

## FILM, ART, AND THE THIRD CULTURE: A PRÉCIS

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*Film, Art, and the the Third Culture* – hereafter, *FACT*<sup>1</sup> – takes as its starting point a historical coincidence: at the time of the completion of the book, sixty years had passed since C. P. Snow's first published intervention on the topic of the 'two cultures', in 1956. Snow's arguments on this topic were to ignite a major intellectual debate across the next decade and beyond, highly visible in the public sphere on both sides of the Atlantic. A Cambridge physicist turned novelist and politician, Snow's career journey was integral to the view he advanced: that there was a pernicious, and worsening, divide between the 'cultures' of the natural sciences on the one hand, and the humanities ('literary intellectuals') on the other; and that the divide was harmful both intellectually and in terms of the practical relevance and benefits of academic research (an ancestor of what in Britain is now officially termed 'impact'). Snow did envisage, however, the possibility (and indeed existing pockets of) a 'third culture', in which scientists and humanists were 'on speaking terms'.<sup>2</sup> This vision of a third culture, I argue, mirrors in the public sphere the naturalistic tradition in philosophy – a tradition that, while consolidating itself under that label in the twentieth century, can be traced all the way back through the Enlightenment to Aristotle.

Naturalistically conceived, philosophy is closely aligned with science and empirical enquiry. Within the sphere of analytic philosophy, naturalism is a highly influential, indeed probably the dominant, approach to philosophy. It has exerted some influence on aesthetics, especially in recent years, but it has been less visible in aesthetics and the philosophy of art than, say, in the philosophies of mind, science, and even ethics. Chapter 1 of *FACT*, 'Aesthetics Naturalized', reviews some of the history and sets out the case for a naturalized aesthetics. *Theory construction*, as distinct from conceptual analysis, is fundamental to a naturalistic approach, I argue – where theory construction involves a constant interplay between conceptual clarification and empirical enquiry, in contrast to the strict separation of these two activities in (at least orthodox) conceptual analysis.

<sup>1</sup> Jerrold Levinson's poetically licensed acronym for my *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) – see his commentary on the book, 'FACT is a Fact of Both Art and Life', *Projections* 12 (2018): 60–70. Levinson's piece appears as part of a symposium comprising eleven commentaries on *FACT* along with my response.

<sup>2</sup> C. P. Snow, 'The Two Cultures: A Second Look' (1963), in *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 71.

(It is interesting to note that Dickie, in writing of the ‘myth of the aesthetic attitude’ in another important essay published not long after he published ‘Is Psychology Relevant to Aesthetics?’, was in effect pursuing theory construction by holding the concept of the ‘aesthetic attitude’ to an empirical as well as conceptual standard. For that is exactly what is implied by the word ‘myth’; if the ‘aesthetic attitude’ is a myth, it is no more deserving of a place in our thinking about aesthetic experience than is miasma in our thinking about the transmission of disease.)<sup>3</sup> Chapter 1 also introduces the idea of *thick explanation*. While thick description – a well-established method in the humanities – involves a richly contextualized description and interpretation of a human behaviour or practice, thick explanation involves the integration of the personal and subpersonal levels of description (rather than treating these as mutually exclusive or incompatible perspectives on the mind).

Chapter 2, ‘Triangulating Aesthetic Experience’, sets out an approach to aesthetic experience consistent with theory construction. The method of ‘triangulation’ involves the integration of the three kinds of evidence available to us in relation to the mind in general: phenomenological, psychological, and neurophysiological evidence. As Schellekens observes in her commentary on *FACT*, when combined these elements give us the kind of thick explanation limned in Chapter 1; and in doing so ‘[t]he door is thereby opened to admit, at least in a limited and principled fashion, the first-person perspective within a scientific approach to the mind.’<sup>4</sup> In the context of the philosophy of mind, such triangulation occupies the middle ground between radical functionalism (which gives little or no weight to the significance of neural evidence) and neurofundamentalism (which holds that, in the long run at least, the brain will tell us everything there is to know about the mind). If the eliminativism of Patricia and Paul Churchland constitutes an example of the latter, some of the late Jerry Fodor’s sceptical writings on brain scanning provide an instance of the former. A further important feature of triangulation is that no one of the three forms of evidence is held to be more important than the others, each form of evidence, considered in isolation, having its limitations. Across the chapter, I explore and test the model of triangulation in relation to various films and a related range of aesthetic experiences, with case studies on suspense and empathy. While suspense and empathy certainly arise outside aesthetic contexts, they are

<sup>3</sup> George Dickie, ‘The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 56–65.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture*, 117; Elisabeth Schellekens, ‘Psychologizing Aesthetic Attention’, *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 115.

pervasive enough within the arts that we might consider them *basic aesthetic emotions*.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the two types of evidence at stake in the model of triangulation which might seem most distant from one another and most in need of defence as elements of a single explanatory scheme: phenomenological and neuroscientific evidence. Chapter 3, 'The Engine of Reason and the Pit of Naturalism', considers in detail various neurosceptical arguments, from both the philosophy of mind and philosophical aesthetics. These arguments, and various responses to them, are considered in case studies on the startle response and affective mimicry, demonstrating the contribution made by neuroscientific findings (especially concerning mirror neurons) to these psychological and aesthetic phenomena. Chapter 4, 'Papaya, Pomegranates, and Green Tea', turns its attention to the burgeoning field of consciousness studies, and the complex history of debate about the nature of mind and conscious experience lying behind this contemporary trend. I explore the way consciousness has been represented in various traditions of film-making, and the ineliminable centrality of conscious *qualia* to aesthetic experience.

Chapters 1 through 4 constitute Part I of the book, 'Building the Third Culture'. Taken together, they aim to set out and defend the idea of a third culture, as well as a set of principles and methods through which such an intellectual culture can be realized. Part II of *FACT*, 'Science and Sentiment', sets these principles and methods in motion in relation to the affective and emotional life of cinema – the ways in which films both represent and elicit emotions – as well as sustaining the theory building of Part I.

Chapter 5, 'Who's Afraid of Charles Darwin?', explores the expression of emotion in film, through gesture, posture, the voice, and above all the face, against the backdrop of Darwin's *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872). Here I consider the vicissitudes of Darwin's evolutionary account of emotion, including the rehabilitation and refinement of a Darwinian perspective in the hands of contemporary psychologists such as Paul Ekman and Dacher Keltner. The chapter explores the treatment of emotional expression in a range of film-making traditions, as well as arguments in early and classical film theory concerning the (assumed or hoped for) universality of emotion in film, especially in the 'silent' era prior to the introduction of the 'talkies'. Chapter 6, 'What Difference Does It Make?', continues to explore contemporary research on, and theories of, emotion, with a particular emphasis on the role of culture in emotional experience. Rejecting the Hobson's choice – and the false dichotomy that stands behind it – between a narrowly biological account of emotion and a 'culturalist' perspective according to which biology plays no significant role, I defend

a *biocultural* view of emotion (and by extension, of aesthetic experience). The emotion of disgust, for example, may have evolved in the first instance as a barrier against contact with and ingestion of physically harmful substances (faeces, vomit, rotten food) which hardly vary across cultures. But the bodily systems supporting such 'core' disgust can also be recruited by our higher-order belief systems, such that we can experience disgust in relation to much more variable sociocultural acts and objects. (In a similar spirit, Nanay argues that 'the top-down influences on our perception that make perception very different in different periods and different parts of the world [...] force us to take the cultural variations of our aesthetic engagement seriously, paving the way to a truly global aesthetics')<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 7, 'Empathy, Expansionism, and the Extended Mind', focuses on empathy and a family of related affective states, continuing the exploration of such states begun in Chapters 2 and 3, and developed in the final section of Chapter 5. Here the emphasis is both 'downwards', in the direction of the neural mirroring systems which subtend aspects of empathy, and 'outwards' towards the environment – the world beyond the skin and the skull into which the mind extends itself, according to advocates of the theory of the extended mind. I argue that the overlapping practices and institutions of storytelling, depiction, and 'fictioning' (creating fictions) form a major aspect of the extended mind, greatly enhancing our ability to represent and reflect on the problems – many of them ethical – arising from interpersonal and larger social interactions. Elaborating further on the biocultural underpinning of the theory of emotion developed across Part II, I link these practices and institutions, and the idea of the extended mind more generally, with *niche construction*: the capacity of species to adapt environments to their needs (even as those species are subject to the pressures of natural selection, that is, to the pressure to adapt to the environment). Culture, one might argue, is nothing other than niche construction writ large.

Chapter 8, 'Feeling Prufish', pushes beyond the 'garden-variety' emotions (happiness, fear, anger, and the like) which form the basis of most discussions of emotion in both the philosophy of mind and philosophical aesthetics. A comprehensive theory of emotion in film and the arts more generally needs to account for both generic emotions, which often form the basis of specific genres of art – comedy and horror, for example – and the more peculiar blends of emotion to which individual works often give expression. To the extent that the theory presented achieves this, it also shows how any tension between the particularizing tendency of art and the generalizing impetus both of

<sup>5</sup> Bence Nanay, 'Aesthetics as Philosophy of Perception: A Précis', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 56 (2019): 94.

the sciences and of philosophy can be reconciled. A naturalistic account of the role of emotion in art is well placed to explain both the patterns and regularities in the world of aesthetics and the arts, as well as the particularities of individual works which at once emerge from and stand out against the backdrop of, such regularities.

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