausible fictional truths of a non-moral nature. For example, imagining talking animals or faster-than-light travel, are ordinary and unproblematic imaginings required by certain kinds of fiction. However, there seems to be a problem when we are asked to imagine things that we find morally repugnant - imagining, for example, that the village elders in *Moolaadé* are *right* to approve of female circumcision and the killing of anyone who opposes it. This imaginative inversion of moral values, the puzzle suggests, is extremely difficult, and perhaps impossible, to achieve.

As I argued in chapter four, there is value in imaginatively projecting into the perspective of those in different circumstances, victims of injustice or oppression, poverty or religious intolerance. But this involves no imaginative shift in one's own moral views. The question is whether there is ethical value in imagining the perspective of someone who occupies an ethical standpoint alien to one's own - either a character's view or the view implied by the film. Michael Tanner argues, *pace* Walton, that we *can* imagine alternative moral views to our own, and what's more, it is a very important feature of moral argument and reasoning that we can.[8] First of all it is important to allow us to imagine the moral

---

[7] Hume, D. 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985/1777) p.246.
Walton, K. 'On the So-called Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance' in Nichols S. (ed) *The Architecture of the Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006) p.154-55. Walton distinguishes between a cluster of related puzzles. I shall concentrate on what he calls the 'imaginative' puzzle.

[8] Tanner, M. and Walton, K. 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality pt.II' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, 68 (1994) 57

perspectives of those with whom we have moral disagreements. But also, and as a consequence of this, it is important for the possibility that we can recognise reasons to change our own moral views. If it *were* impossible to imagine a moral viewpoint that is different to one's own, then it would also be impossible that one's moral views could develop as a result of an act of the imagination. Imagining how things appear to a perspective such as one of the village elders in *Moolaadé* might be rather difficult, but it is surely, as Tanner argues, an important moral skill to be able to imagine how things appear not just to people with whom you agree, but with whom there is a difference in views. Imagining how things appear to an alternative moral viewpoint does not mean temporarily *believing* those views, but rather temporarily imagining believing them.

This brings us back to the important distinction that Richard Moran draws between 'hypothetical' and 'dramatic' imagining. The former, he says, is a relatively easy and unproblematic form of imagining: '...if a person can engage in counterfactual reasoning at all, he should be able to imagine the truth of any proposition he understands, in the sense of making a simple hypothetical supposition.'[9] But dramatic imagination involves an additional emotional component which problematises the task: '...imagining along these lines involves something more like genuine rehearsal, "trying on" the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it. It is something I may not be able to do if my heart is not in it.'[10] Tanner underestimates the problem because he conflates these two forms of imagining. Recall the advice that Atticus Finch gives Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: 'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... Until you climb into his skin. Walk around in it.' Considered in the light of Moran's argument, Atticus' advice seems much less a matter of an automatic mechanism and more demanding than at first it seems. Imagining another person's point of view can often be natural and instinctive, but it can sometimes require a strenuous effort of will and imagination. And just as we can speak of a 'failure of imagination', it can sometimes be an *achievement.*

The fact that we *can* enter into the perspective of morally repugnant characters raises another closely related puzzle - what Murray Smith has called the 'puzzle of perverse allegiance'.[11] How is it that we can sympathise with characters who display the kinds of attitudes and behaviour that we ordinarily despise? Is it that we 'root' for the

---

[9] Moran, R. 1996, p.87

[10] Ibid, p.105

[11] Smith, M. 'Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes; or, Apparently Perverse Allegiances,' in Plantinga, C. and Smith, G. (eds.) *Passionate Views: Thinking About Film and Emotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) pp.217–38

characters, like Tony Soprano, who, on a work-internal scale of moral-badness, are *relatively* good? Do we sympathise with them despite their badness, or because of it? Do their actions manifest our darker fantasies? Smith asks: 'What are the moral implications of the fact we do sympathise with Soprano..?'[12] One possible answer might be, as I suggested in chapter four, that our moral beliefs are not exactly what we take them to be, and when we get swept up in an empathetic enjoyment of Tony and Christopher's robbery, for example, we are shown a glimpse of what we *actually* value, rather than what we *think* we value. In 'The Second Coming', Tony brutally punishes a rival gangster for an insult to his daughter Meadow. What does it indicate about my own moral views if I cheer him on? Or if I laugh when later, in a meeting with A.J's psychologist, Tony finds a bloody tooth in the hem of his trousers? Dan Flory makes a similar argument when he claims that *Do the Right Thing* confronts the white viewer with a 'sympathetic racist' and forces this viewer to also confront the possibility of his or her own racially influenced sympathies. As I argued in chapter four, the ethical aspect of *The Sopranos* is in a doubled process of objective detachment - first of all from a sympathetic allegiance with Tony to a more objective realisation of his true nature, but secondly, in the shift from the viewer's sympathetic emotional response to a more objective and self-critical *meta*-response to those feelings. The way that *The Sopranos* elicits from the viewer first sympathy, and as the narrative progresses, develops that response in a process of gradual alienation, constitutes a basis for the second level of detachment. As Smith says, '...the show fosters toward its protagonist [a] partial, ambivalent, and fluctuating sympathy...'[13] The ethical value of the work is generated in that ambivalence, in the uneasy tension between sympathetic engagement and objective detachment.

The question which I asked at the beginning of the introduction was: in what ways is our imaginative engagement with works of narrative fiction related to the imagination as it functions in our moral reasoning? The answer to it has consisted in a variety of manifestations of a fundamental distinction in the structure of our imaginative engagement between alternative points of view - internal and external, subjective and objective perspectives. The ethical aspect of the examples that I have discussed is to be found in the connection between these two perspectives.

---

[12] Smith, M. 'Just What is it that Makes Tony Soprano such an Appealing, Attractive Murderer?' in Jones, W. and Vice, S. (eds) *Ethics at the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 67-88

[13] Ibid, p.87

In responding to works of narrative fiction we take up a dual stance. From the internal point of view we imagine the world of the fiction, and from the external point of view we recognise its features and qualities *as* a work of fiction. In responding to narrative fiction film one of the aspects of this dual stance is the attitude that we adopt towards the visual image. The question of how we are to understand the notion of 'imagining seeing' is, I argued in chapter one, best approached by thinking of it not as a propositional from of imagining but rather as a manifestation of the imaginative attitude. This internal/external distinction might suggest that the imagination is an attitude which is confined to the internal perspective, in Kendall Walton's terms, in the *making-believe* of fictional truths.[14] But I argued that the imagination, in its associative and constructive form, is also centrally involved in the external perspective. Not, in other words, as an *attitude* but as a combinatory and creative operation of thought - a form of the imagination which, as Moran puts it, '...has less to do with simply imagining something to be the case ... and more to do with what we ordinarily think of as "imaginativeness."'[15] George Wilson's analysis of *The Searchers* exemplifies how the operation of the creative imagination, recognising and combining formal features of the film, feeds in to a deeper and richer, internally imagined experience of the narrative. Recognising, for example, that there is a pattern of symmetry and rhyme which links Ethan and Scar provides a basis for a revised and improved understanding of the story.

As I argued above, this 'imaginativeness' is a fundamental means of deriving ethical value from narrative fictions, and a crucial part of the ethicist claim that there is a logical connection between ethical qualities and aesthetic features. To a very large extent the ability to derive ethical value from narrative fiction requires employment of the associative, combinatory form of the imagination - in Moran's words, engaging with a work of narrative fiction in this way requires '...the ability to make connections between various things, to notice and respond to the network of associations...'[16] One of the ethical aspects of narrative fiction film is to be found, therefore, in the relationship between the internal and external perspectives.

The internal/external distinction is one between imagining the world of the fiction from within, and a more detached and critical standpoint which recognises the film *as* a fiction. But there is also, I argued in chapter two, a corresponding distinction within the internally imagined perspective. This distinction is between imagining how the fictional

---

[14] Walton, K. 1990, p. 35

[15] Moran, R. 1994, p. 86

[16] Ibid, p.86

world is from within the perspective of one of the characters - as I called it, *subjective imagining* - and imagining how things are in the world of the fiction from a perspective independent of any particular character's point of view - *objective imagining*. As I argued above, in *The Sopranos* this dual attitude takes the form of a gradual and outward process of detachment; from initially subjectively imagining Tony's point of view towards a more objective (but still work-internal) evaluation of his actions. Secondly, and as a result of the first process of (fictional) detachment, we can be moved to a more objective view of our own (actual) moral beliefs.[17] The ethical value is in the adoption of a more objective perspective, first on Tony and then on oneself.

But as I also claimed in chapter four there is value in subjective imagining for its own sake, and not just as an element in a greater scheme. Atticus' fatherly advice expresses what Thomas Nagel calls the fundamental moral argument - 'How would you feel in his place?' It also encapsulates what many of us value about engaging with works of narrative fiction. As I put it in chapter four, subjective imagining in response to fiction offers us the opportunity for both the *extension of experience*, and also the *exercise of empathy*. Imagining 'what it's like' - either what it's like to be you, or what it's like to be myself in your circumstances - offers an expanded range of experiential data on which to base moral reasoning and decisions. Moreover, it is a kind of data which is, without the help of fictional imagining, ordinarily unavailable to us; either because it would otherwise be derived from experiences which I am unlikely to experience myself, or experiences which I could not in principle go through because they are yours. In Smith's phrase, works of fiction can act as 'cognitive prostheses' which extend the range of opportunity to deepen our ordinary imaginative tendency to empathise with other people.[18] Imagining 'from the inside' is something that we naturally do, and is something which we consider it ethically valuable to do. Fiction-directed subjective imagining also offers the opportunity for the *exercise* of an ethically significant mental faculty - both in the sense of an occasion for its use, and also in the sense of its training and development. Empathising with fictional characters utilises the same kind of cognitive and emotional mechanisms as empathising with actual persons. Anything, therefore, which cultivates and develops this natural tendency may be considered a contribution to the cultivation of an ethical virtue - the virtue of compassion.

---

[17] That is, if we are sufficiently self-critical and reflective. See chapter four for more detail on this important caveat.

[18] Smith, M. 2011, p.109

But, as I also argued in chapter four, subjective imagining on its own, unconstrained by a more critical and reflective detachment, is liable to blind us to morally relevant facts. It is liable, first of all, to blind us to the ethical flaws of the characters with whom we 'identify'. Getting 'swept up' in the emotional experience of one character can also obscure the equally valid rights and interests of others to whom that character is opposed. Moreover, as the more traditional Brechtian objection reminds us, this form of appeal to 'identification' and emotion can often be an effective tool of ideological reinforcement, oppression and prejudice.[19] But that is not to say that there is *no* value in subjective imagining, just that it must be tempered and guided by a more objective point of view.

Adopting the perspective of another person, 'climbing into their skin', is at the same time the transcendence of one's own point of view. Atticus' advice therefore has two aspects; first, it is ethical because it fosters a compassionate concern for the interests of others, and gives a sense of the contingent conditions of life to which they are subject, and which inform and constrain the choices that they make. Secondly, it absents us from ourselves, removing us from the distorting force of our own interests, desires and beliefs. As Nagel reminds us, the objectifying impulse can take two forms. Either, as I have just mentioned, the objectivity of transcending one's own position in adopting the point of view of another particular person, or an objectivity which is detached not merely from my own point of view, but from any particular perspective at all. As he puts it: 'Objective transcendence aims at a representation of what is external to each specific point of view; what is there, or what is of value in itself, rather than *for* anyone.'[20] This second form of objectivity - the view *sub specie aeternitatis* - is what Iris Murdoch identifies as the ultimate ethical value of fiction.

I have already described how *The Sopranos* offers us a more objective view of ourselves, but this kind of self-directed objectivity is not the form that Murdoch has in mind. For Murdoch, the value of engaging with art is the opportunity it offers us to step beyond ourselves entirely and to take up a view of the world in which we play no central role - it is a form of 'unselfing'. This anti-egoistic virtue is, however, only found in good art, which is a much rarer beast than the ordinary consolatory fantasies which constitute the

---

[19] Indeed, the more usual form of the discussion of ethics in academic film studies, in feminist psychoanalytical strands for example, sees the imagination as playing a highly negative role. Laura Mulvey's influential *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, for example, argued that patriarchal social structures are reinforced by fostering in the viewer an imaginative identification with the scopophilic male gaze of the camera. (see introduction)

[20] Nagel, *T. Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) p.209

majority of works of art. Murdoch's notion of a 'just mode of vision' is related to, but distinct from, the more familiar ideas of an 'aesthetic attitude' or 'disinterestedness'. The latter concepts are more to do with an artwork having intrinsic value independently of any utility it might have for ourselves - we value it in and for itself. This brings us back to the Hegelian 'propriety' objection, raised (and refuted) by Paisley Livingston, which I mentioned in the introduction and in chapter three, that art should not be put to non-artistic ends.[21] For Murdoch, on the other hand, the detachment from self offered by art is valuable because it allows us to see reality more truthfully and undistorted by our own partial beliefs and desires. And this more detached view does indeed have a kind of cognitive educational utility for the one who achieves it - it is an answer to the question: 'How can we make ourselves better?'[22]

Murdoch's notion of 'unselfing' has been criticised as a form of asceticism, too pure and too detached an ideal to be of any use in an actual human life. This is part of Nussbaum's objection that there is a contradiction between Murdoch's neo-Platonist universalising tendency and her novelist's concern with the particular. But this fails to recognise the peculiar form of objectivity which Murdoch advocates, a form which is peculiarly well suited to the aesthetic characteristics of fiction. It is a form which approximates the ideal which Nagel refers to in *The View from Nowhere*, as a combination, or a reconciling, of two alternative perspectives on life, the subjective and objective points of view. For Murdoch it is through art that we stand the best chance of achieving this viewpoint. Indeed, there is an echo of Murdoch's view towards the end of Nagel's book. As he says: '...there is an attitude which cuts through the opposition between transcendent universality and parochial self-absorption, and that is the attitude of non-egocentric respect for the particular. It is conspicuous as an element in aesthetic response...'[23] In Murdoch's terms this is the 'unselfing' which is fostered by works of (good) art; it is an outward form of attention, directed beyond oneself but not thereby cast adrift from its moorings in life. Nussbaum criticises Murdoch for the tension which she detects between the universal and the particular, but what she fails to see is that for Murdoch the universal perspective is achieved by means of a non-egocentric concern with the particular.

In a television interview with the philosopher Brian McGee, Murdoch said: '...a great artist has got a kind of tolerance because he can see an awful lot of what's really there... I think there is a kind of breath of tolerance which comes out of Shakespeare,

---

[21] Livingston, P. 2010, p.39

[22] Murdoch, I. 1970, p.83

[23] Nagel, 1986, p.222

because he can see so much...and how many different ways there are of thinking about the world. And this is a kind of virtue. It is this virtue of tolerance which a lot of dictatorial art, as it were, is deliberately excluding.'[24] The ethical virtue of tolerance and the aesthetic virtues of complexity and ambiguity converge in the particular form of ironic realism exemplified by Rohmer's *Contes Moreaux*, by *Five Easy Pieces* and other films of the 'New Hollywood' period, by *The Sopranos* and *A Blonde in Love.* And it is tempting to see it as a characteristic of one strand of the 'Czech new wave', rooted in a response to 'dictatorial art'. There is, in films like *Jiří Menzel's Closely Observed Trains/Ostre sledované vlaky* (1966), or Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos' *The Shop on Main Street/Obchod na korze* (1965), as there is in the novels of Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal and Josef Škvorecký, first of all a thematic concern with the place of the personal in a context of the brutal indifference of historical forces. But also a sort of clear-eyed and detached compassion for characters. The objectivity, the 'breath of tolerance', that Murdoch describes (or prescribes) in art is not a view of reality that adjudicates between conflicting and contradictory perspectives, like an ideal judge, but a view of reality that acknowledges the contradiction in itself. It is a form of realism conducted in an ironic mode, but above all a realism of sympathy - an ethical realism. As Murdoch describes it: 'Most of all it exhibits to us the connection, in *human* beings, of clear realistic vision with compassion. The realism of a great artist is not a photographic realism, it is essentially both pity and justice.'[25]

One of the sources of Plato's antipathy towards art was its powerful ability to draw us into an imaginative enactment of (as he saw it) immoral forms of life; in the dramatic imagining of a flawed view of reality, we replicate, perpetuate and reinforce that view. But I have tried to show that it is exactly this imaginative faculty that is required in order to be able to understand and enter into the ethical point of view that fiction offers. The ethical stance is an attitude which consists in an ability to hold in the imagination two opposed viewpoints on life - it is the preservation of a skeptical sympathy. In other words, subjective and objective perspectives are both necessary conditions of the ethical stance, but on their own neither is sufficient. Just as Nussbaum argues that the moral emotion of sympathy is cultivated through the exercise of sympathetic engagement with characters, so too is the virtue of tolerance fostered by its enactment in imagination - seeing how the world appears to a vision that is both from within and also external to the subjective. It is a central feature of narrative fiction that it can accommodate multiple and contrasting perspectives, not in

---

[24] *Men of Ideas*, BBC 2, (1978)
(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wdc7DQv3RA&feature=related)

[25] Murdoch, I. 1970, p. 87

a dialectical combination - combining the attitudes of characters A and B to arrive at the correct moral principle C - but in a way that describes our essentially dual perspective on reality without either complete subjective immersion or the illusory and reductive distortions of maximal objectivity. As Nagel puts it: 'It is better to be simultaneously engaged and detached ... for this is the opposite of self-denial and the result of full awareness.'[26] The ethical stance seeks not to remove the tension between subjective and objective viewpoints, but to acknowledge it.

[26] Nagel, 1986, p.223

Bibliography

Allen, R. 'Cognitive Film Theory' in Allen, R. and Turvey, M. (Eds.) *Wittgenstein, Theory and the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2001)

Benjamin, W. *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt; trans. H. Zorn, (London: Pimlico, 1999)

Barrett, D. 'Twist Blindness' in Buckland, W. (Ed.) *Puzzle Films* (Blackwell, 2009)

Bazin, A. *What is Cinema?* Vol.1 trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967/2005

Bonzon, R. 'Thick Aesthetic Concepts' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67:2 (2009) 191-9

Cavell, S. *Pursuits of Happiness* (Harvard University Press, 1981)

Coleridge, S.T. *Biographia Literaria 1817 (http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/6081)*

Coplan, A. 'Will the Real Empathy Please Stand Up' in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 49, Spindel Supplement (2011), 40–65

Coplan, A. and **Goldie, P.** (eds.) *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Currie, G. 'Bergman and the Film Image' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 34:1 (2010) 323-339

———'Realism of Character and the value of Fiction' in Levinson, J. (ed.) *Aesthetics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Currie, G. and **Ravenscroft, I.** *Recreative Minds* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002)

Carroll, N. 'Moderate Moralism' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36:3, 1996, 223-238

———'The Wheel of Virtue' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60:1 (2002)

———*The Philosophy of Horror* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Carroll, N. and **Choi, J.** (eds.) *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006)

Carroll, N. and **Bordwell, D.** (eds) *Post Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996)

Choi, J. 'Leaving It Up to the Imagination: POV Shots and Imagining from the Inside' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 63:1, (2005)

de Sousa, R. *The Rationality of Emotion*, MIT Press, 1987

Davies, D. 'Can Film be a Philosophical Medium?' *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics*, 5:2, August 2008

Elsaesser, T., Horwath. A and **King, N.** *The Last Great American Picture Show*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004)

Flory, D. 'Spike Lee and the Sympathetic Racist' in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art History*, 64:1

Gaut, B. 'Imagination, Interpretation and Film' in *Philosophical Studies*, 89, 1998

———*A Philosophy of Cinematic Art*, Cambridge University Press, 2010

———'Empathy and Identification in Cinema' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 34:1, 136-157

Giovanelli, A. 'In and Out: The Dynamics of Imagination in the Engagement with Narratives' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 66:1 (2008)

Goldman, A. *Simulating Minds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Goodenough, J. and **Read, R.** (eds.) *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

Hamilton, C. 'Art and Moral Education' in Bermudez, J.L. and Gardner, S. (eds.) *Art and Morality*, (London: Routledge, 2003)

Hume, D. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, (ed.) Selby-Bigge and Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978[1739-40])

———*Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, (ed.) Selby-Bigge and Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975[1777])

———*Essays, Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund,1985/1777)

Jackson, F. 'Epiphenomenal Qualia' *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 (1982)

Jones, W. and Vice, S. (eds.) *Ethics at the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Kundera, M. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984)

———*The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986)

Kieran, M. 'In Search of a Narrative' in Kieran, M. and McIver Lopez, D. (eds.) *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts* (London: Routledge, 2003) pps. 69-87

Lamarque, P. and **Olsen, S.H.** *Truth Fiction and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

Lamarque, P. 'In and Out of Imaginary Worlds' in Knowles, D. and Skorupski, J. (eds.) *Virtue and Taste* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993)

Lear, J. 'Katharsis' *Phronesis*, 33:3 (1988) 297-326

Levinson, J. 'Seeing, Imaginarily at the Movies', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 43:170(1993) 70-78

———*Aesthetics and Ethics* (ed), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Livingston, P. *Cinema, Philosophy, Bergman: On Film as Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

———'Theses on Cinema as Philosophy', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art History*, 64:1 (2006) 1-8

Matravers, D. 'Why We Should Give Up on the Imagination', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 34:1, 190-199

McLaughlin, B. and **Rorty, A.** (eds.) *Perspectives on Self-deception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)

Midgely, M. 'Brutality and Sentimentality' *Philosophy*, 54:209 (1979) 385-389

Moran, R. 'The Expression of Feeling in Imagination', *Philosophical Review*, 103:1 (1994) 75-106

Mulvey, L. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Screen 16 (3) 6–18

Murdoch, I. *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970)

Nagel, T. *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)
Mortal Questions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979)

Neil, A. 'Empathy and (Film) Fiction' in Carroll, N. and and Bordwell, D. (eds) *Post Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) 175-194

Newman, I. 'The Alleged Unwholesomeness of Sentimentality' in Neil, A. and Ridley, A. (eds.) *Arguing About Art*, (London: Routledge, 2008) pps. 320-332

Nichols S. (ed) *The Architecture of the Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006)

Nussbaum, M. *Love's Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

———'Tragedy and Self-sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity' in Rorty, **A.O.** (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) pps. 261-291

———'Exactly and Responsibly: A Defence of Ethical Criticism' *Philosophy and Literature* 22.2 (1998) 343-365

———'When She Was Good' in The New Republic, 31st Dec.2001 (http://www.tnr.com/article/when-she-was-good)

———'Danger to Human Dignity: the Revival of Disgust and Shame in the Law' *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50:48 (2004) B6

Nystrom, D. 'Hard Hats and Movie Brats: Auteurism and the Class Politics of the New Hollywood', *Cinema Journal*, 43:3 (2004)

Plantinga, C. *Rhetoric and representation in Non-Fiction Film*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

———*Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectators Experience* (Berkeley: University of California press, 2009)

Plantinga, C. and **Smith, G.** (eds.) *Passionate Views: Thinking About Film and Emotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999)

Prinz, J. 'Against Empathy', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 49, Spindel Supplement (2011) 214–33

Rohmer, E. *The Taste for Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

Russell, B. 'The Philosophical Limits of Film' in Carroll and Choi, 2006, pps.387-390

Sidgwick, H. *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan,1894/1907)

Smith, A. *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*,Raphael and Macfie (eds.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976[1790])

Smith, M. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995)

———'Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes; or, Apparently Perverse Allegiances,' in Plantinga, C. and Smith, G. (eds.) *Passionate Views: Thinking About Film and Emotion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) pp.217–38

———'Film Art, Argument and Ambiguity' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art History*,64:1 (2006), 33-42

———'Empathy, Expansionism, and the Extended Mind' in Coplan, A. and Goldie, P. (eds.) *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 99-117

Smith, M. and **Allen, R.** *Film Theory and Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)

Smuts, A. 'Film as Philosophy: In Defence of a Bold Thesis' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 67:4 (2009) 409-420

Stam, R. *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000)

Tanner, M. 'Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, 68 (1994) 27 -66

———'Sentimentality' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, 77 (1976-1977) 127-147

Turvey, M. 'Imagination, Simulation, and Fiction' *Film Studies* 8, (2006)

Walton, K. *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

———'How Remote are Fictional Worlds from the Real World' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37, (1978/9) 11-23

———'On pictures and Photographs' in Smith, M. and Allen, R. *Film Theory and Philosophy*, OUP, 1997, pps. 60-75

Williams, B. *Problems of the Self,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973)

———'A Critique of Utilitarianism' in Williams, B. and Smart, J.J.C *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1973)

———*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, (London: Fontana, 1985)

Wilson, G. *Narration in Light* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986)

———'Le Grand Imagier Steps Out' in Carroll, N. and Choi, J. 2006, 185-199

———*Seeing Fictions in Films: The Epistemology of Films* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953)

Wollheim, R. *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

Wood, R. Hitchcock's Films Revisited (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)