

**Cinematic Humanism:  
Cinematic, Dramatic, and Humanistic Value  
in Fiction Films**

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## Abstract

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Might fiction films have cognitive value, and if so, how might such value interact with films' artistic and aesthetic values? Philosophical consideration of this question tends to consist in either *ceteris paribus* extensions of claims relating to prose fiction and literature; meta-philosophical inquiries into the capacity of films to *be* or *do* philosophy; or generalised investigations into the cognitive value of any, and thereby all, artworks. I first establish that fiction films can be works of art, then address this lacuna and identify three hitherto unrecognised values relevant to the issue of learning from fiction films. These values are (i) a film's *stance-based cinematic value*, which is neither an artistic nor an aesthetic value, but which pertains to the integration of a film's content, its form, and its themes and/or theses; (ii) a film's *dramatic value*, which recognises the use of dramatic argumentation to enable us to *make sense* of agents' intentional actions; and (iii) a film's *humanistic value* which acknowledges a film's power to provide illuminating insights into the human condition. In tandem with a series of sceptical arguments that question the very notion of cognitive value, I demonstrate how stance-based cinematic value, dramatic value, and humanistic value can provide fresh ways with which to understand and appreciate *that* we learn from films, *what* we learn from films, and *how* we learn from films. Grouping these values together under the rubric of *cinematic humanism* offers new resources for a paradigm shift capable of staying true to the spirit that informs both sides of the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate whilst cutting through the Gordian knot it has become.

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### Declaration

I declare that this thesis (of 79,749 words, excluding the bibliography and filmography) is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References. Arising from this thesis are the following publications:

(2022 fc) *Philosophy of Film Without Theory* (co-edited with Craig Fox) Chaim, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan

(2021) ‘Review of Christina Rawls, Diana Neiva & Steven S. Gouveia (eds.) *Philosophy and Film: Bridging Divides*’ in *Debates in Aesthetics* 16(1) pp. 65-70

(2020) ‘Inaugurating Philosophy of Film *Without Theory*’ (co-authored with Craig Fox) in *Aesthetic Investigations* Special Issue on Philosophy of Film *Without Theory* 3(2) pp. 175-184

(2020) ‘*The New World: Heideggerian or Humanist Cinema?* in *Aesthetic Investigations* Special Issue on Philosophy of Film *Without Theory* 3(2) pp. 200-227

(2020) ‘Review of Rupert Read *A Film-Philosophy of Ecology and Enlightenment*’ *Philosophical Investigations* 43(3) pp. 295-298

(2020) ‘Review of Alexis Gibbs’ *Seeing Education on Film: A Conceptual Aesthetics*’ *Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Online Reviews* available at: <https://www.philosophy-of-education.org/book-reviews/book-review-seeing-ed>

(2019) ‘Cinematic Humanism: A Solution to the Problem of Cinematic Cognitivism’ in Iris Vidmar (ed.) *Narrative Art, Knowledge, and Ethics* Rijeka, Croatia: Rijeka University Press pp. 175-199; originally published in 2019 in the *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* XIX (56) pp. 331-350

(2018) ‘Review of Rafe McGregor *The Value of Literature*’ *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (3) pp. 332-336

## Introduction

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*From Western Union you get messages. From me you get pictures.*<sup>1</sup>

Samuel Goldwyn, 1940

Historically speaking, the making and watching of fiction films is a relatively recent activity in the lives of human beings. Nonetheless, reflection on the value of films, and on-screen storytelling, is beset by one of philosophy's most ancient quandaries: can fictional works be a source of knowledge, understanding, or insight worthy of the name?

In 2019, American film director Martin Scorsese bemoaned the ubiquity of superhero movies at movie theatres, particularly the so-called 'Marvel Cinematic Universe' (MCU) blockbusters made by one of Walt Disney's production subsidiaries Marvel Studios.<sup>2</sup> Between 2008 and 2019 Marvel Studios released trilogies featuring the eponymous *Iron Man*, *Captain America*, *Thor* and *Avengers*; as well as two *Ant-Man*, two *Spider Man*, and two *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies, along with the individual films *Black Panther*, *Doctor Strange*, *Captain Marvel*, and *The Incredible Hulk* – several of which have confirmed sequels in the works.<sup>3</sup> All 23 films have taken substantially more at the box-office than their stated budgets; the most successful, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), parlaying its production cost of \$400 million into a worldwide box-office return of \$2,797,501,328 thereby outstripping James Cameron's *Avatar* to take the record for the highest-ever global theatrical ticket sales.<sup>4</sup> With further revenue streams from television, cable, satellite, SVOD (streaming video-on-demand) and DVD/Blu-ray licensing; together with soundtrack and merchandise sales, these MCU movies deliver a return on investment that is arguably unrivalled in cinema history. Yet according to film director Martin Scorsese, these movies are not *cinema*; they are more appropriately likened to *amusement parks*.

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<sup>1</sup> See Westein (1940). This quote has also been attributed to Brendan Behan, Harry Warner, Moss Hart, Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne. See here: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/05/11/send/> [accessed 14.2.20]

<sup>2</sup> Scorsese's comments were made during his London-delivered BAFTA 2019 David Lean Lecture on 12 October 2019 and in an interview with Empire Magazine; see Semlyen (2019).

<sup>3</sup> No MCU films were released between August 2019 and July 2021 due to Covid 19 restrictions. *Black Widow* opened 9<sup>th</sup> July 2021, the first MCU film to be distributed since before the pandemic.

<sup>4</sup> See Box Office Mojo: [https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt4154796/?ref\\_=bo\\_se\\_r\\_1](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt4154796/?ref_=bo_se_r_1) [Accessed 25.12.19] The use of the term 'theatrical' in theatrical revenue refers to the exhibition in cinemas which, in the United States, are called 'movie theatres'.

Unsurprisingly Scorsese's comments grabbed headlines in the trade press and fanzines. These articles revealed little interest in the detail, context, or purpose of the director's remarks, and Marvel Studios President Kevin Fiege dismissed Scorsese's observations with a *laissez-faire* relativism:

Everybody has a different definition of cinema. Everybody has a different definition of art ... Everybody is entitled to their opinion.<sup>5</sup>

Scorsese responded to the ensuing media furore with an op-ed in *The New York Times*, consolidating, rather than attenuating his views. MCU films are examples, he writes, of “worldwide audiovisual entertainment”, a separate field of activity whose products rarely overlap with those of “cinema”.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the superhero and comic book-originating trilogies that are the hallmark of Marvel Studios' particular brand of audiovisual entertainment do not consist of original stories and sequels, but are more accurately described, according to Scorsese, as *remakes* of the same film, designed to “satisfy a specific set of demands ... on a finite number of themes.”<sup>7</sup> Such worldwide audiovisual entertainment is a risk-free venture, or at least is one pursued with a keen eye on risk-minimisation; its productions are “market-researched, audience-tested, vetted, modified, revetted and remodified until they're ready for consumption”.<sup>8</sup> As such, they cannot be ‘cinema’, notwithstanding the fact that they are often made by people of “considerable talent and artistry.”<sup>9</sup> For Scorsese, works of ‘cinema’ are, by contrast, works of art, in virtue of their being:

about revelation — aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation ...  
 about characters — the complexity of people and their contradictory  
 and sometimes paradoxical natures, the way they can hurt one another  
 and love one another and suddenly come face to face with themselves.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Couch (2019)

<sup>6</sup> Scorsese (2019)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

This recent Marvel vs. Cinema clash is the latest iteration in the lengthy history of controversies over the nature, and relative merits, of so-called ‘popular’ or ‘mass art’ and ‘high art’.<sup>11</sup> And indeed, there are undoubtedly unresolved ontological and definitional issues about film and/as art. It is, however, the epistemic issues at play here, rather than the metaphysical, which orientate this dissertation. One can already see an epistemically relevant dimension in Scorsese’s acknowledgement that contradiction has a role to play in the very idea of characters achieving self-knowledge. But it is Francis Ford Coppola – coming to the defence of his fellow director – who highlights the fact that we want, and hope, to learn from films:

When Marty Scorsese says Marvel pictures are not cinema, he’s right because we expect to learn something from the cinema. We expect to get some enlightenment, some knowledge, some inspiration...<sup>12</sup>

Debate as to whether or not works of art, *as* works of art, can be a source of enlightenment, knowledge, and/or understanding, is almost as old as philosophy itself; which perhaps offers a not insubstantial explanation as to why the debate appears to have arrived at an impasse. The very idea of proposing alternative or previously underexplored approaches to this topic, in the hopes of moving the discussion forward, risks signalling either ignorance or foolishness. In the hopes of avoiding both, the account I motivate, articulate, and defend here – which I christen ‘Cinematic Humanism’ – is nonetheless committed to the view that by focussing on one of the youngest of humanity’s art forms we can shed light on one of philosophy’s longest running preoccupations.

Very briefly, this dissertation is structured as follows. In Chapter 1, I argue that a fiction film can be an artwork according to various theories of art, but that this conclusion should not be conflated with the assumption of medium essentialism. This prompts Chapter 2’s re-examination of the concept of cinematicity, which leads to the recognition that cinematic value can be construed in three ways: as an artistic, an aesthetic, and a stance-based value. In Chapter 3, I critically examine Berys Gaut’s proposals that works of art are sources of knowledge and Noel Carroll’s clarificationist argument that whilst works of art cannot provide knowledge as such, they can deliver a deeper understanding of what is already known. Although the attraction of these cognitivist claims is recognised, I argue that both

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<sup>11</sup> See Carroll (1998a).

<sup>12</sup> Coppola quoted in Perez (2019). See also Aftab (2019) and Fleming Jr. (2019).

positions are vulnerable to sceptical challenges. Rather than motivating a turn to non-cognitivism, in Chapters 4 and 5, I identify and articulate two hitherto unrecognised learning-related values: dramatic value and humanistic value. A film has dramatic value insofar as it helps us make sense of hard-to-understand actions, and humanistic value in virtue of its ability to provide illuminating insights into the nature of the human condition. In Chapter 5, I also complete an argument, begun in Chapter 3, challenging the very notion of the cognitive, and argue that we need an alternative paradigm within which to discuss what, and how, we learn from fiction films. I propose that with the three new values identified, i.e., stance-based cinematic value, dramatic value, and humanistic value, brought together under the rubric of cinematic humanism, we have a fresh set of resources capable of facilitating the required paradigm shift; one that is nonetheless capable of remaining ‘true’ to the spirit that inspires all those involved in the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate.

## Film and/as Art

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The subject matter of this thesis is a philosophical investigation into the cognitive value of fiction film works of art. Its *raison d'être* is to argue for a paradigm shift in the way this subject is dealt with and provide a set of new resources that might be, or contribute to, such an alternative. Both this investigation and ambition are, however, moot unless there can be, and are, fiction film works of art. Moreover, as the ongoing debates concerning cognitivism about art regularly have recourse to the notion of a work's value *qua* art, or *qua* a work of art, it is not only imperative to establish that fiction films can indeed be works of art, but – in so doing – begin the challenge of identifying the multiplicity of distinctions that inform and modify this *qua* qualification. To these ends, in this chapter, I argue that fiction films can be works of art, albeit not in a medium-specific sense. I use Louis Malle's 1981 film, *My Dinner with André* as a case study.

More specifically, in Section 1, I identify several different approaches to the question *can fiction films be works of art?* First, I focus on the confusions in play between classificatory and honorific accounts. I then shift focus from theories of art to theories of individual *art forms*, prompted by Dominic Lopes' suggestion that by passing the buck from art *per se* to art forms, the results will be more philosophically robust than any one-size-fits-all theory of art seeking to illuminate why an individual artwork is a work of art. This is shown to generate its own problems, prompting a different approach to taxonomizing (and thereby theorizing) artworks, using a taxonomy suggested by David Bordwell. This raises the spectre of Roger Scruton's fundamental sceptical concerns that the very idea of a *sui generis* photographic artwork is an oxymoron. Sceptical issues acknowledged, and where possible, dissolved, I finish the section by using Berys Gaut's modified Cluster Account to establish that *My Dinner with André* is a work of art, simultaneously demonstrating the extent to which this film 'qualifies' as a work of art on a number of alternative leading theories.

In Section 2, having established that a film can be a work of art, I focus specifically on the question of whether films are so-called 'medium essentialist' artworks. I consider Noel Carroll's, Murray Smith's and Berys Gaut's contrasting positions on this topic and diagnose why Smith's suggested resolution – medium deflationism – cannot solve the problems inherent to medium-essentialist positions. In Section 3, I pull together my concluding

remarks. Before embarking on Section 1, I now briefly introduce the film used as this chapter's case study.

The New York-set film, *My Dinner with André* is written by Wallace Shawn, directed by Louis Malle, and stars Shawn and André Gregory. In the film, Shawn's character, a dispirited playwright, Wally, makes his way to an upmarket Manhattan restaurant to meet his long-time-not-seen friend, the theatre director, André. During the crosstown journey Wally's voice-over reveals he is a somewhat apprehensive, not least because mutual friends have reported seeing André crying in the street. During their dinner – lasting roughly 95 of the film's 110 minutes – André recounts personal experiences with actors in international experimental theatre workshops as well as time spent with non-actors living in remote communities. This is all part of André's ongoing search to find – putting it simply – the meaning and value of life and of theatre: two ambitions which for him, are quite possibly the same. As the evening progresses, Wally shifts from being an awkward, monosyllabic audience for André's monologues to an enthusiastic co-conversationalist. The last customers in the restaurant, André pays for the meal, and the friends part. Wally heads home in a taxi, a final voice-over confirming his newfound child-like wonder at the passing shops and their associated memories. Re-encharmed with the world around him, Wally tells us that, arriving home, he told his girlfriend all about his 'dinner with André'.

The film is about two friends and theatre colleagues meeting for dinner; it was also developed, written, and is acted by two real-life friends and theatre colleagues. The characters' names are the actors' real names and 'André's' extraordinary stories refer to actual events and people in his own life. The on-screen meal seemingly occurs in real time and, as viewers, we feel ourselves to be eavesdropping on an unscripted conversation. Our attention is not particularly drawn to any aesthetically obviously visual elements or choices. Nothing catches the eye or draws our focus away from the substance of conversation, the friends' developing relationship, and the sense of shared concerns and intimacy that, once established, grows throughout the course of the film.

In fact, the film is based on a screenplay that was the edited product of 2,200 pages of transcripts of conversations Shawn had with Gregory over several months. Shawn's script was further cut by director Malle during extensive rehearsals. Both actors regard their 'characters' in the film as distinct from themselves, albeit each confesses to learning about himself from making and watching the film.<sup>13</sup> Six months were spent rehearsing with a video

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<sup>13</sup> See Ryan (1982) for Gregory's observations on his own character in the film, and Shawn (1982) for his.

camera exploring options such as the speed of delivery of the dialogue, the general tempo, and various challenges pertaining to the *mis en scène*. The film was shot in 16 days, on a specially built set. As Pauline Kael rightly recognises, “An immense amount of skill and planning must have gone into making ‘My Dinner with André’”<sup>14</sup>; a point echoed by director Malle who states, “It was the hardest piece of directing I’ve ever done.”<sup>15</sup> Critics overwhelming regard the film highly.<sup>16</sup> It is described as “an early classic of the American independent film movement,”<sup>17</sup> “riveting cinema,”<sup>18</sup> “astonishing in its audacity” and having a “beautiful and moving” end.<sup>19</sup> It is also variously characterised as “animated radio,”<sup>20</sup> “a compelling cinematic experience,”<sup>21</sup> and a film that manages to *escape* the “tyranny of the ‘cinematic.’”<sup>22</sup> In other words, *My Dinner with André* looks to be an example of a fiction film, a work of art, and something that has artistic value, but which may or may not have cinematic value.<sup>23</sup> We will come to the question of cinematic value in the next chapter, but let us begin by considering how might decide whether a film – including this one – is a work of art.

## 1 Film as art?

Perhaps the most obvious way of deciding whether a fiction film can be art, or a work of art, is to identify a particular theory of art (i.e., a theory of art *in general*) and establish whether or not a particular film meets that theory’s necessary and sufficient conditions; or, if more appropriate, its disjunctive conditions or proposed criteria. There is no shortage of theories to

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<sup>14</sup> Kael (1982, 81)

<sup>15</sup> Atlas (1982)

<sup>16</sup> On the website *Rotten Tomatoes* which collates, score and aggregates film reviews, *My Dinner with André* has a 92/100 score from the critics, and 85/100 from over 7,000 members of the public.

<sup>17</sup> Macaulay (2015)

<sup>18</sup> Macnab (2002)

<sup>19</sup> Ebert (1981)

<sup>20</sup> Parkinson (2009)

<sup>21</sup> Taubin (2015)

<sup>22</sup> Kawin (1981-82, 63)

<sup>23</sup> Here are two trailers for the film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7hSY0QOkII>  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUgq\\_MhDyeY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUgq_MhDyeY)

choose from, be they functional,<sup>24</sup> institutional,<sup>25</sup> historical-intentional,<sup>26</sup> mimetic,<sup>27</sup> cluster,<sup>28</sup> formalist,<sup>29</sup> and so on. That said, this philosophical tactic raises several immediate concerns.

First, if one uses a particular theory of art to ascertain whether a film is a work of art it would appear to tie the truth of any claim about the artistic nature of that film to the correctness of that specific theory. Yet the artistic status of the paintings of Rembrandt van Rijn, Roger van der Weyden and Henri Matisse; the music compositions of Henry Purcell, Johannes Brahms, and Maurice Ravel; the sculptures of Donatello, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, and Auguste Rodin; and the plays of William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, and Tennessee Williams do not wait on the pronouncements of a correct theory of art, do they? Do we really stand in need of a correct theory of art before recognising that various films by directors Yasujiro Ozu, Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Abbas Kiarostami, Charlie Chaplin, Francis Ford Coppola, etc., *are* works of art? Indeed, is it not an adequacy condition on any viable theory of art that it capture the fact that the filmic achievements of these directors *just are* paradigmatic examples of artworks?

One might be sceptical about identifying any individual film director as the sole author-creator of a film, given the hugely collaborative nature of filmmaking, but one could re-articulate the thrust of this objection by listing individual films, rather than their directors. Is it not the case that, for example, films like *Tokyo Story*, *Vertigo*, *Persona*, *Seven Samurai*, *Where the Friend's House Is*, *Modern Times*, *The Godfather*, etc. must be recognised as the works of art that they are, for any particular theory of art to be taken seriously.<sup>30</sup> The point

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<sup>24</sup> Functional theories are taken to include all those that root the definition of art in an object's function or role, including aesthetic theories of art which define art in terms of its capacity to provide an aesthetic experience or, as Beardsley characterises it "aesthetic gratification" (1982, 22), that is gratification "obtained primarily from attention to the formal unity and/or regional qualities of a complex whole (1982, 22) For Beardsley, art is "either an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangements that is typically intended to have this capacity" (1982, 99).

<sup>25</sup> See Danto (1964) for his initial articulation of the proposal that, "To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld." (1964, 580). See also Dickie (2001, 61-73) for an historical summary of the four versions of his own institutional theory, including his first three, or "earlier" ones dating from 1969, 1971, 1974, and the "later" 1984 "major overhaul of the theory" (2001, 53), together with a detailed examination of where Richard Wollheim and Danto's expositions of his account are, he argues, erroneous.

<sup>26</sup> Levinson (1979)

<sup>27</sup> I take it that Plato holds a mimetic theory of art; and more recently Young (2001) for whom resemblance is a key artistic notion.

<sup>28</sup> See Gaut (2000) for his original presentation of this disjunctive account; and (2005) for his slightly modified version.

<sup>29</sup> See Clive Bell (1914)

<sup>30</sup> It is not necessary for the substantive claims of this thesis that one hold any particular commitments concerning film authorship. I use the film director's name merely as shorthand for the responsible artists involved in the creation of a particular film.

would not change: a theory of art that did not recognise such films as works of art would miss its mark.

Second, there is the difficulty of deciding which theory to use to evaluate the artistic identity or credentials of a particular film. There is no philosophical consensus as to which theory of art is correct. Nor is there agreement as to whether a theory of art ought to be what George Dickie distinguishes as “descriptive” or “classificatory”, that is to say “value-neutral”, as opposed to an honorific or evaluative theory.<sup>31</sup> The former aims to provide a theoretical definition or account of good, bad, or mediocre art; whilst the latter’s explicandum is works that are good. To complicate matters there are philosophers, like Berys Gaut, who do not recognise a theoretical distinction between classificatory or honorific approaches.

Third, if it is held that no extant theory of art is sufficiently rigorous or successful to be used, one might argue that it would be better to reverse the explanatory priority. So, rather than use a theory of art to establish the artistic status of a particular film work, one might begin with the assumption that certain films are works of art and use this to develop a new theory of art. Such is Jesse Prinz’s tactic in seeking to establish “a principled way to draw the line between being *L’Avventura* and *Showgirls*”, so as to ensure artistic status for Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1961 film, whilst denying it to Paul Verhoeven’s 1995 critically panned film.<sup>32</sup> Having sub-divided theories of art into three species,<sup>33</sup> and concluded that each is found wanting, Prinz articulates his own theoretical explanation of why films are works of art; namely that they, “afford an aesthetic stance.”<sup>34</sup> Given that this works for films, so he claims, it invites a wider-scope application. Prinz argues that, “[w]ith some further condition” his affordance theory of film might be “elevated into a theory of what, in general, makes something count as art.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this definition of art would seem to be very similar to Monroe Beardsley’s proposal that “an artwork is an arrangement of conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character.”<sup>36</sup> For Prinz, however, the notion of affordance is itself a philosophical term of art – one he develops from Gibsonian psychology – and it is the affordance, rather than the aesthetic experience, that carries the theoretical work on his account.

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<sup>31</sup> Dickie (2001, 56)

<sup>32</sup> Prinz (2010, 474) Prinz also claims that early Hitchcock is only ‘borderline’ art.

<sup>33</sup> See Prinz (2010) for his argument that these three, less ‘antiquated’, theories of art – George Dickie’s Institutional Theory, Jerrold Levinson’s Historical or Historical-Intentional Theory and Carroll’s supposed Narrative Theory – are inadequate to their task.

<sup>34</sup> Prinz (2010, 481)

<sup>35</sup> Prinz (2010, 484)

<sup>36</sup> Beardsley (1981, xix)

Unfortunately, Prinz's affordance theory is not able to facilitate the very distinction he seeks to draw. For by assuming that *L'Avventura* is art, and *Showgirls* is not, and seeking a theoretical explanation as to why, Prinz is pursuing a definition of art that is honorific or evaluative. Yet at the same time, although he finds in the former an aesthetic affordance not offered by the latter, Prinz simultaneously insists that whilst a film may "afford an aesthetic stance" this "is no guarantee that the stance may deliver a good verdict."<sup>37</sup> His theoretical definition risks developing an evaluative condition which he then hopes might remain purely classificatory: a consequence that risks undermining Prinz's original theoretical rationale. Whilst this confusion might be resolved, it is hard to see where the resources will come from to do this, given Prinz's theoretical account side-steps the identification of likely affordance-providing properties to "careful empirical study".<sup>38</sup> This theoretical route looks to deliver an underspecified aesthetic-experience account, which abdicates its key conceptual task. On Prinz's account we are left none the wiser as how to discriminate between *L'Avventura* and *Showgirls*, both of which do indeed provide aesthetic experiences, but only one of which is supposedly art.

Fourth, one might argue that there is, in principle, something awry with the very idea of developing a theory of art at all. *A fortiori* any attempt to establish the artistic *bona fides* of a film using theoretical conditions and definitions, is itself suspect. Whilst this worry might be traced back to Wittgensteinian meta-philosophical concerns about the very project of providing philosophical theories with necessary and sufficient conditions,<sup>39</sup> a different worry is, more recently, pressed by Dominic Lopes.<sup>40</sup> For Lopes, the pursuit of a theory of art *per se* is a misguided enterprise, not because the pursuit of theory is a mistake, but because the relevant area of theoretical construction ought not to focus on *art* in general, but on the various individual art *forms*. The reason being, according to Lopes, that any theory of art capable of doing duty for all artworks in all artforms, will inevitably be too explanatory thin to be of any merit. Ascertaining the artistic status of, say, a particular painting, according to a theory of art that is tasked with also applying to works of sculpture, architecture, dance, literature, etc., looks to be a tall order. Instead, Lopes argues, that by "passing the buck" from an all-encompassing singular theory of art to a collection of art-form-specific theories, the theorist can be more sensitive to the challenges, features, and histories of each art form.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Prinz (2010, 484)

<sup>38</sup> Prinz (2010, 482)

<sup>39</sup> See Wittgenstein (2005, Sections 86 to 93, 299-318)

<sup>40</sup> Lopes (2008)

<sup>41</sup> Lopes (2008, 124-127)

Such an approach would also make it possible for the theories of different art forms to be flexible enough to favour whichever functionalist, proceduralist or mixed theory might be most appropriate. Indeed, for Lopes, once the buck is passed it turns out that “there is nothing left to explain when you have theories of the [individual] art forms and the arts.”<sup>42</sup> That said, Lopes does not wait on any forthcoming ‘theory of the arts’ – a theoretical project he believes is itself warranted – to announce that “music, dance, theatre, literature, *film*, painting, architecture, and the like” just are the very art forms whose theoretical understanding would benefit from such buck passing.<sup>43</sup> But *are there* any such theories of film as an art form?

One might think that Berys Gaut’s account of what he calls ‘cinematic art’ is an example of a theory of *the art form that is film or cinema*. In fact, this is not the case. For Gaut uses his claims that films can represent, and as such can communicate thoughts, together with his own cluster account of art (in general), to the conclusion that films can be art, i.e., works of art. This is not, therefore, a way of offering a theory of film as an art form (à la Lopes’ injunction) but is, at best, a case of *deriving* a theory of the art form from a pre-existing theory of art, together with some thoughts on medium-specific properties. (We will investigate this further in the next section.) A similar theoretical route and priority thesis can be ascribed to Rudolph Arnheim, the classical film theorist Gaut readily acknowledges as his most important predecessor.<sup>44</sup> In Arnheim’s *Film as Art*, the German claims that “Film resembles painting, music, literature, and the dance in this respect – it is a medium that may, but need not, be used to produced artistic results .... the movies are not necessarily film art.”<sup>45</sup> Instead, Arnheim grants films their artistic status in virtue of their expressive powers, i.e., in virtue of their capacity to fulfil the conditions of an expressive theory of art (in general). In a late interview, however, he champions a metaphysically orientated functional account. “Art reveals to us the essence of things, the essence of our existence; that is its function.”<sup>46</sup> And insofar as films can do that, they are works of art. As with Gaut, therefore, whilst it is thereby possible to *derive* a theory of a supposed film art from Arnheim’s work, it is a consequence of a theory of art not an alternative to it.

One might develop alternative theories of some such Lopesian art form using the resources of other classical film theorists but as Noel Carroll argues,<sup>47</sup> whilst the majority of

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<sup>42</sup> Lopes (2008, 127) 7

<sup>43</sup> Lopes (2008, 124, emphasis added)

<sup>44</sup> Gaut characterises his own philosophy of cinematic art as “neo-Arnheimian” (2010, 49)

<sup>45</sup> Arnheim (1957, 8)

<sup>46</sup> Arnheim in Arnheim & Grundmann (2001)

<sup>47</sup> Carroll (1988, 257-263)

these early theorists declare their intention to define what makes cinema or film an art form, in practice they are championing those technical particularities that best characterise their preferred film-making styles: a *modus operandi* Carroll calls “preferential stylistic gerrymandering.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, classical film theorists are most definitely in pursuit of honorific, rather than classificatory, theories – and highly bespoke ones at that. That said, the proposals and definitions of the classical theorists are worth considering, if one wishes to use a Lopes-style theory of film as an art form. It remains the case that one is still using examples of films that are already regarded as paradigmatic or indubitable works of art as litmus tests for the viability of any such theory. Thus, the Lopes buck-passing manoeuvre fails to provide a successful way away out of this worry, whilst exposing the fact that there is not yet a theory of the art form of film.

Thus far we have raised, without resolution, concerns that risk undermining the project of how to confirm the artistic status of a fiction film, and thereby demonstrate there can be a fiction film work of art. Perhaps, though, we are looking at this in the wrong way.

## 1.1 Alternative Artistic Taxonomies

David Bordwell suggests that film can be conceived of as an art in any one of the following ways: as a photographic art, a narrative art, a performing art, a pictorial art, and an audiovisual art.<sup>49</sup> If one takes this approach then the opportunity to identify works of film art becomes a matter of identifying the applicability of these, alternative, artistic categories; indeed, this captures what many classical and contemporary film theorists have been doing, by focussing on how the artistic nature of films is constituted (wholly or in part) in virtue of the involvement of photography. But on closer inspection nowhere is the lack of a theoretical or critical consensus more apparent than in the proposal that film is a photographic art.

For Arnheim, films are a photographic art. This is not, however, because of photography’s potential but rather because the photographic techniques deployed by filmmakers have important *limitations*. It is these limitations that enable film’s art-making possibilities. As Arnheim explains, “... the very properties that make photography and film fall short of perfect reproduction can act as the necessary moulds of an artistic medium.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Carroll (2003, 7)

<sup>49</sup> Bordwell (2007)

<sup>50</sup> Arnheim (1957, 3)

According to Arnheim, this is because there are discrepancies between photographic recording and how our eye, and our thoroughly embodied vision, works and these very distinctions create the conceptual space in which art can emerge.<sup>51</sup> By exploiting cinematographic choices that inevitably diverge from our ‘normal eyesight’ (particularly choices regarding camera positions and movement, lens selection, and lighting), together with the possibilities inherent in the un-vision-like resources of editing or “montage”, Arnheim declares the filmmaker to be firmly on the “royal road to art.”<sup>52</sup>

André Bazin agrees with Arnheim that any assumption that cinematography might, one day, be capable of reproducing reality completely is a “myth of total cinema”.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, were such a thing as ‘total cinema’ possible, it would, according to both Arnheim and Bazin, rule out the possibility of any film being art. In contrast to Arnheim’s claims, though, Bazin takes the evolution of photographic techniques as generating an asymptotic intimacy between cinematography and reality, but it is this ever-increasing closeness which encourages rather than reduces the potential for art. The development of the capacity of ‘faster’ lenses which enable deep-focus images even in low lighting conditions, together with the use of 1000-foot film magazines that allow for long-running (potentially edit-free) takes, makes it possible for film to achieve a new level of realistic representation. For Bazin, such technical developments reduce the need to rely on editing, which he takes to distance the viewer from ‘reality’ and thereby diminish the artistic possibilities of film.<sup>54</sup> This allows the kind of on-screen “spatial realism” and temporal continuities Bazin regards as key to multiplying film’s artistic possibilities.<sup>55</sup> Increased depth of focus “brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with the reality” and given this is “more realistic” it “implies ... a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part of the action in progress.”<sup>56</sup> Editing, for Bazin – again in contrast to Arnheim – requires the action watched be *already* understood, because the viewer has to

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<sup>51</sup> According to Arnheim, “Since our eyes can move freely in every direction, our field of vision is practically unlimited. A film image, on the other hand, is definitely bounded by its margins. Only what appears within these margins is visible, and therefore the film artist is forced – has the opportunity – to make a selection from the infinity of real life” (1957, 73).

<sup>52</sup> Arnheim (1957, 87) See also (1957, 111-127) for Arnheim’s examination of the other art-facilitating capacities of film technique which include, the mobile camera; backward, accelerated and slow motion, dissolves, superimposition, and simultaneous montage; and the manipulation of focus and mirror images.

<sup>53</sup> Bazin (2004 [1967], Volume 1, 17-22)

<sup>54</sup> On this Bazinian picture, digital cinematography is even more capable of facilitating art, as there is effectively no time limit to takes.

<sup>55</sup> See Noel Carroll (1988) on Bazin’s theoretical views. Needless to say, the notion of realism is by no means straightforward. See Currie (1995, 79-108) for three kinds of realism, and Gaut (2010, 51-97) for seven types.

<sup>56</sup> Bazin (2004 [1967] Volume 1, 36) ‘The Evolution of the Language of Cinema’

bring an understanding of an action to bear in order to make sense of it when confronted by an edited, or ‘cut up’ version, filmed from different angles. As Bazin explains, “montage presupposes of its very nature the unity of meaning of the dramatic event,” and thus “by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression” – the very thing that supposedly raises the artistic potential of the film.<sup>57</sup>

Whilst Arnheim and Bazin offer quite different conditions in virtue of which films are photographic works of art, they none the less share the conclusion that they can be. There remains a profoundly sceptical challenge from Roger Scruton, who argues that film cannot be a *sui generis*, independent, representational, photographic art for there is no such thing: the very notion of a photographic art is oxymoronic. If Scruton is correct, this pulls the rug out from under both Arnheim and Bazin’s accounts.

For Scruton, the photographic aspect of films is something of an artistic red herring; a piece of philosophical misdirection. For on his account of art (in general) the fact that photography, or as he characterises it, *ideal* photography, is a purely causal event entails that it cannot be used to produce an object capable of being a work of art.<sup>58</sup> For a work of art is – and must be – an intentional object created with a particular purpose and capable of fulfilling that purpose; namely the bringing into being of an object of aesthetic interest where an aesthetic interest is an interest in something “for its own sake”.<sup>59</sup> For this to be possible, it requires that one can ask ‘Why?’ of the whole of the intentional object, or any of its parts, aspects or features: why has the author-creator made the choice to make or include *this* or *that* aspect or feature?; why shape or handle *this* or *that* in *such-and-such* a way? In virtue of our ability to ask, explore and potentially answer an indefinite number of ‘why’ questions, a work is amenable to artistic understanding and thereby is a work of art. If it is not possible for a maker to be responsible for any, and all, of the visibilia and audibilia of a work, the ‘why’ question cannot be legitimately asked of everything that can be seen or heard. As such the work cannot be understood, it cannot be meaningful, and it cannot be a work of art.<sup>60</sup> Such is the predicament of causally produced ideal photographs; hence the barrier to there being any such thing as a photographic art, or cinematography-based art form.

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<sup>57</sup> Bazin (2004 [1967] Volume 1, 36) ‘The Evolution of the Language of Cinema’

<sup>58</sup> Scruton’s ‘ideal’ qualification limits the notion of ‘taking a photograph’ to the exposure of a light sensitive surface. This is what Dawn Philipps helpfully suggests we recognise as being the ‘photographic event’ (2009, 339), itself one of several necessary steps in a what is a multi-step process that constitutes ‘taking a photograph’.

<sup>59</sup> Scruton (1998 [1981], 128) ‘Photography and Representation’. See also Scruton (2009) for confirmation that ‘for its own sake’ aesthetic interest is “an interest of which only rational beings are capable.” (2009, 319)

<sup>60</sup> It is worth noting that for Scruton works can have meaning for us in “three primary ways”, namely “representation, expression, and symbolism.” (2009, 319)

One might attempt to resist such Scrutonian scepticism by arguing that in the activity of choosing lenses, camera angles, and editing the photographic results, one *just is* bringing all meaningful aspects and features of the photographic creation under the responsible control of the author-creator. Do not such intentional choices make for an intentional object? Indeed, are these not the very resources employed by classical theorists like Arnheim and Bazin in seeking to establish the art of photography, and thereby a photography-based cinema? For Scruton, however, such responses fail to rehabilitate the potential for a possible photographic art; because the involvement of the author-creator's deliberate and purposeful choices are not part of (ideal) photography *per se*. Rather, they are examples of pre- and post-photographic choices and activities and as such cannot overcome the prophylactic consequence of the wholly causal core moment of photographic exposure. Lens selection, deliberations over the positioning of the camera, choosing one of many alternative ways of choreographing the *mis en scène*, and the cutting and re-arranging of the recorded material in the editing, are, on Scruton's account, better understood as contributions to making a work of *dramatic* art, and/or even *pictorial* art. The fact that there is a single (causal) photographic event in multi-process series of events, does not an item of photographic art make. In support of Scruton, one might argue that a painter's use of a palette knife rather than a brush does not deliver some new *sui generis*, 'palette knife art form'.

Where does this leave us? Even if Scruton is right and there is no such thing as a photographic art, ideally conceived, these need not deny the possibility of film's artistic status. For even Scruton himself champions the "poetry" of Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*; acknowledges the "mastery" of Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*; and characterises Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* and Jean Renoir's *La règle du jeu* as "cinematic masterpieces".<sup>61</sup> Notwithstanding his recognition of the "genius" of Eisenstein and his aesthetic appreciation of the achievements of other film directors, Scruton argues such films are not examples of an independent representational photographic, or cinematographic, art form but are best recognised and appreciated as *dramatic* masterpieces.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, this is Scruton's solution to his own sceptical challenge.

Perhaps the theoretical search for a definition of the photographic or cinematography art is – like the search for the *art form that is film* – misguided. Perhaps we should be pursuing theories of dramatic arts, literary arts, performance arts, and so on.

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<sup>61</sup> Scruton (1998 [1981], 145, 143, and 119) 'Photography and Representation'

<sup>62</sup> Scruton (1998 [1981], 145) 'Photography and Representation'

In sum, there is no theoretical consensus as to the definition of film *qua* art, nor is there for the definition of film *qua* an example of the film artform, or even, for film *qua* an example of some *sui generis* photographic art, so what are we to do, if we want to establish that a fiction film can be a work of art? Let us step away from these generalizing pursuits and turn to our case study film. If there is a case to be made that *My Dinner With Andre* is art, then perhaps this can illuminate a way forward.

## 1.2 So is *My Dinner with André* art?

In light of Berys Gaut's commitment to both a 'cinematic art' and a Cluster Account of Art, let us proceed on the basis that the latter can illuminate the former. Moreover, given the Cluster Account uses a number of criteria, some of which can separately be found doing definitional duty in alternative theories of art, by using the Cluster Account as a framework for consideration, perhaps we can establish which, if any, theories – in a broad sense – might establish that *My Dinner with André* is a work of art.<sup>63</sup>

According to Gaut's so-called 'modified cluster account' any work is a work of art if it fulfils a single *necessary condition*, "namely its being the product of an action,"<sup>64</sup> and also satisfies at least one of following *criteria*: that it possess "positive aesthetic qualities"; be "expressive of emotion"; be "intellectually challenging"; be "formally complex and coherent"; have the capacity to "convey complex meanings"; exhibit an "individual point of view"; be an "exercise of creative imagination"; be an "artefact or performance that is the product of a high degree of skill"; belong "to an established artistic form"; and/or be a "product of an intention to make a work of art".<sup>65</sup> Let us consider each of these in turn.

*My Dinner with André* undoubtedly fulfils the sole necessary condition, in virtue of being *the product* of many months of deliberate, intentional *action*, from the many hours of Gregory's recounting of his past activities and preoccupations to Shawn's editing of the transcripts; from Shawn's and Gregory's choice of a director to the raising of the production finance (including a one-off special stage production at the Royal Court Theatre, London);

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<sup>63</sup> Although Gaut's cluster account is presented as an open-ended disjunctive *account* it is regularly referred to, by other philosophers of art, as a *theory*.

<sup>64</sup> Gaut (2005, 274, fn. 4)

<sup>65</sup> Gaut (2005, 274). Being the product of an intentional action is not to be confused with (or to entail) being an intentional object in the way Scruton (following Anscombe) understands it. For whilst cakes, say, are what Gaut would call "the products of intentional acts" (2002, 303), Scruton's view of the "double intentionality" of art holds that "one and the same emotion or response can be focused simultaneously on two objects – the object that is believed to exist [the painting, or film, say], and on which attention is focused; and the imaginary object which is summoned into, seen in, or heard in the present object" (2009, 319).

from the months of rehearsals by director, cast, and technicians, to the 16 days of principle photography and the months of post-production, etc.

Having *positive aesthetic qualities* is the first criterion of Gaut's account. These are to be understood, according to Gaut, as those qualities "comprising beauty and its subspecies;" a use of the notion of aesthetic, that for Gaut is "narrow scope".<sup>66</sup> The film has any number of such aesthetic qualities. These include the film's the harmonious balance; the deliciously witty visual and verbal comedy; the elegantly clear point of view; the charm of Wally's initially unexpected yet gloriously inevitable transformation; the beauty of some of the framing in the shots; the handsome design of the restaurant with its limited palette and stylish restaurant set, and so on. *My Dinner with André* provides plenty of aesthetic features and rewards that suffice to meet Gaut's first criteria; and the film also passes muster for any definition of art that requires a work deliver aesthetic interest and/or facilitate aesthetic experience.

Gaut does not spell out how his second criterion – being *expressive of emotion* – is to be taken, but the characters in this film undergo a range of emotions and elicit emotion responses from the viewer. André's hunger for theatre audiences to 'wake up' has a visceral emotional urgency, as does Wally's impassioned eulogy for his electric blanket. André's fear and distress during the recounting of his 'burial alive' ritual is palpable, as is Wally's unqualified joy when going home. One might object that people sitting in the safety, indeed privileged luxury, of a Manhattan restaurant and 'just' talking cannot create enough action, drama, or suspense to express emotion, but that presumes that confessing and exploring important hopes and dreams, ideas, and aspirations, worries and soul-bothering troubles, cannot provide emotionally rich material. Not only does *My Dinner with André* fulfil Gaut's criterion for being expressive of emotion, I see no reason to deny that it would satisfy any expressive theory of art.

Gaut's third criterion for a work to be a work of art is that it be *intellectually challenging*. This film offers its audience two characters wrestling with complex intellectual ideas, inviting us – indeed seducing us – into joining in the challenge of grappling with the issues under consideration. This is a product not just of the substance of the conversation, but the way the film is structured, the choice of the point of view, the pacing of the various recounted stories, the quality of the acting, and the film's encouragement by the use of single shots (and not just over-the-shoulder shots) that helps us feel that we have joined André and

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<sup>66</sup> Gaut (2005, 274)

Gregory at their table, and are being invited to ‘think along’ with these two.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, we must grapple with meeting the characters for the first time. This requires that we rise to the challenge of contending with André’s self-absorption and Wally’s nervousness. So whilst this is on the one hand a film “about two people talking,”<sup>68</sup> it is also, in the words of critic Roger Ebert “about living” and “about the fragility and great preciousness of life.”<sup>69</sup> For Shawn, it is “about a couple of men making a stab at intimacy,”<sup>70</sup> and for Gregory, “about talking whose purpose would be to open up the audience’s ability to talk.”<sup>71</sup> Such characterisation is only possible if a work has a degree of intellectual challenge. There is no spoon-feeding of unexamined lives, or life, here.<sup>72</sup> This film meets Gaut’s criterion for being intellectually challenging and would similarly meet any this condition for any alternative theory of art that took Gaut’s third criterion as a necessary or sufficient condition.

Gaut’s fourth criterion, being *formally complex and coherent* is, I suggest, ambiguous. Are we to understand ‘formally’ as qualifying both ‘complex’ *and* ‘coherent’ or just ‘complex’? In other words, is this criterion either (i) a conjunction of formal complexity and formal coherence, or (ii) of formal complexity and non-formal (possibly content-related) coherence. In the case of (i) what is it for a work to be formally coherent, as opposed, presumably to formally incoherent? Is an atonal piece of music formally coherent or incoherent? Is an action painting formally coherent or incoherent? Perhaps, though, Gaut intends something along the lines of film theorist V. F. Perkins’s core theoretical notion of coherence. Coherence, according to Perkins, is a gradable feature of films. Minimal coherence is that which is required for spectator to make sense of what they see in a film, but as coherence increases in subtlety and complexity, the sense and significance of what is to be seen in a film is “locked into the picture’s form”.<sup>73</sup> If this is Gaut’s understanding of ‘formally coherent’, then it would look to recognize an interdependence, indeed inseparability of form and content, albeit without actually using those words.

Whichever way this criterion is understood (and there may be yet further ways to do so), *My Dinner with André* satisfies it. The film is formally complex in virtue, at the very

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<sup>67</sup> See pp. 71-73, below, for examples of these shots taken from the film.

<sup>68</sup> Malle quoted in Atlas (1982)

<sup>69</sup> Ebert (1981)

<sup>70</sup> Shawn quoted in Gussow (1982)

<sup>71</sup> Gregory quoted in Macauley (2015)

<sup>72</sup> In Gaut’s original articulation of his Cluster Account the *intellectually challenging* criterion involved ‘questioning received views and modes of thought’ (2000, 28), and though this clarification is dropped in Gaut’s modified (2005) account *My Dinner with André* questions received views and modes of thought throughout, not to mention challenging received views about what a film ‘ought’ to be.

<sup>73</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 119)

least, of its diversity of shots and camera movements; its colour palette; its soundtrack with synchronised dialogue and atmospheric sound effects, and so on. The film is also both formally coherent (understood à la Perkins) and merely coherent (understand as being coherent in content). In the former instance, the film synthesises the various diverse complexities of moving image and sound into a singular work that flows seamlessly, without jarring or disorientating the viewer, to deliver something credible and convincing. Moreover, it delivers an entirely different experience than that had when reading the published screenplay.<sup>74</sup> The film is also coherent in content, as per the latter alternative, in virtue of it being immediately accessible and recognisably about familiar human practices, conducted in standard, non-surrealist ways. Two friends meet in a restaurant, are attended by waiters, order and enjoy a meal and an evening's conversation and finally depart for home. In whichever way Gaut wishes us to use his criterion of being *formally complex and coherent*, the film meets this criterion simply, one might argue, by being a constantly changing series of moving and diverse images, lasting for 110 minutes, which commands, holds, and rewards the attention of its audience from start to finish by offering an unfolding drama that one can follow. *My Dinner with André* would thereby also satisfy any alternative theoretical account of art for which formal complexity and coherence is either a criterion, or necessary and/or sufficient condition.

Having the *capacity to convey complex meanings* is Gaut's fifth, disjunctive, criterion.<sup>75</sup> *My Dinner with André* may be deceptively simple, but this does not prevent it from conveying complex meanings. One such meaning is that someone who may be on a self-imposed quest to re-vivify their existence, re-enchanted their troubled love of theatre, and re-discover some sense of self-worth and purpose as an artist, might – by honestly sharing their related thoughts, worries, and adventures – end up dispersing their friend's own private fog of unarticulated disenchantment though they themselves remain wrapped up in, and perplexed by, their own troubles. I take it that is a complex meaning, and if it fails to suffice to meet this criterion, I am unsure what Gaut is trying to pick out here. One could argue that the criterion is questionable, and needs further elucidation, but if we take it at its face value, the film serves to satisfy this criterion without having to open the Pandora's Box and resolve the question of how to understand the notion of an artwork's 'meaning'.

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<sup>74</sup> Shawn (1994)

<sup>75</sup> Note that for Perkins, "Coherence is a prerequisite of meaning" and the means by which a filmmaker, "creates significance" (1993 [1972], 116).

It is not altogether clear what Gaut's sixth criterion, *exhibiting an individual point of view*, aims to identify. Is this 'individual' point of view, meant to rule out the creation of an object by forces of nature, and ensure it is a person-made work? Or is the individual point of view to be contrasted with a group point of view, notwithstanding that some art works – jazz improvisations, cathedrals, etc., are made by collaborating groups of people? Or is the idea of the 'individual point of view' criterion that the object or work itself be recognised as (somehow) *having* a point of view? One can think of having a point of view as a matter of a film's having a particular formal device or, alternatively, that it has certain content, e.g., that the work says something. *My Dinner with André* can satisfy all these distinct interpretations. Firstly, the film was made by humans, rather than accidentally created by some elaborate pool of chemicals that happened to 'deposit out' an object indiscernible item from the one made by Malle, Shawn, Gregory, and others in 1980 and 1981. Secondly, whilst the individual point of view might rule out collaboration, it need not rule out collaboration in the service of a singular controlling point of view under the control of one individual. On all accounts of the making of the film, director Malle had the final say in how the film was directed and what elements of the original script were kept or cut. There is no known 'interference' by financiers or distributors that 'overrode' Malle's individual point of view on how he could or should make the film. On the third option – the film's having a formal point of view – the film presents a story from Wally's point of view and is very rigorous in the maintaining of that point of view, throughout. We begin and end with Wally; we experience André from Wally's physical and psychological point of view; our trust in André's testimony is a consequence of our Wally's trust in it, and so on. On the fourth possibility – having something to say – this would appear to be covered by previous criteria of having a complex meaning.

I take it that *My Dinner with André* has little difficulty in fulfilling the seventh criterion of being an *exercise of creative imagination* in virtue of it being a moving picture that is not a copy of any prior artefact, either in part or whole, and is itself the product of an innumerable creative, imagination-requiring, actionable choices. As this criterion does not appear to require any evaluative dimension, there is no need to demonstrate that a particular standard has been reached. Such an achievement does, however, require an extremely *high degree of skill*, Gaut's eighth criterion. All aspects of making this film including the writing, directing, acting, production and costume designing, sound-recording, cinematography, editing, producing, etc. require substantial ability, experience, and professional *savoir-faire*.

That the result looks as ‘so easy’ pays credit to the enormous skill involved, and there can be no doubt this criterion is met.

Gaut’s penultimate criterion<sup>76</sup> is that the work, or object, in question *belong to an established art form*. Bearing in mind the concerns about defining film as an art form, already rehearsed, let us accept that by 1981, the year of production of *My Dinner with André*, film is an established art form. After all, by this point, 66 years have passed since the publication of Vachel Lindsay’s *The Art of the Moving Picture*, probably the first book to champion film as an art.<sup>77</sup> One might, however, object that *My Dinner with André* is not so much a film as an example of ‘canned theatre’, and that, insofar as it can be considered as belonging to any particular form established art form, it is a work of *theatre*. Certainly, one could use a transcript of the film to create a playscript and put on a play version of *My Dinner with André*. Adapting original film material for the stage is by no means unusual and has produced theatricals versions of films from *Pretty Woman* to the *The Lion King*. The point, however, is not that the material *could* be transferred to a viable stage production, or even that the material might be *better suited* to theatre; even if both of these claims were true – which I do not think is the case – *My Dinner with André* remains a film. It was also initiated and developed by Shawn and Gregory with a view to being a work of film rather than of theatre, even though both men have theatre careers and that would have been a viable creative option for them.<sup>78</sup> Shawn and Gregory also ‘cast’ a film director rather than theatre director even though, as theatre-makers themselves, they had excellent knowledge of, and access to, theatre directors.

We needed a director with a great sense of humour on the one hand and a great sense of drama on the other – a master storyteller who would be able to bring out whatever qualities of suspense and tension our script might contain. We needed someone who would care about the issues in the script but who would not totally identify with either one or the other of the characters, or for that matter, despise either one or the other of the characters. We wanted someone who would know how to satirise us both – who would see us clearly as men who had grown up with privilege and money, two lazy dilettantes philosophising over a meal while the world outside was toiling and suffering –

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<sup>76</sup> Gaut does not regard his ten criteria as ‘closed’: the nature of his cluster theory is such that it is amenable to further extension of its disjunctive criteria.

<sup>77</sup> Lindsay (2000 [1915])

<sup>78</sup> Ryan (1982, 447)

and yet who could also portray us with the human sympathy what would be necessary in order to interest an audience in our fate.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, the art form that is film provided the dominant context in which all creative decisions about *My Dinner with André* occurred. For the record, Shawn recounts that he and Gregory “decided to send our script at once to [film director] Louis Malle”, who immediately responded and agreed to direct it.<sup>80</sup>

If Gaut’s *art form* criterion is satisfied by the above argument, then I take it one can use the same resources, to show that *My Dinner with André* can satisfy the necessary and sufficient condition of being (a work of) art on Jerrold Levinson’s Historical-Intentional Theory of art, as well as George Dickie’s Institutional Theory of art; in both its earlier and later versions. On the Historical-Intentional Theory, “a work of art is a thing intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art: regard in any of the ways works of art existing prior to it have been correctly regarded”<sup>81</sup> where “intends for” means “makes, appropriates or conceives for the purpose of”.<sup>82</sup> One may think that there is something implausible about Levinson’s use of a recursive definition, but if that is a problem, it is a problem with his theory, not with any film which was developed and produced with the intention of being regarded as another film in an ongoing artistic tradition of film. After all, by the time Louis Malle directed *My Dinner with André* he had already directed over 25 (mostly fiction) motion pictures, in as many years, and was a leading figure in both the French and American film industries. The film itself was shown to the public and critics – and continues to be shown – in the standard industry ways and was awarded the Best American Film in 1982 by the Boston Critics Circle. In other words, the moving picture artefact was created, handled, judged, and watched, in such a way as to participate in the institutional activities and practices that are constitutive of being a work in a continuing art-form-centred historical-intentional activity.

According to George Dickie’s 1971 articulation of his Institutional Theory, an object is defined as a work of art “in a classificatory sense” if it is:

- (1) an artifact (2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the art world) has conferred the status of

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<sup>79</sup> Shawn (1982, 119)

<sup>80</sup> Shawn (1982, 119)

<sup>81</sup> Levinson (1979, 234) See also Levinson (2002, 367).

<sup>82</sup> Levinson (1979, 236) See also Levinson (2002).

candidate for appreciation.<sup>83</sup>

Much of what justifies the film satisfying Gaut's ninth cluster criterion, and Levinson's theory, applies here, too. *My Dinner with André* is an artefact, and has been and continues to be not just something offered as a candidate for appreciation, it has received appreciation, and continues to do so, from the film-focussed art world. One might however be sceptical about Dickie's notion of an art world, especially a film art world. In Dickie's own attempts to clarify confusions over just what, or who, this relevant art-status-conferring world is, he denies that the appropriate art world needs be an art *crowd* (of organisations, museums, critics, viewers etc.) Rather, it is possible for an artefact to be offered as a candidate for appreciation, by a *single* person; indeed, by the artist-creator themselves. In articulating this clarificatory refinement to his Institutional Theory, Dickie uses film to help make his point:

When I spoke of a group conferring the status of candidate for appreciation, I had in mind, not the whole artworld or a group of its nominated representatives, but a group that makes a movie, puts on a play, or the like.<sup>84</sup>

In other words, it is the very activities of Shawn, Gregory, Malle, and the rest of their collaborators, both in front and behind the camera, whose work in creating this candidate for (their own and others') appreciation which provides *My Dinner with André* with its artistic status, according to the later version of Dickie's Institutional Theory. So the film fulfils the criteria for being art, or a work of art, according to both the early and later versions of the Institutional theory as well as satisfying Gaut's penultimate criteria for his Cluster Account.

The final criterion of Gaut's Cluster Account of art is that of *being the product of an intention to make a work of art*. I will not repeat the various empirical evidence that supports *My Dinner with André*'s ability to satisfy this criterion but assume that sufficient evidence has already been presented to warrant this. While no individual criterion is either a necessary or sufficient for an object or artefact to be a work of art - though it can "count towards"<sup>85</sup> an object being so - Gaut does insist that "if *all* of the properties that are criteria are

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<sup>83</sup> Dickie (2001, 53) See also pp. 52-73 for Dickie's distinctions between his three 'early' attempts to formulate an institutional definition of art, in 1969, 1971 and 1974, and the "later version" (p. 52) of 1984 which he offers as a corrective to confusions relating to these earlier articulations.

<sup>84</sup> Dickie (2001, 54)

<sup>85</sup> Gaut (2005, 274)

instantiated, this suffices for an object to fall under the concept.”<sup>86</sup> Given *My Dinner with André* satisfies all ten of Gaut’s art-confirming criteria this film is thereby a work of art.<sup>87</sup>

In sum, *My Dinner with André* can be shown to be a work of art on Berys Gaut’s Cluster Account of Art using arguments that also justify it to be a work of art, according to the Dickie’s Institutional Theory (in both its versions), Abell’s New Institutional Account, and Levinson’s Historical-Intentional Theory, as well as any other putative account that takes one or more of Gaut’s criteria as its own sufficient condition. Moreover, the reasons harnessed to show *My Dinner with André* is a work of art, would permit comparable reworking to show that *L’Avventura* and *Showgirls* – and, indeed, an indefinite number of other fiction films (and documentaries) – are also works of art, *contra* Prinz. Thus, whilst there are important caveats and sceptical positions worth acknowledging about the ‘film as art’ question, I take it that fiction films, can be and typically are works of art. The question now is, *qua* works of art, does this entail a medium specificity?

## 2 Medium-Specificity and the Art of Film

As we have seen, Arnheim and Bazin championed the artistic legitimacy of film – at least in its honorific or evaluative sense, if not its classificatory one – by arguing that the medium-specific resources of editing and/or cinematography justified films being acknowledged as works of art. Whilst the classicists’ various theorising is arguably better appreciated as examples of rationalised cheerleading for the theorists’ stylistic preferences, comparable debates concerning medium-essentialism continue. For Berys Gaut, medium specificity continues to be regarded as highly relevant to an understanding of what he calls the “cinematic art.”<sup>88</sup> But does a cinematic art have to be a medium-specific art? After all, the medium of language can be used to order in a restaurant, get married, say a prayer, write a piece of legislation and so on, as well as write a poem, a play, a novel, an epic saga, or a libretto. Stone, steel, plastic, brick, marble, and mud are just some of the media used to make works of architecture but in so doing, are they creating different forms of art? Yet, according

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<sup>86</sup> Gaut (2005, 274, emphasis added)

<sup>87</sup> This also ensures that *My Dinner with André* satisfies Catherine Abell’s New Institutional Account, which uses Gaut’s artistic criteria to help constitute a new definition of an institution, in which an institution is one “whose existence is due to its being perceived to perform certain functions, and these functions form a significant subset of the following: promoting positive aesthetic properties; promotion the expression of emotion; facilitating the posing of intellectual challenges; promoting formal complexity and coherence; facilitating the communication of complex meanings; promoting the exhibition of individual points of view; promoting originality; and promoting the exercise of a high degree of skill” (2012, 683).

<sup>88</sup> Gaut (2010)

to Carroll, “medium specificity ... as traditionally construed” is the view that, “art forms are individuated by their physical media which also provide said art forms with norms of excellence that, in turn, are determined by the possibilities and/or limitations of their material constitution.”<sup>89</sup>

In this section, I investigate three post-classical accounts of medium specificity of film art – essentialism, deflationism, and eliminativism – and diagnose the source of current confusions relating to the issue of medium specificity. In addition to ensuring the issue is clarified, my secondary aim is to prepare the ground for an alternative conception of the cinematic (and thus cinematic value) which I propose and defend in Chapter 2.

## 2.1 How Essential is Medium Specificity?

According to Berys Gaut, “For a medium to constitute an artform, it must instantiate artistic properties that are distinct from those instantiated with other media.”<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, some correct explanations and evaluations of individual art works refer to “distinct” properties of “the medium in which these artworks occur.”<sup>91</sup> These claims form the cornerstone of Gaut’s medium-specific views and as such his philosophy of cinematic art. *Prima facie* they look to present a strong commitment to an artistic essentialism on matters of medium specificity. By contrast, Noel Carroll denies that any (such) medium-specific claims are relevant to either our theoretical and critical engagement with films as art; indeed, he urges us to, “Forget the Medium!”<sup>92</sup> For Murray Smith, Carroll’s “eliminativism” goes too far: a modest amount of medium essentialism being inescapable.<sup>93</sup> But do Gaut, Carroll, and Smith operate with the same understanding of the nature of a medium? And if they do, can Murray’s medium deflationism provide a genuine ‘third way’ forward for these seemingly conflicting views? Let us begin by considering just what medium *is*.

The standard assumption, as identified above, is that a potentially artistic medium is a physical material. It is therefore unsurprising that Smith takes it to be uncontroversial that a medium just is one or more physical materials used in the making any work or object, e.g., paints, brushes, canvas, etc. In the particular case of a medium’s artistic use, the medium can be regarded as, Smith suggests, a “material bridgehead between the artist and the

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<sup>89</sup> Carroll (2019, 29)

<sup>90</sup> Gaut (2010, 287)

<sup>91</sup> Gaut (2010, 286). See also Gaut (2002), (2010), (2012a) (2012b)

<sup>92</sup> See Carroll (2003), (2008), (2019)

<sup>93</sup> See Smith (2006)

appreciator”.<sup>94</sup> Without the medium, we would lose the “sensuous embodiment of the idea” that is the work of art.<sup>95</sup> Whilst, at first glance, this might seem straightforward, in that he characterises the *medium* as the *material* bridgehead, Smith reveals that he does not distinguish between the medium and the material in his account. Similarly, in Carroll’s characterisation of medium specificity he refers to “physical media” rather than “physical material,”<sup>96</sup> and uses the terms ‘material’ and ‘medium/media’ interchangeably. Not so Gaut, however, who makes a distinction between the material and the medium of a work or activity; a view that stands in the way of Smith’s attempts to deflate medium-essentialism.

On Gaut’s view, the *material* one might use (say, paper, pencils, charcoal, and an eraser) is distinct from the *medium* of its use, which is to be understood as the many number of *ways* the material can be used: a set of ways being “a set of practices for the use of physical or symbolic materials.”<sup>97</sup> Each different set of ways or practices is, therefore, its own medium. Amongst different media, some (ways or practices of using that material) are used to bring into being objects or works with artistic properties and values. Those media used in the creation, or attempted creation of, such artistic features are those which identify the *medium-specific* art-forms. As Gaut states, “the art form is a particular use of the medium that either aims to realise artistic values or that does realise those values.”<sup>98</sup> The medium here is not, as it is for Smith or Carroll, the material or perceptible ‘stuff’ but the practices to which such stuff is subject. For the medium to be an artistic one, depends on a functional account of what those ways or practices are used for.<sup>99</sup> Thus, Smith’s more familiar *physical* or *material* account of a medium becomes, in Gaut’s hands a *practiced-based teleological* account. For Smith, a medium is *what* you use, for Gaut it is *how* you use your material or the practices you engage in, when using your material. Furthermore, to be a medium-specific art form depends on *what you use your medium for*, namely bringing into being artistic properties.

If we apply Gaut’s account to drawing, then the idea seems to be this. Paper, pencils, charcoal, etc, are *materials* which can be used in any number of ways, say: drawing a map to show someone directions, playing noughts and crosses, or sketching a *Madonna and Child*.<sup>100</sup> To the extent that these ways are different they are to be understood as generating different

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<sup>94</sup> Smith (2006, 142)

<sup>95</sup> This is Smith quoting (without referencing) Hegel in Smith (2006, 142).

<sup>96</sup> Carroll (2019)

<sup>97</sup> Gaut (2012a, 185)

<sup>98</sup> Gaut (2010, 289)

<sup>99</sup> I leave to one side that no criterion of Gaut’s Cluster Account that might be construed as functional is deemed a necessary condition, whereas this seems to be built into his medium essentialist commitments.

<sup>100</sup> My examples, not Gaut’s.

media, and to the extent to which media (or ways/practices of using materials) are used for artistic purposes, these media individuate art forms.

But can that be right? For how are we distinguish different ways or practices of using the material? Whether we are drawing a map, playing noughts and crosses, or sketching figures, we are putting pencil to paper and moving it around. In the first instance we are providing instructions, in the second playing a game, in the third drawing a picture of a religious subject, but what criteria are we to bring to bear in order to decide whether the material is being used in different ways, and so creating different media? We seem to have a dilemma: either (i) the ways or practices involved in each distinct activity are to be taken as different ways or practices, and every distinct thing one does with pencil and paper and eraser is a different medium. So sketching *a Madonna and Child* is one medium, sketching a pet is another because it is done in a different way, sketching the Lake District another, because it is done in a yet further way; and playing noughts and crosses is one medium, playing hangman another, doodling another medium etc., or (ii) we recognise that what is doing the work in differentiating putative media are the *purposes* to which material is put, i.e. what the material is being used to do; what activity is being pursued, i.e., we bring in the function or end goal of the activity.

With (i), the amount of distinct media proliferates to an indefinitely large number entailing an equally indefinite number of possible medium-specific art forms; to the point where each artwork risks exemplifying its own art form, because it has been done in its own *way*. Whilst with (ii), the very task of distinguishing medium-defining ways and practices, prior to – or separate from – the identification of the purposes or aims which those ways or practices are serve, cannot be done. The first horn looks to produce an unmanageable proliferation of individual art forms, which is self-defeating. On the second there are no criteria for establishing when a set of ways or a practice is the same or not, without reference to what those ways are being used for, so no progress is being made. Are the ways of using paper and pencil to draw a map the same or different to the ways of using it to play noughts and crosses or sketch a path through a field or make an abstract design? One can avoid this dilemma by not generating it in the first place, i.e., by not pursuing this kind of praxeological account of media which holds that a medium is distinct from both the material it uses and the purposes to which it is put.

Why do it then? It does have one key benefit for Gaut, because it offers a resource with which to counter the Scrutonian sceptic for whom the use of photographic equipment is, at its core (or ‘ideally’), wholly causal; a point that Scruton, reasonably claims puts paid to

any notion of a *sui generis* independent photographic art – a claim that Gaut, by contrast, is looking to sustain. Gaut’s distinction between material and media allows him to side-step Scruton’s worry, without having to answer it. He does this by distinguishing between being, on the one hand, a photographic medium and on the other hand being in a causal medium and thereby make the following claim, “[I]n discussing a film, I may explain some of its features by appeal to the fact that it is in a casual medium and some to the fact that it is a photographic one.”<sup>101</sup>

Implicit in Gaut’s distinction is that photography is a medium (i.e., as a way of using material) which is separate from being a casual way of using material. For Scruton the causal aspect of photography not only cannot be removed from photography, it *is* photography, at its most essential. If one hives off the casual aspect of the photography, then one is not – as Gaut makes room for – left with some nonetheless independent *photographic* medium that is potentially art, but rather – as Scruton recognises - a *pictorial* or *visual* medium. This also allows Scruton to recognise works of cinema as belonging to ongoing dramatic traditions that have developed over millenia. In other words, for Scruton what is essential to photography, and thus blocks any *sui generis* photographic art, is its art-preventing causal nature. Like Carroll, Scruton is simply inviting us to ‘forget the medium’, as it is irrelevant to the artistic status of a film. Gaut’s medium/material reconception circumvents this by removing the causal question from photography, and thus cinematography and film.

One might compare this to the suggestion that the development of reinforced steel girders creates a new art form, rather than extends the potential for the existing art form of architecture. On a Gautian account, reinforced steel girders would be a material that could be used in new ways, thereby generating a new medium, which, when used for artistic ends, would mean a new artform. If one did not wish to use a Gautian notion of media in this way, one might simply say that the ongoing artform that is architecture has developed over thousands of years, exploiting an ever-widening range of different materials which have, in turn, expanded the artistic possibilities of the long-standing art-form, architecture.

Put simply, Gaut’s medium-specificity manoeuvre – seeking to legitimise a ‘casual medium’ as something that is distinct from a photographic medium – creates a way of identifying photography as a potentially artistic medium without having to ‘solve’ the casual problem at the heart of the Scruton’s challenge; and it does so in such a way as to make it possible that there can be a ‘cinematic art’ that is unique and not beholden to, or any

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<sup>101</sup> Gaut (2010, 291)

furthering of our pictorial, visual and dramatic art forms. In other words, Gaut's unique reconceptualising of medium-specificity gives him an Archimedean point to create the conceptual space for his 'cinematic art': the cinematographic equivalent of a *sui generis* reinforced-steel art form, that is distinct from the artforms of architecture or sculpture. But is this kind of medium essentialism anything other than a taxonomic alternative?

To answer this, we need to recognise that, thus far, Gaut's medium-essentialist position is, only classificatory. But as Carroll rightly observes, medium-essentialism, standardly conceived, is both a classificatory and evaluative claim: it looks to the medium-specific properties of an art form to identify what make a particular work a *good* example of its art form. Does Gaut's re-worked notion of a medium, as the ways or practices of using its materials, come with an evaluative commitment?

## 2.2 Medium Essentialism: Honorific Accounts

On an honorific or evaluative aspect of medium-essentialism, standardly conceived, what makes a work of a particular art form, a good work of that art form are the "norms of excellence" which are facilitated or constrained by the "possibilities and/or limitations of their material constitution."<sup>102</sup> Arnheim's medium essentialism is to found in his clear commitment to the idea that to make a *good* film one must "cultivate the peculiar possibilities of cinematographic technique".<sup>103</sup> Amongst other things this includes the photographic and editing practices seen in, "the casual succession of clever and appropriate camera angles" which is an "accomplishment of mature film art."<sup>104</sup> Also singled out as a norm of excellence, for Arnheim is "montage" which provides the film-makers with a "first-class formative instrument."<sup>105</sup> Moreover, Arnheim identifies those film-making possibilities that he regards as *undermining* the norms of excellence. Just because sound recording is possible, and film can take advantage of synchronised sound recording, does not necessarily mean it should, nor that its presence adds to the value of a film. Rather the opposite is the case. "The absence of the spoken word concentrates the spectators' attention more closely on the visible

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<sup>102</sup> Carroll (2019, 29)

<sup>103</sup> Arnheim (1957, 35)

<sup>104</sup> See Arnheim (1957, 56) where Arnheim credits this point to Léon-Moussinac's "very useful book *Panoramique Du Cinema*."

<sup>105</sup> Arnheim (1957, 83)

aspects of behaviour;”<sup>106</sup> a point that is taken to speak in favour of the “the little [film art] that is good, instead of the great quantity that is bad.”<sup>107</sup>

But is this really medium essentialism? For as Arnheim points out, in his *A New Laocoön*, “if one tried to ignore the properties that the film shares with other media – as has been done *ad majorem gloriam* of the movies – one cannot hope correctly to evaluate the art of film.”<sup>108</sup> And with this thought we are back with Scruton and the idea that there is no *sui generis* independent photographic, or cinematographic art – just new works that draw on and bring together the merits of visual, audio-visual, pictorial and dramatic arts. For the selection, position, and movement of a recording camera to create a composition that develops through time, draws upon a filmmaker’s pictorial, visual and dramatic understanding. Similarly, the selection of shots in an edited sequence which helps create the rise and fall of suspense, the various dramatic crescendos and diminuendos, the story points, and their distinct emphases, etc., cannot be understood exclusively as a medium-specific technical device but is guided by dramatic, musical and even poetical demands. Using a piece of equipment or a particular material stuff, or handling them so as to achieve these goals, no more makes for a medium-specific art form, than using re-enforced steel in architecture creates a new medium-specific art form of steel architecture, or painting with a palette knife rather than a brush is a new art form.

That said, Arnheim is committed to a degree of medium specificity, arguing that all art forms have what I would call a *primer inter pares* medium. Whilst theatre can be a literary and a performance art, because it “does not require staging – it merely permits it” – it is first and foremost literature, according to Arnheim.<sup>109</sup> Whilst opera is the “collective effort of two media” nonetheless the musical component “dominates decisively” with its librettos subservient to the music.<sup>110</sup> One might use Wagner’s operas to object to this view, but Arnheim dismisses the composer on the grounds that his work is “so debatable and strongly influenced by theory that by itself it does not represent a valid counterargument.”<sup>111</sup> In the case of film, Arnheim’s evaluations come down clearly on the side of silent rather than sound film; a silent film has the greater potential for artistic value than a talkie. “It was precisely the absence of speech that made the silent film develop a style of its own, capable of condensing

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<sup>106</sup> Arnheim (1957, 110)

<sup>107</sup> Arnheim (1957, 134)

<sup>108</sup> Arnheim (1957, 213)

<sup>109</sup> Arnheim (1957, 217)

<sup>110</sup> Arnheim (1957, 222)

<sup>111</sup> Arnheim (1957, 222)

the dramatic situation” which, for Arnheim led to the “most cinegenic species of tale”.<sup>112</sup> The introduction of sound brought in “a theatre-type play” which whilst it may be “well developed psychologically ... means replacing the visually fruitful image of man in action with the sterile one of the man who talks.”<sup>113</sup>

In other words, Arnheim’s seemingly ontological medium essentialism is a stylistic preference for one kind of film over another. Insofar as Arnheim’s classificatory medium essentialism might be a theory of film as art; his honorific medium essentialism is perhaps best regarded as film criticism. This offers us a way to understand, in principle, if not in all its detail, Gaut’s own contemporary medium essentialism.<sup>114</sup> It also points to one way of resolving the Gaut/Carroll/Smith debate about medium essentialism, deflationism and eliminativism.

As recognised, Gaut is a medium essentialist in a classificatory sense. On his account the cinematic art is made possible thanks to the “plasticity of the cinematic recording medium.”<sup>115</sup> This plasticity allows for what Gaut calls “*variable* divergence” between a film recording and what it a recording of. Following Arnheim, it is this divergence that makes it possible for a recording medium to be an artistic medium: the plasticity of the cinematic recording medium – the fact that recording can be done in various ways – makes it an art form. What then *are* those art-engendering ways? Whilst Arnheim is – as detailed above – only too ready to commit to an answer to this question, Gaut avoids it. Instead, the evaluative or honorific dimension of his medium essentialism is limited to the claim that “Some correct artistic evaluations of artworks refer to distinctive properties of the medium in which these artworks occur.”<sup>116</sup> Not only do we have to beware what Gaut means by ‘medium’, we are not told which artistic evaluations are correct, appropriate, preferable, or why.

This highlights a dilemma associated with medium-essentialism’s evaluative aspect. Either (i) one states *which* materials, ways, or practices are those that make an artwork a good work of that medium or (ii) one states *that* some of the materials, ways, or practices that make an artwork in a particular medium a good work of that medium. In the first case, the risk is that one shifts from offering an (implicitly ontological) theory about the nature of art

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<sup>112</sup> Arnheim (1957, 222)

<sup>113</sup> Arnheim (1957, 229)

<sup>114</sup> Gaut, like Arnheim, allows for a work of art to be in multiple media, claiming they can be “nested”: “Media can contain other media, a phenomenon that I term nesting” (2010, 19). I take it that such nesting creates a hierarchical taxonomy that, again following Arnheim, allows for a singular, dominant, medium. Hence for Gaut ‘cinematic art’ can be a higher-order medium that is both a ‘causal’ and a ‘photographic’ medium; as earlier discussed.

<sup>115</sup> Gaut (2010, 43) and Gaut (2002, 311)

<sup>116</sup> Gaut (2010, 26)

to engaging in art criticism; the risk here is that one is not describing the features that make a work a good work but prescribing them. In the second case, one avoids this problem but at a cost of being unable to provide substance to, or evidence in support of, one's claim. How are we to evaluate the idea that *some* of the materials, ways, or practices that make an artwork in a particular medium a good work, if we do not know which materials, ways or practices are being proposed or referred to? We need to know where, and at what, to look.

One might respond by saying that (ii)'s point is to make it conceptually clear that having a medium-essentialist classificatory view must entail a medium-essentialist evaluative view. *Prima facie*, it seems that Gaut takes the second horn of the dilemma, as he would appear to remain silent on just what the distinctive properties of the medium in question are, in the case of cinematic art. Unlike Arnheim, as Carroll points out, "Gaut does not say when reference to the medium will result in cinematic achievement or not."<sup>117</sup>

Carroll is, however, being a little swift here. For I believe that Gaut does embrace the first horn of the dilemma. To illuminate this, and further consolidate the problematic nature of medium specificity, let us look at what Gaut, and others, say about *My Dinner With André*.

### 2.3 *My Dinner with André*: Gaut's uncinematic art

Gaut claims that his neo-Arnheimian argument shows that "there is a specific cinematic mode of presentation evidenced by the distinctive and in some respects unique ways in which cinema represents its subject matter."<sup>118</sup> As already recognised, he does not, however, go into detail about these ways, other than to advert to the plasticity of the cinematic recording. As such, one might think that the very fact of using a moving picture camera with its highly plastic cinematographic recording techniques together with the practice of editing together sections of moving pictures would, by definition, be cinematic. Yet Gaut denies this, insisting instead that, in the case of *My Dinner with André*, the film is:

uncinematic because it does not exploit in any interesting fashion any cinematic devices, such as montage, elaborate framing techniques, camera movements: it uses these devices only for recording purposes.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Carroll (2019, 36)

<sup>118</sup> Gaut (2012a, 186)

<sup>119</sup> Gaut (2010, 295)

What this announces is that it is not actually the fact of the intrinsic plasticity of cinematography and editing *per se* that makes for a “specific cinematic mode of presentation”, but rather that this needs to be exploited in some interesting way. Gaut, it seems, is switching tracks: proposing an honorific or evaluative form of medium essentialism. A film’s cinematic nature depends not on how it is made, i.e., by exploiting the plasticity of cinematographic recording devices, but rather in virtue of a preferred sub-set of those ways or practices. If this is the case, then Gaut is following in the footsteps of Arnheim and Bazin.

Hence Gaut’s medium essentialism has aspects of both a classificatory and an evaluative theory. Furthermore, rather than being at odds with Carroll’s description of standardly conceived medium essentialism it now seems to conform to it. Thus, like the proposals of Arnheim, Bazin, and others, Gaut’s medium essentialism is committed to providing normative directions for the making of works of film, for anyone who wants them to be deemed art.

Gaut denies, however, that his account of medium specificity, particularly as it relates to film, entails filmmakers are being given prescriptions for the artistic pursuit of their ‘medium’. This is because the standard view of medium essentialism, he suggests, is an *all-things considered* account, whereas he favours a *pro tanto* position.<sup>120</sup> By this Gaut means that whilst some, perhaps the majority of, medium essentialists, might claim that “all things considered, art forms should engage in and realize practices and artistic goals that are distinctive to them”, he does not.<sup>121</sup> Rather, in the case of cinematic art, being cinematic is a *pro-tanto* virtue, merit, or positive value (similarly being uncinematic is a *pro-tanto* vice, demerit, or negative value), but neither are all-things-considered evaluations. “Pro tanto judgements contrast with all-things-considered judgements ... [g]iving something a pro tanto merit might make it all things considered worse, since it might undermine some other pro tanto merits that it would otherwise possess.”<sup>122</sup> To be clear, *pro tanto* reasons – or reasons based on *pro tanto* features or judgements – cannot be eradicated, only overridden. But can this distinction between ‘all things considered’ and *pro tanto* features or judgements provide clarity on the question of medium essentialism?

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<sup>120</sup> Gaut does not italicise ‘pro tanto’ in his (2012b) article but does in his main (2010) monograph. Whilst my own policy is to italicise Latin phrases, I conform to the italicisation and punctuation choices in third party quotes.

<sup>121</sup> Gaut (2012b, 205)

<sup>122</sup> Gaut (2012b, 205)

As we have just identified, on Gaut's view, not any and every way of using the unique film-making tools and resources offered by cinematography and editing is cinematic, only some are, but what, when and why, are these *pro tanto* merits, and by what criteria are they identified? Either *pro tanto* cinematic features are virtues that relate to the artistic identity of a film in which they feature, or they are unrelated. If they are connected to a film's artistic identity, then the criteria used for deciding on the *pro tanto* merits of cinematic features is *derivative* of the criteria used for a singular all-things-considered judgement, and thus *pro tanto* virtues are not thereby autonomously evaluable. On the other hand, if there are criteria that can be used to identify autonomous *pro tanto* cinematic merits which pre-exist an all-things-considered judgement, what are they? Gaut's account remains, I would argue, incomplete.

If one considers his comments on *My Dinner with André*, the primary *pro tanto* cinematic virtue is a feature of film-making that is used in an 'interesting' way, where an example of one such interesting way is the use of 'elaborate framing techniques'. But why should an elaborate framing technique be better or worse, *intrinsically*, than a non-elaborate framing technique? And what makes a framing technique elaborate in the first place? How could a framing choice have merit as a stand-alone matter, as opposed to it being a choice exercised for a particular artistic aim, or to solve a practical problem such as, say, coping with a large crowd in an awkward filming location. But Gaut has reworked the notion of what a medium is and given it (supposed) *pro tanto* virtues that are both distinct from the material involved and autonomous from the artistic purposes to which the material is put. With this move, he risks undercutting the very general idea that a medium is something (however defined) that has an instrumental *purpose*. Yet as Carroll points out "a medium is a means" to an end, and Gaut seems to have boxed himself into a corner, and appears to have "lost sight of the very thing a medium is."<sup>123</sup>

Let us assume, however, that such worries can be quelled and that *pro tanto* cinematic merits can be identified. Then according to Gaut, a cinematic *pro tanto* merit of a film might be outweighed by non-cinematic *pro tanto* virtue of some other type. He claims that,

[M]aking a work more cinematic (a *pro tanto* merit) might, depending on the case, make less salient the quality of the dialogue (a *pro tanto* merit)

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<sup>123</sup> Carroll (2019, 34)

and so make it overall worse.<sup>124</sup>

Overall worse as what? A work of art, but of what art form? Gaut's notion of a 'cinematic art' is ambiguous. In claiming to be a medium-essentialist account Gaut's account of 'cinematic art' appears to oscillate between CA<sub>1</sub>, and CA<sub>2</sub>, where:

CA<sub>1</sub>: Cinematic art is the cinematic artform that works of cinema can be and sometime are;

CA<sub>2</sub>: Cinematic art is constituted by the *pro tanto* cinematic virtues that can be harnessed, along with other various non-cinematic *pro tanto* (virtues) in the making of a multi-media, involving art form.

One can read Gaut as arguing for CA<sub>1</sub> when prioritising his claim to be offering a neo-Arnheimian account that is vigorously medium essentialist. This is because on Arnheim's view there is a *sui generis* cinematic art form. To be clear, Arnheim, like Gaut acknowledges the multi-media nature of many works of art, but nonetheless concludes that such "hybrid forms are unstable,"<sup>125</sup> and that the "talking film" is one such example of a hybrid (multi-media) work.<sup>126</sup> Arnheim's apparent pluralism ultimately gives way to what is, I suggest, better characterised as medium *singularity*. "The individual artist, tends to conceive the world in one medium only."<sup>127</sup>

There would seem little point in proposing a medium-essentialist theory if one was not attempting to justify CA<sub>1</sub>. Yet Gaut's position is, in fact, CA<sub>2</sub>, which is not a claim that there is a *sui generis* cinematic art *form* (à la Arnheim.) Rather it recognises that there are works of art that are made in different media (i.e., works made in different ways or by using different practices), some aspects of which are ways and practices of a cinematic medium. In other words, Gaut's medium essentialism is not a medium-*qua-art-form* essentialism. Gaut's notion of a 'cinematic art' must not, therefore, be understood as being elliptical for a 'cinematic art *form*'. I take it that Carroll recognises something along these lines when he insists that Gaut, in offering a "revisionist" account of medium essentialism, is "changing the

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<sup>124</sup> Gaut (2012b, 205-6)

<sup>125</sup> Arnheim (1957, 230)

<sup>126</sup> Arnheim (1957, 5)

<sup>127</sup> Arnheim (1957, 230)

topic rather than offering a defensible version of something authentically considered a medium specific thesis.”<sup>128</sup>

In sum, Gaut’s version of a medium essentialism account of cinematic art does not establish a *sui generis* art form, moreover it does not actually seek to; nor does it provide any, let alone a viable account of cinematic properties (understood as a sub-set of properties manifested by works created through film-making practices). As demonstrated in this section, medium-essentialism, thus construed – as well as ‘standardly’ construed, following Carroll’s characterisation – risks being a barrier to our understanding of films as art.

### 3 Concluding Remarks

We have established that *My Dinner with André* is a fiction film that, according to Berys Gaut’s Cluster Account of Art is a work of art, and in so doing demonstrated by example how one might go about characterising many other fiction films, as works of art. Moreover, the arguments brought to bear show that on various other theories of art, fiction films can qualify as works of art, and that, as works of art, one need not consider films to be medium specific artworks. Traditionally conceived medium essentialism has been shown to lead to an unresolvable dilemma. Gautian-style medium essentialism has been shown to be a ship sailing under a false flag. Scrutonian scepticism about the possibility of a photography and, thus, cinematographic art has been shown to have as its target medium essentialism, and not the artistic status of films.

In investigating these issues, filmmaking has emerged as a collection of multi-material, multi-media activities in which people use a vast range of worldly and creative resources, equipment, and strategies to make films which can be works of art. The art form that is film is one that shares material, media, people, resources, equipment, and techniques with works in a range of other audio-visual art forms. In arguing that these claims are warranted, I agree with, and have provided reasons in support of, Carroll’s point that, “we may continue to share the common-sense conviction that (some) films (some) motion pictures or moving images are art. The burden of proof otherwise belongs to the sceptic.”<sup>129</sup>

Carroll’s injunction to ‘forget the medium’ is a more promising path to philosophical progress than Smith’s attempt to appease all parties with his medium deflationist proposal, not least because none of the parties are using the key notions in the same way, or to the same

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<sup>128</sup> Carroll (2019, 46 and 36)

<sup>129</sup> Carroll (2008, 33)

end. Medium essentialism, in its various forms, including Gaut's, is either ambiguous, a collection of mutually contradictory positions, or prescriptive; whilst medium deflationism retains the problems of medium essentialism without offering any new benefits. Indeed, Smith is not unaware of this rather impoverished notion, arguing that we might as well carry on talking about it because "we're stuck with medium specificity talk now – as part of the history of film theory".<sup>130</sup> There is, however, a way of talking about medium specificity that recognises it as being historically situated and of historical interest – as with our considerations of Platonic 'forms' and Lockean 'ideas' – without having to also buy into its (often confused) implications. I therefore move forward, to consider the question of cinematic value, adopting Carroll's eliminativist *cri de coeur* to 'forget the medium!' under the "slogan", "Excellence above purity".<sup>131</sup> This shifts our focus on to the values of films, without first having to fight a counter-productive battle attacking a medium essentialist position that is, ultimately, indefensible. Where, though, does this leave the notion of the cinematicity and thus cinematic value?

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<sup>130</sup> Smith (2006, 144)

<sup>131</sup> Carroll (2019, 35)

## Cinematic Value

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In Chapter 1, we established that a film can be a work of art and that this need not entail medium essentialism. This allows us, now, to re-consider the notion of cinematicity, or the cinematic, free from metaphysical presumptions, entailments, or prescriptions.<sup>132</sup> In this chapter, I argue that there are at least three categorially distinct ways of construing cinematicity: as an artistic, an aesthetic, and a stance-based notion, none of which is reducible to, or the equivalent of, the other. As such, cinematic value also comes as a trio of values. In what follows I pay particular attention to the third way of construing cinematicity, namely as a stance, or way of attending to a film that is the basis for recognising in the film a distinct stance-based cinematic value. Recognising that there are three distinct conceptions of cinematicity, each with their own associated cinematic values, allows – in principle – for a greater degree of discrimination when considering the relation between cinematic and other values, including cognitive value. Stance-based cinematic value is the value of a film that may be identified in virtue of bringing a particular form of attention to bear on a film, namely one that assumes a film’s form, its content, and its themes and/or thesis can be, and may be, integrated. For the avoidance of doubt, as will be demonstrated, this stance-based cinematic value, or integrated value, is not a subjective value.

More specifically, in Section 1, I distinguish between aesthetic and non-aesthetic conceptions of cinematicity, challenging – whilst benefitting from – work by Aaron Smuts, who rightly recognises the fact that novels, video games and other non-film works are characterised as cinematic. In Section 2, I exploit aspects of Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen’s notion of a *literary stance* to point to an alternative notion of cinematicity, one that suggests the possibility of taking *cinematic stance* towards a film. This opens up the possibility that a specific stance, i.e., a particular form of attention or way of considering a film, may make available features of that film that can then be appreciated as having a value that is not otherwise captured by, or reducible to, artistic or aesthetic notions of cinematic

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<sup>132</sup> See Kelly (1964, 421) for the claims that “a film is cinematic” because it “is made in conformity with certain principles arising out of its nature” and “should not strive to be something other than what it is”; notwithstanding it may involve literary, dramatic, musical, and visual features. Kelly’s arguments can be usefully seen as foreshadowing Gaut’s position.

value. In recognising just such a third, stance-based, or stance-enabled conception of cinematic value, however, I argue that it is not to be confused with Lamarque and Olsen's more familiar notion of a *literary stance* which is tied to the value of a work of literature *qua* art, and thus just is one and the same as its artistic value. In Section 3, I pull together my concluding remarks and look ahead. I continue to develop my arguments using *My Dinner with André*, as well as other fiction films.

## 1 The Cinematic: Preliminaries

When not being used as a philosophical term of art, 'cinematic' simply means of, or relating to films, motion pictures, filmmaking and/or cinematography, whether these are used in artistic activities or not. It is synonymous with the equally neutral 'filmic'.<sup>133</sup> On this use, one can talk about making a filmic or cinematic exploration of, say, a sunken ship, or outer space, as well as referring to *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* or *Gravity*. Characterising a film as cinematic is also way to acknowledge that a film has one or more of a particular sub-set of praiseworthy features.

According to Aaron Smuts to describe a film as cinematic is to highlight the extent to which it features, "expansive scenery, extreme depth of field, high camera positions, and elaborate tracking shots."<sup>134</sup> He suggests that this connotation of 'cinematic' can be traced back to the third quarter of the twentieth century when (particularly English-language) movie producers and studios were experiencing dwindling audiences as a result of increased television ownership. This encouraged an increase in the production of films designed to exploit widescreen formats and offer features arguably best experienced in public cinemas rather than at home. Marketing departments championed "expansive and expensive" epics in Cinerama and Cinemascope delivering "cinematic" experiences not available on the television screen.<sup>135</sup> As big vistas with beautiful imagery and complex camera shots are more effective on large rather than small screens, certain visual styles and features became associated with the 'cinematic' film as opposed to the televisual. This use of 'cinematic' is, I suggest, a particularly aesthetic one, in virtue of placing a specific emphasis on the visual.

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<sup>133</sup> See the OED's entry here:

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33085?rskey=GpWcXr&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid> (with first references dating back to 1912. Miriam Webster's definition can be found here: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cinematic>)

<sup>134</sup> Smuts (2013, 82). A documentary that used these filming strategies could equally be characterised as cinematic.

<sup>135</sup> Smuts (2013, 81)

The grand scope of the epic films of D. W. Griffiths, and other movies from a pre-television era, as well as the work of contemporary directors are now also described as cinematic, in this praise-worthy aesthetic sense. Over the last several decades, the list of cinematic features has expanded, but the focus is still very much on *visual* aesthetic features. Film-making advice on how to achieve director Terrence Malick’s “most iconic of cinematic styles” recommends shooting at magic hour (i.e. in, and often into, the final rays of the setting sun); exploiting wide-angled hand-held photography, and using shots of “nature in its beauty”.<sup>136</sup> (See examples taken from *Days of Heaven*, *The New World*, and *Tree of Life*, directed by Malick, in Figures 1 and 2 below, and 3, overleaf.)



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

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<sup>136</sup> See Aldredge (2016)



Figure 3.

Malick’s visual sumptuousness disintegrates any putative line between photographic, pictorial, and painterly visual aesthetics.<sup>137</sup>

Similarly, Alfonso Cuarón’s 2018 multi-award-winning, black-and-white film, *Roma*, about the life of a Mexican family’s maid, has been described as “the most cinematic movie to hit Netflix ever” on the grounds that it is “ravishing” and “spectacular-looking” notwithstanding that it is in black and white.<sup>138</sup> Cuarón – who was both *Roma*’s director and director of photography – describes taking an “Ansel Adams’ approach” to his cinematography. He echoes Adams’ ‘zone’ system in ensuring attention is paid to every inch of the image, and includes a range of shades of grey, as well as black blacks, and bright whites, to deliver the kind of detailed grandeur and beauty found in Adams’ black and white photography, albeit in *Roma* this is often achieved using exploiting post-production visual effects.<sup>139</sup> (Figure 4, overleaf.)

<sup>137</sup> Malick’s films are often re-edited by people interested in creating ‘beautiful’ stand-alone montages, free from any story purpose. See, for example, this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cuU12Oc0VE>

<sup>138</sup> Reid (2018)

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Cuarón and ‘behind-the-scenes’ footage of this sea shot are available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOnFZTtubg>



Figure 4.

*Roma* is also replete with complicated cinematography, not least during the film's climactic sequence – when the maid, Cleo, rescues a child in trouble in the water – which involves tracking with a crane-mounted camera into, and over, a choppy sea. (Figure 5.)



Figure 5.

Interior filming is no less open to being handled in cinematic ways, i.e., to deliver a visually arresting aesthetic impact. Martin Scorsese's famous Steadicam<sup>140</sup> shot in his 1990 film *Goodfellas* follows the main character, Henry, escorting his future wife, Karen, into the Copacabana nightclub, on their first date. Henry leads Karen into the club through a side door, avoiding the crowded front entrance. In a single take of all-but three minutes, Henry

<sup>140</sup> The Steadicam is a combined body harness and gimballed camera mount which allows the camera operator to take hand-held footage without the image bumping or jarring.

leads Karen through the club's basement corridors and its kitchens, before emerging into the main nightclub and being led to the best seat in the house.<sup>141</sup> According to the Steadicam operator who physically filmed it, the shot choreography was driven not only by story reasons but by the intrinsic visual aesthetic. "We got to the kitchen and Michael Ballhaus [the film's Director of Photography] said, "Marty [Scorsese], we have to go into the kitchen." Marty said, "Why would they go into the kitchen?" And Ballhaus said, "Because the light is beautiful."<sup>142</sup>

Such visually striking interior and exterior shots, I characterise as cinematic - *aesthetically* construed. I suggest that these are the kinds of 'interesting' shots that Gaut regards as *pro tanto* virtues of a *cinematic art*. Yet, it is perfectly possible to have an equally elaborate, technically difficult shot but which goes unnoticed; indeed, it might be designed to go unnoticed because drawing attention to itself would be dramatically, or otherwise, counterproductive. In such cases, is the result cinematic or not? And does it have cinematic value, aesthetically construed?

Orson Welles' 1958 film *Touch of Evil* opens with a spectacular single take of over three minutes which tracks, jibs, and cranes up and over buildings and through traffic in a controlled piece of choreography that weaves the viewer in and through a crowded American/Mexican border town and its inhabitants.<sup>143</sup> Whilst Welles' choice for this sequence can be justified dramatically and/or thematically, it is standardly regarded as extremely cinematic because it is a breath-taking visual achievement. By contrast, later in the film there is a single moving shot, lasting over five minutes, which involves a policeman, a suspect, his girlfriend, and her lawyer, and several others all in a tiny three-room apartment which, according to Welles, was harder to achieve than the film's opening.<sup>144</sup> Furthermore, it was (supposedly) designed to go unnoticed: a goal that is, in the main, successful. The apartment shot does not draw attention to how it looks; it does not present itself as a self-consciously painterly or pictorial series of moving images one is being invited to enjoy, or appreciate for itself. So although it can be, it is not of cinematic value, understood as meaning of value in virtue of its visual aesthetic. Rather, the achievement of this extraordinary shot remains, as has been argued, "hid[den] ... in plain sight."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> See the Copa shot here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Sr-vxVaY\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Sr-vxVaY_M)

<sup>142</sup> Mulcahey (2015)

<sup>143</sup> This opening shot is available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yg8MqjoFvy4&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yg8MqjoFvy4&feature=emb_logo)

<sup>144</sup> This apartment shot is available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzcNU\\_1KqG0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tzcNU_1KqG0)

<sup>145</sup> Morrow (2016)

We seem to be in a situation where there are valuable aspects of a film that remain uncaptured by our existing conceptions of the cinematic, when they are conceived either in artistic or aesthetic terms. It would seem almost inevitable, therefore, to conclude, as Gaut does, in the case of *My Dinner with André*, that the unobvious is uncinematic. This not only highlights the fact that we have an inadequate set of conceptual resources with which to identify and explore all the valuable features of a film. It also *prima facie* points to the fact that, on some accounts, there is no difference here between the aesthetic and artistic uses of the notion of the cinematic. If one thinks a film is only an example of a cinematic art if it is somehow formally conspicuous, then our conceptual resources for engaging with films are discovered to have shrunk even further than we might have thought, at exactly the moment when we find them wanting. It is however consistent with certain views, including one of the mainstays to Gaut's own philosophy of art in general, namely that "the aesthetic value of art is the same as its artistic value."<sup>146</sup> The only qualification to this claim is that there is what Gaut calls a 'narrow scope' notion of aesthetic which is restricted to beauty (and which was discussed in the context of his cluster account.) In other words, according to Gaut, there is a wide-scope conception of aesthetic value that is co-extensive with artistic, and a narrow-scope that is limited to beauty. But whichever approach shapes the framework of one's philosophy of art, the result is the same: there are values a film has that fall outside of the realm of the artistic and the aesthetic (be the latter conceived in narrow or wide-scope terms).

In sum: judging a film to be cinematic, or otherwise, can be done in artistic or aesthetic terms (which on some accounts are the same and on others different) and thus gives rise to conceptions of artistic and/or aesthetic cinematic value. To the extent that these are different, the aesthetic conception of the cinematic and thereby aesthetic value (cinematically construed) are characteristically regarded as identifying and valuing films as visually lush, impressive, or extravagant, and the viewer's attention is drawn to these qualities, to some degree, as formal contributions to the film. This, however, leaves any number of a film's features and aspects as having no identifiable value, falling as they fall outside the scope of both a work's artistic and aesthetic values. This situation risks fuelling critically impoverished views about what filmmaking is, what filmmakers achieve, and how, why, and in what ways films can be, and are, valuable.

One might object that one does not need to tease out these various connotative nuances in the notion of the cinematic; that this is straying from the philosopher's task onto

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<sup>146</sup> Gaut (2007, 40)

the critic's territory. But that, I believe, is a profound mistake. For we need a comprehensive grip on what is meant by, 'cinematic', to investigate how, if in any way, a film's cinematic value connects to its cognitive value.

It is also worth noting that the term 'cinematic' is not always used signal either artistic or aesthetic praise. According to Smuts, American film critic Pauline Kael's *5001 Nights at the Movies* uses the term 'cinematic' only six times, in nearly a thousand pages, and five of these are in scare quotes.<sup>147</sup> Although one 2017 headline of a video game review by one of leading film and game critics declares, 'The Most Cinematic Gaming Franchise: Why You Must Play the "Uncharted" Games'<sup>148</sup> games are sometimes criticised for being 'too cinematic', meaning they 'force' players to watch "minimally interactive narrative sequences" that are "no fun to play."<sup>149</sup> Here 'cinematic' connotes a work that turns the player into a passive spectator, a point that echoes the visual emphasis of film-based visual aesthetics. Furthermore, when novels and even non-fiction are described as 'cinematic', this may or may not be use as a term of praise.<sup>150</sup> Thus being cinematic, in these ways, need not entail the having of any supposed 'cinematic' value.

I have argued that the notion of cinematicity has various connotations, and that it is important to discriminate between artistic and (visually) aesthetic uses of the term. I have also recognised that these uses of the term 'cinematic' are sometimes descriptive, sometimes evaluative. This makes conceptual room for the possibility of a pluralistic account of cinematic value. That said, there remain yet further features of films that deserve understanding and appreciation and which are not captured by these standard uses; which points to the need for a further construal of cinematicity. We can source some of the constituents of a possible further conception – of what it is to be cinematic - in the philosophy of literature, namely in Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen's recognition that one might take a *literary stance* towards a written work. Perhaps if we can take a *cinematic stance* we might find a way to capture these aspects of a film that fall through the artistic and/or aesthetic 'gaps' in our philosophical and critical engagement with works of film art, and thus develop a more comprehensive set of resources when it comes to thinking about how cognitive value relates to cinematic value.

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<sup>147</sup> Smuts (2013, 83)

<sup>148</sup> Tallerico (2017)

<sup>149</sup> Smuts (2013, 87)

<sup>150</sup> See Kellman (1987) for examples that refer to the novels of Proust, Ferber, Updike, Pynchon, and Hemingway.

## 2 Stance-based Values

As recognised in the previous section, being a work of cinema and being a cinematic work are not always the same thing. Just as Gaut characterises that which makes cinematic art *cinematic* in terms of the interesting and elaborate ways (but not the whys) in which film-making techniques are used, he uses a comparable idea in literature. “A work of literature” he states, “may be honoured for being very literary, or derided for being written in flat and halting prose.”<sup>151</sup> But Gaut’s example misses the point, for there may well be circumstances where the use of flat and halting prose is a powerful creative choice. One can imagine an entire novel, written from the first-person point of view of protagonist of limited vocabulary and awkward speech patterns, in which the use of flat and halting prose contributes to its value. In other words, one cannot simply separate how the medium is used from what it is used for – a point already made. Thus, the notion of ‘literary’ which Gaut is mobilising to help identify literary value, is the prose equivalent of a conception of cinematic value which emphasises valuable handsome landscape photography, elaborate camera movements, and ostentatious visuals. It is a way of writing whose stylistic tropes and verbal flourishes are very much on display, there to be noticed and admired.

‘Literary’ writing, understood in this Gautian way, is or involves, a style that draws attention to the writing itself. In the prose arts, there is a term for this self-consciously ‘fine-writing’: it is *belles-lettres*. Being a work of literature or a literary work is not, nor does it entail or necessitate, however, it being a piece of *belles-lettres*; as we know from the works of Hemmingway and haiku poetry. Nor is the literary *value* of a piece of prose either entailed or necessitated by that piece of prose’s value as *belles-lettres* prose. By the same token, being a film artwork, or an example of filmic, or cinematic art, neither necessitates or entails that it manifests some specific (often showy) set of aesthetic features or properties. To presume this would be to make the moving-picture equivalent of the erroneous equation of the *literary* with the *belle-lettrist*. It would be to conflate all conceptions of the cinematic with, shall we say, a ‘belle-cinématique’.<sup>152</sup> What is needed is an alternative conception of the cinematic, together with the relevant associated value: a conception that avoids such

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<sup>151</sup> Gaut (2010, 295) The quote continues: “These terms are all evaluative, and they claim that the works in question are good in part because they exploit features that are distinctive to the medium”, but I will not re-open the medium-essentialist issue again.

<sup>152</sup> Thanks to Peter Lamarque for coining this term to help characterise my point.

confusions and does not collapse into, or is reduced to, either an artistic and/or aesthetic conception or associated value.

In the philosophy of literature, Lamarque and Olsen propose an understanding of literary value that is conceptually tied to the taking of what they identify as a literary *stance*. I now argue for a related, but as will become clear, by no means identical, film-related, value-connected stance: the *cinematic stance*.

## 2.1 The Cinematic Stance

Roughly speaking, to take a cinematic stance is to bring to bear, on a film, a particular type of attention, namely an attention that is focussed on the way or ways in which a film's content, its form, and its themes and/or theses may be integrated. One takes a cinematic stance by approaching a film on the presumption that its constituents – understood as its form, content, themes and/or thesis – are the kinds of things that stand in potentially integrable relations. One takes a cinematic stance because one seeks to identify if this integration has been achieved and if so, to understand how, in what ways, and to what degree, the integration is achieved. In other words, in bringing to bear a cinematic stance, i.e., bringing to bear this particular assumption-guided way of attending to a film, one is interested in understanding what the film is about, how this is handled, and what the film is *really* about, not as autonomous aspects or elements of a film, but as potentially interdependent and integrated co-constituents. The taking of such a cinematic stance does not entail that any such integration of content, form, theme and/or thesis, will be revealed or discovered in the work; for there may be no such integration. Thus taking a cinematic stance does not entail a film's having a stance-based or – as it might also be called – 'an 'integrated' cinematic *value*.

By taking a cinematic stance towards a film – and in so doing investigating, and potentially discovering the possible ways in which the film's content, form, and themes and/or thesis are integrated – one is thereby identifying the substance to be evaluated. In other words, taking a stance-based approach to the three constituents of a film provides one with the wherewithal to make an evaluative judgement about the film's stance-based or integrated cinematic value.

Taking these elements individually:

- CS-F:<sup>153</sup> an individual *film* is a human-made collection of one or more moving images of finite length which may have a synchronised soundtrack, and which is typically made to be viewed in a particular temporal order and at a specific speed<sup>154</sup>;
- CS-S: the *cinematic stance* is a way of engaging with an individual film that assumes the film's trio of constituents: (i) its content, (ii) its form and (iii) its themes and/or theses can, but need not, stand in integrated relations, and that in attending to the film in order to identify and discern what, if any, of these potentially integrable constituents the film has, one is taking a cinematic stance.
- CS-V: the *cinematic stance-based value* of a film is the value of that film in virtue of the extent to which the film's trio of constituents: (i) its content, (ii) its forms, and (iii) its themes and/or theses are, in fact, integrated. This is a gradable value; one that recognises that at the point of maximum integration the trio of constituents can be understood and appreciated as interchangeable.

Regarding CS-F, the word 'film' is used in a generic, non-medium-specific way and has no medium-involving ontological implications. Any film, be it a fiction, documentary, abstract, or essay film, is a potential candidate towards which one can take a cinematic stance. The notion of 'human-made' allows for the human use of equipment in filmmaking and exhibition. This is not limited to photographic equipment, given it includes such hand-drawn and/or digital and software-generated moving images of the type that Gaut christens 'blended' or *mélange* images.<sup>155</sup> Being 'human-made' rules out naturally occurring image-producing cameras obscura, unless these are deliberately incorporated into films by human activity. The 'series of moving images' need be only a single unedited shot, or a series of

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<sup>153</sup> I am here deliberately echoing Gaut's MSF (Medium Specific Art Form), MSX (Medium-Specific Explanation) and MSV (Medium-Specific Value), as a way of contrasting this non-medium-specific alternative. See Gaut (2010, 286-287).

<sup>154</sup> Certain interactive storytelling works offer the reader or viewer some control over the ordering of events, but these are perhaps better regarded as interactive games, rather than films, though there are overlapping features and one might take a stance towards an interactive work to evaluate how integrated its parts are, into the whole.

<sup>155</sup> See Gaut (2010, 45) for his taxonomy of digital film-making methods, which include mechanical methods of image capture, hand construction and computer synthesis.

images. The ‘finite length’ qualification is required for the film to be a singular work that can be, in principle, engaged with as a distinct whole. To take the cinematic stance towards work and examine its trio of constituents, requires that it be a contained, closed, and complete work. A film that is re-edited in any way and consequently viewed in a different order is a different film.

One might raise concerns that CS-F is not sufficiently extensionally rigorous, and no doubt there are likely borderline cases. Consider a ‘film’ created by a judiciously positioned rock pool which manages to ‘photographically’ record a passing elephant thanks to the convenient confluence of appropriate chemicals in the water, apposite lighting, and the rest.<sup>156</sup> Would this be a film, given it is not human made? Not according to CS-F: it is not the created product of a deliberate human act or activity. One could, however, take the cinematic stance towards such a thing on an ‘as if’ basis, i.e., on the assumption or insistence that it can be understood and appreciated *as if* it were. Given there are many billions of people who hold that the universe is to be understood and appreciated as a divinely created object brought into being by an intelligent entity capable of making choices, acting on them (without limit), and having values, one can imagine a situation in which the rock-pool, elephant film could be approached as intelligently, purposefully, and deliberately ‘produced’.

Regarding CS-S, the cinematic stance, this is a way of engaging with a work. It is not, however, simply a matter of experiencing the film and (possibly) articulating that experience, but also of investigating it and reflecting on the potential interdependency of its constituents and how they mutually inform and impact each other. Such active engagement is not just a process but one that is cyclical rather than linear. I hesitate to characterise it as ‘hermeneutic’ because this might bring in unwanted connotations, as this is now a philosophical term of art. Suffice it to say that one’s understanding and appreciation of a film – like any real-life situation – changes; and, as a result of these changes, one’s experience can shift in ways that prompt and modify subsequent investigations and appreciation. As such taking a cinematic stance towards a film – with the aim of increasing and enriching both one’s understanding and subsequent evaluation of it – is a matter of an open-ended engagement that focusses on the film’s constituents and their relation; an encounter that is unlikely ever to be ‘completed’, albeit the rewards of one’s continuing engagement might dwindle.

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<sup>156</sup> See Gaut (2002, 302-303) and (2010, 28) for the elephant example, there used to argue that there can be such a thing as “natural photographs” (2002, 302) understood as a purely casual product that creates, as he sees it an intentional object. This, however, would entail that every effect of any cause - such as the shadows on the grass made by leaves of a tree in sunlight - is its ‘intentional object’.

The focus of that understanding and appreciation, and which motivates the taking of an active cinematic stance is not a two-part relation between form and content,<sup>157</sup> but the putative tripartite relations, between content, form, and themes and/or theses. Taking these constituents individually, I begin with content.

Content is a matter of what the film is about and what can be seen, and heard, and seen to be happening in a film. For example, on a minimalist description of content, *My Dinner with André* is a film about a playwright who has dinner with a friend in Manhattan, then goes home. One could go into evermore increased detail: the playwright walks to the subway, travels on a subway train filled with graffiti and walks from the station to the restaurant; he waits for the other man at the bar; he orders a drink, etc. There is no end to the observable minutiae that one might categorise as part of the film's content, e.g., there is breadbasket on the friends' restaurant table which hides André's plate of food. The content of the film, at whatever level of detail that is used to describe it, in part or in whole, is *what* we see and hear. I take it this is not contentious, but note, for the moment, that it can be identified on a sliding scale of degrees of fine- or coarse-grainedness.

The form of a film is any and everything that can be regarded as *a way* of presenting both visually and audibly that which we see or hear. It is the 'how' by which the content's 'what' is presented. This includes, as a minimum, all the shots we see, be each a single shot, a two-shot, a wide-shot, an over-the-shoulder shot, a zoom shot; a shot from below, from above, or on the level; a tracking shot, a pan, a jib, etc., It also includes the ordering of those shots, and their running time, along with the rhythm and pace their assembly and sequencing generates. The form of the film also includes the design of rooms, furniture, and onscreen props; as well as the design of all the costumes, hair, and make-up; the onscreen locations - this street, such-and-such a building, that view, this landscape; every piece of heard dialogue, sound effect, background noise, atmospheric sound, as well as incidental or source music and of course, silence. Furthermore, the form of a film, includes not just a particular take of an actor's performance, but the actor themselves, when regarded as a casting choice. It also includes the genre of the film, from western to noir, from courtroom drama to comedy. I return to the formal specifics of *My Dinner with André* in the next section, when considering how they inform stance-based cinematic value.

The third relata involved in taking a cinematic stance is a film's theme or themes, and/or its thesis or theses. Examples of themes might be friendship, war, or education. A

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<sup>157</sup> See Thompson-Jones (2005) for the inseparability of form of content.

film's thesis (if it has one) is an extractable claim articulable as a truth-evaluable proposition, e.g., 'No friendship can last a lifetime'; 'There is no such thing as a just war; and 'It's never too late to get an education.' I take it this much is uncontentious. The themes of American director Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation* and his 1972 film *The Godfather* might reasonably be identified as, in the first case, surveillance and in the second, the Mafia. This way of considering a film's theme, however, seems more akin to a work's topic or subject area of focus; no effort or imagination is required to identify such themes. In these examples, surveillance and the Mafia are, I would argue, more appropriately recognised as features of these film's *content*. There is, however, a richer sense of theme which pertains to what a film is, let us say, *really about*. Insofar as the cinematic stance is interested in investigating, understanding, and appreciating the theme, or themes of film, it is theme in this second sense: something that stands in interdependent relations with a film's content and its form. Here is Coppola:

“[W]hen I make a movie I always have to have a theme, preferably in one word ... when I made "The Conversation" the theme was privacy. When I made "The Godfather" the theme was succession.”<sup>158</sup>

Using this distinction, *The Conversation* is *about* surveillance (*qua* topic or content) but thematically it is also *really about* privacy. *The Godfather* is *about* the Mafia (*qua* topic or content) but thematically it is *really about* succession. The theme, understood in this way, need not be an interpretation *per se*,<sup>159</sup> but might be the recognition of a unifying notion; one that can provide a key to unlock a greater understanding and appreciation of the interdependencies of a film's content and form. Realising *The Godfather* is *really about* succession rather than the Mafia is not unlike having something come into view as the result of Gestalt switch. Once seen, it is there; it cannot be unseen, and it makes other things look different.

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<sup>158</sup> See Coppola (2016) for more on the subject including: “And I taught my [filmmaking] children to try to know what that big theme is because ... you have to answer so many questions every day, like should she have long hair or short hair? Should she wear a dress or a skirt? Should he have a car or should it be a bicycle? And you know the answer so you just fire them off. But once in a while you don't know the answer. And that's when you say, well, what is the theme?” ... [I]n "The Conversation" when we went picking sort of trench coats for the character that Gene Hackman - and I didn't know which one. I didn't want him to look too much like a detective. He wasn't really a detective. And then I said to myself, well, what's the theme? And I said privacy. So there was one coat that was a plastic coat that you could see through. So I chose that. ... [I]n the case of "Godfather" being succession, I would always know that as long as I was telling a story of the succession of - there was a king and he had three sons and one was very this and one was very that and ... I knew ... what I was doing.”

<sup>159</sup> Theme and thesis are discussed by Beardsley (1981, 401-419) as part of the subject of interpretation.

This second, more fecund notion of theme, is perhaps closer to Beardsley's proposal that an artistic theme in *literature* – the focus of his own discussion – is “something named by an abstract noun or phrase: the futility of war, the mutability of joy; heroism, inhumanity” or “pride, divine power, fate, irremediable evil, the driving spirit of man.”<sup>160</sup> That said, Beardsley's examples reveal the extent to which certain noun phrases, e.g., ‘the futility of war’ or ‘the driving spirit of man’, are, in fact, elliptical theses, i.e., ‘War is futile’ and ‘Man has a driving spirit’. This is even more obvious in Beardsley's suggestion that the theme of *War and Peace* is “the endless rhythmic alternation of youth and age, life and death, ambition and resignation.”<sup>161</sup> One could readily turn this into a truth-evaluable claim: ‘There is an endless alternation of youth and age, life and death, ambition and resignation’, without thereby imposing on this new ‘thesis’ more than is already implicit in the supposedly non-truth-evaluable ‘theme’. So, whilst a theme may well be a “concept” that one “singles out for attention” as Beardsley suggests, when it is articulated in such detail, even as a noun phrase, it can carry the same force as a truth-evaluable proposal or thesis.<sup>162</sup> For the moment, though, nothing hangs on being able to draw a firm line between theme and thesis. It simply remains important to recognise there can be an oscillation between the two. My continued referencing of theme *and/or* thesis is, therefore, a way to recognise that sometimes the former is an elliptical expression of the latter, where it is not expressed as a grammatical propositional.

One might, however, be sceptical about the very possibility of identifying discrete features of a film in terms of separable content, form, and theme and/or thesis. After all, many aspects of films, particularly fiction films, could just as reasonably be deemed part of a film's content as its form. If *The Godfather* is *really about* succession, then the fact that this is explored through the lives of criminal family, would suggest that the Mafia plot is not part the film's content, rather it is accurately identified as the *form* taken by this succession story. It is part of the *way* the theme is realised, not some separate content-supposed *what*. My response to this sceptical challenge is to say that not only is this is not a problem, it begins to help illuminate some of the benefits of the cinematic stance I am proposing. For the cinematic stance not only allows the interchangeability of form and content, it encourages such flexibility of categorisation, as being a potential product or consequences of interdependence and integration. The cinematic stance recognises that the three constituent parts are not *ontologically* ‘fixed’ or ‘given’ features or properties of the film, whatever that

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<sup>160</sup> Beardsley (1981, 403 and 404)

<sup>161</sup> Beardsley (1981, 403)

<sup>162</sup> Beardsley (1981, 405)

might mean. Rather, sometimes it is better to recognise or understand an element, feature, or property of the film as part of its content, whilst at other times (and for other reasons) see it as an aspect of form; or yet again, even as its theme. This is possible because these are conceptual distinctions not metaphysical ones.

In the 1950, Hollywood-set, film noir *In a Lonely Place*, directed by Nicholas Ray,<sup>163</sup> one of the secondary characters, Charlie, an aging and seemingly alcoholic actor, quotes from Shakespeare's 29<sup>th</sup> Sonnet, 'When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes...'<sup>164</sup> On the one hand, Charlie's dialogue, and the situation in which he says them, are part of the *content* of the film: one can say of the film that it contains a shot in which Charlie recites such-and-such lines whilst watching his distressed and confused friend Dix be put to bed by his girlfriend. On the other hand, insofar as the film uses the poem as a *way* of conveying what Charlie feels about Dix it can also be regarded as a contribution to *how* the dramatic story of the film, and thus the film itself, is realised. To recognise, understand and appreciate the use of the poem in this way, is to recognise, understand and appreciate it as a *means* of dramatising the unfolding screen story, i.e., as part of the *form* of the film. It is also a *way* of showing Charlie's skill and resources as an actor – all the more poignant now that he rarely gets work – as well as revealing Charlie's imagination, sensitivity, and compassion for his friend in such a way as to encourage the audience's compassion for Dix, a man of questionable morality. Furthermore, the use of the poem dramatises something of what Charlie feels about not only about his friend but possibly about himself, hinting at possible deeper reasons for the connection between the friends, not least their way of demonstrating the characters' – and the film's – respect for the power of great writers. The poem is therefore understandable both as part of the film's content and part of its form.

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<sup>163</sup> This film is adapted from Dorothy Hughes 1947 novel about a serial killer. It was produced by Humphrey Bogart, through his own production company, and starred Bogart and Gloria Grahame. 'Charlie' is played by Robert Warwick.

<sup>164</sup> When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
 I all alone beweepe my outcast state,  
 And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
 And look upon myself, and curse my fate,  
 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
 Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,  
 Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
 With what I most enjoy contented least;  
 Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
 Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
 Like to the lark at break of day arising  
 From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;  
     For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings  
     That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

The sonnet also encapsulates one of the leading *themes* of the film, specifically: the unique value of the memory of a lost love in nourishing one's otherwise tawdry soul. The first-person confessional lament of the sonnet's implied author could be Dix speaking, in another time, another place; only Dix does not yet know that is what is coming; and it his friend, who is deemed a fool, does. In other words, taking the cinematic stance towards a film encourages the recognition and (consequent) appreciation of the fact that when we use the notions of content, form, and theme and/or thesis, to investigate, understand and appreciate a film, we are using flexible notions that are context and aspect dependent. The poem is at once part of the film's content, part of the form it uses to articulate one of its themes; a way of characterising its speaker and the person whom the speaker is referring to, and more. Objecting to these notions – of content, form, theme and/or thesis – on the basis that they are extensionally or categorially fluid does not prohibit the cinematic stance but enables and strengthens it. Furthermore, taking a cinematic stance recognises that the (more familiar issue of the) inseparability of form and content (where content is conceived as encompassing themes and theses) is not to be argued *to*, but rather is what we argue *from*.

Finally, let us consider CS-V, the cinematic stance-based value of a film. This is the value, the particular cinematic value, that a film has when considered as a work whose constituents have the potential for interdependence and even potential interchangeability. The more these constituents – form, content, and theme and/or theses – are related, the more they are integrated; the more integrated they are, the more likely they are to be interchangeable; and the more (stance-based or integrated) cinematic value the film has. Conversely, the more limited the integration of content, form, and themes and/or theses, the less (stance-based or integrated) cinematic value will be identified.

One might object that this promotes the idea of some presumed 'integration algorithm'. This is not the case. There is no exact science to the value of a film in virtue of the extent of its integration of content, form, and themes and/or theses; there is not even an *inexact* science - nor would any such thing be desirable.<sup>165</sup> This would foreclose on the possibility of new ideas and fresh achievements in filmmaking and screen drama. The stance-based cinematic value of a film is neither the product of or measurable by, any algorithm, nor expressed numerically.

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<sup>165</sup> One might think that if there was anything that invited an 'art of measurement', to borrow from Plato's Protagoras, then it would be Gaut's conception of *pro tanto* features and their relationship to some 'all things considered' 'total'.

The most important sceptical challenge to this stance-based notion of cinematic value is what might be called, the ‘Occam’s Razor Objection’. According to this worry, cinematic value, as articulated, is simply surplus to requirements. After all, so this objection goes, do we not already have two perfectly good and comprehensive value-involving notions already, in artistic value and aesthetic value? Is the cinematic value of a work of a film art not simply its artistic value or, perhaps its aesthetic value or perhaps both (if one conflates the artistic with the aesthetic). After all, as Lamarque states, “Literary value is a species of artistic value”, so why not stance-based cinematic value too?<sup>166</sup>

The short answer to this challenge is that the cinematic (stance-based) value is *not* a species of either artistic value or aesthetic value, the reason being is that it is not identical to any extant view of artistic or aesthetic value, nor is it the same as the value of a film *qua* art. What I identify and present here, as (stance-based or integrated) cinematic value, is conceptually tied to the taking of the cinematic stance towards a film’s relation between content, form, and theme and/or thesis with the purpose of understanding the how, and to what degree the relata are integrated. Whereas, on Lamarque and Olsen’s literature-related account, literary value is the value of a work towards which one takes a literary stance, that stance being a stance towards the work *qua* a work of art where being a work of art of value is identified by the practices of art appreciation on an institutional theory of art. In other words, whilst the philosophical fortune of Lamarque and Olsen’s account of literary value is *rightly* – in part – tied to “the unique value manifested in the complex unity of form and content”,<sup>167</sup> and the practice of taking a literary stance, it also is internally connected to a specific theory of art, and a particular set of appreciative practices. Stance-based cinematic value is not, and does not need to be, circumscribed in this way. Stance-based cinematic value is not the cinematic value of a film *qua* a work of art, and it is not tied to the practices of art appreciation that help constitute an institutional theory of art. This need not prevent it contributing to the evaluation of a film’s artistic or aesthetic values; the point is simply that it is a separate value from these. That said, (stance-based or integrated) cinematic value is often – unwittingly – the very thing that is being championed by critics and those engaged in the evaluation of a film. For often what is deemed to be of merit is the integration, and indeed interchangeability, of a film’s form, content, themes and/or theses.

For the avoidance of doubt, a further distinction between the cinematic stance and the stance-based, or integrated, cinematic value I identify and Lamarque’s stance-based

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<sup>166</sup> Lamarque (2007a [1997], 21)

<sup>167</sup> Lamarque (2009, 420)

conception of literary value is that on his account literary value, *qua* a species of artistic value, has a for-its-own-sake value. “When we value individual works of art as art, we must value them for their own sake.” (2010, 209). There is nothing in this stance-based cinematic value that requires one to succumb to this constraint. Rather, by recognising three distinct types or construals of cinematic value – artistic, aesthetic and stance-based – stance-based cinematic value is free from the question of whether its value must be a ‘for-its-own-sake’ type of value, or not. (Later I discuss how the various trio of values, being identified in Chapters 2, 4, and 5, have both intrinsic and instrumental values). Rather, stance-based cinematic value allows for an understanding and appreciation a film *regardless* of what one’s theory of art in general is, or what one’s theory of film *qua* art is (be this medium-specific or not).

Instead, what makes for the stance-based cinematic value of a work of film art are the relations between the three (not two) constituent aspects of the film – its content, its form, and its themes and/or theses – discovered and subsequently appreciated through reactive critical inquiry.<sup>168</sup> It may be thought, however, that this view of stance-based cinematic value, or integrated cinematic value, is capable of providing justificatory support for certain theories of art. In his later writings, Danto states that a work’s being *about* something, and being so in an *embodied* way, are the two main criteria required to distinguish art (including non-representational works) from reality, albeit they are not sufficient.<sup>169</sup> Scruton concurs. “Even the most abstract art can be ‘about things, as Bach’s *Art of Fugue* is ‘about’ discipline and exactness, and Jackson Pollock’s action paintings are ‘about the opposite.’”<sup>170</sup> Whilst there is a line of thought that might be developed here, to do so is beyond the needs of the current investigation.

There is, however, a further difference between Lamarque and Olsen’s literary stance and the cinematic stance (and its stance-based value partner) I am identifying here. This turns on the fact that there are quite distinct institutional practices of appreciation that, in the realm of literature provide an important role in Lamarque and Olsen’s institutional theory of literary works of art, but which have no direct parallel in the realm of film. The institutional realm of

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<sup>168</sup> I take the phrase ‘reactive critical inquiry’ from Bernard Harrison (2015), but for the current purposes one can think of this as one and the same as work-orientated reflective engagement that does not seek to bring external interpretative theories to bear on the work (as many film theorists and film studies scholars do.)

<sup>169</sup> Furthermore, for Danto, aboutness does not require representation. “Malevich ... would have been astonished to be told that his *Black Square* was not about anything. Robert Rauschenberg’s all-white painting was about the shadows and the changes of light which transiently registered on its surface and in that sense about the real world.” (2000, 133)

<sup>170</sup> Scruton (2009, 452)

appreciative practices in which literary artists and their achievements operate has a long-standing and rich history incorporating traditions and methods of critical engagement which have evolved over centuries; which are pursued and shared by artists, critics, and readers, as well as essayists and thinkers from the realm of letters; and which also involve artists, scholars, and researchers both inside and outside of academia. For over two millennia, there has been a long ‘conversation’ between all these participants about the ways in which language has been and can be used to create and craft works of literary value, and this has fed into the creation of the works that form part of what that tradition scrutinises and constitutes. As Lamarque & Olsen point out, “Adopting the literary stance towards a text is to identify it as a literary work and apprehend it in accordance with the conventions of the literary practice.”<sup>171</sup>

By contrast, in the mere 125 years since the first photography-based moving pictures were made and shown, at least a third (if not more) of that time has been spent by authors and critics – mostly writing not in the English language – arguing over whether film ought to be regarded as an art, in the first place. The very fact that this was a live question for such a substantial period of time is perhaps not surprising given, as V. F. Perkins reminds us, “Movies owe their existence to a peculiarly mixed marriage between the camera, the magic lantern and the optical toys of the nineteenth century.”<sup>172</sup> This is not the kind of parentage that might be thought to reach back to the great works of Homer and the Athenian playwrights.

Furthermore, by the time the study of film begins to get a serious foothold in anglophone academic communities, its arrival coincides (or perhaps better, is facilitated by) the embrace of post-modernism, structuralism, deconstruction, post-structuralism, critical theory, and ‘Theory’ (with a capital ‘T’) in humanities departments of English and cultural studies. As film studies departments gained their own identity, they shared this diet of critical resources and the academic assumptions that inform it. In seeking to legitimise the study of film, these ‘isms’ guided the burgeoning academic engagement with film, and the creation of its supposedly ‘own’ critical practices. Moreover, these ‘isms’ not uncommonly regard the critical strategies and practices of classical, Renaissance, Enlightenment and Enlightenment-rooted periods – which had served and shaped the literary practices and traditions – as anathema.<sup>173</sup> The very idea of there being film-related ‘institutional practices’ that might be

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<sup>171</sup> Lamarque & Olsen (1994, 256)

<sup>172</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 41)

<sup>173</sup> For more detail see and Carroll (1996b) and Fox and Harrison (2020)

comparable to those constituting the long-running literary tradition struggles to find a foothold; rather the very idea of there being or needing to be such institutional practices is questioned and undermined from the moment film becomes an academic or scholarly subject.

The newly burgeoning realm of (anglophone) film studies – beginning in the 1960s and 70s – inherits a literary tradition in the process of being disrupted, that is increasingly less interested in technique, skill, and artistry, at exactly the moment when these might have been established as areas of interest and objects of understanding. The opportunity and challenge of understanding and appreciating the formal resources that can be brought to bear in the service and creation of content, theme and/or thesis have, still, been radically under-explored in film, by comparison to the literary world. Instead, fiction films were soon repurposed to become evidential source material for a range of wider ills deemed to be haunting and undermining our contemporary Western society; ills to be exposed using Marxist, psycho-analytic, feminist, and other types of ‘Theory’-sharpened, and emboldened, critical implements. In such contexts and directives, films are not looked at in terms of their internal relations of content, form, theme and/or thesis. Rather, films are examined as items of unwitting evidence of an ideologically hide-bound world. Thus, the very idea of taking a cinematic stance towards a film’s content, form, and themes and/or theses, as part of an institutional practice has not only gone unembraced, but to the extent it is considered, has often – though not always – been deemed to be something to be overcome and disabled.<sup>174</sup> This perhaps points to why, in the words of Noel Carroll, the work of those film Theorists who owe much to the substance and preoccupations of Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, has contributed to creating a “standard-issue sausage machine churning out readings that look and smell the same”, whose expression rarely rises above “arcane peregrinations.”<sup>175</sup>

Outside of academia there are, of course, film critics and writers writing on film that might be regarded, collectively, as constituting a modest but nonetheless film-related institutional practice. Whilst these can and do offer insights into films, these aspects of film criticism and commentary are almost entirely part of the marketing of film and/or news media. Critics are not normally able to present or develop *argued* evaluations that concern the relations between a film’s content, its form, and its themes and/or theses given, amongst other

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<sup>174</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972]) is a rare example of resistance to these standard film studies/film Theory approaches.

<sup>175</sup> Carroll (1996b, 43, 37).

things, word count limitations and core injunctions to avoid revealing the film's plot.<sup>176</sup> In literary criticism and appreciation, such "spoiler alert" prohibitions are, by contrast, not in force when discussing *Middlemarch* or *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Furthermore, it is only in the last few decades that one can re-watch films, as one might re-read a poem, and then only in virtue of spending money on equipment, DVDs and/or paying streaming or rental costs. This lack of access and opportunity to re-watch is perhaps one explanation for why so much of the formal means used by filmmakers goes unnoticed, unidentified, and ignored. As films are around for longer, we might find that film education and critical engagement develops to the point where technical and formal choices, and their impact on content, form, theme and thesis, are recognised. As it stands, however, one rarely finds appreciation-focussed discussions considering, say, a film's handling of close-ups through using over-the-shoulder shots rather than singles; yet in literature we readily discuss the impact on a speech of being phrased in strict, or otherwise, iambic pentameter, without regarding this as obscure, pedantic, or irrelevant; let alone, fail to notice it.<sup>177</sup>

Frustration with Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist and other 'Theory'-orientated film Theory was, in part, responsible for the development of what is called 'cognitive film theory', an ongoing approach to the study and the philosophy of film that emerged during the 1990s. Encouraged by, and often already pursuing, developments in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science, philosophers of art and film, in particular, embraced more naturalised (in the Quinean sense) approaches to their film-related understanding and explanation.<sup>178</sup> The focal points of the "piecemeal" theorizing pursued on this philosophical approach are not, however, the understanding and evaluation of individual films, or the identification of cinematic merit - though that may change.<sup>179</sup>

In sum, there is very little comparison between literature's historical, institutional, and appreciative practices, and those in the realm of film, thus it makes no sense for the cinematic stance, and its value, recognised here, to be tied to an *institutional* account of film art and/or art appreciation. Stance-based cinematic value is not, then, directly analogous to the notion of

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<sup>176</sup> Magazines like *Sight and Sound* in England did not have this worry, but they are perhaps best recognised as following the path of 'Theory' and the literary 'isms' already sketched. This is not to ignore the role play by film discussions in *Cahiers d'Art* but these were not in English, albeit the value of previously ignored English-language films was celebrated here.

<sup>177</sup> In the next section I discuss what the difference are between these shots, as used in *My Dinner with André*.

<sup>178</sup> By 'Quinean sense', I mean committed to Quine's 'naturalised' vision of philosophy as "continuous with science" (1969, 126).

<sup>179</sup> Carroll (1988, 255)

literary value proposed by Lamarque and Olsen. It is not the value of a film work *qua* art, nor is it the same as its artistic value (if one conceives of these as being different.) Using a distinction Lopes draws, one might say that stance-based cinematic value is, like religious, propaganda, decorative, or financial value, a value “in art” but not a “value *as* art”.<sup>180</sup> Stance-based or integrated cinematic value is the value of the extent to which a film’s trio of constituents – form, content, and themes and/or thesis – are integrated; where the greater the integration the higher the (stance-based or integrated) cinematic value. Conceptually, the highest form of integration is one in which the constituents are interchangeable. Identifying this is the product of critical inquiry into a work of art that is a film – on any account of what it is that makes that film a work of art.

Returning to the Occam’s Razor Challenge, however, what of *aesthetic* value? If one holds that aesthetic and artistic value are identical then the arguments above showing that stance-based cinematic value is not a species of artistic value carry over, and stance-based cinematic value is not a species of aesthetic value either, as artistic value just is aesthetic value.<sup>181</sup> If, however, aesthetic and artistic values are not the same, then given a film can have a (non-artistic yet) aesthetic value, or an aesthetic construal of cinematic value, then might a separate (non-aesthetic) stance-based cinematic value be surplus to requirements?

Given that the stance-based or integrated cinematic value of a film is the value of the integrated relations that can be understood and appreciated as holding between a film’s content, its form, and its theme and/or thesis, it is, by definition, *not* the same as a work’s aesthetic value, which is typically a value particularly connected to our response to a work’s formal features or aspects, often regarded without reference to content. One might object and suggest that aesthetic properties, such as being profound or moving, go beyond an appreciation of purely formal aspects of the work and must necessarily incorporate ‘aboutness’. Were this concern to be articulated in the most rigorous of substantial arguments, this still would not entail that cinematic value is an aesthetic value, because stance-based cinematic value is *always* a matter of understanding and appreciating the ways and degrees in which the content, form, themes and/or theses of a work are integrated (if indeed they are) – and not merely *sometimes* a matter of so doing. Indeed, it is a benefit of this account of cinematic value – rooted in the taking of a cinematic stance – that cinematic

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<sup>180</sup> Lopes (2011, 523)

<sup>181</sup> Cf Lopes’s claim that “there is no characteristic artistic value distinct from aesthetic value” (2011, 518) and, “[a]rtistic value as distinct from aesthetic value is not an option.” (2011, 536). Such commitments may be a necessary corollary of his call to pass the buck from an unrequired (in his view) theory of art to a theories of individual art forms, but as we have seen already, such a proposal is not without its own problems.

value is *not* one and the same as aesthetic value, for this allows for a film to have *both* stance-based cinematic value and aesthetic value. We can therefore aesthetically value a film for its handsome photography or elegant camera movements – or any other example of belle-cinématique – without that entailing it thereby has any stance-based cinematic value. This is not a distinction that can be made on Gaut's account, which not only conflates the cinematic and the aesthetic, but also conflates the aesthetic and the artistic.<sup>182</sup>

In sum: our Occam's Razor-wielding sceptic raised concerns that stance-based (integration-focussed) cinematic value was surplus to our value requirements, and that stance-based cinematic value was either one or both of artistic and aesthetic values, or a species of them. This has been shown to be an unfounded worry; but an important one. For it helps *inter alia* to confirm that there is both a need for, and the conceptual space to accommodate, a stance-based cinematic value. Let us now return to *My Dinner with André*, and take a preliminary look at why, *pace* Gaut and Smith,<sup>183</sup> it is rich with stance-based cinematic value.

## 2.2 The cinematic value of *My Dinner with André*

In taking a cinematic stance towards *My Dinner with André* one is – as with any film – actively engaging with the film on the presumption that the work's content, its form, and its themes and/or theses are related and potentially integrated, and that through reactive critical inquiry one can come to develop one's understanding and appreciation of the extent to which this is the case, and how this is achieved, and thereby recognise the value of these objective features of the film. As already highlighted, the notions of content, form, themes and/or theses are understandable and appreciable as the trio of constitutive aspects of the film that are conceptually distinct but in no way ontologically fixed or static. Depending on how we conceive of the role played by some feature of the film, e.g. it being set in an expensive restaurant, this can be identified as part of the film's content (i.e., what it is about) or its form (i.e., how part of its content, or one or more themes and/or theses are realised.) Indeed, as already indicated, it is not just the integration of a film's content, form, theme and/or thesis which provides a film's cinematic value, but the very possibility these elements are interchangeable increases the film's stance-based cinematic value. It is unsurprising,

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<sup>182</sup> Gaut (2007)

<sup>183</sup> To be completely accurate, Smith credits his wife as saying *My Dinner with André* is good but not cinematic, whilst he remains noncommittal.

therefore, that taking the cinematic stance is a rewarding experience; one that can grow with repeated viewings of this, and indeed, other films.

I now take a closer look at *My Dinner with André* to demonstrate just a small part of what taking a cinematic stance can involve. In Figure 6 overleaf, I present a selection of screenshots taken from the film which indicate the main sequences and actions of the film: Wally journeys to a restaurant, he waits for André, they eat and after the meal Wally goes home in a taxi. (1a) is almost the opening frame of the film.



1a., 1b., and 1c. Wally walks through New York City. Wally's voice-over tells us he is en route to a restaurant to have dinner with André.



2a. Wally takes the subway. 2b. Wally arrives at the restaurant and puts on a tie.



3a. Wally enters the restaurant. 3b. Wally waits for André. 3c. The restaurant trio plays.



4a. Wally is greeted by André. 4b. The waiter announces men's table is ready.  
4c. Wally and André are seated at their table.



5a., 5b., and 5c. Various 'single' shots of Wally during the meal, from different angles and on different lenses and (thus) with different backgrounds.



6a., 6b., 6c., Various single shots of André during the meal, from different angles and on different lenses and (thus) with different backgrounds.



7a., 7b. Two examples of 'over-the-shoulder shots' on Wally.



8a., 8b. Two examples of ‘over-the-shoulder shots’ on André.



9a., 9b., and 9c. Three examples of ‘two-shots’ of Wally and André.



10a., 10b., and 10c. Three examples of hybrid ‘over-the-shoulder’ shots that are also ‘two shots’ because we can see both men’s faces, courtesy of André’s face reflected in the mirror.



11a. Wally’s point-of-view shot of the empty restaurant. 11b. André pays for the meal.



12a. Wally looks out of the taxi window at the passing shops.

12b. Wally's point-of-view shot of a New York street.

Figure 6.

The cinematic stance seeks to understand and appreciate what and how a film's content, form, and theme and/or thesis of a film are related, possibly integrated, and perhaps even interchangeable; and having done so appreciate the film's stance-based (or integrated) cinematic value. Content-wise, the film is primarily about playwright, Wally, who nervously agrees to meet an erstwhile colleague and friend, André, after a mutual acquaintance reports seeing André crying in the street. The two men have dinner in a fancy restaurant, and prompted by Wally's questions, André talks at length, revealing that his is indeed quite raw emotionally; currently caught up in a many-years-long quest to understand what it is to 'really live' and 'just be' as well as to genuinely see and connect to other people, personally and professionally. His existential travail has taken him from the forests of Poland to Everest, from Scotland to the desert; he has sojourned with monks and actors, encounter seed-collectors and flag-makers, but there seems to be no answers forthcoming, only moments of connection and wonder, none of which quell André's angst. Wally spends the first half of the evening hiding his nervous awkwardness but in the second half, he stops being an audience of one, for André's monologues, and the two men have a real conversation. By the time the evening finishes, Wally is a changed man. His own disengaged, almost churlish defensiveness, has evaporated, and a raft of own core values, priorities and commitments have been dusted off, examined, and validated, anew.

The film's themes might reasonably, I think, be taken to be *the meaning of life*, and/or *friendship*, or – taking a leaf from Coppola's book – *conversation*, or perhaps better, *connection*. Thinking in terms of theses, rather than themes, the film could also be understood as offering an individual dramatization of any of the following (and many more) generalised theses: One person's failed search for the meaning of life can be another's epiphany; The

kind of friendship in which one may admit one's deepest fears is a rare and precious thing; Genuine conversation is hard but rewarding because it requires one to listen, to think, to engage honestly and openly, etc. One could go on, almost indefinitely, here.

How then might we go about understanding the imaginative and other challenges of making a story about two men meeting and talking over dinner into a vehicle for such themes and theses? What are some of the many content-involving and formal choices that one can take, and that have been taken to make this not just a viable possibility but a major achievement. In filmmaking one has the two overarching formal choices to make (i) whose story is it? (in the sense of who travels the biggest psychological distance or has the biggest so-called 'character development'), and (ii) which character's point of view is that story to be dramatised from? The answers embraced here are that it is Wally's story; it is about the journey he goes on, in virtue of meeting with André. We are shown his state of mind (dejected, nervous, preoccupied) at the beginning; we watch him slowly 'come to life' over dinner; and we follow him to his finishing line, newly re-enchanted with his home city, having stopped seeing it, and stopped cherishing the part it has played in his life. By contrast, Gregory does not change: his questioning remains. With Wally being the person whose story it is, it is a standard (but by no means exceptionless) choice to dramatisate it from Wally's point of view. Thus, when the men are not together, before and after the meal, we are with Wally, not Gregory.

Dramatising the distance Wally travels, psychologically and emotionally, is well achieved in the exploitation of his odyssey-style journey; starting and ending in (roughly) the same place, having gone somewhere he has never visited and undergone an (unanticipated) transformative encounter. Hence this creative choice presents opportunities not just to have Wally's journey to and from the restaurant, but to contrast the substance of those sequences. Already, we can describe Wally's getting to and from the restaurant as both part of the film's content and/or its form. One can also see these bookendings as constitutive of a theme of transformation, in virtue of the way they function as a twice-taken 'litmus test' that reveals Wally's different 'before and after' states of mind and soul, at the start and end of his own, albeit local odyssey.

If we look specifically at the screen direction of travel, this integrated and interchangeable piece of content/form/theme can be seen to be further constituted by a number of simple formal choices. En route to the restaurant, Wally consistently walks screen-right to screen-left: (1a), (1b), (1c), (1d), and (1e). In the restaurant he goes 'up' to the bar – straight ahead of him (3a) and by taking his seat at the dinner table he is now engaged in

looking from screen-left to screen-right (5a); this he continues to do (apart from a few seconds) right to the end of the film (12b). This is a deliberate formal choice that simultaneously has content and meaning. For readers of languages that are read from left to right there is a greater sense of 'flow' watching something on screen move from left to right. It is not as 'hard work' as following something moving right to left. A character walking from screen-right to screen-left tends to convey the idea that their passage is harder than when moving in the opposite direction. This familiar psychological fact is used to exacerbate Wally's plodding journey *to* the restaurant, which requires him to walk screen-right to screen-left. Similarly, a character positioned in the left-hand side of the frame who is looking towards screen-right, 'looks different' to one positioned in the right-hand side of the frame, looking screen-left. There is often a greater sense of readiness and receptivity to imminent and future events, when looking left to right. Compare (2a) in which Wally is looking right to left as the subway train all but slams into his face, with (12a) where Wally is looking left to right into an open vista, offering an unguarded and hopeful face.

Such observations have informed the creation of pictorial images for centuries, and the skill required to use them consistently and meaningfully is a creative achievement found also in painting and drawing, as well as in filmmaking. Wally's psychological state is physicalised by the *way* it is filmed, as well as being the *content* of what we see, and dramatising the *thematic* aspects of the film. We might also note that (1a), part of the opening shot of the film where Wally – a small figure in the upper right-hand side – is walking screen left, is effectively walking directly towards a garbage can. When Wally meets André and is swept into his friend's bear hug, he is effectively walking away from the viewer, into the frame, neither left nor right. In other words, he is walking into a future that could go either way and could be turn out to be either positive or negative; easy or difficult. Moreover, the hug is shown as an over-the-shoulder shot, with Wally presenting almost all of his back to us. This effectively puts us, as viewers, into the position of being greeted by André, again consolidating the fact that this will be dramatised from Wally's point of view and is likely to be Wally's story; one that may also provide us with a journey that we might share. Is the hug part of the content of the film, or its form (a way of establishing the point of view of the film) or its theme (the loving nourishment friends can give each other)? The very fact that these questions can be legitimately posed already indicates the interdependence, integration and indeed interchangeability of the film's content/form/theme/thesis constituents. And this is but the tip of the iceberg as to how, in this extremely sophisticated piece of film-making, form is not only a way of handling the film's content or expressing themes but creates it.

On the Gaudian conception of ‘cinematic art’, a cinematic film is, in contrast, likely to have elaborate camera movements and demonstrate unavoidably the so-called ‘plasticity’ of the recording medium it uses. Ostentation is not required, however, on the current account of stance-based cinematic value: it may well be beside the point. To show the difference between the two conceptions, consider, a few brief observations on the use of variable camera lenses, positions, and movement. As can be seen from even these modest illustrations, there are many different lenses, camera-to-subject distances, angles, and figure-framing sizes in *My Dinner with André*. There are also camera movements inside the restaurant, e.g., (10a) and (10b) are two images from a shot that tracks in, to create a more tightly framed two-shot. Malle often tracks in fractionally, as a sequence of conversation, or a speech, crescendos, or otherwise heads towards a punchline, a reveal, or an unexpected turn. This creates greater intimacy with the speaker (or listener); encouraging the sense one is ‘leaning in’ to a short sequence, or being ‘pulled in’ towards a particular moment; something that is then typically rewarded by a dramatic development.<sup>184</sup>

The close-up (6c) – which is the biggest close-up in the entire film – is the culmination of series of ever tightening shots of André as he recounts the events of an acting workshop in a Polish forest in which he is (unexpectedly) buried alive for half an hour, having had to write his will. The shot comes at the climax of André’s tale. It encourages us to recognise this is the deepest or darkest of point of the whole conversation, thus far; the nadir to which all of André’s confessional talk has, up to this moment, been leading. The framing removes all the restaurant in the shot, leaving nothing but André’s head. This effectively takes us with him into his (entombed) place of darkness where there is nothing but André and his own thoughts, before he re-emerges, and we with him: returned and reborn into our ‘real world’, and the extreme close-up cuts to a wider shot. It comes roughly half-way through the film and operates as the central turning point of the film.

After this shot, and point in André’s monologue, Wally tentatively starts to become a conversant in his own right, and not just an audience for, or interviewer of, André. Just as André was somehow born again, on release from his ‘grave’, so Wally too begins comes to life. In loosening out from such a tight close-up, the film finds, as it were ‘visual room’ for Wally to enter the drama. This shot sequence is a classic example of the full integration of content, form, and theme. Later on in the film, as Wally’s and André’s conversation

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<sup>184</sup> Malle also uses various tracking shots when filming and choreographing the waiter’s multiple encounters with Wally and André. These moments are often exploited to reposition the camera ready to start a fresh post-waiter sequence; a device often timed to facilitate the conversation to shift to a new topic.

flourishes into a genuine dialogue, we get – for the first time – shots like (10a), (10b), and (10c), which show both men’s faces in shot simultaneously. Thanks to the use of the mirror reflection of André: they are now involved in a genuine dialogue. One could go on, indefinitely, about the ways the camera and the *mise en scène* work together to bring into being content, form, and theme; and integrated them.

A few brief thoughts on the production design of Wally and André’s table and its surrounding area in the restaurant - a major contributor to the film’s stance-based cinematic value. That Wally is on a long banquette on which a neighbouring diner is also seated gives authenticity to, and encourages our sense of intimacy with, Wally and André’s conversational meal. For many of the camera angles on André, in particular, are from a recognisable position in the restaurant where we as viewer/observers could actually be seated, and thereby there is a sense in which we might inhabit the same three-dimensional space. The choice of which character sits in which seat is important, too. In certain close ups on André (6b) the background is the bar, and its coloured twinkling lights twinkle, halo-like behind his head. This gives him an appropriately other-worldly and even glamorous feel. Wally’s close-ups, in contrast, are more ‘pedestrian’ thanks to the plainer flat wall behind him, which is used to echo or better, consolidate, the seemingly humdrum examples he uses to make his points, e.g., about the comfort and joy he gets from his electric blanket. The mirrors make possible several judiciously timed *mise en abyme* shots, revealing the inescapability of existential questions even as ‘ordinary life’ goes on, unnoticed around them. These examples show that bringing the cinematic stance to bear on the film – in even the most preliminary of examinations – showing the extent to which content, form, and theme can be understood and appreciated as not only related, but integrated, and are indeed, in many cases, interchangeable, and thereby manifesting substantial cinematic value.

I trust these observations begin to cast serious doubt on Gaut’s claim that this film is a “straightforward recording of the eponymous André Gregory and his friend Wallace Shaw, having dinner together and talking for nearly two hours.”<sup>185</sup> Not only does Gaut seem to miss the development of the character ‘Wally’, let alone the fact that no straight forward recording could achieve what this film achieves, what is missing from Gaut’s encounter with, and judgment of, the film is what Perkins would call its “artistry”, the very thing – on his own account – that makes film the art that it is – that makes it “film as film”.<sup>186</sup> Yet this is a cornerstone of Gaut’s notion of cinematic art: “[W]e can properly hold the artistry to reside in

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<sup>185</sup> Gaut (2010, 295).

<sup>186</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 26). “Film as film” being the title of this book.

the mastery of the medium [as an autonomous element] and not just in the mastery exhibited in what is being filmed.”<sup>187</sup> The very idea of wanting to separate these, is, I think, confusing. But now that cinematic value can be understood as having an artistic, an aesthetic, and a stance-based construal, there is conceptual space for Gaut’s view to co-exist with the kind of value that I here argue, has gone unnoticed and unrecognised, including by Gaut himself.

### 2.3 A Neo-Perkinsian Account?

If Gaut’s cinematic art is neo-Arnheimian, then perhaps the stance-based cinematic value recognised here, is neo-Perkinsian. After all, for V. F. Perkins, “A single image is made to act both as a recording, to show us what happens, and as an expressive device to heighten the effect and significance of what we see.”<sup>188</sup> What Perkins calls his “synthetic approach to movies”<sup>189</sup> is perhaps what I am calling the stance towards a film that seeks an understanding and appreciation of integrated relations between its content, form, theme and/or thesis. Here, again is Perkins:

In order to comprehend whole meanings, rather than those parts of the meaning which are present in verbal synopsis or visual code, attention must be paid to the whole content of shot, sequence, and film. The extent to which a movie rewards this complete attention is an index of its achievement.<sup>190</sup>

This looks to be akin to stance-based cinematic value. Indeed, I would acknowledge that there are more continuities of preoccupation and substance between my account of the cinematic stance and its value and Perkins’ synthetic approach, than between my work and that of any other writer on film. There are, however, crucial differences.

Firstly, Perkins is putting forward a theory of film “as film”, which I take to mean he is participating in the tradition of arguing for film to be recognised as an art, in an honorific (and not classificatory sense.) His synthetic approach seeks to articulate what makes a film an

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<sup>187</sup> Gaut (2010, 43)

<sup>188</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 78)

<sup>189</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 106)

<sup>190</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 79)

excellent film work of art. My account of what it is to take a cinematic stance and the value one can thereby come to recognise a film as having is not an account of film as art, or *qua* art, either classificatory or honorific. It could be – but as it stands, it is a philosophical account that stands apart from, and is neutral about, whatever might make a film a work of art. The reason for this is two-fold: as we have seen, there is a lack of consensus not just on which of the various theories of art, if any, is correct; but there is also some disagreement about the very project of pursuing such a goal at all. Taking a cinematic stance in pursuit of its associated value is not a matter of requiring or being committed to any theory of art, notwithstanding that I have shown it to qualify as a work of art on several leading theories; nor is not offered as an account of artistic value; unlike what I take Perkins to be pursuing. To be fair to Perkins, I may be reading into him something that Carroll is putting there, by grouping Perkins with Arnheim and Bazin.

Second, and relatedly, insofar as Perkins is giving an account of a theory of the art of film, he risks being prescriptive about what filmmakers should do, if they want to make art; or at least make a ‘good film’. So even though he protests he is not guilty of proposing any normative theory of art – à la Arnheim and Bazin – me think he doth protest too much.<sup>191</sup> This point is rightly identified by Carroll, who recognises that “Like Bazin’s and Arnheim’s, Perkins’s film theory appears to be an implicit defence of a particular style of filmmaking – in Perkins’s case expressive realism.”<sup>192</sup> We can see this in Perkins’s resistance to the value of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* lion montage: “Unattached stone lions had no place in a film which looks to convey ideas and emotions through the presentation of experiences believably undergone by a group of rebel sailors.”<sup>193</sup> But why should consistency of style or formal approach not be stretched or breeched in service of thematic expression? From the point of view of stance-based cinematic value, such a choice would be something to understand and potentially appreciate, rather than something to pre-emptively rule out because it is “inconsistent”.<sup>194</sup> Moreover, it highlights, I think, Perkins’ preference for ‘synthesis’ achieved without ostentation; which is the obverse of Gaut’s *belle-cinématique*. And whilst I think it is imperative to look for value in places and techniques that do not draw attention to themselves, Perkins seems to place more value on that which is hidden or camouflaged, as if it quintessentially exemplified film as film. Taking a cinematic stance, by

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<sup>191</sup> See Perkins. “We cannot lay down rules for the creators”. 1993 [1972], 189)

<sup>192</sup> Carroll (1988, 253)

<sup>193</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 189)

<sup>194</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 189)

contrast, does not lead to any prioritisation of preferences concerning *how* integrated relations are achieved; in fact, it offers the resources with which to move beyond them, yet stay within the realm of value.

Perkins was right, in an important sense, to claim that “the concept of the cinematic, presented in terms of demands, has stunted the useful growth of film theory”.<sup>195</sup> As shown, it can become tangled up in medium-essentialist arguments, and/or oscillates between (limited) aesthetic and artistic uses. Perkins response to the very idea of cinematicity was to drop it. My response is to re-habilitate it.

### 3 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have resisted the idea that Gaut’s ‘cinematic value’ picks out a singular merit in a film. Instead, I have identified three different conceptions or construals of the notion of cinematic value – as an artistic value, a distinct aesthetic value, and a separate stance-based value. Artistically construed cinematic value may, but need not, connote a medium-essentialist art; Aesthetically construed cinematic value, is typically a way of recognising the merits of a range of extravagant, or eye-catching visual styles – operating either throughout a whole film, or at the level of individual shots and scenes. In films, it often connotes an attractive, interesting, or overt set of visual features, properties, or style deemed to be intrinsically valuable in virtue of exemplifying ‘*belle-cinématique*’.

Stance-based (or integrated) cinematic value uses the term ‘cinematic’ in none of the above identified ways. Rather taking a cinematic stance is a way of engaging with a film, by focussing attention on if and how the relations between (i) what the film is about - its *content*; (ii) the film’s audio-visual features, properties, and style – its *form*, and (iii) what the film is ‘really about’ or means - its *theme(s)* and/or *thesis(es)* are integrated. The understanding, and appreciation of the degree and extent of this integration, recognised in virtue of taking a cinematic stance provides the wherewithal to identify a film’s (stance-based or integrated) cinematic value; and the extent to which the relata are not just integrated but sometimes even interchangeable provides the criteria for (stance-based) cinematic excellence.

We are now nearly ready to investigate the two intimately related questions that motivate this thesis: do fiction film works of art have cognitive value, and what, if anything,

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<sup>195</sup> Perkins (1993 [1972], 59)

is the relation between a film's cinematic value and its cognitive value? There remains, one final preliminary question to be investigated: what is cognitive value?

## 3

### Cognitive Value

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Thus far we have established that fiction films can be, and are, non-essentialist, multi-media works of art, and that fiction films that are works of art can, and do, have cinematic value. We have also discerned three distinct ways of construing or recognising such films' cinematic value, i.e., as an artistic value, as an aesthetic value (typically the value of a film's visual properties or style), and as a stance-based value. Relations between a film's cinematic values and its cognitive value will turn on what, if any, cognitive value fiction films have. In this chapter, I critically examine two leading accounts of the cognitive value of artworks demonstrating that – as with cinematic value – there is no one single thing that can be regarded as the cognitive value of a fiction film. Given the extensive and incommensurable conceptions of cognitive value, this has serious implications for the question of value interaction. In this chapter I argue that whilst cognitivist claims for the value of fiction films are intuitively compelling the 'cognitive/non-cognitivist' debate is now irresolvable in its current form. Thus, the purpose of the arguments of this chapter is to motivate the need to reconsider how the key concerns and pre-occupations of cognitivism might be re-conceived, and to acknowledge the power of some of the objections that will necessarily have to be faced by any alternative account or proposal.

It is noteworthy that there is almost no direct focus on the cognitive value of fiction films. Instead, claims about the cognitive value of fiction films are, to the extent that are mentioned at all, often a straightforward matter of *ceteris paribus* extensions to more broadly conceived accounts of the cognitive value of art - either works of art in general, or narrative or fiction-based works, in particular. Hence, in what follows, I avail myself of the work of philosophers of art and literature as well as film, whilst remaining alert to the applicability, or otherwise, of their claims.

There is also, to be sure, an ongoing debate as to whether films can *do* or *be* philosophy, which at times is sometimes, but not always, couched in terms of cognitive value. This philosophical project emerged from proposals that film might legitimately be regarded as a distinct philosophical medium. Historically this preoccupation begins with the creation of so-called 'film-philosophy' developed by film theorists, and more Continental-philosophy inspired academics, in the 1990s, and early part of this century, partly in the wake

of a pointed attack by Noel Carroll, David Bordwell, and others, on such theorists' methodological commitments; an attack which questioned the intellectual worth of much of film theory.<sup>196</sup> The topic has since become of interest to more analytically orientated philosophers of art and film, and some of the issues explored under the aegis of film-as-philosophy or philosophy-through-film, are pertinent to any consideration of the cognitive value of fiction films. One example is the role and use made of so-called 'thought experiments' in fiction film and philosophising; a point that will be considered below.

It is, however, important to separate the issue of the cognitive content and value of fiction films from that of films *doing* or *being* philosophy. The primary reason for this is that any question as to whether films can philosophise is necessarily tied to meta-philosophical questions as to the nature and task of philosophy itself. One might hold philosophy to be a theory-building activity that is "continuous with science," à la Quinean-inspired reductive naturalism;<sup>197</sup> or a Wittgensteinian-orientated, theory-repudiating pursuit that "leaves everything as it is,"<sup>198</sup> or share Deleuze and Guattari's belief that "philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts".<sup>199</sup> Or one might share Fodor's observation, "[W]ho cares what gets *called* philosophy. It's my impression that most of what happened in philosophy before 1950 wouldn't qualify according to the present usage."<sup>200</sup> With such competing views, and incompatible methodologies in play, the question of whether film can do or be philosophy cannot be separated from meta-philosophical issues; albeit this presumption seems to have found little traction, in practice.<sup>201</sup> Whilst this chapter's investigation may result in resources that might contribute to that debate, answers to the question as to whether or not films can be or do philosophy are not necessary for the substance of this chapter.

In Section 1, I provide a brief overview of several concerns pertaining to the very idea of the cognitive. In Section 2, I critically examine Berys Gaut's epistemic cognitivism, raising objections to his claim that works of art have epistemic value in virtue of their ability to teach us non-trivial knowledge by providing us with art-sourced testimony, imaginative

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<sup>196</sup> See the introduction and individual contributions of Bordwell and Carroll in their (1996) See also my Harrison (2021) and Fox & Harrison (2020)

<sup>197</sup> Quine (1969, 126).

<sup>198</sup> Wittgenstein (2009, §124). See also Sections 86-93 in 'Philosophy' in Wittgenstein (2013, 299-318)

<sup>199</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1991, 2)

<sup>200</sup> Fodor (2008, 76)

<sup>201</sup> This is beginning to change, see Nieva (2019); though noticeably her range of meta-philosophical positions includes none that might be characterised as Wittgensteinian, Heideggerian, or phenomenological.

experiences, thought experiments, and by developing our non-propositional cognitive abilities.

In Section 3, I consider Noel Carroll's argument that the cognitive value of artworks, delivers cognitive gain not in virtue of any new knowledge achieved but by providing an increased understanding of existing knowledge. This shift in focus emphasises the supposed ability of art works (including films) to clarify, rearrange, and make freshly salient the knowledge we bring to the work. I press Carroll on the details of the so-called 'virtue wheel' which he takes to be at play in narratives, and which is designed to promote such understanding. *Inter alia*, I draw attention to the wheel's focus on synchronic rather than the more important diachronic distinctions in virtues and agential values. Throughout I seek to be mindful of the differing demands of an empirical and a conceptual account, helpfully highlighted in Greg Currie's recent work on the relation between imagination and knowledge in fiction.<sup>202</sup>

In Section 4, armed with several distinct conceptions of cognitive value, I turn to the question of cognitive value's interaction with cinematic value. In so doing, what emerges are problems concerning the very way in which the value interaction problem is structured. Taking seriously Peter Kivy's injunction – "Let us stop trying to reconcile the differences and start trying to recognize them"<sup>203</sup> – I use the challenges raised throughout the chapter to motivate the need to re-think the cognitive value debate. Section 5 concludes the chapter, connecting its preoccupations with the final two chapters. Throughout this chapter I use the 2006 German feature film *Das Leben Der Anderen* as a case study. Before turning to Section 1, I briefly introduce the film, henceforth called '*The Lives of Others*'.

*The Lives of Others* is written and directed by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck and is set in East Berlin, in 1984. The central dramatic story begins when Stasi officer Gerd Wiesler is assigned to lead a round-the-clock surveillance investigation of lauded playwright Georg Dreyman. Wiesler wiretaps the apartment Dreyman shares with his equally successful actress girlfriend Christa-Maria Sieland. Eavesdropping, Wiesler discovers in Dreyman someone who shares his commitment to the worth of the communist system and is no less idealistic about its merits. But as the monitoring continues, Wiesler's loveless, friendless, and art-free existence comes into stark contrast with Dreyman and Maria's loving relationship, Dreyman's precious friendships, and the couple's life which is rich with music, drama and poetry. Soon both men are confronted with reasons to question their life-long loyalty to the

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<sup>202</sup> Currie (2020)

<sup>203</sup> Kivy (1993, 127)

State and its principles: Weisler discovers that his mission is motivated by a corrupt Minister's sexual ambitions towards Christa-Maria and is being knowingly facilitated by Wiesler's own power-hungry Stasi boss, whilst Dreyman is forced to acknowledge the soul-crushing nature of being a blacklisted artist, when a theatre-director friend who has not worked in years, commits suicide.

Both men begin to rebel. Playwright Dreyman turns to non-fiction, accepting the challenge to write an article on the country's suppressed suicide statistics and have it published in the West. Weisler turns to a form of fiction of his own, as his surveillance reports cease to become completely accurate. Meanwhile, Christa-Maria, now being blackmailed into sleeping with the predatory Minister, must choose between betraying her partner to Weisler's boss, or risk becoming blacklisted herself. In the story's climactic raid on the couple's apartment, Christa-Maria rightly believes that the Stasi operatives are about to discover the red-ribboned typewriter that will confirm not just Dreyman's traitorous actions, but – worse still – will reveal that she has informed on him. She kills herself. Surprisingly, however, the incriminating evidence is not, as Wiesler's boss anticipates, in its secret hiding place. The missing evidence confirms that Wiesler has intervened (off camera) and taken the typewriter to protect both Dreyman and himself; for if the truth about Dreyman's article comes out, so too will the fact that Wiesler's reports are fictions, designed to protect the person under surveillance. Over Maria's dead body, both men realise that they – as well as the system they once believed in without question – have contributed to Maria's death, either directly or indirectly. They are devastated. Weisler is demoted to the bottom rung of the Stasi ladder.

The film then jumps forward in historical time to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the immediate aftermath, for the last ten minutes of screentime. Dreyman reads his Wiesler-penned Stasi file in the swiftly opened archives and discovers that he was under surveillance by an agent writing increasingly creative reports. Forgoing a possible personal introduction, Dreyman instead dedicates his new book, *Sonata for a Good Man*, to Weisler. When the ex-officer, now a leaflet deliverer, finds the new novel in a bookstore, he reads the dedication as act of forgiveness from Dreyman; a redemptive characterisation acknowledging the deceptions of the erstwhile Stasi officer. In the final shot of the film – and for the first and only time – Weisler *starts to smile*.

The film is part-espionage thriller, part-social drama. Its limited colour palette, use of actual locations, and genuine period hand props, help deliver an East German visual aesthetic

much vaunted for its accuracy.<sup>204</sup> No special effects are used in the filming and the cinematography eschews all elaborate camera moves and handheld photography; even the resources used in the sound design are completely analog.<sup>205</sup> The resulting film is nonetheless handsome, visually arresting and sophisticated. Director Von Donnersmarck, the film, the cast (particularly the mesmerising performance of Ulrich Mühe, playing Wiesler) along with various heads of department won 79 international awards, including the Oscar for Best Film in a foreign language.<sup>206</sup>

*The Lives of Others* is about a surveillance operation that has life- and value-changing consequences for a secret police officer and two leading East German artists. It is also really about “a movie about a world in which there is no justice;”<sup>207</sup> about the claim that “as long as there’s power, there will be abuse of power;”<sup>208</sup> and offers as a “central theme” the “idea of art’s redemptive – and humanizing – power.”<sup>209</sup>

Critically championed for being “supremely intelligent” and “unfailingly honest”<sup>210</sup>, the film features actors whose “restraint ... cuts laser-like to the truth.”<sup>211</sup> Timothy Garton Ash, a specialist on recent East German history, writes, “The small inaccuracies and implausibilities are, on balance, justifiable artistic license allowing a deeper truth to be conveyed.”<sup>212</sup> Karsten Jedlitschka, expert on the Stasi Archives, confirms that it “provides a nightmarish glimpse inside the daily workings of the secret police, showing methods and equipment of oppression and persecution during this period of communist dictatorship in East Germany.”<sup>213</sup> Soon after its release the film began being shown to German school children “with the intention of painting a true picture of the conditions in East Germany;”<sup>214</sup> a welcome corrective to the then current trend for so-called ‘Ostalgie’, i.e., romanticized works nostalgic for life in the East, which were “threatening to inundate the German viewing public.”<sup>215</sup> Given its “understanding [of] everyday life and dictatorial rule in the GDR and in

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<sup>204</sup> Dueck (2008, 599)

<sup>205</sup> Carson (2010, 15)

<sup>206</sup> Awards’ details are available here: [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0405094/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0405094/awards?ref_=tt_awd)

<sup>207</sup> Lane (2007)

<sup>208</sup> The director, von Donnersmarck quoted in Carson (2010, 21)

<sup>209</sup> Dueck (2008, 606)

<sup>210</sup> Scott (2007)

<sup>211</sup> Carson (2010, 13)

<sup>212</sup> Ash (2007)

<sup>213</sup> Jedlitschka (2012, 81)

<sup>214</sup> Westphal, (2012, 99)

<sup>215</sup> Creech (2009, 103)

dictatorships more generally”<sup>216</sup> it is perhaps unsurprising it is also one of the top 15 films shown to American World History high school pupils.<sup>217</sup>

Although most critics agree with the film’s characterisation as “an indictment of the sinister brutalities of the Stasi,”<sup>218</sup> more qualified critical responses argue that the film is in conversation more with the history of *cinema* (particularly *The Third Man*, *Casablanca* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*) than history *per se*, not least because of its exploitation of the power of fiction to “obliterate, distort, sanitize, or heighten reality”<sup>219</sup> and provide “a beautiful film [that] sits over that uglier truth.”<sup>220</sup> *The Lives of Others* is seen both as a film that “triggers the imagination of the viewer to engage with the traumatic past, and offers a *fable* with which to access it.”<sup>221</sup> Commentators go as far as calling *The Lives of Others* “overpraised” in light of the fact that “every plant has a payoff, and the moral of the story is as obvious as skywriting;”<sup>222</sup> even accusing the film of “mobilizing clichés of unreconstructed stereotypes of masculinity and gender relations, employing them in a fantasy about male bonding based on the sacrifice of a guilty and guilt-conscious woman.”<sup>223</sup>

In other words, whilst the predominant view<sup>224</sup> is that *The Lives of Others* is a highly accomplished film capable of illuminating the challenges of living through a particular time and place, it has nonetheless been characterised as a “fairy tale”<sup>225</sup> that “depicts not truth, but rather a moral ideal draped with the trappings of reality.”<sup>226</sup> Such tensions echo ongoing concerns in the philosophical debate about the cognitive value of art, in general, and its relation(s) with a work’s other values. For these reasons, I offer the film as a pertinent case study. Furthermore, as the film can, itself, be understood as offering a thesis about the moral transformative power of art, I take it that – like Berys Gaut’s example of Caravaggio’s 1602 painting *The Taking of Christ*,<sup>227</sup> it might be an example of a work that “both exemplifies and

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<sup>216</sup> Lindberger (2008, 565)

<sup>217</sup> Stoddard & Marcus (2010, 85). Empirical studies found 92% of teachers (surveyed across three states) reported using a film (or film clips) at least once a week.

<sup>218</sup> Bradshaw (2007)

<sup>219</sup> Sternlieb (2014, 33)

<sup>220</sup> Funder (2007)

<sup>221</sup> Dueck (2008, 600, emphasis added)

<sup>222</sup> Foundas (2006)

<sup>223</sup> Lindberger (2008, 563)

<sup>224</sup> On *Rotten Tomatoes*, 162 professional critics give the film a 92% score, and over 100,000 paying viewers give it 96%. See here: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_lives\\_of\\_others](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_lives_of_others)

<sup>225</sup> Andreas Dressen quoted in Westphal (2012, 102)

<sup>226</sup> Westphal (2012, 102)

<sup>227</sup> Gaut (2007, 136 ff.)

illustrates the doctrine of aesthetic cognitivism”.<sup>228</sup> I aim to show, however, that even if *The Lives of Others* can be regarded as exemplifying and illustrating both a Gautian characterisation of cognitivism and Carroll’s clarificationism – which I think it can – there are a number of challenges to their cognitivist claims that cannot be either answered or side-stepped.

## 1 Cognitive Preliminaries

At first blush, reflecting on the cognitive value of a particular object, feature or activity looks to involve considering the ways and extent to which it is a source of, facilitates, or perhaps even constitutes knowledge. In one sense, this might be regarded as philosophically straightforward: knowledge is a matter of justified true belief. After all, every one of the 78 specially commissioned overviews “covering the whole of contemporary epistemology”<sup>229</sup> in the recent, state-of-the art, 900-plus-page *Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, is about propositional knowledge.<sup>230</sup> *Companion* co-editor Duncan Pritchard announces elsewhere that “to engage in an epistemological enterprise at all” is an, “attempt to track the truth,”<sup>231</sup> whilst Jonathan Kvanvig offers the unambiguous statement that, “knowledge requires truth ... and always will.”<sup>232</sup> In other words, matters epistemic, i.e., being or relating to knowledge, are matters propositional and truth-evaluable. In epistemological circles, characterising something as cognitive, i.e., being or relating to knowledge, is one and the same as being, relating to, or being explanatory of, our propositional, truth-apt beliefs and ways in which they are justified.<sup>233</sup>

Yet so-called ‘cognitivist’ accounts that champion the fact or possibility that works of art have non-trivial cognitive value, are informed by conceptions of the cognitive that are by no means limited to the epistemologists’ propositional presumption. Nor, indeed, are they

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<sup>228</sup> Gaut (2007, 136). “Aesthetic cognitivism” being Gaut’s conjunctive claim that artworks can have cognitive value and that this can contribute to their aesthetic value. Remembering, that Gaut’s equation of the aesthetic and the artistic entails that *aesthetic* cognitivism just is *artistic* cognitivism.

<sup>229</sup> Peter Graham quoted on the cover of Bernecker and Pritchard (2011).

<sup>230</sup> The publisher’s own description of the collected volume, available here: <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Companion-to-Epistemology/Bernecker-Pritchard/p/book/9780415722698>, states the book offers “a comprehensive and up-to-date survey of epistemology, charting its history, providing a thorough account of its key thinkers and movements, addressing enduring questions and contemporary research in the field.”

<sup>231</sup> Pritchard (2005, 243)

<sup>232</sup> Kvanvig (2003a, xi)

<sup>233</sup> John Turri’s encyclopedia entry on epistemology states that “Epistemology is the philosophical subdiscipline that studies the evaluative dimension of cognition...” (2013, 263) before proceeding to focus wholly on propositional knowledge.

even limited to what Myles Burnyeat calls the “epistemic troika” of propositional knowledge, know-how, and acquaintance knowledge.<sup>234</sup> Indeed as Jukka Mikonen rightly points out, there are cognitivists who claim that works of fiction and literature can teach us, not just “knowledge of concepts, modal knowledge or knowledge of possibilities, knowledge of human nature or emotions,” but can:

educate emotionally, train one’s ethical understanding, call into question moral views, cultivate or stimulate imaginative skills and/or cognitive skills, ‘enhance’ or ‘enrich’ the reader’s knowledge, ‘deepen’ or ‘clarify’ her understanding of things she already knows, ‘fulfil’ her knowledge or help her ‘acknowledge’ things, give significance to things, provide her knowledge of what it is like to be in a certain situation, that is, offer her a ‘virtual experience’, often of situations she could not or would not like to encounter in her real life, and so on...<sup>235</sup>

Arguments and claims concerning the putative cognitive content and value of works, are thereby beholden to the many and varied ways in which the cognitive *per se*, is conceived. One might categorise these various conceptions of the cognitive on a spectrum. At the narrow-scope end of the spectrum, the cognitive is typically taken to be co-extensive with the epistemologists’ default assumption, i.e., being or relating to propositional knowledge or justified (and non-lucky) true belief. At the other, wide-scope end, the cognitive is the broadest of broad churches, encompassing matters that are, or are related to, knowledge and understanding, teaching, learning, and a manifold collection of associated notions, including such things as emotional intelligence. One might reasonably think that the widest scope characterisation of the cognitive ensures that all (or nearly all) works have cognitive content of some sort and cognitive value to some degree. The strength of a wide-scope view is that it acknowledges the sheer breadth of matters cognitive; the potential weakness is that this very largesse delivers an embarrassment of cognitive riches, opening the floodgates to a near-ubiquitous cognitivism that loses any viable potency or purpose. A comparable point is pressed by ‘no-truth’ theorist Peter Lamarque:

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<sup>234</sup> Burnyeat (2011, 3)

<sup>235</sup> Mikonen (2013, 9-10) and see footnotes 36-56 (2013, 146-147) for his extensive references.

Who would deny that art is often involved with “exploring aspects of experience,” “providing visual images,” “broadening horizons,” “imagining possibilities,” “exploring and elaborating human ideas”? If this is cognitivism, then I too am a cognitivist. But I don’t think this has anything essentially to do with truth or knowledge or learning.”<sup>236</sup>

In other words, competing views of cognitive value are already hostage to mutually incompatible views about the nature of the cognitive *per se*. The problem is further complicated by the fact that so-called ‘cognitivist film theorists’, i.e., philosophers of film who are intellectually situated in the analytic and naturalising traditions, are sympathetic to representational theories of mind and conceive of the cognitive in ways that are operative in cognitive science. Such philosophers champion a conception of the cognitive that is not only widening the *scope* beyond anything previously thought of as cognition-related, but also applying it to actions, activity, and events and both personal and sub-personal *levels*. As philosopher of film, Carl Plantinga, urges:

we must broaden our conception of cognition to include bodily and affective processes, such as perception, emotion, and affect, in addition to those mental activities such as inference making and schematic categorization that in this context I will call “computation” activities. I will also argue that cognition must not be necessarily associated with rationality, nor is it primarily an activity of the conscious mind.<sup>237</sup>

If one is working with such a characterisation of cognition, the cognitive does not simply expand the epistemologists’ default propositional presumption to matters non-propositional, but includes bodily responses, unconscious mental activity and theoretically postulated sub-personal mental ‘computation’. On this picture it is by no means clear how the very idea of cognitive content in a work, or content cognised as being in a work, is supposed to be identified, let alone evaluated. Currie points out (on a suitably cautionary note) that there are serious concerns about any account of the cognitive that includes the “retuning of sensibilities of which we may be both unaware and over which we may be unable to exercise any direct

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<sup>236</sup> Lamarque (2006, 128-129)

<sup>237</sup> Plantinga (2016, 132)

control.”<sup>238</sup> Indeed, with any such wide-scope, multi-level conceptions of the cognitive, the worry is that our notions of learning, training, inculcation and even indoctrination, merge, and the very idea of epistemic responsibility, cognitive warrant, standards of correctness, or the need for critical engagement, float free from any pertinent restraint.

These scope and level variations confirm the fact cognitivists’ accounts of the cognitive content and value of works of art, including fiction films, do not share the same notion of the cognitive. Rather, any arguments for the cognitive value of works, must simultaneously offer tandem arguments for, or at least identify relevant claims concerning, their operative conception of the cognitive. Thus, accounts of the cognitive content and value of art works are potentially in thrall to bespoke conceptions of the nature of the cognitive *ab initio*. This is not merely a caveat to be borne in mind when considering the cognitivist debate about the cognitive value of art, but as I will spell out further, goes a long way to explain the longevity, and seeming intractability, of this ongoing debate.

With these preliminaries in mind, let us begin this investigation by considering Berys Gaut’s epistemic account, in which he argues that works of art can provide cognitive value in the form of both propositional and non-propositional knowledge.

## 2 Gaut’s Epistemic Account

According to Berys Gaut, the cognitive and the epistemic are “equivalent”.<sup>239</sup> In considering his account I will therefore follow his practice of using the notions interchangeably notwithstanding that, typically for epistemologists, non-propositional knowledge is standardly also non-epistemic.<sup>240</sup> Gaut’s ‘epistemic account’ uses a predominantly narrow scope, person-level, notion of cognitive content and value, to argue that works of art – and thus by implication fiction films that are works of art – can provide audiences with “cognitive gain”.<sup>241</sup> On Gaut’s view, an artwork has cognitive/epistemic merits in virtue of its “giving or conveying” new, non-trivial knowledge.<sup>242</sup> Gaut characterises his cognitivist view as “stronger” than “minimal cognitivism” because it turns on the requirement that the work does not merely manifest or exhibit its epistemic merits but it teaches them to an “normatively

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<sup>238</sup> Currie (2020, 85)

<sup>239</sup> Gaut (2007, 136)

<sup>240</sup> Matters are further complicated, however, because leading accounts of knowing-how, particularly Stanley & Williamson (2001) and Stanley (2011) argue that know-how is *au fond* a species of propositional knowledge, and thus in that sense are epistemic.

<sup>241</sup> Gaut (2007, 11, 138, 166, 167)

<sup>242</sup> Gaut (2007, 138, 136).

specified” audience, i.e., an audience who understands the work correctly.<sup>243</sup> According to Gaut’s proposal, a work can teach audiences in three ways: by conveying testimony, by prompting and directing the exercise of our imagination, and by providing experiences that develop the skills of its audience. Whilst Gaut chooses to articulate, and argue for, his strong(er) cognitivism, using paintings by Caravaggio and Rembrandt, and literary works, his account is not circumscribed in any way that necessarily excludes fiction film. Nor are there any *prima facie* reasons why Gaut’s knowledge-generating sources –testimony, imagination, skills-furthering experience – cannot or ought not to be thought applicable to fiction film.

Two quick cautionary notes before we begin. First, Gaut distinguishes ‘experiential imagining’ from ‘experience’ as indicated by the separation of concerns in Sections 2.2 and 2.3 below. Second, Gaut sometimes trades on our pre-philosophical<sup>244</sup> notions of imagination and at other times uses ‘imagination’, ‘to imagine’ or an ‘imagining’ as philosophical terms of art. In the latter case, he appears to accept the proposal that works of art, particularly narrative or fictional ones, *mandate* their viewers, readers, or listeners *to imagine* what the work represents, and in so doing come to have *belief-like imaginings*.<sup>245</sup> This picture echoes Gregory Currie’s notion of a “recreative imagination,”<sup>246</sup> in which our engagement with works of fiction also mandates us to have “desire-like imaginings,”<sup>247</sup> and the “imaginative counterparts to the emotions”.<sup>248</sup> One might be committed to the meta-philosophical view that getting one’s epistemology right requires getting one’s philosophy of mind right first, but any such metaphysics-first epistemology would need to be argued for. The default assumption here is that investigation into questions concerning epistemic value need not wait on any correct metaphysics of mind, or metaphysics of anything.

## 2.1 Testimony

Gaut argues that a work of art can provide testimony and thereby have cognitive or epistemic value. This suggestion is immediately appealing; artists regularly write about, or paint, things that they know and have experienced, and we often regard this as a strength of the work,

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<sup>243</sup> Gaut (2007, 138, 138, 139)

<sup>244</sup> I prefer the characterisation *pre-philosophical* rather than *folk psychological* simply because there can be an assumption by some who refer to folk psychology that our normal concepts such as belief, desire, knowledge, imagination, emotion, etc are theoretic concepts in a folk theory; a view I do not share or wish to imply.

<sup>245</sup> See Matravers (2014, 7-44) for an overview of such commitments; their source in the work of Kendall Walton, and a number of challenges not just to the idea of any such mandate, but to the fact that it can distinguish fiction from non-fiction.

<sup>246</sup> Currie and Ravenscroft (2002, 21, and 9) and Currie (2020)

<sup>247</sup> Currie (2020, 49ff.)

<sup>248</sup> Currie (2020, 72)

especially as they may seek to convey something about the subjects involved and/or their attitudes to those subjects. *The Lives of Others* is no exception. Von Donnersmarck visited East Germany (where family members still lived) during the 1980s, when the film is set.<sup>249</sup> In writing the script and making the film, he – and his design crew – did a vast amount of research, which resulted in an extremely high level of on-screen visual accuracy. He cannot be charged with ignorance or insincerity. Given, as Gaut recognises, “history ... rests overwhelmingly on testimonial evidence” it seems not unreasonable to argue for the analogous epistemic merit of works of art that offer testimonial evidence.<sup>250</sup> As such, von Donnersmarck’s achievement might reasonably be regarded as an excellent source of knowledge.

Where the analogy with history breaks down, however, is that *qua* fiction filmmaker, von Donnersmarck is not constrained by need to convey *only* truths, or even to convey *any*. It is not constitutive of the practices of fiction-creation, unlike those involved in the production of history, that there is an operative injunction to ‘get things right’, and a responsibility to revise accordingly, if one discovers this has not happened. A work of fiction does not cease to be a work of art because it is found wanting when measured against some standard of (external to the work) truth, in the way a piece of historical prose would be. Were this to be the case, it is not just films like Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* that would be artistically problematic, but every painting of, say, the *Assumption of the Virgin*, including Titian’s masterpiece, and so on. Even if the makers of fiction films, including *The Lives of Others*, do aim to communicate *some* information, this is only one amongst several aims.

How though might aspects of a fiction film which are designed to, and are supposed to convey truths, to be identified? Negotiating one’s way round the candidates requires bringing to bear one’s pre-existing knowledge of the world. But if this is the case, then how can a work be a *source* of knowledge? At best, the film is capable of being a source of beliefs or hypotheses, but not knowledge as such. This strategic retreat from knowledge to knowledge-candidates is at the heart of Iris Vidmar’s argument for testimony as art-sourced cognitive value; an account comparable to Gaut’s position.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Bernstein (2007); Carson (2010);

<sup>250</sup> Gaut (2007, 143)

<sup>251</sup> On Vidmar’s (2013) defence of ‘fictional testimony’ as a source of cognitive value, although a work might testify to the truth of *p*, the work alone is incapable of providing justification that *p* is the case. Such fictional testimonial cognitivism shifts the cognitive goalposts from knowledge to belief in ways akin to Peter Kivy’s cognitivist defence of propositional literary truths, which turns out to establish not knowledge but rather the “*plausibility*” of beliefs. (1998, 18 original emphasis).

Gaut does recognise the importance of practice-based considerations, acknowledging that artworks are not “fact-checked” and there is no “*institutional guarantee*” that what is represented is accurate.<sup>252</sup> So although Gaut claims that “Testimony is an essential source of knowledge of the world”, it remains one that “suffers from epistemic handicaps.”<sup>253</sup> Given Gaut does not, however, show us how to overcome these handicaps, perhaps Stacie Friend’s proposal can help. According to Friend, it is not simply the case that “Testimony, like perception, is normally a reliable process of acquiring information,”<sup>254</sup> there are strategies available for bringing some justificatory criteria to bear when engaging with fiction. Most importantly, they turn on an appreciation of the genre requirements of a work and/or the standards the author or creator of a work is known to bring to bear. In the case of Gore Vidal’s *Lincoln*, a fictionalized novel committed to accuracy, Friend claims that we “are more likely to track true and false information accurately” in the book, thanks to a combination of our knowledge of Vidal’s research methods, the genre of the book, and an “awareness of narrative technique”.<sup>255</sup> But even Friend acknowledges this comes with epistemic risks. How to adjudicate between accurate statements and artistic license, embellishment, and/or downright ‘cheating’, remains unclear. One thinks of Friedrich Schiller’s 1800 play *Mary Stuart*, which culminates in a meeting between Queen Elizabeth and Mary, Queen of Scots – itself a wholly fictional encounter. Added to which an ‘awareness of narrative technique’ requires that an entirely transparently engagement with the work would be inadequate. Without some notion of, and alertness to, the prose-writing – or fiction-making- techniques and tactics being used, one will be ill-equipped to negotiate accurately, to adjudicate between putative true and false claims being made (or ‘taught’) by the work.

Do such considerations present a serious, indeed potentially insurmountable challenge to the notion of artistic testimony as a source of knowledge, in film? One might argue that filmmakers have more resources to marshal in being accurate and conveying truths, especially in the exploitation of actual locations, accurate period costumes, vehicles, props etc. Conversely, these same resources can be used to generate the *appearance* of accuracy and potentially bewitch viewers into finding the events dramatised more credible than they are. On-screen fiction may deepen, rather than dissolve the adjudication worry highlighted.

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<sup>252</sup> Gaut (2007, 144, original emphasis)

<sup>253</sup> Gaut (2010, 69)

<sup>254</sup> Friend (2007, 46)

<sup>255</sup> Friend (2007, 46)

Moreover, films often have hybrid genres which pull in different directions, and the genre of ‘social realism’ can be exploited to deliver an epistemic authority where none exists.

Historians looking at *The Lives of Others* argue that whilst the locations, the set-dressing, and the visuals of the film are to be commended for their accuracy, there is, however, a much more serious problem with the fundamental idea at the heart of the film’s story. For the film exploits the premise that Officer Wiesler is single-handedly running an important surveillance operation in such a way as to avoid any of his colleagues double-checking his reports – a possibility that historical evidence rules out.<sup>256</sup> In reality, operations much less serious than one such as this, would involve teams of people each providing multiple surveillance reports that were then corroborated against each other. In other words, the surveillance operatives at the time *were themselves* under surveillance; a point never acknowledged in the film. It would therefore have been impossible for Wiesler to write fictitious reports. The opportunity for him to have a character-development-prompting dilemma about whether or not to engage in such deception would not therefore arise; or at least not arise as something that could be done without accomplices. This point was known to the writer/director, who acknowledges that real-life dissident songwriter Wolf Biermann had thirteen people cross-monitoring him.<sup>257</sup>

According to Anna Funder, author of *Stasiland*, side-stepping such practical realities to facilitate the story is not merely a matter of artistic license, it promulgates a more grievous flaw by offering a potentially profound misrepresentation of “the ‘total’ nature of totalitarianism”.<sup>258</sup> Given a surveillance operation on someone like Dreyman would have involved at least a dozen people, all cross-checking each other, individual operatives might console themselves that were ‘just doing their job’; thereby avoiding the sense of personal responsibility that Weisler finds himself confronting.<sup>259</sup> In the 110 miles of Stasi files created by 91,000 full-time employees, there is no known case of a Stasi officer having done what Wiesler did.<sup>260</sup> To (mis)represent the mechanics of Stasi surveillance is to “misunderstand the nature of bureaucratization of evil.”<sup>261</sup> Do we really want to make claims about epistemic gains from testimony, when as Funder points out, and von Donnersmarck himself

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<sup>256</sup> Funder (2007) and Ash (2007).

<sup>257</sup> Von Donnersmarck quoted in Carson (2010, 16).

<sup>258</sup> Funder (2007)

<sup>259</sup> Funder (2007)

<sup>260</sup> Ash (2007)

<sup>261</sup> Funder (2007)

acknowledges, “drama has its own imperatives” to which truths are ultimately subservient.<sup>262</sup> Thomas Lindberger presses the point, characterising the film as an example of “Stasiploitation” in which “‘Facts’ in the conventional sense interest [von Donnersmarck] only in as far as they support the convincing staging of this fantasy.”<sup>263</sup>

Gaut’s primary bulwark against this objection is to remind us that no knowledge is indefeasible. In one sense, Gaut is right that to insist that indefeasibility is too strong a standard to meet; this would play this too far into the hands of the sceptic. Yet conceptually, knowledge is factive. It remains, however, that if one argues for the legitimacy of defeasible claims to knowledge as a way of justifying artistic testimony, more needs to be said about what would count as reasonable justification and what methods are to be used to discern it. Without specific ways of responding to what I call ‘epistemic adjudication concerns’ might one have to concede the truth of the German proverb *Eine halbe Wahrheit ist eine ganze Lüge*; a half truth is a total lie?<sup>264</sup> Or are the “small inaccuracies and implausibilities”, together with the manipulations in service of artistic license, permissible and legitimate given they allow “a deeper truth to be conveyed”?<sup>265</sup> Long-standing Platonic worries about the misrepresentational power of poetic mimesis – which at best mislead, at worst corrupt - hang in the air, unanswered.<sup>266</sup> If such cognitivism is to be as robust as is claimed we need to consider the imagination - the most substantial source of epistemic value in a work of art, according to Gaut.

## 2.2 Imagination

According to Gaut not only do we use our imagination to gain non-trivial knowledge of the world; works of art can aid this activity of imagining. Consequently, artwork-facilitated

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<sup>262</sup> Funder (2007). See also Zizek (2009) for criticism that the film “misses” the “true horror” of the situation it presents.

<sup>263</sup> Lindberger (2008, 561)

<sup>264</sup> Quoted in Jedlitschka (2012, 107)

<sup>265</sup> Ash (2007)

<sup>266</sup> See Plato (2007), particularly *The Republic* Book II (376e ff) which considers true and false stories; and the implications for making children more cowardly (381e); Book III (386a ff) and the need to supervise story choices; and Book X (600e ff) for the poet’s lack of genuine knowledge. See Annas (1981, 94-101 and 336-344) for ways of appreciating the multiple art-involving internal inconsistencies *The Republic*. See Walsh (1969, 16-30) for a consideration of ‘Plato’s Problem’ which she earlier cashes out in terms of the idea of “cognitive irresponsibility” (1943, 433). See Vidmar (2013, 190 ff.) for engagement with Plato-sourced concerns, specifically in relation to testimony. Given that Plato distinguishes dramatic presentation from narrated presentation, seeing the former as more epistemically problematic than the latter, his concerns are particularly pertinent for films.

imagination can deliver non-trivial knowledge.<sup>267</sup> Specifically, Gaut distinguishes four types of imagination-sourced or enabled knowledge: (a) knowledge of what one “should do”, e.g., pursue one career rather than another; (b) self-knowledge concerning how one would behave in situations one has never encountered, e.g., being tortured; (c) knowledge of others’ feelings and experiences, or “what it is like to be”, say, a 60 year old bereaved woman; and (d) knowledge of what is morally right, e.g., whether health care should be free and universally available.<sup>268</sup> Gaut’s cognitivist argument and conclusion is:

- (1) One’s imagination is a source of non-trivial knowledge about oneself, others, and the world.
- (2) Engaging with artworks aids one’s imagination.

So, (3) Engaging with artworks is a source of non-trivial knowledge about oneself, others, and the world.

I take it Gaut is here not necessarily saying that ‘aiding one’s imagination’ is a matter of being *mandated to imagine*, but this distinction is not altogether clear, and one can read Gaut as if he is committed to this, or without assuming this to be the case.

Let us take each of the four types of supposed imagination-sourced knowledge individually. In (a), knowledge of what one should do, Gaut claims to know (i.e. to have known earlier in his life) through the deployment of his imagination that he should be a philosopher rather than a doctor. But what is this example meant to be an example of? Is Gaut pressing the idea that claims of the form ‘I should do such-and-such’ are examples of modal claims that the imagination can come to know? If so, does this presume that modal claims have an atemporal truth value, in virtue of some metaphysically robust atemporal truth-maker? Does this assume or entail that there is a supposed (modal) fact of the matter than *it just is the case that* Gaut should or ought to be a philosopher rather than a doctor? This looks to be a very strong commitment; one that rejects the pertinence of changing contextual factors and developing character traits, interests, and priorities. Do not our lives unfold in unexpected directions in which we pursue, develop, and discover unanticipated abilities, dispositions, practical and intellectual skills, and preoccupations? One might consider (or

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<sup>267</sup> Gaut (2007, 145 ff.)

<sup>268</sup> Gaut (2007, 145) Gaut’s own examples.

imagine) that were Gaut to have become a doctor, he might have found his metier as, say, a medical pathologist; a job that harnesses a fascination with subtle distinctions and diagnoses, potentially analogous to certain styles of philosophical investigation. Gaut might now be enjoying the combination of intellectual creativity, detective work, and research and development offered by this medical specialty; unable to imagine himself doing anything else.

Perhaps, though the ‘should’ of the example does not indicate the speaker is making a modal claim or assertion but instead indicates the speaker is making a *recommendation*. Even if we accept that, in some uses, a recommendation is truth evaluable (and one might argue that this an open philosophical question<sup>269</sup>) then is it not reasonable to claim that such truth values are likely to be temporally indexed and/or context dependent. After all, ‘I should, go on a diet’ *qua* a truth-evaluable recommendation might be true one year, false another. If the truth of ‘I should be a philosopher not a doctor’ is a time- and context-sensitive recommendation, then the question arises: how does one adjudicate between exercises of the imagination that support a claim, and those that deny it?

Gaut’s response to this challenge is to invoke the need for a “discipline[d]” imagination which ensures the appropriate “fit with relevant evidence”.<sup>270</sup> The worry here, though, is that this simply restates the requirement that knowledge *be* knowledge, rather than just belief or supposition, and thus be appropriately and acceptably justified. The question at issue remains: how does the exercise of one’s imagination enable such justification. Perhaps, though, Gaut’s ‘I should be a philosopher’ example is in fact a gesture to the importance and value of first-personal imagination-sourced *avowals*. After all, one can sincerely avow “I am in pain” or “I am in love” and this provides appropriate justification for a third party to come to know that I am in pain or in love. Indeed, first-person genuine avowals in the pain and love cases *just are* the best evidence (for a third personal claim) that someone is in pain or love. Are we being invited to acknowledge that first-personal imagination-sourced avowals such as “I should be a philosopher” are thereby also knowable and known to those who imagine them?

One response to this would be to say, in a Wittgensteinian spirit, that it does not make sense to say one *knows* one is in pain; rather one *just is* in pain when one says, ‘I am in pain.’<sup>271</sup> The presumption otherwise, of what might be called ‘epistemic self-reflexivity’, is

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<sup>269</sup> A recommendation might be of pragmatic value, without being true. It might be a rule or a heuristic.

<sup>270</sup> Gaut (2007, 154)

<sup>271</sup> Wittgenstein (2009, §264)

confused idea. It is by no means obvious that the substance of first-person avowals is an epistemic matter. But if we concede to Gaut there is a kind of self-knowledge about what one ‘should do’ to be achieved through imagination, it remains obscure how one might escape the self-fulfilling prophecy that ‘imagining makes it so’.

It is also not clear how engaging with a work that is someone else’s creative product helps you gain knowledge of what you should, yourself, do. There are any number of screen dramas about doctors, from Stanley Kramer’s 1955 *Not as a Stranger* to the 331 episodes of the Michael Crichton-created 1994-2009 American TV series *ER* which might well seduce someone into wanting to pursue a medical career. Yet it would be unsurprising if a cinematic diet focused on films such as Cristi Puiu’s 2005 *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* and Miloš Forman’s 1975 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, would fail to do this. Indeed, they are likely to put off all but the most vocational of putative medical students. For every film that might aid one’s imagination to come to ‘know’ what one should do, another film might well justify its contrary or contradiction. We are back with the adjudication objection, by a different route.

In the self-knowledge-focussed cases, (b), the idea is that one can come to have knowledge about what one would do in counterfactual cases. According to Gaut one can “experientially imagine”<sup>272</sup> how one might behave in hitherto unencountered situations, such as being tortured; thereby gaining knowledge about oneself. Experiential imagining is, on his view, to be contrasted with so-called “minimal” imagining: the former involves imagining “what it is like to feel and look soaking wet and cold”; whilst the latter is just a matter of “imagining being soaking wet and cold”.<sup>273</sup> Gaut compares experiential imagining to imaginative *acquaintance* and minimal imagining to imagining a (true) description of an experience.<sup>274</sup> We are being invited, it would seem, to understand that we can, through the use of our imaginative faculties, gain non-propositional *acquaintance knowledge* with what it *feels like* to be wet, or to be tortured, even if we have never experienced these before.

Such experiential imagining might reasonably be thought of as the goal certain filmmakers, as with Steven Spielberg’s stated ambitions for the opening sequence of his 1998 film, *Saving Private Ryan*, which dramatises the Normandy landings of the Allied forces in World War II:

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<sup>272</sup> Gaut (2007, 155)

<sup>273</sup> Gaut (2007, 155). Whilst being tortured is not an experience many have undergone, being wet and cold is.

<sup>274</sup> Gaut (2007, 155)

It's easy to point out a couple of shots that are obviously very graphic, but it's the accumulation of the sequence on Omaha Beach that's supposed to help the audience understand the physical experience of combat. I didn't want to do something I've done with many of my other movies - allowing the audience to be spectators. Here I wanted to bring the audience onto the stage with me and demand them to be participants with those kids who had never seen combat before in real life, and get to the top of Omaha Beach together."<sup>275</sup>

The idea that one can imagine being acquainted with what it feels like to participate in the Normandy Beach landings, or to be tortured in a way worthy of being described as *acquaintance* knowledge is, however, seriously questionable.<sup>276</sup> What are the criteria or conditions by which such acquaintance knowledge is knowledge, as opposed to speculation or projection or the 'feeling' *that* this is what such-and-such must be like? It is difficult – to my mind, impossible – to *re-imagine* the sun on one's face, after weeks of cloudy weather and rain; let alone *re-experience* one's *acquaintance* with *feeling the sun* – notwithstanding this is already a feeling, or sensation, one has had many thousands of times. How might one reasonably be regarded as drawing any warranted acquaintance knowledge of matters such as being tortured, without having been tortured, and when the experience is wholly alien. Flinching and cringing at the site of a realistic torture scene on the screen, seems to fall considerably short.

A Gautian could remind us of the scene in Quentin Tarantino's 1992 film *Reservoir Dogs*, when the character Mr Blonde tortures a kidnapped policeman and cuts off his ear.<sup>277</sup> This is difficult to watch even though at no point do we see the policeman's ear being cut off, or indeed the ear. All we see is a gesture we take to being the flinging of the supposedly detached ear across the room in a scene reminiscent of various stagings of Cornwall's gouging out of Gloucester's eyes in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. But how are either of these

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<sup>275</sup> Spielberg quoted in Ebert (1998). Spielberg's achievement – to the extent that one believes he achieves his ambition – is perhaps better characterised as a 'virtual experience'; an art-facilitated cognitive gain identified by Dorothy Walsh (1969, 91), whose terminology, Gaut champions.

<sup>276</sup> At times, Gaut collapses the difference between an experiential imagination of a never-before-experienced experience and what one might call an experiential re-imagination, which is, I think, contributing to these mischaracterisations of *acquaintance* knowledge.

<sup>277</sup> Film clip available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIt8UVZDxJ4>

scenes aids to imagining what we would feel like were we to be tortured? We do not feel any sense of hopelessness or impotence, or profound loss; we are not in pain or anguish, etc. Rather what is made vivid is *that* these are appalling acts for one person to do to another. If there is knowledge to be had from watching such things, then is it not the propositional knowledge *torture is horrific*? Furthermore, does the filmmaker not expect his audience to bring this knowledge to their viewing, which is why rather than having to communicate it, they can exploit it. Only for a viewer ignorant of very idea of torture would such scenes provide a ‘cognitive gain’ and this would, presumably, be a third-personal piece of knowledge, not a first personal piece of self-knowledge. Even then, any such audience member would require third-party assistance to learn that what they are witnessing exemplifies an act of torture, as such.

Similar concerns can be raised with Gaut’s (c), the knowledge of others, which also trades on the exercise of experiential imagination. Here the suggestion is that we can come to know what it ‘feels like’ to be someone else; the idea being we can gain ‘knowledge of others’ where that is to be construed as ‘knowledge of what others are feeling’ or ‘knowledge of what others feel like’. Gaut’s example is that one can come to know what it feels like to be a 60-year-old bereaved woman. Gaut is not arguing that we can come to know *that* such a bereaved woman feels whatever she does; rather he is making the much stronger claim: we can come to know *what it feels like to be her*. On his account, this can be achieved through using one’s imagination alone, and when an appropriate exercise of the imagination is ‘aided’ by engaging with works of art about such grieving widows.

There are several points to be made here, not least, the fact that filmmakers, scriptwriters, actors, or indeed novelists or ballet choreographers, etc, do not have to be able to know what it feels like to be such a person to be able to create such a fictional character. All they need to be able to do, in the case of such creative works, is to decide *that* such a person or character might feel a certain way and be able to dramatise, describe, or otherwise present it. Consequently, Gaut’s knowledge-of-others claim ascribes more to a work’s audience than it does to its creators.

One might respond by saying this empathic knowledge *just is* what is required for knowledge of others; indeed it is the way (perhaps through the simulation of others’ beliefs, feelings, and desires) that we gain knowledge and understanding of others. Any related propositional knowledge is derivative of this. There are several problems with such an approach, not least that it takes us into the further consensus-free philosophical waters of

‘empathy’ and ‘empathetic knowledge’;<sup>278</sup> not to mention it puts epistemic achievement in thrall to individuals’ psychological make-up. One consequence is that we again meet the adjudication problem. Even if we concede, for the purposes of argument, that there is such a thing as empathy, and that it may be a source of knowledge, how do we tell which things we find ourselves ‘empathising’ are accurate, and which not. Plato’s worry<sup>279</sup> – that we can be emotionally manipulated and come to have false or and/or undesirable values and attitudes – remains unquelled.

The point is well-made by Currie, who argues, both empirically and conceptually, for a deflationary account of the epistemic capacity of empathy. As he points out “fiction’s role in promoting empathy is apt to be over-rated if we ignore the distinction between how easily we respond empathically, and how intelligently we do so.”<sup>280</sup> Currie’s call for modesty is shared by Matravers, who reminds us that art, including films, are, “in the business of presenting us with a world to *contemplate*,”<sup>281</sup> rather than being a source of knowledge. If contemplation, thinking about, supposing, considering, musing on, etc. were deemed to provide cognitive gain, then getting out of bed in the morning and deciding what to have for breakfast would meet the criteria for being of cognitive merit; arguing for epistemic cognitivism would now be pointless.

It is worth remembering, that Gaut appears to be arguing for the value of imagination (alone and art-aided) at the person level. Empathic knowledge as a simulation-generating and simulation generated-way of coming to have knowledge of others is, however, a (supposedly) sub-personal activity. There is, though, no such thing as a sub-personal activity that is subject to the constraint of having to meet standards of correctness; and it is not clear that there is any such thing as knowledge or understanding if it is not capable of being held to standards of correctness.

Confusion arises, in such matters, I would argue, when standards of success are conflated with standards of correctness. If one thinks of the process of digestion, such a conflation often, and unproblematically, occurs. A person whose digestion is working properly may be reasonably described as having a *successfully* or *correctly* functioning

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<sup>278</sup> See Currie (2020, Chapter 11) and Matravers (2011) for further details about the lack of consensus on empathy *per se*, let alone empathic knowledge.

<sup>279</sup> See Plato (2007) *The Republic* Book X; “... imitation as a whole produce work that is far from the truth, namely, that imitation really consorts with a part of us that is far from reason, and the result of their being friends and companions is neither sound nor true” (2007, 603a). I take it ‘sound’ here, together with ‘true’, allows us to construe Plato’s point as covering both propositional and non-propositional knowledge.

<sup>280</sup> Currie (2020, 2017)

<sup>281</sup> Matravers (2017, 144, emphasis added)

digestive system; the choice of word makes no distinction. In connection with sub-personal processes, the criteria for success and for correctness are identical. By contrast, to say, of a person, that they play golf correctly is not to say they play it successfully. Playing golf successfully requires one to win on a regular basis. Playing golf correctly requires that one play in accordance with the rules, an achievement that is compatible with never winning a round of golf in one's life. One could not always fail to digest a meal and yet be digesting correctly. If one were playing golf incorrectly, one could have one's mistakes pointed out, and adjust accordingly (or choose not to, if one were Donald Trump). This requires that what it takes to play golf be a two-way power; i.e., a power subject to one's control. The activities and processes of sub-personal organs and aspects of the human body are not two-way powers; we cannot choose to digest otherwise; we cannot 'correct' the way we digest etc. The same goes for any intercranial, neurological activities or processes. Whilst they may occur successfully, they do not, and cannot, occur correctly.

In the case of knowledge, if one thinks that justifying one's beliefs is just a matter of one's belief-forming 'mechanisms' operating reliably, then one is conflating and collapsing this distinction between success conditions and correctness conditions. If one avoids this misstep, which assumes knowing to be on all fours with digesting, one is left recognising that justifying one's beliefs, and ensuring claims to knowledge are legitimate, is a matter of doing something *correctly*. This is relevant because if imagining is conceived of as *sub-personal simulation* rather than a person-level way of thinking our way into another's shoes or situation, there is no distinction between success and correctness. Because it is only as a person-level activity that imagining is something that might be done correctly (though of course it need not conform to standards of correctness at all.) The very idea of sub-personally simulating one's way to knowledge – which requires a distinction between success and correctness conditions – cannot get off the ground.

Gaut seems, however, to focus more on the person-level activity insofar as he talks about our *conscious* activities of "imagining from the inside" or "internal imagining,"<sup>282</sup> in virtue of which we can come to "shar[e] a sort of intimacy"<sup>283</sup> with another person or character. But at the person-level, such imaginings can – as Gaut himself rightly says – 'misfire' and herein lies the problem: we can get things wrong.<sup>284</sup> Gaut's response to this fundamental difficulty is, once again, to summon his proposed disciplined imagination; now charged with avoiding

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<sup>282</sup> Gaut (2011, 139)

<sup>283</sup> Gaut (2011, 138)

<sup>284</sup> Gaut (2007, 156)

“self-delusion”, “stereotypes”, “wishful thinking” and “fantasy”.<sup>285</sup> But the question remains: with what resources does the experiential imagination avoid such pitfalls? How do we really know what it feels like to be – as in *The Lives of Others* – an actress forced to choose between having unwanted sex with a politician or being prevented from working for the rest of her life? Or an actress who kills herself to avoid her beloved partner realising that she has betrayed him to avoid being professionally blacklisted. I see no reason to question the fact *that* such situations are to be understood as profoundly distressing (both internally and externally to the fiction), but it remains unclear how this is something that can be *felt as* a fictional character, or a real person, might feel it; or that were it to be ‘feelable’ an audience would want to be brought to a suicidal state, even were that state to somehow ‘co-exist’ with other states that might prevent one from killing oneself.

Summoning a disciplined imagination might be a necessary requirement to avoid one’s empathy being tainted by an inappropriate stereotype but quite how it is to be achieved, or policed, to ensure the imagination’s epistemic imaginings are correct, remains obscure. After all, in the case of the recently widowed woman, how are we to ascertain that our empathy at her grief is not wholly misplaced; she might, after all, be delighted to be free of a burdensome marriage. One wonders, also, about the degree of fine-grainedness that our imagining must operate with, to ensure that what it feels like to be in someone else’s situation might suffice for knowledge? Answers to such questions remain elusive.

Lastly, let us consider Gaut’s fourth case (d), that of moral knowledge. Gaut’s claim here is that whilst not all moral learning need involve the imagination, there is a cognitively valuable kind that does. Imagination-involving moral learning is, on his account, an *a priori* rather than *a posteriori* matter, and is pursued by means of “an experiment conducted in the imagination”, and which engages in the kind of experiential imagining, and imaginative acquaintance exercised in (b) and (c).<sup>286</sup> Gaut takes imagination-involving thought experiments to be comparable to the use of thought experiments in philosophy such as Bernard Williams’ *Jim and the Indians* case.<sup>287</sup> He suggests that it is odd there is a resistance to learning about the world through the imagination (with and without the aid of works of art) given “the ubiquity of thoughts-experiments in philosophy.”<sup>288</sup> Thus the idea of artwork-

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<sup>285</sup> Gaut (2007, 154)

<sup>286</sup> Gaut (2007, 158)

<sup>287</sup> Gaut (2007, 160). Williams original presentation of ‘Jim and the Indians’ is in Smart & Williams (1973, 84-85).

<sup>288</sup> Gaut (2007, 161). Currie notes, however, that, “academic psychology, which does seriously study human motivation, does not seem to use [thought experiments]” (2020, 141), perhaps because, as Hacker observes, “a thought-experiment is no more an experiment than monopoly money is money” (2009, 140, fn. 14). Remember

aided, imagination-involving moral learning is to be understood as analogous to thought-experiment-aided moral learning.

What moral knowledge, though, does one learn by reflecting on *Jim and the Indians*? The answer, for Gaut, is that *contra* utilitarianism, whether one should kill a single Indian (supposedly to thereby save the lives of twenty more), “is not obviously the right answer”.<sup>289</sup> This is a ‘justified result’ the ‘thought experiment’ invites us to ‘conclude’. What one learns – or perhaps better, what one realizes – is not so much a case of what *is* the right thing to do, but rather how challenging it can be to find either ‘a’ or ‘the’ ‘right thing to do’ in some situations. However, if what is learnt through so-called thought experiments, or their fictional counterparts, is that the world is not morally straightforward and that moral knowledge of the kind offered by moral theories is inadequate to real-life complexities, then once again, this seems like a modest claim. Moreover, one can imagine any number of distinct thought experiments or fictional situations which would provide the same moral knowledge, i.e., ‘the complexity of this moral situation is such that there is no obvious answer to the question of what is the morally right thing to do.’

That said, one might come to non-trivially learn more about one’s own moral commitments and/or priorities. Recognising one’s personal, let us say, *moral orientation*, is presumably a pre-requisite to reflecting on it, and thus is a non-trivial gain. Bearing this in mind, one can agree with Gaut that there might be epistemic gains to be had from the deliverances of our imagination here; such deliverances are not moral truths *per se* but rather justified true beliefs about which moral commitments and views we do and do not hold, and these may be misguided, partial, radically flawed, or downright false. As such, I would argue that Gaut’s moral knowledge example better serves a particular kind of self-knowledge. The same argument works for coming to know the moral orientation of other people.

It is not, however, this kind of self- or other-knowledge that Gaut has in mind, when arguing how artworks aid our imagination and thus be deemed a source of moral knowledge. Using William Styron’s 1980 novel *Sophie’s Choice* as his key example, Gaut argues that in engaging with this work we come to know *contra* Kant, that there are moral dilemmas.<sup>290</sup> *Contra* Gaut (and Kant) and *pro* Jerome Stolnitz, I would argue that the recognition that our

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too, that Gaut claims to be working with what he calls an *a priori* notion of an ‘experiment’; arguably an oxymoron.

<sup>289</sup> Gaut (2007, 161)

<sup>290</sup> Gaut (2007, 164). Gaut uses the example of Styron’s novel as part of his argument not just for cognitivism, but for aesthetic cognitivism: the view that the knowledge we get is partly constituted by its aesthetic presentation.

moral lives include dilemmas *is* trivial.<sup>291</sup> Rather than being an example of a serious and substantive epistemic gain, is the fact that we have moral dilemmas not the prompt for our pre-philosophical activities of moral reflection and philosophical theory-building?

It is perhaps also worth noting that whilst ‘Sophie’s Choice’ has come to be a metaphor, perhaps even a synonym for the having of a moral dilemma, I would argue that Sophie’s choice to ‘select’ daughter Eva to be taken off and killed on the presumption that this will save son Jan – is not actually the result of a dilemma. On arriving at Auschwitz, Sophie is plunged, uncomprehending, into a morally chaotic and degraded environment that she and we can barely grasp. She is not only forced to ‘choose’ but is also given no time to think through and reflect on what she is doing, and how she might make her choice. I fail to see how this can be a dilemma. Sophie’s pushing away of daughter Eva is less of a choice than a ‘knee-jerk’ reaction; it is the doctor who knowingly forces her into this action who bears the moral responsibility here. Rather, Sophie’s dilemma-constituting choice is whether to kill herself, in the wake of these terrible events, or to carry on living and to give and accept love again.

One might also question the extent to which Gaut’s moral-knowledge-related exercises of the imagination are really ‘experiential imagining’, as such. Is it not more apposite to say that it is by *thinking about* and *reflecting on* our views and values on moral topics and situations, that we come to have more nuanced, more sensitive, and more warranted beliefs? Or is Gaut pressing for the conflation, or equation of imagination, thinking and reflection. We are perhaps forced back to Matravers’ reminder that even Kendall Walton acknowledges, “‘Imagining’ can, if nothing else, serve as a placeholder for a notion yet to be fully clarified.”<sup>292</sup>

Finally, Gaut’s claim that imagination (particularly when aided by works of art) can be a source of moral knowledge emphasises – in the case of prose-based works - the power of fictional and literary devices to make our imaginings “more vivid, precise and powerful and at the same time (not coincidentally) more cognitively instructive.”<sup>293</sup> This idea takes no account, however, of the fact that the creators of thought experiments (art-based or otherwise) one might deploy their skills to harness their audiences’ emotions to persuade them of the ‘rightness’ of known falsehoods; or to persuade them that an incorrect course of action is correct. Yet again, the hovering presence of the Platonic sceptic reminds us that reason can be overpowered by emotion, and caution must be exercised. How are we to ensure our

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<sup>291</sup> See Stolnitz (1992).

<sup>292</sup> Walton (1990, 21) quoted in Matravers (2014, 13).

<sup>293</sup> Gaut (2007, 164)

imagination is ‘disciplined’, as Gaut recommends, if at the same time, Gaut is ready to embrace the idea that by:

deploying the full force of affective and experiential imagination, we can be made to feel the wrongness, rightness or sheer imponderability of certain moral choices, and so we can learn through imagination.<sup>294</sup>

The use of ethos, logos, and pathos to persuade one’s audience, exploits, amongst other things, the rhetorical power of soliciting and directing the emotions of one’s audience to foster just such felt wrongness or rightness. Recognising this returns us to our adjudication concerns. One does not have to be a subscriber to the Platonic tri-partite soul, to be concerned that one’s feelings (be they emotional and/or gut) may not be a legitimate or reliable guide to the truth. Is epistemic veracity in thrall to the variable psychological responses and imaginative powers of individuals?

In *The Lives of Others* we are presented with the moral *volte face* of an ideologically committed Stasi officer in ways that are emotionally powerful and convincing. Yet, according to the Stasi files themselves, not one person in real life, underwent any comparable transformation. Are we, the audience, not guilty of succumbing to the very “wishful thinking”<sup>295</sup> that Gaut tasks the disciplined imagination with guarding against? And did von Donnersmarck not know exactly what he was doing, when – in the writing, casting, and directing of this film – he marshalled a vast range of emotion-generating resources to ensure we find his happy ending capable of packing a credibility-enhancing emotional punch? After all, he could have ended his film prior to the last ten minutes, when the 1984 sequence comes to its natural, indeed inevitable conclusion, with the suicide of Christa-Maria, and both Dreyman and Wiesler’s realization of their own misplaced trust, and participation, in a corrupt and corrupting state. One might say that the released version of film, is designed to give a ‘message’ of hope: that there is a better future ahead for us all, if we understand and forgive each other our crimes. But such a ‘message’ is not an item of knowledge, it is perhaps more appropriately classified as a recommendation, or a guiding principle or rule that we might choose to live by.

The art-work aided imagination that Gaut claims is the leading source of propositional and empathic knowledge of ourselves, each other, and the world, looks at best to be a source

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<sup>294</sup> Gaut (2007, 164)

<sup>295</sup> Gaut (2007, 154)

of *beliefs*; moreover beliefs that cannot be justified except by looking outside of the work. One way of capturing the importance of the distinction between belief and knowledge, especially in connection with our imagination, is to take seriously the distinction identified by Peter Hacker between our cognitive and cogitative faculties. Cogitative faculties are, in themselves, not cognitive ones: ‘to imagine’ is not a factive verb, but rather “a paradigmatically intentional one”; albeit one that might be cognition-facilitating.<sup>296</sup> The cogitative/cognitive distinction reminds us of the fine line that the debate over the cognitive value of fictions films – and art in general – must tread.

### 2.3 Experience

Gaut’s third and final way in which artworks, specifically representational works, can be a source of knowledge, is in virtue of our experience of them. This is not to be confused with the so-called ‘experiential imagination’ discussed in 2.2 above. Instead, Gaut proposes that in engaging with a representational work of art we “interact” with the representation such that this very interaction can “itself can convey concepts, skills and habits of discrimination”.<sup>297</sup> This is a matter of (i) learning “how to look” and notice things that one might otherwise miss and (ii) being subsequently capable of using character-sourced concepts to accurately describe actual people.<sup>298</sup>

Although Gaut does not go into detail about what it is to, or how we actually, ‘learn to look’, I take it that he is alluding to the way in which we can improve the ability to *pay close attention* to a film, or work, so as not to miss any nuance or suggestion. This seems to be an empirical claim that in experiencing representational works we can sharpen our skill in discerning details. Presumably the idea here is that in being motivated to practice this activity, thanks in part, say, to a work’s being engaging, our powers of discernment are honed. As the surveillance practices dramatised in *The Lives of Others* show, we can deliberately choose to search for clues about others and the world that might be hidden, or develop techniques for noticing things that might be open to view, but go unnoticed. I take it that such cognitive gain is a non-propositional know-how.

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<sup>296</sup> Hacker (2013, 405)

<sup>297</sup> Gaut (2007, 143)

<sup>298</sup> Gaut (2007, 143)

In the second case – in which characters and their traits generate new concepts – one might, having read Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, now be in a position to characterise a real teacher as Gradgrindian; a point that does not prompt any obvious objection. Gaut's own two examples, are used to argue that one can gain knowledge of a real person by comparing their qualities to those had by Emma Bovary or Emma Woodhouse.

In the first case – learning how to look – it is, however, quite possible to watch a film passively, paying little attention to the detail, the subtleties, and the saliences of a film. It is by no means guaranteed that even the most fervent payer of attention will notice the salient choice of breed for the serial killer Buffalo Bill's dog in Jonathan Demme's 1991 *The Silence of the Lambs*.<sup>299</sup> Even without being able to identify Bill's dog – a bichon frise – it is visually obvious that this dog is closest in looks to a young lamb. Yet how many viewers notice that Clarice Starling, having rescued Bill's victim and now leading her to safety, has her arm round a young girl who now resembles herself as a child, attempting to rescue a lamb destined for the slaughter?

Added to which, why think that skills developed in watching films translate to one's wider life, which would seem to be Gaut's claim. It is worth remembering that when we engage with works of art we can ask of its elements, 'why' has this choice been made; what contribution is it making to the whole work? Such connections are possible because of the possible thematic salience of what we notice in a film. We do not, however, discriminate or notice aspects and features of the world in the same way: for when we engage with the world around us, we are not looking at its features or properties as intentional products, or aspects thereof, of a created work that may serve a function in making the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

In the second case – our ability to draw illuminating analogies between fictional and real-life figures – is also offered as a matter of gaining empirical knowledge, in part propositional, in part know-how. One might say, however, that it is already a basic premise of pedagogy that *reading* expands one's vocabulary and conceptual resources, and thus the argument for such cognitive gain (when related to fiction or non-fictional prose) is long established. But although this may well work for prose fiction, it is not clear that it transfers easily to fiction film. After all, one can watch a film without even registering, let alone remembering and using the names of characters as new concepts. Given the name 'Emma' is mentioned 375 times in Gustave Flaubert's novel it is perhaps not surprising that (together

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<sup>299</sup> I am indebted to Tim Harrison for this observation.

with the title of Flaubert's book) it might generate a set of qualitative connotations that generate a new concept.<sup>300</sup> But does this happen with the names of characters or objects films?

One might argue that *Rosebud* is now conceptual shorthand for any object of great personal symbolic power thanks to the role played by the childhood sled of that name, in the life of protagonist Charles Foster Kane, in Orson Welles' 1941 film *Citizen Kane*. Consider too the concept *replicant*: an artificially engineered being created to be part of the labour force in a future Los Angeles, of which several examples are featured as characters in Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*. The name of these machines was changed to the neologism 'replicant' in the film version, having been 'android' in the original novel.<sup>301</sup> 'Replicant' is now in common parlance meaning a human-created entity that is visually indiscernible from a human being, radically stronger, and with a pre-programmed finite 'life' span. Would one want to say that we can gain new knowledge about actual androids by being able to conceptualize them as replicants? Perhaps.<sup>302</sup> But given that in the film, replicants 'defy' their programming to set about finding a way to overcoming their 'termination date' – something that an android cannot and could not do – the idea of characterising any putative cognitive gain relating to the concept replicant 'knowledge' looks inappropriate. Indeed, it raises the spectre that works of art not only fail to provide genuine knowledge but are capable of the prompting of misleading beliefs that masquerade as knowledge. Such a concern immediate alerts our Platonic sceptic to remind us that not only are works of art incapable of delivering knowledge, one can be deceived into thinking they do.

If, however, we grant Gaut his point that our experience of representations does provide non-trivial knowledge then we can go on to ask a further question: is the relevant cognitive gain tied to that particular work which is its source? One might argue that were one to watch a totally different adaptation of Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* that used the concept of, and the term, 'replicant', but in almost all other respects was different to the *Blade Runner* adaptation, one would develop a distinct concept of a replicant. In the *Rosebud* case one can imagine an unhappy Kane on his deathbed calling for his beloved sled – as in Welles' film – yet in a story about an entirely different person, of the same name, occupying the bulk of the film. In this case, *Rosebud* could be the same

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<sup>300</sup> This figure was established by word-searching the novel on the Gutenberg website, here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2413/2413-h/2413-h.htm> (31.5.21) See Gaut (2007, 143) for his example of Emma Bovary as a 'set of qualities' that one apply to real people.

<sup>301</sup> See here: [http://www.cineoutsider.com/reviews/dvd/b/blade\\_runner\\_final3.html](http://www.cineoutsider.com/reviews/dvd/b/blade_runner_final3.html)

<sup>302</sup> See McGregor (2016a) on the cognitive value of *Blade Runner*.

concept, whilst the work was itself radically different. Once again, the degree of fine-grainedness is pertinent to the issue, revealing there is no single answer to be had as to what is or might be learned.

In the case of learning how to look with greater discrimination and notice otherwise unnoticed things, it is unclear how such generic skills are tied to the specific activities that might have helped to develop them. One might just as easily develop comparable know-how by becoming a Stasi intelligence officer or a birdwatcher. That said, the audio-visual density of a film, together with its speed and the fact that one cannot stop and start a film at will (except under certain circumstances) might positively discourage close attention.

In sum: Gaut's epistemic account of the cognitive value of works of art raises serious questions as to whether it delivers on its promissory notes. Knowledge, when gained, is trivial; supposed knowledge gained often turns out to be limited to belief or hypothesis-generation; justification of such generated beliefs typically requires a warrant that is either external-to-the-work or is brought to the work by an informed audience; suggestions that what is learned is a form of *acquaintance* knowledge uses a conception of imaginary acquaintance that risks making the very idea of acquaintance knowledge an oxymoron;<sup>303</sup> and when the supposed cognitive gain is a matter of the development of non-propositional skills this seems to be open to being potentially undermined by films, or limited to watching for detail within the films.<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, there are pervasive adjudication concerns as to which knowledge candidates are in fact knowledge, and there is little, if any, attempt to tackle the fundamental Platonic worries about the potential of misleading effects of emotionally charged and otherwise rhetorically persuasive works.

If the strong pre-philosophical attractions towards cognitivism are to be legitimised, perhaps relinquishing the idea of gaining new *knowledge* and focussing on achieving better *understanding* of the knowledge we already have, is the way forward.

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<sup>303</sup> I, for one, would not argue against Elie Wiesel's point: "The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge" (1989).

<sup>304</sup> Many fans of *Marvel*, *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones* other so-called 'franchise' movies and TV series enjoy noticing minutiae in their favourite cinematic worlds, but I am unaware of any experimental evidence or other indication that this facilitates wider-ranging discriminatory powers.

### 3 Carroll's Clarificationism: the Cognitive Value of Understanding

For Noel Carroll the cognitive value of a work of art comes not from any supposed new knowledge it might be thought to convey or facilitate. Rather, it is the value had by an artwork in virtue of providing a change in our understanding of pre-existing knowledge.<sup>305</sup> Carroll is not the first to shift the emphasis from knowledge to understanding. According to Gordon Graham we can resist the idea that “cognitive significance ... must be spelled out in terms of propositional truth,”<sup>306</sup> by challenging the idea that the putative cognitive merit of an artwork derives from its “truth-tracking” features.<sup>307</sup> Instead, for Graham art equips us with a new understanding with which to return to a world and which changes or enriches the ways in which we might appreciate ourselves, others and the world. As Graham claims, armed with such understanding we can “see reality afresh or even become properly aware of it for the first time”.<sup>308</sup> Carroll similarly rejects the idea of “cognitive value in the narrow truth-versus-falsity sense”<sup>309</sup> preferring the idea that narrative works can “deepen” or “enlarge”<sup>310</sup> our understanding. But does Carroll’s so-called ‘clarificationist’ conception of the capacity of artworks to ‘deepen’ our understanding deliver on its promise? In this section, I critically evaluate Carroll’s view to show that whilst it avoids several issues raised in connection with knowledge-only accounts of cognitivism, it too remains vulnerable to objections.

Carroll’s clarificationism turns on the idea that there is a distinction between understanding and knowledge such that the former can be deepened, without (necessarily) adding to the latter, and that artworks that facilitate such a gain in understanding are thereby of cognitive value. Although Carroll’s focus is on moral understanding and the augmentation of our moral powers, there is nothing about clarificationism that limits it to our moral concepts, a point Carroll acknowledges.<sup>311</sup> Understanding, on Carroll’s account can be ‘deepened’ in two ways: (i) new connections can be drawn between previous unconnected beliefs and (ii) connected beliefs can be re-organised, reshuffled, reinterpreted and/or otherwise restructured. In the former case, this might be achieved through the realisation of new saliences that prompt hitherto unrecognised connections between beliefs. In the latter

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<sup>305</sup> Carroll (1998b), (2002), and (2015).

<sup>306</sup> Graham (1995, 27)

<sup>307</sup> Graham (1995, 31). See also Carroll’s discussion of Beardsley’s rejection of cognition as limited to truth-tracking in Carroll (2015, 180).

<sup>308</sup> Graham (1995, 34)

<sup>309</sup> Carroll (2015, 179)

<sup>310</sup> Carroll (1996, 235)

<sup>311</sup> Carroll (1998b, 142)

case, the specificity of narrative examples can demand the reconsideration of the interrelations of our beliefs and thus their individual or joint significance.

One might however object that our engagement with a work does not *direct us* to so deepen our understanding; for – as E. J. Diffey points out<sup>312</sup> – it *asserts* nothing. This is particularly pertinent in the case of fiction films, in which a story may well be presented to us without any overt comment or commentary from the kind of omnipotent narrator often found in novels. Carroll appears to have the resources to respond to this worry, insofar as he recognizes that narrative works are often structured in *assertion-like ways* (my characterisation, not his). Specifically, Carroll holds that a narrative can be organised as “contrastive structure” designed to facilitate our contemplation and understanding of the virtues and vices in certain ways *rather than others*.<sup>313</sup> This is achieved through the creation and exploitation of a range of characters who manifest distinct virtues (or vices) to differing degrees. In other words, narrative works can incorporate so-called ‘virtue wheels’, using them as organising principles to illuminate conceptual nuances. Furthermore, virtue wheels do not merely enable the making of discriminations they encourage judgements about such distinctions. In so doing a narrative can influence the direction and substance of our understanding, in ways analogous to assertion.

In unpacking his notion of a virtue wheel, however, Carroll, seemingly jettisons the clarificationist categorial distinction between knowledge and understanding – collapsing the two. This can be seen in his argument that Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* displays a virtue wheel in which characters manifest differing degrees of, and reasons for, loyalty.<sup>314</sup> According to Carroll, this film helps us refine our concept of loyalty coming to clarify when it is appropriately directed, i.e., when loyalty to a lover or friend is virtuous, etc. But the moral understanding this might be thought to generate is articulated in terms of *knowledge* as Carroll insists that this film’s virtue wheel helps us achieve “self-*knowledge* about our conceptual scheme”, “social *knowledge* of our mores”, as it refines the “cognitive map of the world” we use to judge others.<sup>315</sup> In other words, the distinction between understanding and knowledge struggles to be sustained.

One might think this point is philosophically below the belt: playing ‘gotcha’ with Carroll’s oscillating choice of words looks to present a weak objection to his view. Let us

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<sup>312</sup> Diffey (1997 [1995], 30)

<sup>313</sup> Carroll (2002, 17)

<sup>314</sup> Carroll (2002, 10-11)

<sup>315</sup> Carroll (2002, 18)

therefore allow Carroll – on occasion – to use ‘knowledge’ where we might reasonably think he means ‘understanding’; and let his observation stand.<sup>316</sup> After all, his understanding account reminds us that what is being championed is a *transactional* account of our engagement with works of art:<sup>317</sup> we bring knowledge, beliefs, and values to bear from the real world, and we return to the world with these potentially rearranged; newly cognisant of hitherto unnoticed connections, saliences and significances. This is a tantalizing picture of (a wide-ish-scope) cognitivism about artworks that looks to offer a natural fit for fiction films.

It remains unclear, however, how Carroll’s virtue wheel suffices, by itself, to do the work it is charged with, namely to direct (in an assertion-like manner) the viewers’ attention in such a way to generate the recognition of the appropriate saliences and significances. As proposed, virtue wheels are constituted by the presence of a range of characters whose traits represent different degrees of virtuousness or viciousness. But why should simply having a spectrum of differently shaded characters encourage or facilitate any assertion-like communication about the merits of these virtues and vices? A virtue wheel might present us with a “polarized set of concepts,”<sup>318</sup> through their embodiment in a range of characters but so does the news, and so do our workplaces and communities. In the case of *The Lives of Others*, like *The Third Man*, we also have characters with differing degrees of loyalty to their lovers, their friends, their colleagues, and their political commitments, but is Carroll’s point that simply the presence of ‘variations on a theme’ of loyalty will somehow trigger an appreciation of new saliences and significances that will re-shuffle our beliefs concerning loyalty (in general)?

For Carroll, emotions are involved in this, though quite how, is not clear. As he states, “emotional responses are part of the mix of factors that are engaged in deliberating about the application of virtue concepts”; indeed, on Carroll’s account, “emotions play a role in our discerning, refining, and identifying the virtues.”<sup>319</sup> This looks to suggest – as with Gaut’s empathic knowledge – that correct judgement can somehow be a matter of having the appropriate psychological responses; which, as already discussed, is questionable.

I do, however, think that there is a way of putting the virtue wheel to the use Carroll pursues, but this requires thinking of it in diachronic as well as synchronic terms, something

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<sup>316</sup> Stecker’s conception of the cognitive value shares much with Carroll but yet he chooses to couch in terms of knowledge rather than some supposedly categorially distinct notion of understanding. Our engagement with an artwork, “crystallizes the knowledge [we bring to the work]; it foregrounds it, articulates it more clearly, hooks it up with other things known or not known to create a more comprehensive, more coherent picture” (2019, 86).

<sup>317</sup> Carroll (1998b, 142). Carroll here points out that clarificationism just is a transactional account.

<sup>318</sup> Carroll (2002, 15)

<sup>319</sup> Carroll (2002, 18) See also Carroll (1996a, 236)

that does not feature in Carroll's version. For a fiction film often – as in the case of *The Lives of Others* and *The Third Man* – dramatises a profound, often Rubicon-crossing, change in a character's moral identity or values; one that is standardly rewarded or punished at the end of the film in such a way as to mark that change as being for the better or the worse and incarnating a moral value. The tying of a story-related reward or punishment to the enacted climactic choice of a characters – usually the protagonist – is assertion-like; it directs the audience not only to feel good about the character development manifest in the character's climactic action, but to thereby judge it as virtuous or vicious. In *The Lives of Others*, it is the combination of Wiesler's climactic decision/action (to hide the incriminating evidence) and his reward in the final moments of the film (with the book dedication that directs the audience to understand his final action as good) that encourages us to judge the shift in his loyalty, away from the state, as virtuous. This is only achieved by creating, in Wiesler, a character whose starting and ending positions on the virtue wheel are quite different. The fact that what I call Wiesler's 'coda reward' delivers a happy ending, and thereby solicits a rush of sentimental emotion, can now also be recognised as one possible way of achieving the task of using emotion to 'identify the virtues.' In other words, the virtue wheel requires supplementation by a dramatic story feature that involves and exploits coda rewards and punishments to provide the work's moral ratification (or condemnation) of a protagonist's character development.<sup>320</sup>

The potential problem with this is that it is a deeply manipulative filmmaking technique that can also be used to promote morally dubious positions. Shifting from knowledge to understanding does not placate the Platonic sceptic but re-ignites the now-familiar adjudication worries: how do we know which of our emotional responses conduce understanding as opposed to misunderstanding? The difficulty with Carroll's clarificationism is that whilst it might re-order our beliefs in the light of newly noted saliences and significances, these re-shuffles, re-orderings, and re-arrangements might lead our knowledge and beliefs astray. As Currie points out, "If fictions have the capacity for moral instruction ... they have the capacity to induce moral error."<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> A 1992 CBS/New York Times Poll (quoted in Herman 1995, 4) asked the question: Do you believe that good people will ultimately, in this life or the next, sometimes or other, be rewarded and that wicked people will ultimately be punished? "78% of Americans answered 'yes' and 9% answered 'no'." Although the sample size of this survey is unknown, one might argue that this is because the Christian religion, which is dominant in America, can itself be regarded as a narrative structured to deliver a coda reward for Jesus's climactic action of becoming fully human with his *cri de coeur* of unjust abandonment, 'My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me?'"

<sup>321</sup> Currie (1997 [1995], 56)

In sum, Carroll correctly observes that conceptual understanding (sometimes described by him as conceptual knowledge) occurs as a matter of our reflective engagement with films and other narrative artworks. What conceptual understanding gives us is not new *information* but, he claims, fresh saliences and connections between our beliefs and what we know. On the one hand, we seem to be back with a propositional conception of the cognitive, but at the same time conceptual understanding is described as a capacity. There is an oscillation between the act(s) of understanding and the objects of understanding that makes his account hard to pin down. In articulating how artworks help us gain conceptual understanding, Carroll draws analogies with philosophical thought-experiments facilitated by virtue wheels, seemingly equipping them with additional – emotion-involving and invoking – ways of making conceptual discriminations. What is not explained is how this works, in practice, or how the adjudication worry is to be handled, given, conceptual *misunderstanding* is just as possible as conceptual understanding.

Carroll's emphasis on deepening our conceptual understanding as opposed to knowledge does, however, allow him to slip the net of the 'no-evidence' challenge for he does not claim to be seeking art-sourced truths or empirical knowledge of any kind. Similarly, it allows him to avoid the banality challenge as he is not claiming to offer new truths, *a fortiori* their triviality is irrelevant. This does not fully sidestep concerns about banality, given beliefs, can also be trivial. Finally, Carroll claims to avoid the 'no argument' challenge, by characterising narratives containing virtue wheels as a species of thought experiment and thereby a form of deductive argumentation, albeit a radically enthymematic one requiring completion by an engaged audience.<sup>322</sup> But as Currie recognises one would be hard-pressed in the case of *Anna Karenina* (and surely no less in *The Third Man*) to specify the supposed thought-experiment argument in question.<sup>323</sup>

That said, there remains a powerful compulsion to believe that, over and above a film's entertainment or visual aesthetic values, there is something important to be had – to be *learnt* – from our engagement with films. This chapter has continued the work of the previous one (in which a non-artistic, non-aesthetic cinematic value was recognised) by demonstrating that the very notion of the cognitive, and its attendant cognitive value, is

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<sup>322</sup> Carroll argues that the price of undermining the cognitive value of thought experiments in narrative is to undermine them in philosophy, and thus "in the great and ongoing quarrel between philosophy and poetry, philosophy cannot win without undermining itself." (2002, 19) As previously stated, to engage with this challenge requires moving into the realm of meta-philosophy, which is not necessary for the project at hand.

<sup>323</sup> Currie (2020, 138)

fraught. To complete the task of motivating the need for some such viable alternative, I now consider the so-called ‘value interaction’ issue.

#### **4 Cognitive Value and Cinematic Value – Rethinking Interaction**

Although Gaut and Carroll operate with different notions of the cognitive, they both argue that (some) artworks (sometimes) have (some) cognitive value. In the case of film works of art, what if anything, then is the relation between such cognitive value(s) and a film’s cinematic value?

Let us concede, for purposes that will become clear in a moment, that both Gaut and Carroll can allay objections to their cognitivist claims and put aside the fact that Carroll does not regard Gaut’s arguments, or indeed any propositional knowledge-based arguments, as successful. Let us also acknowledge also that Gaut and Carroll’s views do not exhaust the full range of contemporary or historical cognitivist positions and that there are knowledge-centred cognitivists who offers modifications of, or alternatives to, Gaut’s account, as well as understanding-focussed cognitivists with non-Carrollian alternatives. Finally, let us remember that, as detailed in the previous chapter, it is reasonable to identify three different construals of cinematic value: artistic, aesthetic, and stance-based cinematic value.

Even on the most modest approach to the issue of the interaction between cognitive and cinematic value, there is no single answer to the question about the relation between cognitive value and cinematic value. Rather, as demonstrated in Table 1 (overleaf) one can identify a minimum of 21 identifiable possible permutations and combinations to be considered, each of which comes with its own set of bespoke considerations, and thereby potentially provides a uniquely qualified answer.

<b>Value Interaction</b>		<b>Cinematic Value</b>		
		Artistic	Aesthetic	Stance-based
<b>Cognitive Value</b>	(A) (Gautian) Propositional knowledge - from testimony	1	2	3
	(B) (Gautian) Propositional knowledge - from experiential imagination	4	5	6
	(C) (Gautian) Acquaintance or Empathic Knowledge - from experiential imagination	7	8	9
	(D) (Gautian) Non-Propositional know- how, skills and/or abilities - from close attention and engagement	10	11	12
	(E) Knowledge (non-Gautian alternatives)	13	14	15
	(F) (Carrollian) Conceptual Understanding (or knowledge)	16	17	18
	(G) Understanding (non-Carrollian alternatives)	19	20	21

Table 1.

One might argue that this number of alternatives could be reduced. Declining to recognise stance-based cinematic value, would bring the number of alternative permutations down to 14; regarding a stance-based conception of cinematic value as one and the same as a film's artistic value would likewise reduce the number of options to 14, as would any insistence on equating artistic and aesthetic value. That said, the 21 basic permutations are more likely to need increasing than decreasing, given: (i) (E) is a place-holder for multiple non-Gautian alternatives to knowledge-focussed cognitivism;<sup>324</sup> (ii) (G) is similarly a place-holder for a various non-Carrollian yet understanding-based conceptions of cognitive value;<sup>325</sup> (iii) knowledge- and understanding-focussed conceptions of the cognitive do not exhaust matters cognitive, as discussed in Section 1; (iv) there multiple competing conceptions of both artistic value and aesthetic; (v) the notion of value itself is also subject to a scope debate that questions the legitimacy of instrumental as well as intrinsic values; (vi) any 'new' proposed conception of cognitive, artistic, aesthetic, or cinematic value immediately creates yet another unique alternative. The possibility of the number of permutations and combinations pertinent to the interaction between cognitive and cinematic value increasing exponentially is almost inevitable. It reveals the extent to which any 'answer' to the interaction question is not just in thrall to how the 'question' is couched but – crucially – is doomed to argue past, or in parallel to, existing positions. How is this supposed to enable a debate if the subject of the debate is itself being debated?

An optimistic might suggest that this is too bleak an outlook. After all, so their suggestion could go, when we think about the value interaction debate as it concerns relations between moral and aesthetic values of works, the various possible views fall into a modest seven alternative camps: (i) Radical Autonomism, which holds that artworks have neither ethical merits or de-merits and thus there is nothing to stand in relation with a work's

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<sup>324</sup> See Kieran (2005) in which knowledge, understanding and insight is something art "affords" (2005, 121). See also Novitz (1987) who also shares with Gaut a commitment to cognitivism about art that includes both propositional and non-propositional knowledge and the development of skills; thanks not just to the "resemblance" (1987, 125) between our world and fictional worlds but to a sharing of properties. See McGregor (2016b) for a cognitivist account that turns on narrative as a source of lucid phenomenological knowledge. See Scruton (1998 [1983], 156) for the proposal that works of art can "teach us how to feel"; and (1998 [1993], 250) for great works capacity to provide an "apprenticeship in sympathy". See Wilson (1983) for a cognitivist position that turns on works modifying the concepts of their audiences to the point where there is some change in their action; a dispositional change that qualifies as gaining "new knowledge" (1983, 495).

<sup>325</sup> Elgin, like Carroll, resists what she calls, "the information-transfer model of cognitive progress" preferring to move beyond knowledge conceived as "discrete bits of information" to a conception of understanding, which is a matter of wanting to know "how things hang together." (2007, 44)

aesthetic value; (ii) Moderate Autonomism, which holds that artworks do have ethical merits/de-merits but these are irrelevant to their aesthetic value; (iii) Moderate Moralism, which holds that ethical virtues or defects of works are, or contribute to, their aesthetic virtues or defects; (iv) Ethicism which holds that (as champion Gaut puts it) “relevant”<sup>326</sup> ethical merits/de-merits in works are, or contribute to aesthetic merits/de-merit; (v) Immoralism which holds that some moral merits are aesthetic merits, some aesthetic de-merits; (vi) Contextualism which holds that relevant ethical merits may be aesthetic merits or demerits but this is a context-dependent matter, and (vii) Extreme Immoralism which holds that all moral merits are aesthetic de-merits, and all moral de-merits are aesthetic merits. Furthermore, given Radical Autonomism and Extreme Immoralism are more in-principle positions than ones actually argued for, there are perhaps only five distinct ways in which moral and aesthetic values actually interact.

Might this taxonomy provide a framework for grappling with the interaction between cognitive and aesthetic value; especially given, as Carroll notes, it is moral understanding that provides the focus of much art-sourced cognitive gain? Perhaps we could use this taxonomy to navigate the cognitivist/cinematic value interaction issue; identifying (i\*) Radical *Cognitive Autonomism*; (ii\*) Moderate *Cognitive Autonomism*; (iii\*) Moderate *Cognitivism*; (iv\*) (just Gautian) *Cognitivism*; and (v\*) some kind of ‘Alternating Valence’ Cognitivism, in which cognitive merits are sometimes aesthetic merits, sometimes de-merits; (vi\*) Contextual *Cognitivism* in which cognitive merits are sometimes aesthetic merits, sometimes, depending on the context; and (vii\*) what we might christen ‘Extreme *Reverse Cognitivism*’ in which all cognitive merits are aesthetic demerits. Options such as Alternative Cognitivism, Contextual Cognitivism and Extreme Reverse Cognitivism might be useful in capturing concerns about the negative aesthetic impact of didactic elements in a work, and so on.

This putative sceptical solution is not, however, without problems. For the moral/aesthetic value interaction taxonomy itself fails to acknowledge the distinction between artistic and aesthetic values and often oscillates between mutually incompatible conceptions of the aesthetic. That said, the original taxonomy does benefit from the fact that what is and is not moral is standardly not a subject of disagreement; whereas what is not cognitive – and thus what is cognitive value – goes to the heart of the difficulties with cognitivism. Moreover, we cannot tell which aspects of, say, *The Lives of Others* are, as it

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<sup>326</sup> Cf. Gaut (2007, 10)

were, to be cognitively trusted. Here is Wiesler's Stasi boss Grubitz explaining the contents of a PhD he has just marked:

'Prison Conditions for Subversive Artists Based on Character Profile'. Pretty scientific, eh? And look at this: "Dissertation Supervisor, A. Grubitz. That's great, isn't it? I only gave him a B. They shouldn't think getting a doctorate with me is easy. But his is first-class. Did you know that there are just five types of artists? Your guy, Dreyman, is a Type 4, a "Hysterical Anthropocentrist." Can't bear being alone, always talking, needing friends. That type should never be brought to trial. They thrive on that. Temporary detention is the best way to detail with them. Complete isolation and no set release date. No human contact the whole time, not even with the guards. Good treatment, no harassment, no abuse, no scandals, nothing they could write about later. Know what the best part is? Most Type 4s we've processed in this way never write anything again. Or paint anything, or whatever artists do. And that without any use of force. Just like that. Kind of like a present.<sup>327</sup>

Does any of this psychological 'widget talk' describe any known theory? Were such imprisonment prison strategies used in East Germany in 1984? The resources to answer this question are simply not available within the film. What we can learn from it, is that it is an extremely adept way of characterising Grubitz as a cruel philistine who is not only unaware of 'whatever artists do' but insists on being proud of his ignorance. So much so that Wiesler, who has begun to experience the life-enriching aspects of 'whatever artists do' decides, on hearing to this, against handing over the critical report on Dreyman that he has arrived to present to his 'superior'; thereby taking one further small step along his character development journey.

In addition, helping oneself to the moral/aesthetic interaction taxonomy in order to make progress in our understanding of the cognitive/aesthetic interaction, is not served until we can move beyond claims that 'some' or a 'relevant' feature or element of a film (or artwork) provides cognitive gain and are able to identify just which these features or elements are. Helping oneself to the moral/aesthetic interaction taxonomy would be inadequate to the

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<sup>327</sup> Donnersmarck (2006)

current (cognitivist) task at hand, so much so that the task at hand itself is beginning to look suspect.

Remember: the question is two-fold: (i) can and do fiction films have cognitive value? and (ii) if so to what extent does any such cognitive value interact with films' cinematic value. Thus far we have recognised the pull of two of leading pro-cognitivist accounts whilst simultaneously calling into question the extent to which they have the resources to respond to potential concerns – of which there is no shortage.<sup>328</sup> We now seem to have four options:

- (A) Concede to non-cognitivism and thereby make the interaction issue redundant.
- (B) Re-commit to cognitivism, identify which of the available conceptions of the cognitive, and thus of cognitive value, to operate with; successfully defend this against current (and potential further fresh) criticisms; then bring this conception to bear on the interaction issue, using the three conceptions of cinematic value.
- (C) Re-commit to cognitivism, acknowledge the vulnerability of all current conceptions of the cognitive, and thus of cognitive value; identify, if possible, a new, bespoke conception of cognitive value; then bring this fresh conception to bear on the interaction issue, using the three conceptions of cinematic value.
- (D) Rethink what is at stake in this philosophical 'debate' and consider alternative ways forward.

Option (A) comes at a very high price, for as currently framed, non-cognitivists are regularly charged with being formalists. Critics of those who refuse to find 'cognitive value' in a film – or in any work – seem to assume this entails the view that a work has no content at all, or

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<sup>328</sup> Most of the following objections have been touched on, in the foregoing, but for more detail (though not in relation to fiction films) see Keiran & Lopes (2007 xii-xv) for their four Triviality, Warrant, Uniqueness and Relevance Challenges, as well as what I take to be a separable, fifth Metaphysical Challenge). See also Gibson (2008, 576-579) for a not dissimilar quartet: the Problem of Unclaimed Truths (perhaps better expressed as the Problem of Unexpressed Truths) which I have discussed in terms of assertion; the Missing Tools of Inquiry which problematizes the lack of argument, scrutiny or warrant-generating activities; the Problem of Fiction, and the Nature of Artistic Creativity which reminds us that artistic have a freedom that allow their exploration of 'The Great Escape' without having to provide 'the Great Mirror'. There are also relevant Empirical Challenges found most recently in Currie (2020) which argue for the as yet unachieved need for tangible evidence of learning and Cavell's (1979 [1971], 188) Moving Image of Scepticism Challenge which considers the way in which film recapitulates a sceptical 'gap' between us and the world.

none of any value whatsoever.<sup>329</sup> Those who would argue that non-cognitivists about art must be, or err towards, formalism are conflating what Gaut considers the two central questions of ‘aesthetic cognitivism’, that is the epistemic question (do works have cognitive value?) and the artistic/aesthetic question (does any such cognitive value contribute to aesthetic or artistic value)? For as Lamarque repeatedly points out,<sup>330</sup> a non-cognitivist of his own ‘no-truth’ stripe, is not denying a positive answer to the first question, but only a positive answer to the second, on the grounds that “truth is not an artistic value”.<sup>331</sup> This does not, however, prevent formalist charges from being regularly levelled.

Option (B) sustains a problem already identified, namely, that of encouraging cognitivists to speak past each other, as positions become increasingly refined and mutually exclusive. Option (C) adds to the sins of (B), consolidating the questionable practice of turning ‘cognitive’ into a philosophical term of art.

Option (D) is an invitation to revisit the way the philosophical discussion is structured and the assumptions it makes. Interestingly, neo-cognitivist Gibson suggests that cognitivist commitments are part of “a much larger, grander philosophical project” that he describes “[f]or lack of a better term” as the defending of a “*humanistic* view of the arts”.<sup>332</sup> Gibson is, I think, right to identify the fact that there is a bigger project at stake here, and correctly recognises, on this view, that works of art, including films, are “intimately bound up with the human world and human values.”<sup>333</sup> It is not necessary, however, to use cognitivism to leverage humanistic views, as I will argue in Chapter 5. For now, I trust I have motivated the need to re-think our approach to the debate.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

There is no single answer to *the* [sic] question of a film’s cognitive value or its interrelations with the various cinematic values of a film. Furthermore, the Platonic sceptic, one of whose main worries, I have recharacterized as the ‘adjudication concern’ continues to dog the heels of all cognitivist positions. Rather than being addressed, it is side-stepped, thanks to the

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<sup>329</sup> According to Young (2001) a non-cognitivist cannot even scrape by as a formalist about art and artistic value, for “only works with cognitive value *are* works of art” (2001, 2, emphasis added). Note also, Catherine Elgin’s comparable insistence that “A work of art is good just in case it embodies and/or advances understanding” (2020, 150)

<sup>330</sup> See Lamarque & Olsen (1994) and Lamarque (1996), (1997), (1999), (2006), (2007a), (2007b), (2009), (2010a), (2010b), (2014), and (2020).

<sup>331</sup> Lamarque (2006, 127)

<sup>332</sup> Gibson (2008, 586)

<sup>333</sup> Gibson (2008, 586)

opportunity for accounts to help themselves to quantifiers that commit them to claims that we learn ‘some things’ from ‘some’ films, ‘some of the time’; without being able to identify what, when or why.<sup>334</sup> Yet this is the question at issue, bearing in mind the following acknowledgement by the director of *The Lives of Others*:

This was the credo of the Munich film school, that you can communicate any artistic message looking good, and it will reach many more people than if it looked less appealing than it could.<sup>335</sup>

What is needed, amongst other things, is a way of acknowledging this fact without succumbing to it.

In the previous chapter, we recognised the possibility of a stance-based conception of cinematic value which identifies, and engages with, the ways in which a film’s content, its themes (or thesis/es) and its form, are integrated, or not. With stance-based cinematic value we *already have* one resource capable of providing a bulwark against charges of mere formalism, as this value is necessarily content-involving, and the cinematic stance is one that brings to bear – in its reactive critical inquiry – the presumption of serious or substantial content.<sup>336</sup>

This chapter has provided a range of reasons and arguments in favour of moving beyond the problematic cognitive value paradigm, in search of how we might understand what we can learn from films, and why we think this may be of value. I return to the subject in Chapter 5 to complete these arguments. In the remaining two chapters, I identify two further unrecognised values, that – together with stance-based cinematic value – can provide the resources for a possible alternative paradigm. Let us now look at the first of these: *dramatic value*.

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<sup>334</sup> In Carroll’s case, the ‘some’ in question is by no means extensive, given his view that “the vast majority of narrative works” do not provide such “learning” (1998b, 141). Four years later this proportion had grown to “some – not all, but still much – literature” (2002, 4).

<sup>335</sup> Von Donnersmarck quoted in Carson (2010, 20)

<sup>336</sup> In this it echoes Lamarque and Olsen’s emphasis on serious and “humanly interesting content” (1994, 289).

## Dramatic Value

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*...the life and soul, so to speak, of tragedy is the plot*<sup>337</sup>

Aristotle

Cognitivism holds that works of art, including films, are valuable in virtue of the knowledge and/or understanding they provide, either directly or indirectly. In the previous chapter, I argued that any such cognitive value works of art are thereby presumed to have is hard to identify, source, articulate, and justify. In so doing I gestured towards the need to recognise and develop alternative resources which might provide other ways to consider and appreciate the commitment that nourishes cognitivist claims; namely that works teach us things that are important and worth coming to learn or understand. As part of this, I now identify a hitherto unacknowledged value – dramatic value – which is not only linked to understanding but offers new ways to conduct both familiar and fresh film-involving investigations at the crossroads of aesthetics, epistemology, and language.

Key to dramatic value are the relations between *actions*, *intentional agents*, and *dramatic argumentation*. For dramatic value is a value that fiction films have insofar as they *make sense* of the actions done by situated intentional agents. This is achieved through what I call ‘dramatic argumentation’; a form of argumentation that, in contrast to deduction and induction, does not use propositions, nor does it not aim at securing the truth or strengthening the warrant of an empirical claim. Rather, dramatic arguments use a structured series of actions, with the distinct aim of *making sense* of what situated agents do. The more of an achievement it is to make sense of what an agent finally does, the more dramatic value the film has.

In Section 1, I identify one of the fundamental problems bedevilling the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate and argue that the constitutive elements of dramatic argumentation and value – actions, agents, arguments – offer a way to circumvent this difficulty. In Section 2, I present preliminary conceptions of the relevant notions involved in making sense, i.e., understanding, intelligibility and meaning, interpersonal actions, and

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<sup>337</sup> Aristotle (1997, 1450a38-39)

situated agency. In Section 3, I articulate the mechanics of dramatic argumentation. In so doing, this brings the language-involving notion of criterial understanding into focus. In Section 4, I propose and respond to roughly a dozen objections, developing further the substance and detail of dramatic argumentation and dramatic value, and show how taking a cinematic stance can impact a film's dramatic argumentation. Stance-based cinematic value and dramatic value can thereby be interconnected. In Section 5, I offer some concluding remarks and look ahead to the final chapter.

## 1 The Problem – Redux

A cognitivist about art is supposedly faced with a deeply problematic fact: fictional characters are not real people; they are their creations. Stasi Officer Gerd Wiesler, like dinner-companion André, like Blanche Dubois, Don Quixote, Bizet's Carmen, Inspector Maigret, Mack the Knife, Odysseus, Charlie Chaplin's Tramp, The Terminator, and all the thousands of characters that exist only on the pages of unproduced screenplays, have all been brought into being by one or more of the art, the craft, and the sheer effort of their various 'parental' screenwriters, directors, film editors, playwrights, novelists, lyricists, poets, actors, performers, and comedians. As such, fictional characters are not material; not spatio-temporal continuants; they are not alive and cannot die – although they might be killed off. Faced with such facts, a sceptic argues that it is a mistake to believe we can learn about ourselves by engaging with works that present their audiences with fictional characters. Non-humans cannot illuminate what it is to be a human being; so the charge goes.

One might challenge the sceptic on the grounds that using such a 'doubting Thomas' - itself a fictional creation devised to help progress our understanding – is self-refuting. But we do not need to exploit such a response, for as evidenced in earlier chapters, there is already a battery of resources, assembled over millennia, aimed at combatting such scepticism. In contemporary philosophy of art, recent iterations seeking to silence the sceptic include not just, as discussed in the previous chapter, Berys Gaut's imagination<sup>338</sup> and Noel Carroll's understanding;<sup>339</sup> but Iris Vidmar's testimony,<sup>340</sup> Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen's valorisation of serious thematic content,<sup>341</sup> Rafe McGregor's literary thickness,<sup>342</sup> Currie's

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<sup>338</sup> Gaut (2007)

<sup>339</sup> Carroll (1998b)

<sup>340</sup> Vidmar (2013)

<sup>341</sup> Lamarque & Olsen (1994)

<sup>342</sup> McGregor (2016b)

empathetic entry into characters' lives<sup>343</sup> and John Gibson's exploitation of a Cavellian inspired notion of acknowledgement,<sup>344</sup> as well as the potentially unifying thematic power of metaphoric insight<sup>345</sup> and more. I now wish to add to these options – whilst attempting to challenge the need for them – a value that turns on the recognition that whilst people and characters are very different kinds of things, to the extent they can all be regarded as *situated intentional agents* they have much in common. Ontologically, a fictional 'agent' might be thought to be an abstract object of some kind and thus be incapable of action at all, thereby requiring a fictional operator in front of claims as to their agency, i.e., '*According to fiction film F*, character C is  $\phi$ -ing'. I will assume that this is the case, but I also hope to show that – given the focus of dramatic argumentation and value – making sense of character C  $\phi$ -ing is done in the same way as making sense of real person RP  $\phi$ -ing. As such, the metaphysically motivated operator becomes unnecessary, for any claims being made about the making sense of actions are not metaphysical claims. For those concerned about the very idea of putting aside metaphysical claims, nothing I say in what follows is undermined by prefixing claims about fictional agents with, '*According to fiction film, F...*'.

Both human beings and characters act, and act in various ways. We and they can act with and without certainty, conviction, care, and commitment; both thoughtfully and thoughtlessly. We and they have the capacity to choose to act or not act, to do so for reasons, and to surprise ourselves. We and they make sense of other situated intentional agents (be they living or fictional) *in the same ways*, though we can also make sense of characters as a design feature in a work of art, serving a teleological and/or thematic purpose. As such, it is helpful to take Lamarque's point that one can adopt an internal perspective on a character (in which we do not think of characters as designed elements in a work, but just as restaurant diners, waiters, Stasi officers, writers, etc.), and an external perspective in which one does.<sup>346</sup> As will become clear, in making sense of agents' actions, in a film, one is adopting an internal perspective; and when one adopts a cinematic stance towards that action, and engages in reactive critical inquiry as to how this sense-making has been achieved, one brings to bear an external perspective.<sup>347</sup> That said, for this to be more than just a refusal of the

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<sup>343</sup> Currie (1998, 164)

<sup>344</sup> Gibson (2007) and (2009)

<sup>345</sup> Gibson (2019)

<sup>346</sup> See Lamarque (2014, 67-82). One might argue that according to certain religions, human beings are design features in a teleological creation, but this line of thought is not necessary for the current task.

<sup>347</sup> I take the phrase 'reactive critical inquiry' from Bernard Harrison (2015), but for the purposes here one can think of this as 'reflective engagement'.

legitimacy of the presumptions that nourish sceptical doubt, more needs to be said about what it is to make sense.

## 2 Sense-making

Making sense of ourselves and characters as situated intentional agents, is not the same as establishing empirical or scientific knowledge about them. Empirical knowledge of human beings is (and requires the investigation of) contingent facts pertaining to human beings as spatio-temporal continuants in the material world. In other words, empirical knowledge is factive. Scientific empirical knowledge about human beings is the product of revisable theory construction supported by the experimental investigation into spatio-temporal continuants and those of their properties capable of standing in causal relations potentially subsumable under laws. That said, although scientific ‘knowledge’ aspires to the factive it is, almost always, not. As Catherine Elgin points out, however, this need not stop the scientific claims and laws being “true enough”, notwithstanding the fact that techniques such as curve-smoothing and ignoring outliers are an acceptable part of the theoretical development of scientific “laws, models, idealizations and approximations that diverge from the truth”.<sup>348</sup>

Given making sense of the actions of situated intentional agents (be they real and fictional) is not a kind of empirical or scientific knowledge and making sense of the actions of situated intentional agents is not – as I recognise it – propositional, then sense-making neither is, nor aspires to be, factive; it is categorially different. Instead:

*Making sense* of ourselves, or fictional characters, as intentional agents, is a matter of:

- (i) *understanding, making intelligible and making meaningful;*
- (ii) *what we actually do, what we might do, or what we have or might have done;*
- (iii) *to and for ourselves, and to, for, with, and alongside others;*
- (iv) *whilst situated in non-static circumstances and relationships.*

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<sup>348</sup> Elgin (2004, 113)

To complete our preliminaries, I now consider each of these four factors. in turn.

## 2.1 Understanding, Intelligibility, and Meaning

Cognitivists about the value of art sometimes specify that the ‘cognitive gain’ that art offers is not a matter of knowledge *per se*, but of understanding. Such proposals have gained increasing traction since Gordon Graham’s 1995 emphasis on art as “a form of understanding”; a form that can, in particular, “enhance our understanding of human experience.”<sup>349</sup> This baton was carried on by – if not directly passed to – Noel Carroll. As already noted, he favours the idea that understanding offers a cognitive benefit that is distinct from knowledge: “the narrative artwork can become an occasion for us to *deepen our understanding of what we know* and what we feel.”<sup>350</sup> This distinction between knowledge and understanding (at least in the case of art-sourced understanding) is exploited in one of the most recent defences of narrative cognitive value. According to Jukka Mikkonen the “epistemic significance of narratives is not to be explained in terms of knowledge but understanding;”<sup>351</sup> for knowledge, he insists, is too “narrow” and “unsuccessful” a concept for the task.<sup>352</sup> Yet understanding is, itself, a philosophically challenging concept and in the hands of some is a philosophical term of art.<sup>353</sup>

There is nothing resembling a consensus amongst analytic, anglophone, epistemologists and philosophers of mind as to the nature of understanding and whether or it is a species of knowledge. Moreover, even in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jonathan Kvanvig bemoans the fact that “understanding deserves much more attention than it has received.”<sup>354</sup> Perhaps this is one reason why philosophers of art who couch their arguments for cognitive content and value in terms of understanding often leave the concept to ‘fend for itself’, as it were, assuming their readership shares the requisite ‘understanding of understanding’. To be fair, Mikkonen, does add a further nuance to the notion, announcing his own particular commitment is to a “*processual* view of understanding”;<sup>355</sup> a view that he takes to be

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<sup>349</sup> Graham (1995, 35 and 36). See also Graham (2005)

<sup>350</sup> Carroll (1998b, 142)

<sup>351</sup> Mikkonen (2021, 9)

<sup>352</sup> Mikkonen (2021, 42)

<sup>353</sup> See Mikkonen (2021, 51- 52) for his “systematizing” of the views of some epistemologists and philosophers of science on the topic of understanding. Rather than reveal any consistency of position or shared account, the points identified demonstrate the multiplicity of mutually exclusive claims.

<sup>354</sup> Kvanvig (2003a, 188). See also Stephen Grimm (2006) and, more recently his (2019) for the burgeoning developments in this area.

<sup>355</sup> Mikkonen (2021, 53)

epistemically equivalent to, or analogous to, Peter Goldie’s process-based conception of grief, namely, a “complete pattern of activity and passivity, inner and outer, that unfolds over time”.<sup>356</sup> But further details of this, and how one might distinguish any such processual view of understanding from a processual view of *knowledge*, are not yet forthcoming.

This lack of philosophical agreement concerning understanding, and the limited, and often tantalizingly brief, characterisations of what understanding is, go some way to explaining why it is possible for even ‘no-truth theorists’, such as Lamarque and Olsen, to lay claim to the notion of understanding. “Literary works” they readily admit, “can contribute to the development and *understanding* of the deepest, most revered of a culture’s conceptions without advancing propositions, statements or hypotheses about them.”<sup>357</sup> Thus we see cognitivists, along with non-, anti-, or a-cognitivists, availing themselves of ‘understanding’ as an epistemologically relevant currency with which to cash out their own positions. As such, to declare that sense-making stands in a conceptual relation to understanding, is inadequate. Something more needs to be said, at the very least, of what is and is not meant by sense-making-constituting understanding. To situate the kind of understanding that I will be arguing for, I begin by offering a taxonomy of conceptions of understanding found in contemporary epistemology. Consider, then, Table 2, below.

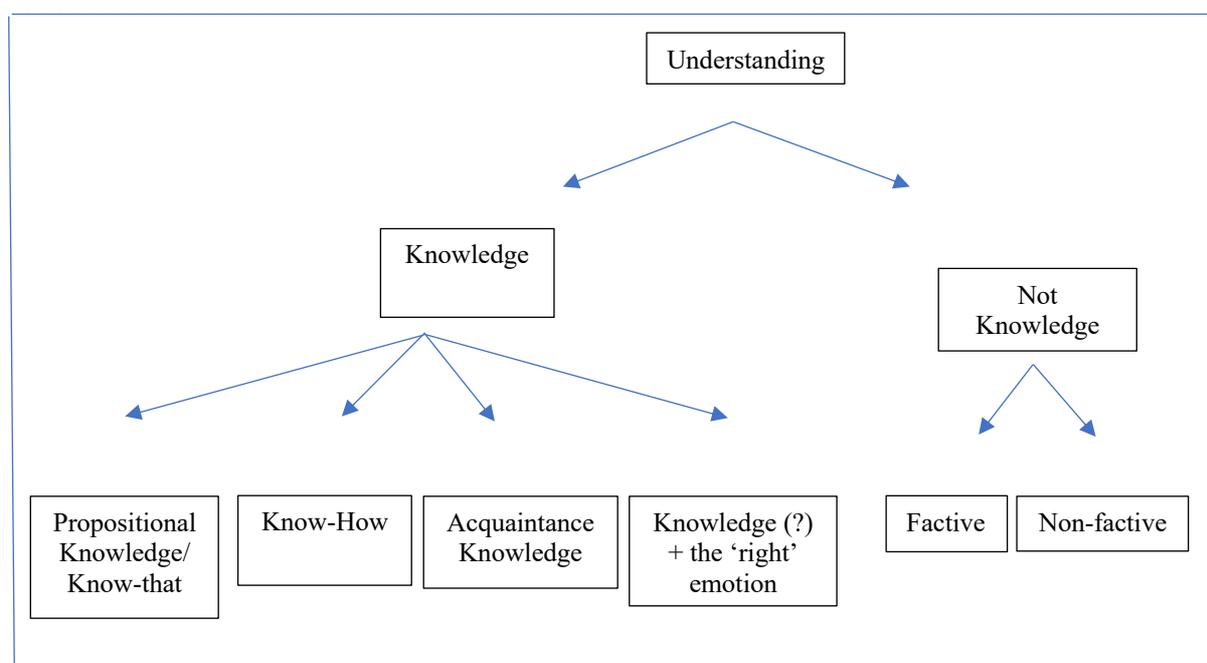


Table 2.

<sup>356</sup> Goldie (2012, 56) quoted in Mikkonen (2012, 55).

<sup>357</sup> Lamarque & Olsen (1994, 24, emphasis added)

One can divide philosophical approaches to, and accounts of, understanding into ones that do or do not take it to be species of knowledge. We have already identified Elgin as in the ‘not knowledge’ camp. For according to Elgin, whilst knowledge (by which she means *propositional* knowledge) is factive, understanding need not be, albeit that such understanding is conducive to knowledge. One might also argue that although propositional knowledge is not compatible with luck, given the implications of Gettier cases or issues concerning lack of environmental epistemic safety – as in fake barn country – one might nonetheless, as a result of luck, come to understand something. An example of this might be an experiment which is de-railed but fortunately re-railed in such a way as to make no impact on the understanding-engendering results. Such a conception of understanding might also allow for factive understanding that is not a species of knowledge. Jonathan Kvanvig argues that in the case of ‘objectual understanding’, i.e., the understanding of an object or topic, understanding requires, where knowledge does not, “an internal grasping or appreciation of how the various elements in a body of information are related to each other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic and other kinds of relations that coherentists have thought constitutive of justification”.<sup>358</sup>

By contrast, most philosophical consideration of understanding either argues for, or assumes that, understanding is a kind of knowledge; though again, here views differ. Unsurprisingly, many epistemologists argue that understanding is some type of particular *propositional* knowledge, or *propositional* knowledge of some particular type of objects, subjects or areas. These views include claims that understanding is a matter of the ‘knowledge of causes’ or answers to ‘why’ questions,<sup>359</sup> or it is “a matter of, “grasping” the truth or “seeing” that things could not have been otherwise,”<sup>360</sup> or “grasping ... dependence relations”.<sup>361</sup> For others, understanding is to be understood as a “cognitive achievement”<sup>362</sup> something supposedly categorial distinct from a ‘knowledge account of understanding.’

For others, understanding seems to hover on the cusp of acquaintance knowledge and know-how, as with the idea that understanding is a way of “grasping a structure” such that

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<sup>358</sup> Kvanvig (2003a, 192-193). See also Kvanvig (2003b). Note that Kvanvig (like Zagzebski and others working on understanding) seek to provide epistemological ‘space’ for the idea of religious understanding as an explicandum. This may help explain the turn to the coherence, and the maintenance of a distinction between knowledge and understanding.

<sup>359</sup> According to Pritchard (2014, 345) this “very popular picture” is “prevalent” in the philosophy of science. See also Grimm (2006).

<sup>360</sup> Grimm (2006, 534)

<sup>361</sup> Grimm (2018, 6)

<sup>362</sup> Pritchard (2014, 318)

“when we grasp an object’s structure we understand the object as a whole”.<sup>363</sup> And indeed, once we move away from propositional knowledge, the opportunity for understanding to be some kind of non-propositional *know-how* comes into play,<sup>364</sup> as does the distinction between ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical understanding’.<sup>365</sup> For others there is an understanding (indeed an aesthetic understanding of works of art) which is a matter of the kind of “cognitive control” that “requires a grasp of the reasons why p is true”, something that is itself a kind of “intellectual know-how”,<sup>366</sup> or that may be deemed to require “appropriate emotional responses.”<sup>367</sup> And, finally, but by no means, exhaustively, there are ways of understanding that are described as having the “proper orientation to the world”.<sup>368</sup>

As this quick sketch indicates, there is a diverse range of contemporary accounts of understanding. The sense-making conception used to elucidate the idea of dramatic argumentation and dramatic value does not, however, fit comfortably into any of these epistemological positions. Instead, it is akin to the notion of understanding involved in understanding a language, and emphasises the idea of actions being *intelligible*, being *meaningful* and *meaningful for* an agent. More flesh will be put on these bones shortly.

## 2.2 Things We Do

A dramatist selects and organises a series of actions done by situated intentional agents in such a way as to make sense of one or more of these actions. What makes dramatic argumentation possible, comes from the fact that how we make sense of characters, or what Aristotle calls “men in action”<sup>369</sup> is the same whether those ‘men’ are real people or fictional creations. This is because the criteria that makes an action what it is, that is to say, what it is to *understand* an action as the action that it is, or what it *means for* an action to be the action it is, does not depend on whether or not the action is done a real person or a wholly fictional character. How does this work?

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<sup>363</sup> Zagzebski (2019, 125)

<sup>364</sup> That “[u]nderstanding is a part of know-how” is Gilbert Ryle’s view. (2000 [1949], 53)

<sup>365</sup> See Bengson (2008, 18). Bengson ultimately unifies theoretical and practical understanding; perhaps unsurprisingly since he holds the view that practical understanding (like know-how) just is a particular kind of propositional knowledge.

<sup>366</sup> Hills (2018, 171, 161, and 161)

<sup>367</sup> Robinson (2005, 107)

<sup>368</sup> Grimm, (2018, 8) This is Grimm’s characterisation of the work of several philosophers interested in religious understanding.

<sup>369</sup> Aristotle (1997, 51 1448a)

Our sceptic might argue that whilst Othello murders Desdemona, nobody dies. And indeed, in one sense this is correct, but as neither Othello or Desdemona are living beings, capable of dying.<sup>370</sup> But it is not necessary and/or sufficient conditions that are at issue here, but *criteria*. Criteria are not one and the same as the necessary and sufficient conditions to which physical spatio-temporal continuants are beholden. Criteria are conceptual, not physical or metaphysical, and are related to understanding, intelligibility and meaning.<sup>371</sup> As such, criteria are not pieces of inductive evidence for the truth of a proposition, in the way that a handkerchief might be inductive evidence for an infidelity. For when something is a piece of inductive or symptomatic evidence, E, for something else, F, it is presupposed that although E is capable of being identified in ways that need not involve F, and one can make inferences using E to conclusions about F. As such, E and F are externally related. Whereas when C is a criterion for F, C and F are internally connected. This is not an inferential relation. Following Wittgenstein, one might say that a “criterion of identity” is part of the rule-involving practice of our language-use.<sup>372</sup>

The actions done by situated intentional agents are the kinds of things for which there are such (conceptual or logical or grammatical) criteria. It is a criterion of murdering another agent that it brings an irreversible end to all possible action, feeling, and thought of that agent. Such criteria are the same, whether the murdering agent and the murdered are real people or characters in a drama. Furthermore, this kind of *criterial understanding* is defeasible (and open to change over time) and changes in circumstances and contexts can have an impact on criteria. Having a high temperature is a criterion for having a fever; but if the person in question turns out to be in an overheated room with the windows shut and has recently had a hot water bottle on their head to soothe a pain, then the criterial grounds for support for any claim that the person has a fever, are undermined. Such criterial defeat does not, however, undermine the logical (conceptual or logical or grammatical) connection between a high temperature and a fever. This can be seen in the following case:

If someone hits his finger with a hammer and screams, assuages his fingers, etc., that establishes that he has hurt himself. However, if all this takes place in a performance of a play, then this behaviour counts as acting as if he had hurt himself. But [this] is itself defeasible ...

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<sup>370</sup> Readers may reapply the ‘according to the fiction film/play/novel’ operator, here.

<sup>371</sup> See Hacker (2019a) for the development of the notion of criteria in the work of Wittgenstein.

<sup>372</sup> Wittgenstein (2009, Sec 322)

for, if the actor leaves the stage with a bleeding finger, groaning, etc, then he has obviously accidentally hurt himself.<sup>373</sup>

In other words, whilst there are *additional* criteria that can be brought to bear to distinguish between doing some action, or being in a particular state, and *pretending to* do some action or be in a state, it is often the case that the criteria for understanding what it is to do some action and pretending to do it, are the same. As Peter Hacker reminds us, “Criteria are determinants of meaning.”<sup>374</sup> There is no need, therefore, to invent some imaginary “i-hurt” – that the character is supposedly experiencing, because the actor playing him is not. Similarly, when Othello murders Desdemona, it is not something other than murder – some imaginary ‘i-murder’ – that we have *alternative* conceptual or logical or grammatical grounds for recognising. Rather, we recognise the criteria which constitute our understanding that Othello is murdering Desdemona, i.e., that he is deliberately ending all possibility of her thinking, feeling, moving, being conscious, ever again, because that is what murder *means*. One of the dramatic achievements of the play is to structure the actions of the characters to bring about the fact that when Othello finally does kill his wife, it is not incoherent but rather makes complete sense. Indeed, it brings with it the force of an unavoidable imperative (from an external as well as internal perspective). Were this not the case, we would not understand what was happening. We could not make sense of what was going on.

What, though, of the fact that actions are sometimes identified under different descriptions? One might, as Anscombe points out, be intentionally sawing a plank, but not intentionally making noise, albeit one is making noise by sawing a plank.<sup>375</sup> Furthermore, whilst one may be intentionally pumping water one may, or may not be, potentially poisoning a family. I will take the notion of intentional action and an intentional agent as unproblematic for the purposes of this dissertation, though clearly it is an enormously complex subject. For the purposes of being able to identify the actions that contribute to dramatic value what is important is that there are actions that people *choose* and *have the (two-way) power* to do, or not to do; and are thereby responsible for what they do in ways that are, shall we say, recognisably ‘soul- or self-shaping’. George Whalley, emphasises the repetitive use of ‘praxis’ (action) throughout not just Aristotle’s *Poetics* but the *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, characterising it as:

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<sup>373</sup> Hacker (2019a, 293)

<sup>374</sup> Hacker (2019a, 297)

<sup>375</sup> Anscombe (2000 [1957], x)

not just any action, but an action arising from choice, directed towards and implying a telos, and to which other subsidiary movements may be attached without deflecting it. It is therefore by its nature complete, purposeful, self-contained, end-implying...<sup>376</sup>

I will let this Aristotelian conception of action serve to characterise the relevant notion of intentional action being used here.<sup>377</sup>

### 2.3 Ourselves and Others

The number of actions situated agents can do is indefinite in number. They need not involve other people (as with sailing solo, potting on seedlings, or curling one's hair), and they may be done *for* oneself and/or *for* other people (as with sailing solo – for charity, potting on seedlings – for the family's food, or curling one's hair – in preparation for a stage performance). They may involve other people (as in running a marathon, running for President, running a business) and, again, may be done *for* oneself and/or for other people (as in running a marathon, running for President, running a business). Actions are not only done by agents *with* and *alongside* others, but *to* them. We act alone and in concert, in the service of, or to the detriment of, others. At times our actions bring us into conflict; at times they facilitate harmonious co-existence.

Even what we say can be action, over and above what the words mean. So-called 'actioning' handbooks for actors, which are used to develop acting abilities and performance-variation techniques, contain lists of transitive verbs identifying things that a person can do to another. The idea, originally developed by Russian theatre director, Konstantin Stanislavsky, is that whatever one's line of dialogue is, it can be spoken, 'delivered' or performed *as an action* done to the person one is speaking to.<sup>378</sup> One can use one's words to *do* something to another character, over and above what the words themselves literally state. One can take any line, be it, "Attention must be paid," "Cup of tea?" or "Friends, Romans, Countrymen, lend me your ears", and by 'actioning it', use it in any number of ways to do something to the

<sup>376</sup> Whalley in Aristotle (1997, 66 note 9)

<sup>377</sup> Here is Aristotle, "So it follows that the first principle of tragedy – the soul, in fact – is the plot, and second to that the characters: it is a mimesis of an action (praxis) and therefore particularly [a mimesis] of men-of-action in action" (1997, 75, 1450b3).

<sup>378</sup> See Caldarone & Lloyd-Williams (2004, xii-xiv) for a brief overview of this.

other person, e.g., abuse, mollify, debilitate, intimidate, cherish, summon, them, etc. Actioning one's dialogue can help actors shift the often debilitating preoccupation with what their character *is* to a more liberating focus on what their character is *doing*; especially what their character is doing *to* someone else.<sup>379</sup> This can help actors stay fresh, and 'be in the moment', as well offering tactics for exploring sub-text. Given such actioning dictionaries contain thousands of verbs, the idea that verbal engagement with another is dominated by, or 'typically' a matter of either communicating information, asking a question, or ordering someone to do something, is radically impoverished.

What actors do, what characters do, and how we viewers make sense of this, highlights the extent to which what we do *to*, *for*, and *with* others involves understanding our actions and our language as all part of an integrated whole. We share with our fellow humans (and characters) a form of life that is language- and thereby concept-soaked; and which we are all involved in sustaining and developing. To the extent that we participate in a non-private, language-using form of life we participate in an ever-evolving, open-ended, concept-using form of mutual understanding. We are in the language game of mutual understanding – of each other and the characters we create and encounter – *together*. Making sense of what others are doing cannot be separated from the language we use in recognising, thinking, and talking about our own and others' actions, be they real or fictional.

## 2.4 Situated Agency

To be a situated agent is to exist in a set of particular and changeable circumstances. For all human beings this includes being biological spatio-temporal continuants for the duration of one's life. For all human beings who develop in conformity to the species norm this includes becoming a language-user. The first fact entails that human beings stand in spatio-temporal relations with other spatio-temporal things (living and non-living), and the contingencies and laws of these circumstances are potential objects of knowledge. The second fact, that we become language-users, is a matter of being inculcated into the rule-involving language practices of the existing language-users amongst whom we are spatio-temporally situated. These two facts together entail and facilitate further facts about our human circumstances; namely that we have relationships with other people and engage in various practices: social, cultural, financial, religious, artistic, and so on. Making sense of what such individuals and

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<sup>379</sup> Some American actors call this 'playing the verb'.

groups of individuals do involves understanding (some of) the circumstances in which they are situated or embedded, together with (some of) their various individual and joint values, aims, priorities, beliefs, feelings, and commitments. As such, the notion of ‘situated intentional agency’ operative here should be understood as being a wide-scope notion, pertinent to be language-using agents.

The potential number of questions one might ask about the circumstances of a real person, to make sense of their actions, are indefinite in number; yet a fictional character, may only have a very limited set of such circumstances. There is no *prima facie* reason to regard this as inherently problematic, as the understanding, intelligibility and meaningfulness of actions need not require much extensive situational knowledge. Sometimes dramatists make deliberate choices to restrict the circumstances of their characters, as seen in certain characters played by Clint Eastwood and John Wayne in Westerns. Sometimes the limited circumstances of an agent are a product of the limited number actions done by the relevant character, and/or the ease in which such actions can be understood. One thinks of the role of girlfriends and molls in gangster and noir films, and of tertiary characters in general.

Sometimes a dramatist aims for a degree of open-endedness or ambiguity when it comes to the extent to which their characters’ actions are to be understood. Limiting information as to the situation of a character can facilitate this, as seen in some of the films of Abbas Kiarostami or Andrei Tarkovsky, and the plays of Harold Pinter and Samuel Beckett. It is by no means incumbent on a dramatist to ensure that their audience can make sense of their characters’ action, but insofar as they want them to, it behoves the dramatist to provide enough information about the circumstances and relations of a character (past and present) to enable their audiences to do so.

### **3 Dramatic Argumentation**

The preliminaries of the previous section complete, we are now ready to identify what dramatic argumentation is, and how it is used to make sense of situated agents’ actions.

Dramatic argumentation exploits the fact that we can make sense of what others – other situated language-using agents – do, or might do. The creator of a dramatic argument – be they an ordinary person making sense of a friend’s action, a historian, or fictional dramatist – exploits their own understanding of their audience’s ability to make sense of one or more actions of situated agent, be that agent ‘real’ or fictional. This is achieved by selecting, designing, and/or creating actions done by situated intentional agents and arranging

them, so that the arrangement of actions enables the sense-making of one or more of the actions, to the desired degree. This is how it works:

Let  $A_1, A_2, A_3, \dots, A_n, \dots, A_{f-1}, A_f$  and  $A_{th}$  be actions done by a situated intentional agent where  $A_1$  is first in a series of actions;  $A_n$  is any action in the ordered series of actions;  $A_{f-1}$  is the penultimate action, and  $A_f$  is the final action.  $A_{th}$  is the overarching single action which I characterise as the *thematic action*<sup>380</sup>. A dramatic argument uses the sense-making of  $A_1$  to  $A_{f-1}$ , to make sense of  $A_f$  i.e., to make sense of the final action and thereby generate, and makes sense, of the overarching action,  $A_{th}$ , which encompasses the whole series of actions. It does so by exploiting what I call ‘the transitivity of sense-making’ and which operates as follows:

$A_1$  either makes no sense, or makes sense on its own, or makes sense in virtue of  $A_f$ ;  
 $A_2$  makes sense in virtue of a way of making sense of  $A_1$ ;  
 $A_3$  makes sense in virtue of a way of making sense of  $A_2$ ;  
 ...  
 $A_n$  makes sense in virtue of a way of making sense of  $A_{n-1}$ ;  
 ...

and so on – until:

$A_f$  makes sense in virtue of a way of making sense of  $A_{f-1}$ .

As a result of this:

$A_1$  may make sense for the first time, or in a new way.

Additionally:

An overarching, thematic, action,  $A_{th}$ , encompassing  $A_1$  to  $A_f$  is brought into being and made sense of.

In such a temporally unfolding series of actions, any action  $A_n$  is always the action of a situated agent in particular changing and changeable circumstances.  $A_n$  (and  $A_{th}$ ) is always an action whose sense is articulable under one, but not necessarily all descriptions. In both non-

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<sup>380</sup> Examples of thematic actions include ‘the fall of Man’ (the *Old Testament*); the rise and fall of the Roman Empire (Gibbon’s history), ‘the fall from grace, or corruption, of Michael Corleone’ (in *The Godfather* and its sequel). One might regard the thematic action as an action understood from an external rather than internal perspective, and as such this will inform the taking of a cinematic stance.

fictional and fictional dramatic arguments of this form,<sup>381</sup> there may be more than one intentional agent acting, and the actions of one agent may change another agent's situation. As such, there may be interrelated dramatic arguments, of varying lengths and complexities.

For the avoidance of doubt, a dramatist may, of course, rearrange the order of actions in order to create suspense, provide misdirection, generate a cliff-hanger before an interval or advertisement break, etc. In cases where the series of actions to be made sense of is not experienced chronologically, there may be periods of time during which certain actions fail to make sense. Either these will make sense in hindsight, or they will not. If an action never makes sense, then it drops out of the dramatic argument, as such, and may serve some other function.

Recognising how a particular dramatic argument shapes and part-constitutes a dramatic work is one thing, being of value is another. Why might reflection on the role played by dramatic argumentation be of value to the ongoing debates about cognitivism and/or humanism? A first answer must necessarily admit – it need not be. Dramatic argumentation is not valuable *per se*. If, however, sense is hard to make of  $A_f$  then in making sense of a final action, a dramatic argument achieves something that already serves to block charges of triviality. But why is it hard to make sense of some actions? And why, if we make sense of final actions as the non-inferential culmination of the transitivity of sense, would such a thing be of value?

### 3.1 The Difficulty with Actions

Broadly speaking there are at least two distinct types of actions that might be hard to make sense of: intrinsically problematic actions, and agent-problematic actions. Actions that are *intrinsically difficult* to make sense of include such actions as committing suicide, killing one's own children, killing one's new spouse, stabbing one's own eyes, and undergoing a religious conversion. It is hard to understand how an intentional agent – be they fictional or real – might even consider such actions, let alone do them.

Empirically informed inferences to the best explanation fail to address the irrevocability, the profundity and the potential significance or meaning these actions can have

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<sup>381</sup> Though I do not argue it here, I take it dramatic argumentation is also used in non-fictional writing that seeks to make sense of actions, and thereby is a resource for the likes of Matravers (see 2014) who challenge the idea of a principled divide between fiction and non-fictional narrative.

for their agents, and so for us. *That* an action is desired does not, reveal *why* it is desired. This point is well-made by Charles Taylor in his discussion of what Anscombe calls ‘desirability-conditions’, in which he argues that something is lost if one simply analyses what makes something desirable into a “neutral, absolute description of the consummation we seek” and a pro-attitude toward it.<sup>382</sup> Indeed, that certain something that would be lost is the very thing we seek when wanting to make sense of difficult-to-understand actions. A related point is also made by Bernard Williams who recognises that in making sense of what others do, it is a “condition of our understanding” that “it should make sense to us that such actions should make sense to people in those circumstances.”<sup>383</sup> Referring to the particular situation of killing oneself and simultaneously deliberately immolating many thousands of others, “for political objectives identified with a certain religion,”<sup>384</sup> Williams suggests that one person might make sense of such action, in terms of the “promised rewards in an afterlife”; another in terms of “heroic and self-sacrificial dying” regardless of any reward to come.<sup>385</sup> These are by no means comparable ways of making sense, nor can they be reduced to any neutral description plus a pro-attitude rider.

In the hands of great dramatists, intrinsically difficult to make sense of actions can become comprehensible, and intelligible, and given meaning. Sense is made of such final actions in virtue of being the final action, in a series of (situated) actions, each of which is made sense of in virtue of previous (situated) actions. That such step-by-step, cumulative argumentation delivers final actions that do make sense, can be demonstrated by the final actions of intentional agents such as Anna Karenina’s and Emma Bovary’s respective suicides; Othello’s murder of his own wife; Oedipus’s self-blinding; and John Grimes’s religious conversion, in James Baldwin’s 1953 novel, *Go Tell it on The Mountain*. In film, one thinks of *The Elephant Man*, David Lynch’s 1980 fictionalized biopic of John Merrick. One might start out thinking that sense will be made of the eponymous character’s final suicide, in virtue of his appalling treatment at the hands of others and the seeming impossibility of self- or other-respect. Yet, in this film, the dramatic argument is so constructed to show us suicide can make sense for an agent precisely at the point when he is, at long last, publicly treated with respect. Indeed, Merrick’s suicide is made sense of as an action of a man for whom to finally be treated, and treat himself, as a human being requires

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<sup>382</sup> Taylor (1980, 35). See Anscombe (1963, § 37) for the distinction between an object or actions being desired and being desirable.

<sup>383</sup> Williams (2002, 234-235)

<sup>384</sup> Williams (2002, 235)

<sup>385</sup> Williams (2002, 235)

only one more thing: that he be able to die like one, i.e., in a bed, lying down – a physical position that will prevent him from breathing. Knowing and wanting this, Merrick removes the pillows from his bed. This is what his final action of [removing the pillows] now means.

Agent-problematic actions are those actions that do not present themselves as obviously problematic to make sense of, but rather they are hard to understand *when done by a particular agent*. It is not that it is hard to make sense of a wife leaving her husband, but if that wife is Nora (in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*) it takes the whole play to bring her – and us – to the point where such an action, done by Nora, not only makes sense, but becomes the only action now capable of being meaningful for her. It is not intrinsically hard to make sense of one man killing another, but if the man who pulls the trigger is Holly Martins and his victim is his life-long 'best friend' Harry Lime (in the 1949 film *The Third Man* written by Graham Greene and directed by Carol Reed) it takes the whole film to bring Holly – and us – to the point where such an action, makes sense in the way that it finally does.

One might also argue that Holly's shooting of Lime is not only an agent-problematic action, but one that can be understood in multiple ways. For Thomas Wartenberg, Holly's shooting of Lime makes sense as the action that "complete[s] his rejection of his commitment to his former friend"<sup>386</sup>. I would argue that one can see it as the apotheosis of his commitment to his friend. Holly came to Vienna at Harry's invitation, because Lime needed some help, and, in the end, Holly helps his friend – only not in the way either had anticipated. The sense one makes of the Holly's climactic final action – pulling the trigger on Lime – is altered if one recognises the role in the dramatic argument of Lime's own final action. For Lime's final action (before being shot), is to nod to Holly. This changes Holly's situation: he is no longer a man training a gun on a man who cannot escape, with a senior military policeman, moments away; he is face to face with a man who – having already shown his moral colours – is now asking for his friend for the ultimate assistance one person might give another. If one does not make sense of Lime's action, i.e., non-inferentially understanding the meaning of it, as soliciting Holly's assistance to help Holly die, one makes sense of Holly's killing of Lime differently, thereby changing the thematic action of the whole film. One could characterise the overarching action of the film as rejecting the demands of loyalty made by one's erstwhile friends - as Wartenberg seems to – but this thematic action is already achieved by Holly's hospital visit in which he sees some of Lime's victims. His change of mind is already acted upon in his decision to assist the police in setting up a trap to capture

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<sup>386</sup> Wartenberg (2011, 317)

Harry. Crucially not only does Wartenberg's reading miss Harry's 'final nod' as a crucial action in the film, but it means the film's dramatic argument that he identifies could achieve its goal without any final confrontation between Harry and Holly.

### 3.2 The Value of Dramatic Argumentation

Why is dramatic argumentation, so characterised, of value?

First, dramatic argumentation helps us make sense of actions that are either intrinsically difficult to understand, or are problematic to understand given the agent doing them. With both types of action, we are brought to the point where the action makes sense and recognise that an action that once would be unthinkable for either any agent, or this particular agent, is not only viable but, when it happens, inevitable. We can thereby realise that an agent can change, sometimes in profound ways. Dramatic argumentation provides us with a new set of *criteria* for the sense-making of an action, or the sense-making of an agent's change, which we did not have before. By (i) *extending the applicable criteria* by which we understand actions to be the actions they are and (ii) *expanding the range of actions* for which we now have criteria, our *critical understanding of actions and agency* is increased, and as such is of intrinsic value.

Second, in increasing our critical understanding of action and agency, we increase the resources we might bring to bear in our future sense-making of the actions of intentional agents, be they fictional characters or real people, a potentially instrumental value.

Third, although reflecting on *how* dramatic argumentation works is not necessary for a particular dramatic argument *to work*, considering how dramatic argumentation does achieve its sense-making goals, makes apparent the extent to which our intentional actions are *meaning-laden*. The actions of [nodding], [dedicating a book], [committing suicide], [shooting someone], [looking out of a taxi], [putting pillows on one's bed] etc., come with an indefinite number of ways of being understood and recognised as meaningful for their agents, given the indefinitely large range situations and contexts for which, and in which, a particular agent acts. The act of [raising a finger] can – in life – make sense as, or can mean, a motorist's thank you to the driver of an oncoming vehicle for conceding the right of way; as a politician's refusal to pass a piece of legislation; and a signal to one's doctor during a hearing

test;<sup>387</sup> and so on. Understanding what is being made sense of, and how this is constitutive of what we mean, delivers both intrinsic and instrumental value.

Four, reflecting on how a particular fictional film uses and exploits its dramatic argument one cannot but become increasingly aware of, and alert to, features of a work that contribute its cinematic values, particularly a film's stance-based cinematic value. (I will say more on this in the next section.)

Although this does not exhaust the reasons why dramatic argument is of value, it is now time to consider challenges to the proposals outlined thus far.

## 4 Objections & Replies

The previous sections have articulated a way of engaging with, thinking about, and valuing fiction films, as sense-making works of art. This involves recognising that, and how, the relation between situated intentional agents, their actions, and the organisation of those actions into dramatic arguments, can be of both intrinsic and instrumental value. I now identify and respond to twelve sceptical concerns, organised in increasingly challenging order.

### 4.1 Scepticism: Medium Close-ups

One might argue that recognising dramatic arguments, and thus dramatic value, in fiction films is problematic in several specific ways: it encourages reductive approaches, it favours transparent rather than opaque engagement, dramatic arguments can fail, they can be trivial, they can be redundant, their constitutive actions can be hard to identify, or identifiable in multiple ways. I now take these challenges individually.

#### Objection from Plot Reductionism

Given the focus of dramatic argumentation prioritises actions, even in a dialogue-heavy film, it looks like the rich complexities of a dramatic fiction film (or play, novel, or dramatic poem) risk being *reduced* to a series of actions. Is not a drama, the sceptic urges, so much more than mere plot, more than just a case of what happens, in what order?<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> As Woody Allen's character demonstrates in *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

<sup>388</sup> See Lamarque (2020, 135)

The power of this objection is easily visible in those unreadable (in my experience) plot synopses found in opera programmes. If dramatic argument and the idea of an organised series of actions were just a case of ‘and-then-this-happens’ and ‘then-this-next-thing-happens’, not only would this be an impoverished proposal, one would actually be engaging with a fictional *chronicle* rather than a *drama*. A dramatic argument is not just a *series* of actions but a series of actions whose organisation contributes to way in which they *make the particular sense they make*, such that were the actions to be presented in a different order, they would make either a different sense, or no sense at all. That is to say, they can be understood, made intelligible and made meaningful for the intentional agent who does them, given the actions that agent has done before. This requires not only that each action be contextualised in terms of having specific sense-making position in a series of agent’s actions; but that also be contextualised in terms of the agent’s *situation*. The agent’s situation includes as many – or as few – of an indefinite range of financial, cultural, and interpersonal circumstances and relations that are required to enable the making sense of actions done in the context of those situations.

In *The Lives of Others*, the unrelenting austerity of Stasi Officer’s Wiesler’s flat, with its complete absence of any unserviceable items, or sign of any human connection, past or present, creates an environment of aesthetic and personal impoverishment that helps make sense of the Wiesler’s actions of, for example, stroking Dreyman’s bed sheets and stealing one of their poetry books. What Dreyman ‘has’ and Wiesler ‘lacks’ – features that are part of their circumstances – is as open to view in the contrasting decor of their apartments as it is the lushness of Dreyman’s velvety corduroy clothes in contrast to Wiesler’s barely serviceable thin grey jacket.

Circumstances though are not just physical, and Wiesler’s situation includes having to work with his intellectual inferior, a man overpromoted thanks to his political shrewdness, rather than in recognition of his genuine abilities. Similarly, Dreyman has no choice but to work with a mediocre theatre director whose only good ideas come from a superior, but blacklisted, director. Both men find themselves working in unmeritocratic environments with colleagues they cannot respect; circumstances which ultimately help make sense of their actions as attempts to deliver an alternative ‘natural justice’.

What this objection does serve to highlight, however, is that the very idea of *dramatising* is not merely a matter of creating and presenting actions, but it is a technique for conveying situation-detailing information. In the first instance, dramatising is a matter of telling a story through the presentation of contemporaneous *actions*: the audience watches

what unfolds as it unfolds, rather than experiencing a story ‘recounted to us’ by a narrator who already knows ‘how the story ends’ and is now telling it to us. We watch a dramatic work in the present tense, as it were, even when watching flashbacks or flashforwards. Dramatising also refers to a range of techniques for conveying not the actions but (information about) the situations of the *dramatis personae*. Dramatising situations, i.e., dramatising the circumstances and relations which contextualise and thereby contribute to the meaning those actions have for their agents, (and us) is a matter of showing and demonstrating the agents’ circumstances and relations, rather than stating them. Techniques for doing this can include the use of actions as well as exploiting choices related to production and costume design, hair and make-up, camera angles and movement, dialogue sub-text, and even casting, etc. In exploiting both ways of dramatising, to develop a dramatic argument, dramatists and filmmakers are cognisant of, and in pursuit of, the very opposite of reducing a drama to its plot. Rather they recognise that everything that you can point the camera at, or put on a soundtrack, can potentially contribute to making sense of what an agent does.

That said, the sceptic’s point might be reworked to press concerns about distinguishing between plot and character, on the assumption that a distinction is required to avoid any reduction of the latter to the former. Moreover, it is part of the purpose of work’s dramatic argumentation to make sense of a final character’s action given that at the start of the drama, neither they, nor we, could have anticipated what they would do what they end up doing, and which comes to make sense. But I take this to indicate that a dramatic argument exploits the fact that in an important sense, *we are what we do*; a point I take to chime with George Whalley’s conception of the plot/character relation in Aristotle. “The fundamental principle of Aristotle’s theory of character development is that we become what we do, that our actions crystallise into our character.<sup>389</sup> Thus the objection from plot reductionism is misplaced: for the plot and character are two sides of the same dramatic coin.

### **Objection from Transparency**

The sceptic might, nonetheless, express concern that the kinds of subtleties and techniques discussed in the previous objection often go unnoticed by viewers. Indeed, the sceptic can argue that if a dramatic argument works, the transitivity of sense facilitates the fact that the

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<sup>389</sup> Whalley in Aristotle (1997, 50, notes 18 and 19)

audience need not understand how the dramatic argument is achieved. What then is the value of recognising fictions films construct dramatic arguments?

The answer turns on a distinction between two different ways of engaging with a film; opaquely or transparently. I help myself to this distinction from Peter Lamarque who uses it connection with ways of reading;<sup>390</sup> here extending it to ways of viewing. Briefly, when one views ‘for transparency’ one views to find out what happens; no thought or consideration, is directed at the question of how the work brings into being what it does, or how film-making and dramatic techniques are used to achieve the substance of film. By contrast, when one views for opacity – or, as I would say, as an act of reactive critical inquiry – one investigates the ways the story is dramatised; the ways in which the *what* and the *how* of the constituents of the drama shape each other, and *to what* thematic or thesis-involving end.

For Lamarque, however, reading for opacity is also a matter of reading a work of prose (typically but not essentially fictional) *as* a literary work. This is one and the same as reading a work *as* a work of art, or just ‘*qua* art’. Literary value *just is* the artistic value of a work of literature, and a work of literature is a “value-laden” notion in virtue of the possibility and rewards of reading for opacity.<sup>391</sup> As I use the notions in the context of film, I do not make these connections necessary or internal ones. As per the first two chapters, I recognise the possibility that cinematic value can be an artistic value, an aesthetic value, *and* a stance-based value; the latter not being used as a way of characterising either of the former two values. Having a stance-based cinematic value that need not be an artistic value, makes it possible to engage with a film as a cinematic work, whilst remaining neutral as to why it is a work of art, yet nevertheless ‘watching for opacity’ by taking a cinematic stance.

One might, of course, be uninterested in engaging with a film as an opaque work. The fact that films can and do make sense of their agents’ actions means it is entirely possible to watch a film transparently, and in so doing one will be doing enough to make a judgement on (at least) a film’s entertainment value. To be clear, there is no reason why a filmmaker should want their film to be watched opaquely. Indeed, in the case of propaganda or didactic films, dramatic and cinematic techniques are often employed to discourage viewers from watching opaquely. But reactive critical engagement requires and rewards viewing for opacity; as taking a cinematic stance not only reveals a film’s cinematic value, but in so doing reveals its relation with dramatic value.

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<sup>390</sup> Lamarque (2020 [117], 114) ‘Belief, Thought, and Literature’ See also Lamarque (2007)

<sup>391</sup> Lamarque (2020 [117], 116) ‘Belief, Thought, and Literature’

In other words, the objection from transparency is not an objection to the notion of dramatic argumentation; it merely points out that some viewers (like some readers) choose not to reflect on, or critically engage with what they are watching (or reading). The fact that such a viewer chooses not to recognise that there is an argumentative sense-making dramatic structure to a work is not an argument for its non-existence.

### **Objection from the Failure of Dramatic Argumentation**

If dramatic value turns on a conception of dramatic argumentation, and dramatic argumentation turns on the transitivity of sense-making from action to action, then should the transitivity of sense break down, the dramatic argument breaks down. If the argument breaks down either no sense, or only an inadequate sense, can be made of  $A_f$ ; and, thus, there is either no thematic action,  $A_{th}$  or it is nonsensical. This sceptical point reveals the fact that to attempt to create a dramatic argument does not entail its achievement. It is quite possible to make a feature film that fails to make sense of its final action, and fails to either generate, or make sense of any thematic, overarching action. In such cases, the film will have no dramatic value.

This skeptical point is well-taken; but given the attempt to create a sense-making dramatic argument of value does not entail its achievement, perhaps the sceptic has an associated target in sight. Perhaps the worry here is that fictions films are to be understood *as always* attempting to create and deliver valuable dramatic arguments. But this is not so. Many films are made that either do not set out to create dramatic arguments or are deliberately designed to resist making sense, or are in pursuit of other, alternative, creative ambitions. Luis Bunuel's 1962 film *Exterminating Angel* is not a film with a dramatic argument, as such. It deliberately thwarts the transitivity of sense-making from action to action.

After an enjoyable dinner party, the guests make moves to depart only to 'discover' they are incapable of leaving the host's house, even though there is no physical barrier preventing them doing so. The guests simply need to cross an 'invisible' line to be able to leave but are unable to do so. They stay, even to the point of risking death, before suddenly – equally inexplicably – regarding themselves as able to leave. One is not being invited to understand the characters in this film as intentional agents whose actions are chosen and which make sense, as intelligible and meaningful for the characters. Indeed, the characters do not have any way of making sense of their actions. Instead, one is invited to see the characters as having their intentional agency thwarted or corrupted; they are beings in the

grip of something – possibly internal, possible external, or possibly a mixture of the two – which renders them powerless, or they believe renders them so.

There are any number of reasons why a film might want to present examples of the loss of agency or its corruption. One might take the film's historical context within the surrealist movement to account for such artistic ambitions and preoccupations. One might see the film as designed to illustrate, by analogy or metaphor, certain views about the nature of society, perhaps relating to religious conformity and/or the rigidity of social and class-based hierarchies, and so on. The lack of a *dramatic* argument does not entail anything about the film's other putative values. And indeed, there is much cinematic value (artistic, aesthetic and stance-based) to be found in the film, in which these themes are developed.

There are also films that attempt (or seem to attempt) to use dramatic argumentation to deliver dramatic value, but which fail. Insofar as these films do reach audiences (paying and non-paying) they may be criticised for 'not working' or being less than satisfactory experiences. It could be argued that Terrence Malick's 2012 film *To The Wonder* tries to create a dramatic argument and fails because too many of the actions needed to achieve the transitivity of sense-making are not shown and/or ambiguous. Time-jumps and inexplicable shifts in characters' relationships announce that something has occurred, 'off-camera', but we are unsure of what these actions or changes of situation are. Thus, we are bereft of the resources to make sense of them. Instead, we are invited to watch characters engaged in activities rather than actions, as very little dramatic argumentation is developed. Whatever meaning these activities have *for* the characters remains obscure, and irrelevant. *To The Wonder* is a film of reactions rather than actions; and reactions to we know not what. As with *Exterminating Angel*, the absence of dramatic argumentation and thus dramatic value does not entail the lack of other values. One could argue that Malick's film aims for – and delivers – a *poetic* goal; providing a lyrical unfolding of images, of portraits, and of moods, each shaped, designed and selected to be seductive, suggestive, allusive, and ephemeral. One might argue that this is an entirely apposite or powerful way of realising the film's thematic preoccupation, which to my mind, is the inexplicable need for, yet elusiveness of, love – both human and divine. Again, the (possibly) deliberate lack of dramatic argumentation and thus dramatic value, does not, by definition, preclude this film having artistic and/or aesthetic and/or stance-based cinematic value.

Any related sceptical worry that prescriptivism is a consequence of dramatic value falls on fallow ground for a comparable reason: just because a film can be regarded as having

a sense-making dramatic argument and thus dramatic value, does not mean to say that it should.

### **Objection from the Triviality of Dramatic Argumentation**

Given a film's dramatic value turns on the quality of dramatic argumentation, even if the transitivity of sense-making goes through to the final action, and a thematic action is thereby generated and makes sense, the possibility of triviality remains. But is the sceptic's worry perhaps itself trivial? Both deduction and induction have trivial examples, without this undermining their value as *forms* of argumentation.

Moreover, as recognised above, there are certain actions (such as suicide and infanticide) that are hard to understand, and thus making sense of specific examples of these actions, as done by particular situated intentional agents, is presumably non-trivial, by definition. One might, as an empirical generalisation, come to establish a correlation between, say, depression and suicide, but insofar as there are millions of people who are depressed who do not commit suicide, depression cannot even be said to *dispose* sufferers to suicide, let alone cause it. Knowing any number of various empirically established correlations does not help one make sense of why *this* intentional agent (real or fictional) in *these* circumstances and situations killed themselves. And whilst it is not obviously challenging to make sense of some actions (like getting married) it can be thoroughly obscure when it comes to making sense of *this* bride marrying *that* groom.

Perhaps the real problem that the triviality challenge seeks to highlight is not that there is no understanding achieved (given that there is), but rather that this achievement is trivial insofar as it is limited to a single case. The triviality is not a matter of content but scope: it is only *that particular* action, preceded by *those specific* other actions, done by *that unique* agent, in *these unique* and *uniquely changing* sets of circumstances, makes sense in *this one-off* way. This is not dissimilar to the kind of pressure brought to bear by Jerome Stolnitz in his classic challenge to literary cognitivism, notwithstanding that here the focus is on dramatic arguments *making sense* of *actions*, rather than establishing explicit or implicit *true claims*.<sup>392</sup> According to Stolnitz's scope-related worry about triviality, either *Pride and Prejudice* asserts "Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep apart two attractive people living in Hertfordshire in Regency England"<sup>393</sup> and does so in such a way that is inseparable from all the specific detailed nuanced description of the fictional lives Elisabeth Bennet and

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<sup>392</sup> Stolnitz (1992)

<sup>393</sup> Stolnitz (1992, 193)

Fitzwilliam Darcy, or there is an extractable psychological truth, “Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep attractive people apart.”<sup>394</sup> In the former case, the scope of truth-evaluable assertion is limited to the (fictional) contents of a single novel. In the latter case, the universality of the scope of the proposition is achieved only by stepping away from the specifics of its source. On this picture, the claim is trivial *in scope* if it is true of the fictional work, and if the scope restriction is lifted, it is either false or trivially true in its *vacuity*.

If the objection is really targeting scope limitations as the primary reason for triviality, the objection misfires, because scope limitations are only pertinent to empirical matters. And as already indicated, dramatic argumentation not only shifts the focus from assertions and truth-tracking to sense-making, it thereby reconfigures the issue from matters empirical to matters conceptual and criterial. Sceptical challenges that try to leverage scope worries are, thus, making a category mistake.

### **Objection from Easy-to-Understand Actions**

The sceptic might switch tack, focussing not on the hard-to-understand actions, but the easy-to-understand ones. This could be a version of the triviality objection, or it could be a way of pressing the redundancy of the very idea that dramatic argumentation has something substantial to offer. After all, the sceptic might remind us, perhaps the transitivity of sense is possible because agents’ action are (without this) already easy to understand. No argument at all is required to make sense of them.

To respond to this challenge, let me set out a short sequence from *The Lives of Others*. Having submitted to the unwanted attentions of the Culture Minister, actress Christa-Maria returns to the flat she shares with Dreyman, showers, and adopts a foetal position on their bed. When Dreyman enters the bedroom, she asks him to hold her; he does (Figure 7).



Figure 7.

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<sup>394</sup> Stolnitz (1992 ,193)

From the shot of Dreyman embracing Christa-Maria (Figure 7.), the film cuts to Wiesler sitting on a chair in the secret surveillance centre in the attic of the apartment block where the couple live. His eyes are closed and he wears headphones; either he is listening to his ‘targets’ or has fallen asleep whilst eavesdropping (Figure 8 below).



Figure 8.

Almost immediately, and with no change of camera set-up, Wiesler’s surveillance colleague arrives for the night shift, appearing over Wiesler’s shoulder (Figure 9 below).



Figure 9.

As soon as Wiesler hears his colleague arriving, he opens his eyes and berates the man for being five minutes late; it is clear he was not asleep. Wiesler rises from the chair, and we realise that the chair has been moved from its normal place, at the surveillance equipment desk, and is now ‘in’ one of room outlines that have been chalked out on the attic floor indicating the floor-plan of Dreyman’s flat. This is the only time, that Wiesler is seen engaging in surveillance whilst in this position. Wiesler then leaves the attic. The film cuts to a high shot looking down on the roundabout outside Wiesler’s tower block flat; then cuts

inside to Wiesler in a lift; then to Wiesler washing his face; then, when his doorbell rings, Wiesler dries his face and goes to the door, opens it, and invites in an expected prostitute.

One might think that sitting in a chair is not an action that is ‘hard’ to make sense of. On a long shift one might want to be seated. Sense-making of the action of sitting in a chair, is surely not difficult. So much so, can it really contribute to a dramatic argument? Indeed, it barely even seems to qualify as an intentional action. Yet, we can make very specific sense of it being an intentional action of an agent who – in his own way – is acting in response to the overheard line from Christa-Maria (to Dreyman) to “Just hold me”. Wiesler moves the chair (off-camera) to a position that is as close as possible to Christa-Maria, albeit one floor, directly above.

Following on, one might think of Wiesler’s bodily position not as an intentional action at all, but simply as the shape Wiesler has ended up in, having fallen asleep at work. However, as soon as it is revealed that Wiesler is not asleep, just listening with his eyes closed, we can make sense of his posture and his gripping of the chair as deliberate action; a way of arranging one’s body to ‘just hold’ someone who is not present, but whom one imagines holding. The chair back goes proxy for Christa-Maria. Understanding Wiesler’s being in the chair in such a way becomes not a way of understanding the state he is in, but an action he is doing. Moreover, it is a matter of understanding the significance and meaning of it *for him*. With this in place, one can make sense of (or make better, more specific, sense of) Wiesler’s next action, namely his booking of a prostitute (off-camera). This then leads on to understanding that the sex with the prostitute (on-camera) is not an action whose purpose is to fulfil a sexual desire, but one pursued in the hopes of fulfilling a need for intimacy; either intimacy in general or intimacy with Christa-Maria.

The point here is that there are different ways to make sense of seemingly unambiguous actions, and that the combination of agent’s changing situation, the organisation of a series of actions, and the transitivity of sense-making, demonstrate the extent to which our understanding of the significance and meaning of an action for an agent *can grow*. We might echo Wittgenstein’s reported observation, “[A]n expression has meaning only in the stream of life,” by saying that an action only has meaning, only makes sense, and can only be understood, in the stream of situated agency.<sup>395</sup>

To be sure the transitivity of sense-making just demonstrated in and around the *Lives of Others* chair sequence is just a fragment of a dramatic argument. Moreover, the sense

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<sup>395</sup> Malcolm (2001, 73 and 75)

made of these actions here described, is not fixed, but may be adjusted, in hindsight, as a consequence of how sense is made of future actions. But the objection that dramatic argumentation is somehow redundant because easy-to-understand actions make sense of themselves, points to a transparent reading that is unlikely to deliver the kinds of rewards available for those interested not just in transparent viewing (and the dramatic value that comes from that) but also in viewing for opacity by taking a cinematic stance, and thereby developing an awareness of the relations between a film's stance-based cinematic value and its dramatic value.

### **Objection from the Invisibility of Dramatic Argumentation**

The sceptic pushes on undaunted: might not actions like those in the chair sequence just discussed, go unrecognised. After all, actions that supposedly make up the elements of a dramatic argument might well be camouflaged by other more obvious or eye-catching action(s). Or perhaps an action's particularly quotidian appearance is such that actions which need to be made sense of lie in full view but remain unnoticed. After all, the relevant argument-constituting actions do not come with helpful flashing neon signs alerting the audience to their presence.

Whilst these points are reasonable, they do not, however, provide an objection against the existence or value of dramatic argumentation *per se*. Rather they assume that a dramatically valueable film could, or even should, yield all its rewards to a single transparent viewing. As already acknowledged, a dramatic argument serves to make sense of a character's actions, particular their final action, without the audience thereby appreciating the full way in which that has been achieved. This does not prevent continued reflection about the film after viewing – during what Peter Kivy recognises as the “afterlife” of a work<sup>396</sup> – as well as through further viewings and ongoing reactive critical inquiry, all of which may well enable richer sense-making to occur. Cinematic value and dramatic value are in dialogue, whether immediately visible or not.

### **Objection from the Difficulty of Discerning Intentional Action**

The sceptic perseveres: even after viewing for opacity and reflecting on all (putative) intentional actions it may still be difficult to decide whether an action is intentional or not,

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<sup>396</sup> Kivy (1997, 131ff.) Whilst this afterlife is necessary for a “full experience” of the work (1997, 134), according to Kivy, I resist the idea of a ‘full experience’ of a work, regarding experience as always open to change and development.

and thus whether it is even a candidate for an action that might play a constitutive part in a dramatic argument. Thus, a film's dramatic argument forever remains an elusive beast. The fact that it can be difficult to tell whether an action is intentional or not, need not be an objection, *pace* the sceptic, but a recommendation. For it promotes the value of taking a cinematic stance and recognising that doing so can enhance our appreciation of how a film's dramatic value has been achieved. That said, it raises a bigger question: what are we trying to 'discern' when considering whether actions are, indeed, intentional?

The short answer to this is that here is no metaphysical 'view from nowhere' in which it *just is the case* that such-and-such an action is, or is not, intentional. Moreover, there is no satisfactory 'perspicuous overview' of the criss-crossing relations that obtain between those actions and reactions that are intentional and those that are unintentional; let alone those related actions and reactions that are voluntary and involuntary; caused and uncaused; and active and passive. To discern how these are related is an enormously challenging philosophical matter as evidenced by works like Anscombe's *Intention*. This need not, however, be a problem. Indeed, not only is it not necessary to wait on a satisfactory, or correct philosophical account of these topics, insofar as dramatic argumentation seeks to make sense of actions (in relation to other actions), films can provide an instrumentalisable resource for any philosopher of action looking to pursue such issues.

One very modest example of this can be seen in what Perkins calls the 'shoulder grasps' to be found in Nicholas Ray's 1950 film *In a Lonely Place*. Within less than three of the first five minutes of the film, Humphrey Bogart's character, Dixon 'Dix' Steele is either on the receiving or the giving end of four shoulder grasps when he visits a private club frequented by people who work in Hollywood (see Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13).



Figure 10.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

On Dix's way into the club, he stops to sign an autograph for waiting children, and is grasped on the shoulders/upper arms by arriving film director, Lloyd Barnes, (Figure 10). Lloyd's action *might* make sense as demonstration of affection, but – in the circumstances of the situation clarified by the sub-text of Dix's dialogue – the physical touch makes sense as an action aimed at encouraging screenwriter Dix to leave the kids and move swiftly into the club, to talk business. (Note: Dix has been established as a screenwriter in the sole preceding scene and here tells the autograph hunters he is a 'nobody', unlike Lloyd. The incongruity of his necessary role yet lowly status in the Hollywood hierarchy is established within two minutes, before he is patronisingly pawed by Lloyd.)

Inside the club Dix spots a friend, the already-drunk actor Charlie Waterman, and joins him at the bar. Lloyd grasps him a second time, once again trying to steer him away from the distraction of others, (Figure 11). Dix resists this and gives Charlie a shoulder/arm grasp of his own (Figure 12). Within seconds a film producer, Junior, arrives, and places his hands on Dixon's shoulders whilst announcing to the club guests he comes hot foot from a positive preview of his latest film, (Figure 13). When Junior refuses to shake hands with Charlie, tempers rise. Junior insults Charlie and Dix steps in with a well-placed punch to Junior's jaw.

The first grasp makes sense as a proprietorial, controlling action. The second grasp 'doubles down' on the sense of the first. The third grasp makes sense as an action of cherishing and respect; the fourth as the action of someone constraining or subduing a potential sceptic. Whilst these are actions that might go unnoticed because of their everyday quality, even if we agree that they can be noticed – does that make them intentional actions, as such? Insofar as one can see these actions as increasing our understanding of the characters in ways that contribute to the sense-making of the whole film, and in particular the

sense that can be made of Dix's final action (when he stops himself in the middle of strangling his girlfriend and walks away) I see no reason not to recognise them as being designed to be read as intentional actions, albeit subtle ones.

There is an important distinction to be made here, nonetheless. Only actions done *by* Dix are constituents of a dramatic argument designed to make sense of Dix's final action. Actions done *to* Dix can be either (i) constituents of sense-making dramatic argumentation designed to make sense of the final actions done by those *other agent-characters*, or (ii) actions whose purpose is to dramatise Dix's *situation*; the circumstances and relations in which he finds himself. We can see Lloyd's shoulder grasp (in Figure 11) as Lloyd's action: as his manhandling of Dix away from the kids to encourage him into the club and to get down to serious business. We can also make sense of it as Dix's action: he surrenders himself to Lloyd allowing himself to be manhandled. We can also see it as an action of Lloyd's designed to dramatise/characterise Dix's *situation*, namely that Dix is someone others need but push around, and he tends to acquiesce.

This helps to understand Andrew Klevan's point (following Perkins) that the actions such as those dramatised in Figures 10, 11, 12, and 13, demonstrate an "important difference between prominence and significance" and that, "[o]nce a feature's significance is recognised, its significance can be revelatory."<sup>397</sup> In other words, it is part of the task of reactive critical inquiry to look at the function of actions not just as possible intentional actions of different people (known under different descriptions) but also possible ways of characterising an agent's situation. In this way, the sceptic's worry can be shown to be not just unnecessary, but welcome, as a way of pointing out the extent to which cinematic and dramatic value are interdependent, as are our transparent and opaque ways of engaging with film.

## 4.2 Sceptical Challenges: The Bigger Picture

It might be thought that the very idea of dramatic argumentation and its relation to a particularly dramatic value is problematic in more fundamental ways than explored thus far. Let us delve further into what I suggest are the four leading concerns that threaten to undermine the very idea that we can make sense of what a fiction character does in virtue of,

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<sup>397</sup> Klevan (2018, 173).

and in the same way as, how we make sense of what real people do, and vice versa. These worries focus on metaphysical conflation, mind-reading, reference, and criteria.

### **The Objection from Metaphysical Conflation**

As the elements of dramatic argumentation have been described, fictional characters are taken to be no different from real people insofar as, *qua* agents, they engage in intentional actions of which sense can be made. Still, the sceptic might argue that nonetheless real agents and fictional ones are relevantly different.

If one accepts the terms of this objection, then it would seem that the sceptic wins. But whilst it is undoubtedly true that real people and characters differ in any number of important ways, what is under consideration is not a metaphysical issue but a conceptual one; it is not the metaphysics of action but our sense-making understanding of action that is the issue. Whether Joe Biden says ‘Hello’ to Jill Biden, or Mickey Mouse says ‘Hello’ to Minnie Mouse, the former is greeting the latter. If Joe puts his lips to Jill’s cheek, or Mickey puts his lips to Minnie’s cheek, we make sense of what is occurring as kissing. The metaphysical identity of the greeter and greeted, the kisser and the kissed is irrelevant to our recognition and (potential) understanding of the actions being engaged in. If an astronaut says, “Open the pod-bay doors, please HAL” to a voice-recognising computer and the computer (finally) responds with “I’m sorry, Dave, I can’t do that”, Dave can be understood as making a request and HAL as refusing to cooperate with the request, whether this is actually happening in reality, or in Kubrick’s 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

If this was not to be the case, how could one even attempt to create dramatic fiction? If there were to be some metaphysical barrier to making sense of situated fictional agents, we would be bereft of the resources with which to engage with what was ‘happening’, and have no motivation to do so. Understanding fictional agents from an internal perspective, filmmakers exploit the fact that metaphysical differences are irrelevant to our ability to understand the actions of fictional agents in the same way as we make sense of ourselves and actual people: for *there is no other option*. This is conceptually prior to the understanding of characters’ actions from the external perspective; that is, as designed features that part-constitute a work, which contribute to a film’s cinematic value.

### **The Objection from Mind-Reading**

At no point in any of the above, have I mentioned the idea of ‘mind-reading’. Dramatic argumentation is presented as something that works on the basis that we can understand and

make sense of others, in virtue of what we see them do, and not because we engage in some sort of projection of ourselves into another's private mental realm. The sceptic's concern is, however, that this is just the wrong picture of how people understand each other (and thus how we therefore understand fictional characters).

My response is that sceptic has made a misstep by buying into a presumption that informs all conceptions of 'mind-reading' - whether simulation theory, theory-theory, or 'reading the mind in the eyes'. For these theoretical approaches assume that explaining how we can 'know others' is a matter of gaining inferential access to the inner 'mental states' of other people, where these are taken to be private representational states of/in the mind/brain. This picture assumes that to be minded is to have such 'inner states' as opposed to having certain powers, and that there is an explanatory need to access to something that, *by definition*, is hidden.

Consider, a person who is knocked over by a bus and writhes around screaming. When we see that they are in pain, we do so because, as language-users we understand the conceptual connection between what they are doing and their being in pain. We understand without making any inferences that such a person is not solely screaming, not just writhing around, but is in pain. We are watching someone in pain.

But perhaps, a trick is being played and we have been unwittingly ensnared in some elaborate *Candid Camera*-style hoax or a police reconstruction, and the person is not in pain. This does not, however, matter. For I would still be right to *understand* that the person (now regarded as a role-playing character) is in pain. For I am not making a judgement as to the metaphysical status of any putative mental or brain state; I am not *inferring* some hidden-from-view physical or metaphysical fact, using supposed necessary and sufficient (or even INUS<sup>398</sup>) conditions; rather I am identifying and making sense of what they are doing and what it means. I find their action *intelligible* by understanding it in this way. An observer to this event – be they a by-stander on the pavement, or a member of an audience seated in a theatre or cinema – understands that in the former case they are witnessing a particular *person* in pain, and in the latter case they are witnessing a particular *character* in pain. What it is to *understand someone being in pain* though, *is the same in both cases*.

But, the sceptic pushes back, what about 'reading the mind in the eyes' tests? Do we not understand people as being in different states even when they are 'acting' (for real, or in a pretend sense) at all; and have no choice other to 'infer to their inner states' from something

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<sup>398</sup> See Currie (2010, 40) for more on this J. L. Mackie-sourced idea of insufficient but necessary parts of conditions which are themselves unnecessary but sufficient.

perceivable, like their eyes? Is this not the very premise that justifies the legitimacy of the so-called ‘reading the mind in the eyes’ test? Consider Figure 14.



Figure 14.

Originally, test-takers were asked to identify whether this person is ‘serious’ or ‘playful’; subsequently the test-designers expanded the choices to four: ‘serious’, ‘ashamed’, ‘alarmed’ or ‘bewildered’.<sup>399</sup> (The ‘correct’ answer is taken to be ‘serious’ in both cases.) Similarly in Figure 15 (below), the original two choices were ‘reflective’ and ‘unreflective’; the revised four are ‘reflective’, ‘aghast’, ‘irritated’, and ‘impatient’, with ‘reflective’ being the ‘correct’ answer.



Figure 15.

Yet imagine the people in Figures 14 and 15 in situations such as (i) watching their child successfully stand up to a bully for the first time; (ii) standing in a helicopter queue as Saigon falls in 1975; (iii) participating in a national cooking competition and watching their soufflé struggle to rise; and (iv) trying to avoid giggling during a job interview, etc. All of these ‘eye shots’ might be extreme close-ups in such situations.

<sup>399</sup> See Baron-Cohen et al (2001). The four-option choice remains standard.

Consider the following examples (in Figure 16, below) of ways of (re-)recognising what people are thinking, doing, and feeling. These are taken from late-night American TV comedy shows.

	<p>'It was a rougher night for former US Attorney General - and grandma saying, "Young lady, you're not leaving this house in a crop top"- Jeff Sessions yesterday.'<sup>400</sup></p>
	<p>'And some familiar faces graced the ballot, like former White House physician Ronny Jackson - seen here winning a staring contest with a ceiling fan.'<sup>401</sup></p>
	<p>'... and Bill Clinton, seen here finding out Ghislaine Maxwell was just arrested.'<sup>402</sup></p>
	<p>'... Mitch McConnell, seen here authorising the vet to put his kids' dog to sleep.'<sup>403</sup></p>
	<p>'... incumbent Georgia Republican, and actor who wants you to ask your doctor about irritable bowel syndrome, Senator Dave Purdue...'<sup>404</sup></p>

<sup>400</sup> *A Late Show with Stephen Colbert Show* 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020, CBS

<sup>401</sup> *A Late Show with Stephen Colbert Show* 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020, CBS

<sup>402</sup> *A Late Show with Stephen Colbert Show* 19<sup>th</sup> August 2020, CBS

<sup>403</sup> *Saturday Night Live* 27<sup>th</sup> March 2021, NBC

<sup>404</sup> *A Late Show with Stephen Colbert* 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020, CBS

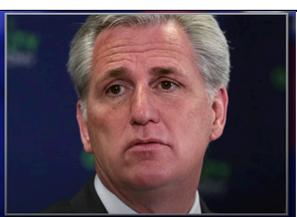
	<p>‘... Democratic challenger, and Bar Mitzvah boy genuinely moved by his bubba’s toast, Jon Ossoff.’<sup>405</sup></p>
	<p>‘...House Minority Leader, and guy watching his ex-wife set fire to his model trains, Kevin McCarthy...’<sup>406</sup></p>

Figure 16.

These examples are chosen to make the point that what someone else’s ‘eyes look like’ is not a clue to be ‘interpreted’ for their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Rather the look in their eyes is dependent upon how we might make sense of what they are doing in a particular situation, as an agent in our world of meaning-laden human practices and activities. Whilst there may be an empirical correlation between the results of (reading-the-mind-in-the-eyes) test-taker’s scores, and the position the taker might be assigned on an autism scale, that does not mean that we engage in so-called ‘mentalising’ when we normally make sense of people.<sup>407</sup>

A similar point is made by Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov’s using his famous experiments in which the face of the Russian actor Mozhukhin was intercut with shots of a bowl of soup, a child in a coffin and a woman. Reportedly, viewers praised the actor for the subtlety of his facial expressions conveying different emotions when responding to the three different objects of his attention – notwithstanding that Kuleshov repeatedly used the same piece of footage of the actor in all three reverse shots on him.<sup>408</sup>

Facial expressions are infinitely subtle (like actions) and our ability to ‘read’ each other, is arguably meaningless and without purpose outside of the circumstances of

<sup>405</sup> *A Late Show with Stephen Colbert* 8th December 2020, CBS

<sup>406</sup> *A Late Show with Stephen Colbert* 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2021, CBS

<sup>407</sup> Baron-Cohen et al (2001, 241).

<sup>408</sup> See one example of the Kuleshov experiment here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JTX2DD4qTQ>

understanding situated intentional agency. This point, made here as a conceptual or philosophical point, is also found in some empirical work.<sup>409</sup> The eyes do not have it.

### **The Objection from Reference Failure**

The sceptic might allow this shift away from the metaphysics but re-express his associated concerns in language-involving terms, worrying that our words and sentences are understandable and meaningful only because they stand in a representative relation to their truth conditions, and these truth conditions are ones that ultimately obtain in the real world. But given sentences that purport to express our understanding of the actions of fictional characters have no real-world referents, we have a problem. If sentences can be meaningful, it must somehow derive from real-world, reference-tethered meaning. This being the case, then either (i) the linguistic articulation of our understanding of agents' actions cannot, and does not, extend or expand our real-world-applicable language-use or meaning, or (ii) the linguistic articulation of our understanding of agents' actions, can and does extend and expand our language-use, but in ways that pertain only to the fictional referents of a fictional realm, in virtue of having something like, say, 'fictional truth-conditions'. Therefore, the sceptic argues, even if one closes or ignores the *metaphysical* gap between our understanding of agents and actions in the real world, and our understanding of agents and actions in the fictional realm, the problematic 'gap' will resurface, as a linguistic one.

As stated, this is a substantial objection. It does, however, assume a theoretical conception of language that is not obligatory. With its focus on truth, truth conditions, reference, and representation, this so-called "calculus" conception of language is at odds with an "anthropological", or "ethnological" conception of language;<sup>410</sup> a distinction drawn by Peter Hacker (following the later Wittgenstein). On the calculus conception of language, one understands what others say in virtue of one's tacit knowledge of a "generative compositional theory of meaning" which is a matter of sub-personal computational interpretation, and which puts one in a *state* of understanding.<sup>411</sup> On the anthropological conception, one understands what others say in virtue of being able to do something, namely, to participate in the learnable techniques of communicative behaviour. As such understanding language is not a state at all, but an *activity* one does that cannot be reduced to an internal 'state' which one is

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<sup>409</sup> See Calbi *et al* (2017) for the suitably entitled 'How Context Influences Our Perception of Emotional Faces: A Behavioral study on the Kuleshov Effect'; the authors' attempt to recreate the Kuleshov experiments which confirmed the "the context sensitivity of emotions and the importance of studying them under ecologically valid conditions" (2017, 8).

<sup>410</sup> Hacker (2014)

<sup>411</sup> Hacker (2014, 1274). This is sourced in Chomsky and consolidated in cognitive science and certain conceptions of the philosophy of mind; a point to which I return in the final chapter.

supposedly ‘in’. The focus of the anthropological conception of language is on our “interaction by means of language” rather than the notions of representation, truth, and truth conditions.<sup>412</sup> Its emphasis is on language-games, and the idea that in speaking and understanding each other, we are *doing* things; we are *making moves* in our language-game(s). Key to the anthropological alternative to the calculus conception of language, is the idea that language “integrates our use of words and sentences into human behaviour in the stream of life.”<sup>413</sup>

When we engage with fictional stories and dramatic works – from the invented bedtime tales parents tell children, to the fairy tales of Anderson and the Brothers Grimm, from nursery rhymes to the Muppets TV show – there is no separating the language we use to describe the actions of agents doing things, whether they are real or fictional. The fictional realm and the language we use in it, of it and about it, *is* part of the “stream of life” in which we live, from our earliest days until our death. Our ability to understand words and sentences *spoken in* fictional contexts is part and parcel of our ability to understand the words and sentences we use when *speaking about* those fictional contexts, which is part and parcel of our ability to understand the words and sentences we use when speaking about non-fictional people, actions and so on. Our language use criss-crosses real and fictional environments, recognising no barriers. If one thinks that understanding fictional agents’ and their actions, is problematic due to a failure of reference supposedly required by a language to be genuinely meaningful, then perhaps the time has come not to question our abilities to understand language and each other in the absence of ‘real’ referents, but to switch one’s conception of language. Here is Wittgenstein:

The contexts of a sentence are best portrayed in a play. Therefore the best examples for a sentence with a particular meaning is a quotation from a play.<sup>414</sup>

The best example of an expression with a very specific meaning is a passage in a play.<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Hacker (2014, 1282)

<sup>413</sup> Hacker (2014, 1282)

<sup>414</sup> Wittgenstein (1982, 38)

<sup>415</sup> Wittgenstein (1982, 424)

The meaningfulness of our language is logically prior to the meaningfulness (or otherwise) of any metaphysical or empirical claims we use language to make.

### **The Objection from Criterial Confusion**

Perhaps the biggest challenge that a sceptic might deploy would come from pressing harder on the operative notions of criteria and criterial understanding, being used in articulating dramatic argumentation and its value. After all, the sceptic could say, the responses to the metaphysical, the mind-reading and the language objections have all traded on responses in the spirit of Wittgenstein. Yet if one is using a Wittgensteinian notion of criteria, even amongst Wittgensteinians the issue of criteria is acknowledged to be a complex one, and its problems are compounded by being an ongoing, possibly unfinished concern of Wittgenstein. Usable conclusions are sketchy. This is perhaps unsurprising, since criteria seem to be both *a priori* (given they are a matter of internal conceptual connections rather than inductive or empirical correlations) yet, at the same time, supposedly defeasible.<sup>416</sup> Is this not a problematic, possibly even incoherent marriage? Given dramatic argumentation helps films have dramatic value because it can extend and expand the criteria we use in our understanding of action-related concepts, as well as extend and expand the actions for which we have criterial understanding, this would appear to be the single most important objection.

The sceptic is right to press these points. They are also correct that this is not an area of Wittgenstein's thinking about which he achieves any 'perspicuous presentation'. And, indeed, there are exegetical differences on display amongst those seeking to articulate what Wittgenstein is doing with the notion of criteria.<sup>417</sup> That said, all commentators agree that Wittgenstein is drawing our attention to the fact that there are distinctions between the ways we use (conceptual) criteria and (empirical) symptoms or evidence. Moreover, all commentators agree that Wittgenstein is not creating some new circumscribed philosophical term of art but is harnessing a common-or-garden notion.

That said, arguably, the fundamental problem that besets this issue is that the topic of criteria is not standardly raised (as here) when considering our understanding of actions, but rather in relation to how we understand the meaning of psychological verbs, such as thinking, experiencing, imagining etc. This is an area where a presumed metaphysical picture that often frames the wider discussion; namely that there is a 'veil of illusion' in play when it comes to our 'knowledge of other minds.' That there is deemed to be a veil of illusion, thereby generating an unavoidable epistemic barrier, is the inevitable product of a supposed 'ground

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<sup>416</sup> See Hacker (2019a, 299)

<sup>417</sup> See Hacker (2019a, 285-306), Witherspoon (2011), McDowell (1998).

zero' fact that people are a metaphysical combination of a hidden inaccessible 'inner' realm and an open to view, or available, 'outer' one; two realms separated by a metaphysical gap which nourishes sceptical concerns. The discussion of criteria is typically explored as a way of understanding or bridging this relation between an inner and outer. But Wittgenstein oft-quoted statement, "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria"<sup>418</sup> is not an argument *for* that metaphysical picture.<sup>419</sup> The scare quotes are reminders that this is an expression of his interlocutor, and the very idea of 'inner processes' is what he is questioning rather than accepting, as an explicandum.

What often gets overlooked, however, in all of this, is that criterial understanding need not be focussed on, or limited to, how we can correctly make third personal attributions of psychological verbs to other people; it is about how we operate as language-users in general. As Wittgenstein points out one might be wrong about whether or not it is raining, as sense impressions can indeed be deceptive, but even if we say 'it's raining' and it transpires we are mistaken, we are still empirically mistaken about *it raining*, i.e., about what is meant by saying that it is raining.<sup>420</sup> When the pitter patter of liquid is heard on the conservatory roof, and we see drops and splashes on the window and outside, and say 'it's raining', we are using our words correctly in so far as the criteria for their use is correctly recognised. The (non-inferential, conceptual) judgement that is expressed in the use of the sentence 'it's raining' is correct, albeit the (empirical) judgement, 'it is raining' may turn out to be false. It may be that the pitter patter of liquid on the roof is a consequence of an overhead plane discharging liquid, so although one is correct to say 'it is raining' insofar as one is exploiting an understanding of the appropriate concept-invoking and invoking *criteria for using these words*, it is, however, an *a posteriori* matter of (empirical) fact, that one is not epistemically correct.

Pitter-patter noises on roofs, splash marks on windows and getting wet when outdoors are (defeasible) criteria for what we understand as rain or mean by 'it's raining'. This is the conceptual or criterial understanding that is in play when we understand what it is that agents do. In recognising, non-inferentially, that dedicating a book to someone is a criterion for forgiving them, one extends one's conceptual understanding of the act of forgiveness.

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<sup>418</sup> Wittgenstein (2009, 580)

<sup>419</sup> For McDowell, like Wittgenstein, if one buys into this picture, the philosophical *faux pas* has already been made. (1998, 394). McDowell's solution to the 'knowledge of others' is to offer a disjunctive account about the nature of epistemic experience, but I think that misses the point that what is at issue is our conceptual framework, which is pre-epistemic.

<sup>420</sup> See Wittgenstein (2009, 353ff.)

One's conceptual framework expands to include this as a possible criterion for this action. In the film's enabling of this non-inferential recognition (through the creation and use of its dramatic argument) the film is responsible for expanding the criteria by which we understand forgiveness. Similarly, helping someone to kill themselves can be a criterion of friendship. This criterial expansion, or criterial understanding is conceptually prior to the correct epistemic use of the concept to make an empirical claim or to pursue inferential knowledge.

The value of criterial or conceptual understanding is therefore a *pre-epistemic* value; it is the understanding that is constitutive of our ability to be concept-wielding, language using beings. So, whilst one may wish to understand the sense-making as understanding, on an epistemic conception of understanding – à la Elgin, Kvanvig, Zagzebski & Grimm – what I am articulating here, is that dramatic argumentation is a way of expanding and extending pre-epistemic criterial or conceptual understanding. If we return to our original taxonomy of understanding, introduced earlier, this type of sense-making understanding is best positioned as indicated in Table 3, below.

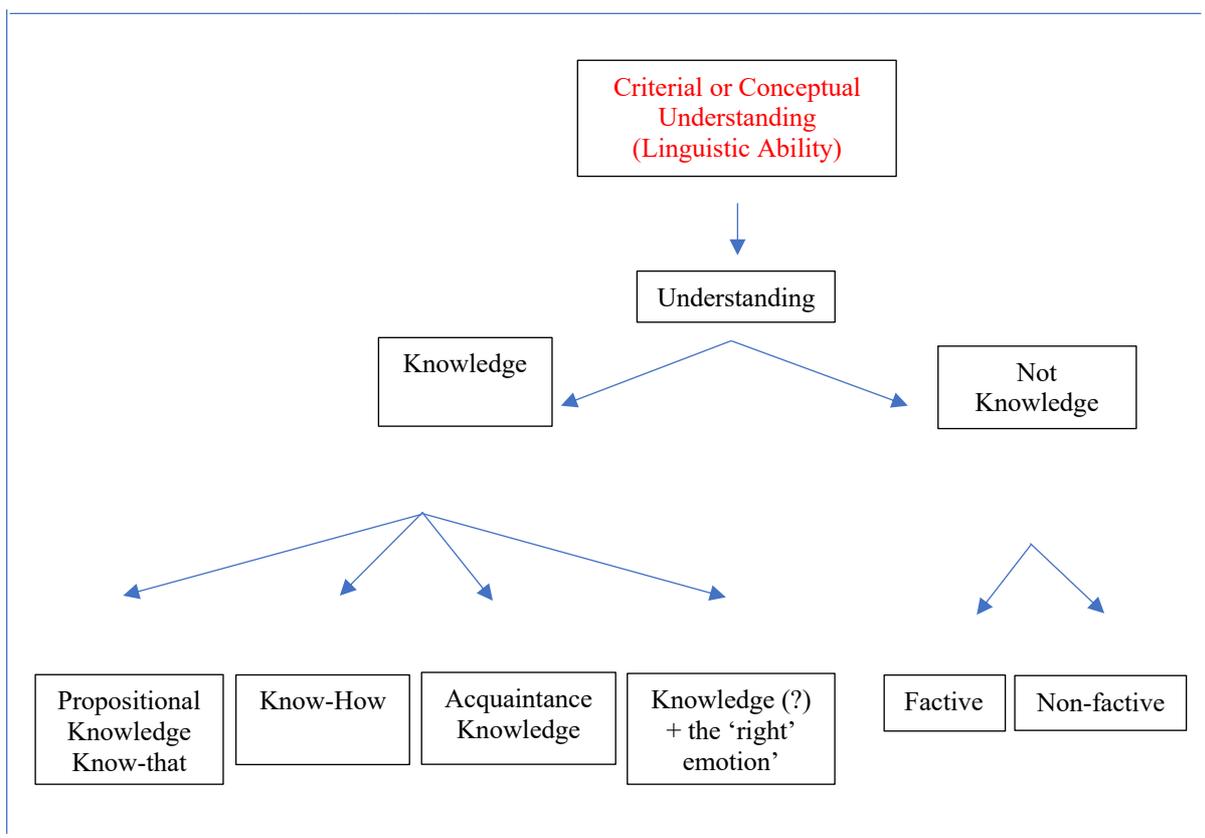


Table 3.

Criterial or conceptual understanding is the *sine qua non*. As agents we do things that can be understood, made intelligible and which can be meaningful for us and others. This is a making sense that is made possible by our linguistic sense-making, actions, and activities. In other words, we are only *homo sapiens* in virtue of first being *homo loquens*.<sup>421</sup>

In focussing on sense-making rather than truth-telling, films with dramatic arguments operate at the level of our criterial or conceptual understanding. It therefore does not matter whether the involved intentional agents are or are not actually real people; as long as they concept-wielding, language-users *as we are* – be they a ‘replicant’, Christa-Maria Sieland, the film director Carol Reed, you, me, or Donald Duck. When we make *new* or *fresh* sense of an action, in virtue of its place in a series of actions done by a situated agent, we both *extend* and *expand* the criteria for our action-involving concepts, and we expand the *actions* for which we have criteria. In so doing, our conceptual framework is shown to be pliable, expansive, and endlessly open to re-shaping.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

A fiction film can have dramatic value. This is the value of a film’s dramatic argument in making viewers make sense of characters’ actions. The dramatic argument of a film is the way in which the film is dramatised so as make sense of one or more of the actions of one or more of its characters given one can regard a character as a situated intentional agent. Dramatic arguments in fiction films are valuable insofar as their sense-making achievements extend and expand the criteria of our action- and agent-related concepts, and thereby extend and expand our criterial understanding, or abilities. Reflection on the dramatic argumentation and thus the dramatic value of a film can include coming to understand its relation to cinematic value; but the value of making sense of characters’ actions does not wait on any understanding of how this is achieved. That is a separate task that requires taking a cinematic stance towards the film, engaging in reactive critical inquiry, and asking what the relation between a film’s stance-based cinematic value and dramatic value might be.

By emphasising the detail of dramatic argumentation and dramatic value as a pre-inferential and pre-epistemic understanding, I am not seeking to rule out other empirical or

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<sup>421</sup> See Hacker (2019b) for nuanced distinctions between *homo loquens* and *homo sapiens*.

inferential forms of understanding. It may well be that some of the resources of dramatic argumentation here outlined can be used in tandem with more epistemic conceptions of understanding. The aim is not to deny the latter, but to recognise that there is a further kind of understanding that is connected to the very fact of being a language-user.

Ought we to regard this pre-epistemic, criterial, or conceptual understanding demonstrated through the recognition of dramatic value as a *cognitive* value? Certainly, conceptual knowledge has been put forward as a cognitive value by the likes of cognitivist-orientated philosophers of art Catherine Wilson<sup>422</sup> and Eileen John<sup>423</sup> but without their – or anyone’s further clarification of just what ‘conceptual knowledge’ is – this is not obvious. Similarly, even ‘no-truth’ theorists Lamarque and Olsen acknowledge, “we can learn from fiction, and not merely factual truths but new ways of thinking; a good metaphor ... can change our conceptual resources.”<sup>424</sup>

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that considerations pertaining to dramatic value, which turn on appreciating ourselves as language-users show that it may be inappropriate to make claims about our conceptual knowledge, or resources, without simultaneously engaging in the philosophy of language. What is important, here, is to be able to discriminate made between pre-epistemic and epistemic types of understanding, and thinking in terms of cognitive value works against, not for, this.

In the next chapter, I bring to bear my final arguments against cognitive value and recognise a third value – humanistic value – which, along with stance-based cinematic value and dramatic value, provides new resources with which to understand and appreciate why we nonetheless can and do learn from fiction films.

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<sup>422</sup> Wilson (1983)

<sup>423</sup> John (1998)

<sup>424</sup> Lamarque & Olsen (1994, 365)

## Humanistic Value

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*The art of the moving image is as old as the other arts, it is as old as humanity itself, and the motion picture is but its most recent manifestation.*<sup>425</sup>

Rudolph Arnheim

What one might learn from fiction films works of art is assumed to be one and the same question as what, if any, cognitive value film works of art have. The *raison d'être* of this dissertation are to show that these are not the same question; to argue that thinking so assumes an unhelpful paradigm; and to recognise and develop resources capable of providing alternative ways of approaching the issue of what we learn from films and how we do so. In this chapter I complete the task, started in Chapter 3, of investigating the very idea of the cognitive and argue that we can and should relinquish the counterproductive notion of cognitive value, and the associated cognitivist accounts of film. I also identify and characterise humanistic value, the third in a trio of previously unacknowledged values. I then demonstrate how stance-based cinematic value, dramatic value, and humanistic value provide new resources with which to understand and appreciate *that* we learn from films and *what* we learn from films. Grouping these new resources together under the rubric of *cinematic humanism* offers a way, I propose, to remain true to the spirit that informs both sides of the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate whilst cutting through the Gordian knot it has become.

Specifically, in Section 1, I complete the argument that the very notion of the cognitive is inescapably compromised by diagnosing the source of the various ambiguities and confusions already recognised and conclude that the benefits of moving beyond the use of this theory-laden term outweigh the drawbacks. In Section 2, I consider the opportunities offered, and problems created, by replacing cognitive value with educational value. In Section 3, I identify, articulate, and defend the merits of humanistic value and respond to objections. In Section 4, I consider the question of how cinematic humanism's three new values – stance-based cinematic value, dramatic value, and humanistic value – interact, using specific films. Concluding remarks are offered in Section 5, bringing together the substance

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<sup>425</sup> Arnheim (1957, 213)

of this chapter with that of the dissertation as a whole. I finish by gesturing towards the possibility that with cinematic humanism we do not have merely an alternative value-based paradigm for philosophical engagement with films but one that might do duty for other works of art and art forms. Throughout this final chapter, I use two films as a joint case study, *Jud Süß* and *Jew Süß*, both fictionalised ‘biopics’ of the same historical character. Before turning to Section 1, I briefly introduce these films and their protagonist.

The real person, Joseph Süß Oppenheimer, was born at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Heidelberg. He became a courtier and confidential financial adviser to the Duke of Württemberg, a position rare for a Jewish person in that era. In the wake of the unpopular Duke’s death, some of his political allies, including Süß, were put on trial and whilst other advisers “got off lightly”<sup>426</sup> Süß was found guilty of “detestable abuses on gentlemen and people,” and he was hanged in 1738 in Stuttgart before a crowd of over 10,000.<sup>427</sup> Having returned to practising his Jewish faith in prison, Süß’s final words were:

I will die a Jew. I am wronged. An injustice is being done to me.  
I have not yet been properly cross-examined and no external counsel  
has been brought to defend me as was done for the other defendants.  
I am to be offered up as the sacrifice for the whole of Württemberg  
to the privileged interest of a few families. I appeal to my judges before  
the judgement-seat of God. In all my deed I have only sought to  
promote the well-being of the country.<sup>428</sup>

Armed with written orders from the Duke for all his actions, Süß was nonetheless held responsible – or deemed the scapegoat – for the raft of unpopular changes imposed on the predominantly Lutheran populace by the high-spending Catholic ruler. Regarded as an “outsider” and an “upstart” for his supposed inappropriate behaviour with Christian women, it is perhaps unsurprising that Süß’s court case was regarded as a ‘show’ trial.<sup>429</sup>

Less than three months after Süß’s execution, a play about his life was being performed. Two hundred years, and an array of novellas, novels, plays, and serialisations later,<sup>430</sup> two very different films were made based using (some of) these facts. The first film,

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<sup>426</sup> Tegel (1995, 221)

<sup>427</sup> Tegel (2011, 14-40)

<sup>428</sup> Tegel (2011, 40-41)

<sup>429</sup> Tegel (2011, 36)

<sup>430</sup> Tegel (2011, 82-86)

*Jew Süss*, produced by Michael Balcon, was made in England in 1934. Adapted from Lion Feuchtwanger's 1925 critically acclaimed best-selling historical novel *Jud Süß*, it was directed by Hollywood-based German émigré Lothar Mendes and starred Conrad Veidt. The second film was the 1940 German *Jud Süß*; directed by Veit Harlan and starring Ferdinand Marian. Both continued the well-established filmmaking tradition of rewriting historical material (both factual and fictional) to suit one's creative vision, skills, and story ambitions. In the case of the German film, the relevant vision and skills were partly those of German co-writer and director Harlan and partly those of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels.<sup>431</sup>

*Jew Süß* (or *Power* as the American release was re-named) was one of the most expensive films ever made in England; a "philosemitic" story dramatising a tragic injustice perpetrated on an innocent man.<sup>432</sup> In the film, Süß's youthful scepticism towards the possibility of persecution is met with the following line, "They did it in 1430, they can do it in 1730, they can do it in 1830, they can do it in 1930. Who is going to stop them?" The film was approved for production by the British Board of Film Censors notwithstanding their rules prohibiting any criticism, overt or covert, of Nazi Germany; perhaps because an undiscerning read of the script assumed the film was 'just' a costume drama.<sup>433</sup> On release some (though not all) critics acknowledged that the film invites its audience to regard the fate of protagonist Süß as symbolic of the ongoing persecution of an entire people. *The Observer* film critic declared *Jew Süß* to be "well written, richly set, photographed handsomely" and showing "class", whilst also declaring it to be unlikely "entertainment for the masses" thanks to its "cheerless last reel".<sup>434</sup> Notwithstanding the mesmeric performance of Veidt, the film is "[u]sually dismissed as an artistic and commercial failure."<sup>435</sup>

The political 'message' of *Jew Süß* was immediately recognised in Austria where the film was banned within a week of its 1934 Viennese première. Germany's Institute für Filmkultur's weekly journal fired what might be regarded as a warning: "Propaganda films can have great impact; exaggerated, they turn against their own makers," before insisting, "This nationalist Jewish film is to be decisively rejected as a monstrous revilement of all non-Jews."<sup>436</sup> Goebbels not only suggested that Harlan and the crew of the German film watch it

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<sup>431</sup> See Tegel (1996) for detail of the film's development history, including its various writers, and the extent to which "opportunism rather than ideology explains the gestation of the most successful anti-Semitic feature ever made" (1996, 527).

<sup>432</sup> Tegel (1995, 222)

<sup>433</sup> Tegel (1995, 219-220)

<sup>434</sup> LeJeune (1934, October 7<sup>th</sup>)

<sup>435</sup> Tegel (1995, 220)

<sup>436</sup> From *Der Gute Film* Journal 26 October 1934 quoted in Tegel (1995, 238)

as part of their pre-production, he later stated, “Here the Jews have made a saint out of a financial hyena. But they can cheat us no more”.<sup>437</sup> Susan Tegel’s claim that *Jew Süss* “can be construed as one of the first shots in a propaganda war” looks to be amply supported.<sup>438</sup>

The reaction to the anti-semitic German film *Jud Süss* was very different. Goebbels described the Berlin premiere as an “incredible success. One hears only enthusiastic responses. The whole room raves. That’s exactly what I had hoped for.”<sup>439</sup> At the Venice Film Festival future film director, then critic, Michelangelo Antonioni wrote:

We have no hesitation in saying that if this is propaganda, then we welcome propaganda. It is a powerful, incisive, extremely effective film ... There is not a single moment when the film slows, not one episode in disharmony with another; it is a film of complete unity and balance ... The episode in which Süss violates the young girl is done with astonishing skill.<sup>440</sup>

Over 20 million people saw the film between 1940 and 1943.<sup>441</sup> It was shown in Poland to non-Jewish inhabitants “prior to deportations or dissolutions of the ghettos” and shown to guards in (at least) Auschwitz, prompting one guard there to subsequently recount, “[Y]ou should have seen what the prisoners looked like the following day!”<sup>442</sup> After the war, director Harlan was put in the ‘Exonerated’ category by investigating Allies, and returned to film-making, but in 1949, after further outcries, he was charged with crimes against humanity for making the film. Ultimately acquitted on the grounds that the film’s causal impact was impossible to determine with sufficient precision, Harlan’s defences ranged from being forced to work on the film under physical threat, to a courtroom declaration that he was “no politician. I am a director. My party is art. If convinced I could not return to my profession my life would be at an end.”<sup>443</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Tegel (1995, 238) and (2011, 154) This was after a 1940 viewing. It is not clear when Goebbels first saw the film.

<sup>438</sup> Tegel (1995, 220). In Tegel (2011, 182) the translation given is, “... People rave. This is what I wanted.”

<sup>439</sup> Renschler (1996, 149)

<sup>440</sup> Quoted in Renschler (1996, 153-154).

<sup>441</sup> Tegel (2011, 185)

<sup>442</sup> Tegel (2011, 187)

<sup>443</sup> Tegel (2011, 210)

## 1 A Cognitive Conundrum

Reasons for embracing the notion of cognition and the adjective ‘cognitive’ are legion. So much so that one might reasonably conclude that the concerns raised earlier – about the variable scope of the cognitive and the oscillations between person- and sub-personal-level characterisations – must be either resolvable or shown to be *au fond* a case of much ado about nothing. After all, the notion of the cognitive is central to the cognitivist/anti-cognitivist debate; without it how would one engage with the arguments of its leading philosophical voices? Moreover, given the increasing drive to interdisciplinarity is it even possible to raise questions about the very notion of the cognitive, and thereby cognitive value, if one wishes to engage with the practices and preoccupations of, say, cognitive science? Any attempt to reconsider the use of ‘cognitive’ as a philosophical term looks to bolt the door after the horse bolted. Is it too late to try? In this section I offer what I take to be the *ur*-argument against availing oneself of the notion of the cognitive. In so doing, I beg the reader’s patience with what may look like a detour, but I argue, is not. For although I said earlier that progress in aesthetics does not wait on a correct philosophy of mind, it can, I believe, be hindered by an incorrect vision of what it is to be minded.

In Chapter 3 I identified various problems manifest in the scope- and level-related ambiguities of matters cognitive. I trust that earlier discussion suffices to demonstrate the need for caution when characterising something as cognitive. It is now time to diagnose the source of these problems and thereby recognise the extent to which ‘cognitive’ is, in fact, a theory-laden term. The key move, in the turn to the theoretical, comes with two crucial stipulations made by Noam Chomsky; stipulations that have become embedded or ‘hard-wired’ to use a preferred metaphor,<sup>444</sup> in the foundations of naturalised philosophy of mind, and which are also responsible for putting the ‘cognitive’ into cognitive science.

In the 1950s – drawing on the work of Alan Turing and soon-to-be Head of MIT Cybernetics, neurophysiologist Warren McCulloch and his colleague Walter Pitts – Chomsky develops the idea of an innate, sub-personal, language-constituting program-cum-mechanism.<sup>445</sup> By the time he unleashes his castigating review of Skinner’s *Verbal*

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<sup>444</sup> I say metaphor, but it is important to note that for Fodor & Plyshyn (and many others) the claim that the mind/brain is a computer is *not* metaphoric: “As Plyshyn (1984a) points out, the claim that the mind has the architecture of a Classical computer is not a metaphor but a literal empirical hypothesis.” (1988, 62, fn. 35) One can add the literal/metaphor ambiguity to the reservoir of concerns.

<sup>445</sup> See my Harrison (2019) for a fuller historical account for how Chomsky’s views come together with the work of Turing, McCulloch, and Pitts to create this perfect cognitive storm.

*Behaviourism* in 1959, Chomsky is not merely engaging in methodological criticism but simultaneously unveiling a brand new approach and set of theoretical principles to be exploited in all considerations of our intelligent and intentional behaviour:

One would naturally expect that the prediction of the behavior of a complex *organism (or machine)* would require in addition to information about external stimulation, *knowledge of the internal structures of the organism*, the way in which it *processes input information* and organizes its own behaviour.<sup>446</sup>

Chomsky presents his Universal Grammar as the first of these innate information-processing internal structures, proposing that we are born with a ‘Universal Grammar’ – the individual ‘initial state’ which incorporates the fundamental structure of *all* languages – and this language faculty or organ grows into its mature ‘steady state’. Both the initial and the mature states are represented in the mind/brain which provides the information-bearing representations and rules that we process, or compute. All this happens at the sub-personal level, “far beyond the level of actual or even potential consciousness.”<sup>447</sup> Furthermore, these ‘mental states’ are now the building blocks with which all this supposedly happens.

It is here, with Chomsky’s stipulative theoretical definition, that we find the birthplace of the contemporary notion of the cognitive:

I have been speaking of “knowing English” as a mental state (or a stable component of mental states), or a property of a person in a certain mental state, but ... What is it that is known? Ordinary usage would say: a language – and I have so far been keeping to this usage, speaking of knowledge and learning a language, eg. English. But ... this way of talk can be misleading... To avoid terminological confusion, *let me introduce a technical term devised for the purpose, namely “cognize”* with the following properties... The particular things we know, we also “cognize” ... Furthermore, *we cognize the system of mentally represented rules* from which the facts follow. That is we *cognize the grammar that constitutes the current state*

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<sup>446</sup> Chomsky (1959, 27, emphasis added)

<sup>447</sup> Chomsky (1965, 8)

*of our language faculty and the rules of this system as well as the principles that govern their operation. And finally, we cognize the innate schematism, along with its rules, principles and conditions.*

In fact, I don't think that "cognize" is very far from "know"...  
*If the person who cognized the grammar and its rules could miraculously become conscious of them, we would not hesitate to say that he knows the grammar and its rules, and this conscious knowledge is what constitutes his knowledge of language. Thus cognizing is tacit or implicit knowledge, a concept that seem to me unobjectionable... cognizing has the structure and character of knowledge... but may be and is in the interesting cases inaccessible to consciousness. I will return to the terms "know" and "knowledge", but now using them in the sense of "cognize"... The fundamental cognitive relation is knowing a grammar."*<sup>448</sup>

By the time Chomsky's gives the 1969 John Locke Lectures at Oxford, Universal Grammar – with its central notion of cognition as unconscious, sub-personal propositional tacit knowing – is now the model on which most, if not all, scientific and (reductive) naturalized philosophical attempts to understand human intelligence and mindedness proceed. As such it not only helps to create, and shape, cognitive psychology, and cognitive science, it instigates the practice of oscillating between person- and sub-person levels, and between theoretical and non-theoretical uses of our concepts and vocabulary; leveraging philosophical intuitions from one level to justify claims about another.

Having reconfigured accessible personal-level knowledge into inaccessible sub-personal cognition, Chomsky makes a second, related stipulation, further fuelling the scope and level ambiguities inherent in the notion of the cognitive. This is Chomsky's separation of the notions of *competence* and *performance*:

We thus make a fundamental distinction between *competence* (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language and *performance* (the actual use of language in concrete situations).<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Chomsky (1980, 69-70, emphases added)

<sup>449</sup> Chomsky (1965, 4, emphases added)

This is not however, an innocent distinction, for Chomsky drives a wedge between these theory-laden concepts of competence and performance and our ordinary ability-related notions:

[O]ne might have the cognitive structure that we call “knowledge of English” fully developed, *with no capacity to use this structure.*”<sup>450</sup>

This is because, according to Chomsky:

[I]t is possible in principle for a person to have a full grammatical competence and no pragmatic competence, *hence no ability to use a language appropriately, though its syntax and semantics are intact.*<sup>451</sup>

With these stipulations Chomsky confirms his philosophico-theoretical claim that you can be linguistically competent, i.e., you can, on his account, be in a speaker’s supposed sub-personal cognitive mental state, while nonetheless being unable to actually speak one’s language. Sub-personal cognition now trumps, indeed usurps, personal level knowledge and ability. The explanans has been severed from the explanandum and seems to have replaced it. Chomsky confirms his newly minted, theory-laden terms, laying the groundwork for the subsequent cognitivist programme:

[M]y concept ‘knowledge of a language’ is directly related to the concept ‘internalization’ of the rules of grammar”... [ and I have] tried to avoid, or perhaps evade the problem of explication of the notion ‘knowledge of language’ by using an *invented technical term, namely the term ‘competence’* in place of ‘knowledge’. However, the term ‘competence’ suggests ‘ability’, ‘skill’ and so on, through a chain of associations that leads directly to much new confusion. *I do not think the concepts of ordinary language sufficient for the purpose at hand; they must either be sharpened, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, or replaced by a new technical terminology.*<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>450</sup> Chomsky (1975b, 23, emphasis added)

<sup>451</sup> Chomsky (1980, 59, emphasis added)

<sup>452</sup> Chomsky (1975a, 315, emphases added)

Cognizing and cognitive competence are thereby installed as the twin pillars of Chomsky's account of what it is to (supposedly) know a language and to know how to speak it, at a sub-personal though not necessarily personal level. This theoretical account of language becomes the paradigmatic way to theorise (about) human intelligence, mindedness, and our so-called 'cognitive abilities', as part of a project that deems that knowing, understanding and being able to speak a language to be conceptually inadequate notions.<sup>453</sup> As such, any presumption that 'cognitive' is simply a non-theoretical adjective meaning 'pertaining to knowledge and possibly understanding' is simply not tenable. It is, therefore, no longer clear what answer, or kind of answer, we seek when we ask, 'does a film – or a work of art – have cognitive value, and how does this relate to its cognitive content?'

One might object that around the time of, say, Lamarque and Olsen's *Fiction, Truth, and Literature*, what we now call the 'cognitive value' debate was squarely focussed on the relation between truth and literary value, and the issues I am raising were irrelevant to their preoccupations and the issues they sought to resolve. This may well have been true, but it is no longer. 'Cognitive value' is such a catch-all phrase now that understanding its provenance, connotations and theoretical commitments is imperative. Furthermore, for philosophers of film, the problem is further complicated by the fact that, around the time of Lamarque and Olsen's 'no-truth' *magnum opus*, philosophers of film were developing so-called 'cognitive film theory,' a cognitive-science-friendly methodological alternative to the then academically dominant film theory or so-called 'Grand Theory.'<sup>454</sup> Not only do cognitive film theorists encourage intellectual exchange with cognitive science, many of them are entirely aware of Chomsky's manoeuvres and embrace them. Indeed, first-wave cognitive film theorist, Gregory Currie states in the preface of his 1995 ground-breaking monograph *Image and Mind: Film and Cognitive Science* that his book "owes much, in spirit at least, to the linguistics of Chomsky,"<sup>455</sup> More recently, Murray Smith makes the Chomskyan-style claim that, "much of the perceptual and cognitive work that we undertake when we make sense of

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<sup>453</sup> The recent term 'mentalizing' is another theoretically loaded neologism that further embeds the questionable idea of mental state cognizing, in the task of trying 'fix by replacing' our supposedly inadequate notions and vocabulary.

<sup>454</sup> The cognitive science orientation of cognitive film theory has become increasingly embedded over the last thirty years, as evident in the commitments on the information page of the website of the *Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image* See here: <https://scsmi-online.org/faq/what-is-the-history-and-purpose-of-scsmi> for confirmation.

<sup>455</sup> Currie (1995, xxiii). See also Bordwell (1989) for Chomsky-citing championing of the merits of cognitivism as both a cognitive science and philosophical project, and its implications for cinema. See also Fox & Harrison (2020) and (2022fc) for the view that *contra* Bordwell (1989) and Currie (2016) continentally informed film theory and analytically orientated cognitive film theory do not represent an exhaustive choice.

and interact with a film happens at the level of the ‘cognitive unconscious’<sup>456</sup> seemingly finding no tension between the idea that the ‘work we undertake’ suggests some form of deliberate intentional action, which is in stark contrast to whatever might happen in some putative ‘cognitive unconscious’.

As part of Smith’s mission to bring the arts and sciences together in a new, ‘Third Culture’ – with film leading the way – he announces his own “commitment to the ‘multi-levelled’ explanation of aesthetic and artistic phenomena, and a recognition of degrees of explanatory adequacy.”<sup>457</sup> In particular he argues for a method of ‘triangulation’ which cross-checks evidence at the phenomenological, psychological and neurological “levels” in order to explain our experience and cognition of works of art.<sup>458</sup> Whilst there is nothing wrong, in principle, with multi-level explanations, proceeding with caution is imperative in order to be clear about what specific relations are supposed to hold between levels. After all, does activity at the sub-personal level (be it neurological or cognitive-psychological) *cause* person-level action, activity and understanding, or is the former a *consequence* of it? Perhaps the former is neither cause nor consequence of the latter, but a *correlation* or a *constitutive part* of it, or, indeed, an enabling *condition*. Smith leaves these distinctions alone, preferring to limit himself of two relations (i) ‘subtention’ and (ii) corroboration. Regarding the first, he claims that “neuroscience ... confirms that different types of cognition are subtended by specific patterns of neural activity” but nowhere does he clarify what this subtending relation is, let alone make any connection with what I call ‘the 5Cs’, (cause, consequence, correlation, constitution or condition). Regarding corroboration, Smith’s position is that if any two of the three levels involved in triangulation deliver “forms of evidence” that “mesh”, then each level’s evidence “is corroborated”.<sup>459</sup> The difficulty with this is that Smith never says which of the 5Cs is corroborated. Moreover, given cognitive-science-informed psychology has become ‘cognitive psychology’ and neuroscience not only helped to create, but continues to use, Chomsky-style sub-personal cognition, it would be unsurprising if evidence from the psychological and neurological levels did *not* reinforce each other’s theory-laden data: they are both shaped by the same theoretical constructs.

Chomsky’s cognition-launching attack on Skinner ought not to be understood as identifying a Manichean choice between a cognitive-science view of being minded, and a

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<sup>456</sup> Smith (2017, 46)

<sup>457</sup> Smith (2017, 10)

<sup>458</sup> Smith (2011, 83)

<sup>459</sup> Smith (2011, 83)

behaviourist one. As Norman Malcolm points out, “Our understanding of human cognitive powers is not advanced by replacing the stimulus-response mythology with a mythology of inner guidance systems.”<sup>460</sup> The problem we have is that we are trapped into commitments towards the latter, simply by using the term ‘cognitive’. Reminders that there are other ‘third ways’ which neither follow Smith’s lead, nor buy into the cognitive/behaviourist bifurcation can be found not just in the work of Wittgensteinian philosophers and others, but in the erstwhile champions of cognitive science, such as John Haugeland. Cognitive science apostate Haugeland comes to reject the cognitivist programme he helped to establish on the grounds that our intelligence not only “abides in the meaningful,” but crucially the:

meaningful is not in our mind or brain, but is instead essentially worldly ...  
we do not store the meaningful inside of ourselves, but rather we live and  
are at home in it.<sup>461</sup>

When looking for the ‘cognitive value’ of a work where are we to look?; to what should we turn our attention?; what exactly are we trying to find?; and how will we know when we have found it? Given the terms ‘cognition’ and the ‘cognitive’ oscillate between theoretical and non-theoretical, wide and narrow scope, personal- and sub-personal-level, and literal and metaphorical uses, we have three possible options when it comes to using these notions and associated nomenclature.

First, one could *Carry On Regardless*. Given those engaged in the cognitive value debate do not currently engage in the kind of ‘digressions’ I pursue here, perhaps I am over-emphasising a problem that does not exist. After all, 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophy currently brims over with things *cognitive*: cognitive processes, cognitive abilities, cognitive mechanisms, cognitive agents, cognitive responsibility, cognitive virtues, cognitive bloat, cognitive ooze, cognitive bleed, cognitive angst, cognitive dissonance, cognitive sandwiches, and so on. At the 2018 Dubrovnik Philosophy of Art Conference, James O. Young discussed cognitive toxicity and Dustin Stokes championed cognitive penetration, with repeated reference to cognitive gaps. That may well be the case, but embracing a ‘do-nothing’ response not only consolidates the mistakes identified, it blocks attempts to diagnose the source of the debate’s current stalemate. For, as demonstrated, no two philosophers arguing over the cognitive value

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<sup>460</sup> Malcolm (1971, 392)

<sup>461</sup> Haugeland (1998, 228, 231)

of works of art is using the same notion of the cognitive. Nobody is talking to each other, anymore.

Second, one could *Carry On With Caveats*. By remaining alert to the distinct uses identified, and the philosophical implications that flow from them, one could announce one's own's assumptions and identify those informing one's interlocutors' arguments. The problem with this strategy is that one's own writing is likely to become perpetually embroiled in methodological preoccupations and scene-setting. Moreover, practically speaking it is not clear that norms pertaining to word limits for academic journal articles word limits and conference presentations make this viable.

Third, one could simply eschew the terminology. If my identification of the *ur*-argument is correct, there are too many incompatible, even contradictory uses of the notion of cognition and the cognitive. Forgoing the word 'cognitive' decreases the likelihood of being unhelpfully embroiled in theory-laden, multiply ambiguous notions and the theories that exploit them. If, however, I have misunderstood the value of the *ur*-argument and there is a non-problematic person-level use of the cognitive – which straightforwardly means *of or relating to knowledge and understanding* – and which everyone in the cognitive value debate is actually using, then there is nothing to lose by simply helping oneself to these notions of knowledge, and understanding, and jettisoning the term 'cognitive' as surplus to requirements.

What one loses, however, is the handy prose option of an English-language adjective that (might just) mean 'of or relating to knowledge and understanding'; but if the price of an easy-to-use adjectival form of a common or garden notion is to import a theory-laden term that is committed to sub-personal representational mental states, then the price is not worth paying.

Given the foregoing, I conclude that what Lamarque calls "the slipperiness of cognitivism" is inherited from the slipperiness of the cognitive.<sup>462</sup> Seventy years ago, Gilbert Ryle declared that the "proper policy," when asked whether imagining is a cognitive or non-cognitive activity, is to "ignore" the question, for, "'Cognitive' belongs to the vocabulary of examination papers."<sup>463</sup> In the intervening years, Chomsky and his conception of what it is to 'know' a language has spawned a conception of what is to be minded that, in turn, has provided the theoretical underpinnings for cognitive science; making it no longer straightforward to follow Ryle's recommendation. Yet, I believe, this would not only be

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<sup>462</sup> Lamarque (2006, 129)

<sup>463</sup> Ryle (2000 [1949], 244)

helpful and productive for philosophers (particularly philosophers of art and film) it might also help cognitive scientists.

In the 1980s, then Director of MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Rodney Brooks led his ground-breaking team of scientists in the development of one of the world's first robots capable of walking around an object-strewn space; an achievement deemed to herald a giant leap forward in AI and cognitive science. Several decades later, Brooks' view of the value of what was achieved, is radically different:

I believe that we are in an intellectual cul-de-sac, in which we model brains and computers on each other, and so prevent ourselves from having deep insights that would come with new models ... We will get out of this cul-de-sac, but it will take some brave and bright souls to break out of our circular confusion of models.<sup>464</sup>

If we acknowledge that 'cognitive' is a theoretical term of art, and we recognise that it nourishes a potential misconception of what it is to be minded, to be intelligent, to be intentional and creative agents, then letting go of the notion of the cognitive in the philosophy of film and art may facilitate new opportunities and understanding in philosophies of art, mind, and beyond, as well as in science and technology. Let us not *Carry On Up the Cognitive*.

But if we let go of the notion of cognitive value in our consideration of the values of films (or works of art in general) do we need to put something in its place; or have we already got some, or all, of the resources we need to investigate the issue of learning from art?

## 2 Educational Value: An Alternative?

As recognised in the investigations of earlier chapters, fiction films have cinematic value and dramatic value.<sup>465</sup> Films can also have entertainment value, financial value (being a saleable commodity), historical value, and so on. *Prima facie*, re-casting cognitive value as

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<sup>464</sup> Brooks (2012, 462)

<sup>465</sup> Although the focus here is on fiction films, what I say here could be extended to non-fictional films; indeed, many of the issues raised by *Jus Süß* and *Jew Süß* are no less pertinent to the so-called 1940 'documentary' *Der Ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew); a point that serves Matravers' wider (2014) charge that the presumption of a fiction/non-fiction categorial distinction is misguided.

educational value looks like a way of jettisoning many of the worrying issues and ambiguities identified above, whilst simultaneously filling the adjectival ‘gap’ left by renouncing the term ‘cognitive’. That said, whilst the notion of educational value solves the cognitive conundrum, it does however bring with it a pragmatic concern prompted by the ‘division of labour’ in recent and contemporary philosophy. For not only is there limited dialogue between epistemologists and philosophers of film or art pursuing questions about art-sourced knowledge, there is even less between members of these groups and philosophers of education, such as those, like Paul Standish, who use film in their own work.<sup>466</sup> Recasting the question of the *cognitive* value of film (and art in general) as one of *educational* value risks being misunderstood as an act of self-exile from the mainstream of analytic theoretical philosophy. Switching from the notion of cognitive to educational value risks wandering into a philosophical no-man’s land, where ongoing debates may evaporate, and new debates are too difficult to inaugurate or facilitate.<sup>467</sup>

That said, reconceiving cognitive value as educational value does not prohibit philosophers of film and art from availing themselves of resources found in naturalised philosophy of mind and cognitive science, should they so wish; it simply stops cognitive science’s methods, claims, and theoretical posits being ‘built into’ the topic *ab initio*. So let us make this shift and, apply ourselves anew to the challenge of identifying the educational value of *Jud Süß* and *Jew Süß*. What if anything might these films have to teach us, and what might we learn?

Süss – in the German film – is a chameleon-like, shape-shifting monster whose nefarious plans to take over the dukedom are stopped when he is rightly executed for rape (and more) by the good and vulnerable folk of Württemberg. Moreover, his execution-worthy ambitions and actions are (presented as) an inevitable consequence of his Jewish identity. According to the English film, Süß – based on the same historical character – is a man who serves not just his own worldly ambitions but those of his aristocratic employer and the community into which he is invited to live and work, before tragically his Jewish identity makes him an easy scapegoat for the disgruntled Protestant folk of Württemberg struggling with financial problems and political turmoil instigated by their corrupt Catholic ruler. In the

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<sup>466</sup> See Standish (2004). See also Roell (2010) for an indication of the extensive use of film facilitating intercultural and intergenerational learning, language, and nonverbal communication.

<sup>467</sup> There is the added problem of the challenges of defining educational value, especially given the current Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson’s pronouncement that, “We must never forget that the purpose of education is to give people the skills they need to get a good and meaningful job” (2020).

German film, Süß's ignominious behaviour leads to a righteous execution; in the English film, notwithstanding his innocence Süß willingly embraces martyrdom to draw attention to the plight of the Jewish people, a doubly courageous thing to do given he discovers very late in life that he is not 'actually' Jewish. In *Jud Süß*, he is Faust; in *Jew Süß*, Socrates.

Both films are conceived of as offering *inter alia* didactic warnings about a dangerous past supposedly still with us. Both films use a single Jewish man to symbolize a whole people; and although they each contain magnificent individual performances by consummate actors, both stories exploit stereotypes in their seemingly self-appointed tasks to deliver a strong, clear thesis or message. In *Jud Süß* this message might be put, 'There is an existential threat from the Jewish people and we must do something about it, now'; and in *Jew Süß*, 'There is an existential threat to the Jewish people and we must do something about it, now.'

Considering the educational value of these films we find ourselves immediately faced with many of the problems identified, and wrestled with, in Chapter 3. How do we discern what, if any, testimony offered by either film is correct? Is that not going to be a matter of bringing our pre-existing knowledge and/or understanding to bear on the films. Is it not we, the audience, who are the source of knowledge and/or understanding here? How do we trust our imaginative engagement with these films given this might lead us astray? Do not the abhorrent and abominable uses to which the German film was seemingly successfully put, during the war, indicate the film's dangerous rhetorical power? It would appear that we must justify any educational value *in* the film by looking *outside* the film, rather than seek out, or trust, any apparent internal warrant. But how, then, can the film be the source of any knowledge? If, instead, we pursue concept-clarifying understanding (à la Carroll) how do we discriminate whether any shift in our understanding of, say, what it is to be Jewish, or Württembergian, is justified or not?

Both films hold and demand our nuanced attention, are we to say that they are both of equal educational value in virtue of helping to develop our powers of attention and discernment, or, as Maureen Donnelly argues, those "skills required for a better understanding of ourselves and other people"?<sup>468</sup> But does this mean propaganda must always be educationally valuable, when it can command our attention? How do we navigate these films in educationally responsible or virtuous ways? What are the consequences for the education value of each film, given one can extract contradictory theses, on the same topic, from each film?

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<sup>468</sup> Donnelly (2019, 13)

Shifting from ‘cognitive’ to educational value in no way de-fangs the bite of our Platonic sceptic. Nor does it provide any new resources with which to tackle our central question about what, if anything, can be learnt from films. The paradigm shift desired is not achieved by simply replacing ‘cognitive’ value by educational value.

It is now time to identify the third value, humanistic value, which – in harness with stance-based cinematic value, and dramatic value – offers resources for an alternative framework capable of addressing what we learn, without falling prey to ubiquitous Platonic sceptic.

### 3 Humanistic Value

What is *not* in contention is that individual fiction films (and other works of art) can provide explorations of, and insights into, serious, often moral, issues and that in virtue of the learning-like illumination this provides, we regard such works as having a particular value. What *is* debated is how best to articulate and explain this, and to identify the pertinent value or values. Our investigations indicate that attempts to respond to these challenges, standardly turn to the theoretical resources of epistemology and the metaphysics of mind on the presumption that the relevant value is epistemic or cognitive. What is supposedly learnt is typically assumed to be something either skills-based or ‘trackable’. The latter is taken to be either a matter of ‘tracking’ the “mental states of hypothetical people,” according to Robert Stecker;<sup>469</sup> or tracking facts in or about the world, as per Matthew Kieran and Dominic Lopes’ starting assumption that ‘A genuine judgement tracks reality. It is compelled by evidence.’<sup>470</sup>

Whichever approach is taken, when using these assumptions, there remains a *primer inter pares* obstacle. This is the fact that a film is incapable of being sufficiently self-warranting to rise to the relevant standards of knowledge or understanding, as these are conceived of in academic epistemology. Whilst *Jud Süß* or *Jew Süß* might be *sources* of beliefs, hypotheses, propositional knowledge, non-propositional knowledge, and/or understanding, whatever teachable skills or trackable facts the film might facilitate requires the appropriate standards of correctness, justification, or warrant to be resourced from *outside*

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<sup>469</sup> See Stecker (2019, 91) for the claim that “shorn of distorting influences” the imagination “might track the mental states of hypothetical people via simulation”. His point being that this (supposedly) develops our ability to track the mental states of real people.

<sup>470</sup> Kieran and Lopes (2007, xx)

the film. To think otherwise is to collapse the distinction between being a source of knowledge (or evidence for, or data that might serve to provide knowledge) and knowledge itself. Were such a conflation coherent, anything and everything, including the world itself, would be knowledge.

There is, however, a further value that manages to be both highly pertinent to the ‘learning issue’ yet does not engender these confusions and which, ironically, has been hiding in clear view for several decades. Signposts to it can be found in the work of advocates on both sides of the cognitivist/non-cognitivist debate insofar as they characterise their otherwise distinct accounts as *humanistic*. The announced *raison d’être* of Lamarque and Olsen’s 1994 *locus classicus* of their non-cognitivist ‘no-truth’ theory is a “vigorous defence” of a “humanistic conception of literature;”<sup>471</sup> and although both Gaut and Carroll are standardly opposed to Lamarque and Olsen, they do share their ambition. Gaut insists that his ethicist view that “art can teach us about morality,” is a “reconstituted humanism;”<sup>472</sup> and Carroll acknowledges that, “[i]n stressing the world-to-text relation between moral understanding and narratives rather than the text-to-world relation, my position converges on the one defended by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in their *Truth, Fiction and Literature*.”<sup>473</sup> This humanistic orientation, and the value it engenders, is well articulated, albeit not fully supported by Currie, as follows:

While we may get historical and other kinds of purely factual knowledge from fiction, this is not what the humanistic tradition emphasizes. Talk of learning from Tolstoy or Proust brings more naturally to mind insights into human character, motivation, and moral values. In such domains we often treat the author not as a transmitter of information that might be available from other authorities also but as a source of wisdom: someone with valuable insight and a perhaps unique perspective on the human condition.<sup>474</sup>

Although Currie’s point is expressed in terms of how we think of *the author’s* humanistic wisdom, it is reasonable, I take it, to transpose his point into one pertaining to the *implied*

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<sup>471</sup> Lamarque & Olsen (1994, 2) This humanistic conception is “normally” but sometimes mistakenly perhaps been confused with “a conception of literature as knowledge” the product of a “perhaps romantic blurring of the imaginative and the cognitive” (1994, 21). I take this latter diagnosis to refer to David Novitz’s self-professed cognitivism which turns on “romantic epistemology (1987, xii)

<sup>472</sup> Gaut (2007, 14).

<sup>473</sup> Carroll (1998b, 158 fn.18)

<sup>474</sup> Currie (2020, 165)

*author's*, or the *work's*, humanistic wisdom.<sup>475</sup> What is important here, as Currie points out, is that humanistic wisdom provides insights into the human condition *as distinct from* information or skills. This is, I would argue, because illuminating insights and wisdom are not achieved through 'tracking' facts that are external to the work; they are not an empirical matter. Moreover, this enables humanistic value to do justice to what John Gibson calls the "textual constraint;"<sup>476</sup> a requirement that whatever enables our learning be *in* the work, "an actual property *of* the text", that is, "part of its *content* broadly construed".<sup>477</sup>

On this alternative picture, humanistic value is not just a measure of something the work brings into being, or has and achieves, but it requires that we recognise the work's insights, appreciate what it illuminates, and appreciate its wisdom concerning the human condition; it is a value achieved by films *and* by us, in concert. But if this tracks nothing or no one, just why is it valuable?

A work has humanistic value in virtue of its capacity to change the way we think about the human condition, i.e., to alter and/or expand what we think it means to be a human being. The evidence for any such change is not in any subsequent action we do or not do, but rather in our expression and avowal of such a change in what or how we think about the human condition. In the following sub-section, I articulate and respond to objections. In so doing I also provide details about the insights I take certain films to have.

### 3.1 Humanistic Value: Objections

The following sceptical challenges argue that neo-cognitivist approaches already suffice to remedy issues with cognitivist approaches; that the notions of the human condition, our humanity, and humanism are themselves too slippery to be useful; that no account has been offered of the inherent normativity of the humanist project; and that it seems necessary for filmmakers to pursue certain limited genres to achieve humanistic value, thereby promoting an unattractive prescriptivism.

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<sup>475</sup> Nothing I say here turns on the debates about cinematic authorship, film narration or narrators.

<sup>476</sup> Gibson (2009, 469 ff.)

<sup>477</sup> Gibson (2007, 27, 28, original emphases)

### Objection from Neo-Cognitivism

‘Why *replace* or *side-step* cognitive value with a set of values that include humanistic value: why not just pursue a more humanistic conception of cognitive value; that way one can have one’s cake and eat it.’ After all, says the sceptic, is this not what John Gibson himself does when characterising his ‘literary humanism’ as one of a “motley” of versions of “neo-cognitivism ... on the frontier of the debate about cognitivism”?<sup>478</sup> According to Gibson, the arts facilitate an “encounter with reality” that is more than “could be captured in a proposition, claim or by answering a ‘what is it like’ question” and as such is both distinct from “truth and knowledge”, and thereby provides a *neo-cognitive* value.<sup>479</sup>

This kind of Gibsonian approach, in which one keeps an operative notion of cognitive value whilst simultaneously characterising it as also humanist or humanistic, is no less problematic than what it replaces. It remains in thrall to the compromised nature of the theory-laden term ‘cognitive’ which is inevitably inherited by any conception of the neo-cognitive. It perpetuates the unhelpful practice of gerrymandering the cognitive to deliver cognitive significance by fiat; a practice that entrenches the problem of debate participants talking past each other, given the possibility of finding any putative common ground is undermined. Added to which, it risks encouraging the replacement of one dubious notion with further quasi-theoretical notions.

Gibson’s own humanist-inflected ‘neo-cognitivism’ exemplifies this last worry, in virtue of the theoretical weight he places on a notion of acknowledgement, borrowed from Stanley Cavell,<sup>480</sup> “[L]iterary works represent ways of acknowledging the world” he claims, “*rather than* knowing it.”<sup>481</sup> Whatever ‘acknowledging the world’ is, it seems to be, for Gibson, something other than knowledge; something that “reaches all the way into the world,”<sup>482</sup> and can still, therefore, be ‘cognitively significant’; a suggestion that implies he remains in the realm of ‘tracking’. Perhaps more problematically, evidence for acknowledgement turns on the demonstrable actions of the acknowledger: not until we act in certain ways in certain situations can we be said to acknowledge what we have supposedly learnt. Leaving aside the possibility that this contravenes Gibson’s own textual constraint, it risks adding an instrumentalizing test to an already obscure notion.

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<sup>478</sup> Gibson (2008, 585, 585, 586)

<sup>479</sup> Gibson (2008, 585)

<sup>480</sup> Gibson (2003, 231).

<sup>481</sup> Gibson (2007, 117, emphasis added)

<sup>482</sup> Gibson (2007, 119)

It is perhaps worth remembering that Cavell's own conception of acknowledgement is developed as part of his wider commitment to "the truth of scepticism,"<sup>483</sup> which is his view that "the human creature's basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of knowing."<sup>484</sup> But if one wants to embrace acknowledgement as a human way of being that is *non-epistemic*, then why burden one's position by characterising it as something *cognitive*? We seem to be going in circles. Ironically, Gibson himself expresses concern about this very thing:

The cognition-*qua*-knowledge paradigm, so central to the understanding of how other core disciplines such as science and philosophy have cognitive value, is inapplicable to literature.<sup>485</sup>

Given the tactic of prefixing cognitivism with 'neo' risks consolidating rather than avoiding the paradigm's inherent problems, why not just step away from the 'cognition-*qua*-knowledge paradigm' and consider the opportunities offered by humanistic value (along with stance-based cinematic value and dramatic value)? Indeed, Gibson at times seems poised to make such a move, referring to artworks as having "humanistic virtues" in virtue of being "portals through which we can peer into the deepest and most significant regions of reality (at least the human, cultural variety of reality)."<sup>486</sup> I take it this need not necessarily be an empirical 'peering' but a way of thinking aimed at gaining insights into, and illumination of, the human condition.

### **Objection from Slippery Notion 1: *the human condition***

'But just what is this so-called 'human condition' - a shibboleth, an incantation, conjured up to be the presumed necessary subject – or intentional object – of humanistic value?' After all, says the sceptic, is not the human condition already under extensive investigation in the fields of psychology, medicine, social science, history, human geography, etc. By re-framing the discussion, or embracing a new paradigm that turns on the notion of the human condition, is one not guilty of replacing one slippery notion – the cognitive – with another?

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<sup>483</sup> Cavell (1979, 241)

<sup>484</sup> Cavell (1979, 241) I agree with Cavell's point that the basis of our relation is not one of knowing, but this does not show the 'truth' of scepticism, but its redundancy.

<sup>485</sup> Gibson (2003, 230)

<sup>486</sup> Gibson (2008, 584)

The sceptic's point plays on the fact that whilst the very idea of the human condition, is not uncommon as a subject of our ordinary and art-related thought and talk, it seems to come without any substantial analytic philosophical pedigree of its own, notwithstanding that it has preoccupied Taoist, Renaissance, existentialist and other writers. It is rare to find a university course on "the philosophy of the human condition", which seems to suggest that either the subject is subsumed by more established philosophical areas or is just a 'folk term' that picks out something that, once philosophically explained, will be explained *away*. In legitimising humanistic value, it is incumbent on any proposal to say something more substantial about 'the human condition', so the sceptic is right to press their point. Let us consider, then, the following observations and reminders.

In our everyday ways of talking and thinking we use the notion of the human condition in both value-neutral and a value-loaded ways. Value-neutrally, the human condition is not a metaphysical condition or set of conditions – contingent, necessary, or sufficient – pertaining to what it is to be a human being. To say that human beings talk about, think about, and reflect on the human condition is to say we talk about, think about, and reflect on what it might *mean* to be human. Crucial to this is the realisation that if someone thinks that such-and-such is a way to think about what it means to be human, then this is indeed a way of thinking about what it means to be human. If it was not already a possible way of thinking about the human condition, it becomes so.

The value-loaded use of the notion of the human condition often connotes that, *qua* humans, we are flawed, or that, in some way, being human is inherently problematic.<sup>487</sup> Whilst actions that might fly in the face of such flaws, or quieten one's troubled soul, are not impossible, they are particularly cherished for what they provide despite – or perhaps better because of – this aspect of the human condition.

It is in this latter sense that Giukin champions Romanian writers, like Ionesco and film-makers like Radu Mihăileanu, for "expos[ing] the *futility* of the human condition, the agony of the individual caught in the drama of politics, social servitude, or detrimental relationships."<sup>488</sup> We see this critical or at least unadorned, unexcused, and unsentimental way of thinking about the human condition in the way Akira Kurasawa describes his own 1950 film *Rashomon*: "Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves ... Egoism is a sin the human being carries with him from birth: it is the most

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<sup>487</sup> See the OED entry: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/89262>

<sup>488</sup> Giukin (2010, 74 emphasis added)

difficult to redeem.”<sup>489</sup> Yet we see in the final sequence of *Rashomon* that we need not be crippled by this realisation. Instead, the insight that *Rashomon* illuminates and which I learn from the film is that we humans find, make, and re-make, by our own acts of will, enough meaning and value in life to keep on trying to be better, despite all our crippling self-deceptions. It is noteworthy that, when articulated, these insights into the human condition often begin, ‘we humans...’.

In other words, whatever we think the human condition is, or means, becomes part of the human condition. This is not idealism, because it is not a metaphysical claim, but a conceptual one about what it means to be human. It is part of our humanity to use our shared language to think and articulate such things. To any sceptic who still insists on finding the notion of the human condition slippery, remember that, unlike the cognitive, it brings no questionable theoretical and metaphysical constructs to the conversation.

### **Objection from Slippery Notion 2: *our humanity***

‘Talk of our humanity is ambiguous and therefore the very idea of a humanistic value alluding to it is no less likely to lead to equivocation.’ After all, says the sceptic, we can use ‘our humanity’ in a value-neutral way to refer to ourselves as human beings – as members of the species, *homo sapiens* – who, in virtue of our conspecificity, have things in common. We might have different languages and cultural practices, but *qua* human beings we all have a language; and we all engage in culturally specific practices and activities. As one might put it: we might have different forms of life, but we share a human form of life.<sup>490</sup> Yet, when we refer to the humanity of an action, a policy, or an object – or draw attention to something’s humane features or aspects – we are characterising it in a positive value-laden way; perhaps in virtue of it being compassionate, kind, generous, decent, considerate, benevolent, or civilising. Humanistic value would necessarily inherit these uses that oscillate between the descriptive and the normative.

One can agree with the sceptic that we use the term ‘humanity’ in both value-irrelevant and value-connoting ways. But why is this problematic, given we do it with the notion of art, too? We say ‘that’s not art’ – meaning a work is not of a particular category of thing, but also meaning that although it is of that category, it is nonetheless a bad or poor example of it. No doubt such oscillation between the two does occur. This does not mean

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<sup>489</sup> Kurosawa (1983, 183)

<sup>490</sup> See Moyal-Sharrock (2015) for the distinctions between and relations between our first and second natures, that develop these points.

there is no such thing as artistic value. Sometimes films (and works of art) can show us characters acting in ways that we recognise as ways people do act – in virtue of our shared humanity – i.e., that we are frightened by a perceived threat to our safety. Sometimes this is done in such a way as to make us recognise that we have commonalities with people whom we might otherwise think of as very different to us: they too – as we are – are frightened by a perceived threat to their safety. If this latter point is news and expands how someone thinks about the nature of the human condition – of ‘we humans’ – then this is an example of finding ‘humanistic value’ in a work. But why should this not also resonate with the humane-orientated use of the term? Romanian film scholar Lenutsa Giukin explains why she characterises Romanian director Radu Mihăileanu's (1998) film *Train de vie* – a film about Romanian Jews attempting to escape Nazis by creating their own ‘deportation train’ and trying to get to Palestine - as an example of ‘cinematic humanism’:

... post-socialist cinema reflected on the inhumane practices/consequences of East-European socialist society. The result of imposed socialism was the deep alteration of human behavior; in post-socialism, there was a need for becoming humane again. The beauty in *Train de vie* is that the community sticks together and when the two characters put everyone in danger, they still go out of the way to 'save' them. Maybe the most beautiful sentence is when the rabbi says that the two are communists, but they are "our communists."<sup>491</sup>

Our ability to see others as fellow members of ‘our humanity’ and the ability to be humane are not oscillating ambiguities, but rather two sides of the same coin. I see no need to worry about a value that has resonating connotations, given these are part of our ordinary understanding of the notion, and not the product of some theoretical or scientific stipulation. Indeed, rather than presenting a problem for the expansion and appreciation of the human condition, this provides traction for it.

### **Objection from Slippery Notion 3: *humanism, humanist or humanistic***

‘Why characterise a film’s insights into, and illumination of, the human condition, as a humanistic virtue rather than humanist one, especially when arguing for the benefit of a new paradigm under the moniker ‘cinematic humanism’? After all, says the sceptic, don’t these

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<sup>491</sup> Personal Communication (16.6.21). See also Giukin (2010).

distinctions highlight a philosophically unacceptable pluralism operative in these notions? At times ‘humanist’ is used as a synonym for ‘secular’, and humanism in such contexts characterises a specifically non- or anti-religious position, yet there is nothing in your appreciation of humanistic value that has such religion-rejecting implications. Moreover, according to Tony Davies, there are indeed “several humanisms”, and “no tidy definitions”.<sup>492</sup> Indeed, amongst the distinct types of humanism he identifies are romantic, liberal, socialist, theoretical, Islamic, Protestant, positivistic, rationalist, and Renaissance humanism. These are not just clashes over nomenclature, they reflect substantive incommensurabilities.

The sceptic is right to push this challenge; and we can add to these distinct ways of conceiving humanism Gibson’s attempt to distinguish an indirect humanism from a direct humanism;<sup>493</sup> and in the work of philosophers of film, including Robert Sinnerbrink who reject as obsolete and discredited the very idea of humanism, preferring to argue for post-humanism.<sup>494</sup> On the humanist/humanistic distinction, whilst Lamarque and Olsen refer to humanistic rather than humanist value so as to avoid any connotations of favouring the secular,<sup>495</sup> Gibson, Bernard Harrison, and Richard Gaskin – all of whom declare themselves to be ‘literary humanists’ – use ‘humanist’ and ‘humanistic’ interchangeably, unperturbed by any secular implications; their choice of adjective dictated, it seems, more by concerns like rhythm and repetition that relate to their prose styles. Insofar as it is easier to say ‘humanist’ than ‘humanisticist’ I think it is helpful to be able to say the former and mean both (as well as avoid having to create a new term). I do think one can justify this choice on the grounds that there are works, like say *Brideshead Revisited* (both book and television adaptation) which provide insights into the powerful grip of religious practices and religious conversion that do illuminate the human condition, and as such can be ascribed humanistic/humanist value.<sup>496</sup>

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<sup>492</sup> Davies (2008, 140)

<sup>493</sup> Gibson (2007, 18 ff.)

<sup>494</sup> According to Sinnerbrink, “humanism no longer carries the moral or aesthetic authority or conviction that it once did” given we are in a “post-humanist condition” as a result of “the disintegration and fragmentation of affect and subjectivity, the paralyzing of our capacity for experiential reflection within affluent liberal democracies, a disintegration closely linked with contemporary forms of mediatized spectacle and cynical consumption of images of violence.” (2011, 116) That said, elsewhere Sinnerbrink champions Stanley Cavell’s for his “humanistic way of thinking” (2014, 91) and Bernard Williams humanistic conception of philosophy. For the latter see Williams (2006).

<sup>495</sup> Personal communication with Lamarque.

<sup>496</sup> One thinks of the narrating protagonist Charles Ryder’s own conversion to Catholicism in Evelyn Waugh’s (1960 [1945]) novel *Brideshead Revisited*, which comes despite his own views that religious faith is “an awful lot of nonsense” (p. 84); “superstition and trickery” (p. 309); “tomfoolery (p. 309); “witchcraft and hypocrisy” (p 310); and “[m]umbo-jumbo” (p. 312).

This points to the inevitability and value of there being pluralist conceptions of humanism and the humanistic. Given that what we think about what it means to be human does not ‘track’ something pre-existing, but rather it expands it, this is to be expected. If there is an essentialism to be had here, it is simply that the focus of our concern is the human condition and the way in which *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one).

### **Objection from the Moral Normativity of the Humanist Project**

‘Let us accept, then, that there is an open-ended, broad-church way of understanding humanism, the humanist, and the humanistic; is there nonetheless not a normative drive to the whole humanist project which requires a film must make us a better person to qualify as having humanist or humanistic value.’ After all, says the sceptic, what’s the point of learning about the nature of the human condition if it doesn’t thereby improve us?

This is to confuse, I would argue, the putative value of a film as an instrument of moral instruction and a work’s humanistic value which, as indicated above, entails nothing about what viewers might go on to do.<sup>497</sup> To assume that there is some causal connection between a film’s humanistic value and the quality of the moral behaviour of a viewer is to impose on cinematic humanism a requirement it neither seeks to fill, nor regards as necessary.

That said, one might reasonably think that having had our vision of the human condition changed or expanded, we now have more things to consider and appreciate when it comes to making choices about our own actions. In other words, whilst humanistic value does not rule out one becoming morally better and may even provide resources with which one might develop in that direction, it nonetheless need not rule it in. This is in clear contrast to the ‘cognitive value’-involving paradigm that demands empirically verifiable proof that works of ‘cognitive’ value make us better people. Here is Currie on literature, although there is no reason to think that the point would not be extended to films, too, “[T]he cognitive value of literature lies not so much in the truths it teaches as in the skills it promotes, making us more interpersonally insightful and sensitive than we would otherwise

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<sup>497</sup> On the topic of the moral value of works of art, it so happens that I think that the only thing that has moral value is deliberate human action, as such I do not hold that the products of our actions are the right kind of thing to have moral value. In the case of *Jud Süß*, I condemn the acted-upon choice of the filmmakers to make it, given its demonising ambitions, but this does not make the film itself immoral, no more is a gun moral or immoral, although it can be used to facilitate human actions that may be either. My account of humanistic value, however, does not turn on recognising this. For historical changes to the questionable role of moral edification in works of art see Lamarque and Olsen (2004).

be.”<sup>498</sup> By moving beyond the cognitive, we move beyond the demand for any such instrumental connection to the moral.

### Objection from Genre Prescriptivism

‘Achieving humanist value favours the kind of social realist films made by directors such as Yasujirō Ozu, Karel Reisz, Krzysztof Kieślowski, Abbas Kiarostami, Vittorio de Sica, Roberto Rossellini, etc., but doesn’t this amount to artistic or creative prescriptivism, limiting the range of genres filmmakers can work in, to achieve humanistic value?’ After all, says the sceptic, Carroll points out works these directors are often classed as “humanist realism” on the presumption that they therefore must be ‘better’ than films in other genres.<sup>499</sup> Is there a risk that cinematic humanism promotes what is essentially an unattractive hierarchy of values, with humanistic value at the top; in tandem with an undesirable hierarchy of facilitating film genres?

First, there is no intention to create a pecking order of film-related values; rather to recognise that there are more philosophically relevant values than have been acknowledged thus far. Second, it is unclear what purpose one would be serving by any such meta-evaluation. Third, whilst Carroll conflates humanist and social realism, in so doing he is not arguing for some unarticulated but nascent notion of genre-related humanistic value but rather pointing out that it makes little sense to compare and evaluate films of different genres on some singular cinematic scale given that films fall into “barely commensurate categories”.<sup>500</sup> Not only is this hard to deny, but by having three types of cinematic value, as well as dramatic value and now humanistic value – as I have identified here – we now have more resources with which to talk about the distinct features of different films; ways that do not force one into some supposed cinematic equivalent of comparing apples and oranges on a single scale that would seek to measure their ‘fruit value’.

Fourth, there is no reason why humanistic value needs to be tied to social realism. As Stolnitz rightly points out, fantasy is exploited with the utmost seriousness in Kenji Mizoguchi’s 1953 film *Ugetsu*.<sup>501</sup> What I learn from this film, *inter alia*, is that yes, we humans are all fools, but fools love too. Sci-fi films and musicals can have humanistic value. Watching Tarkovsky’s 1972 film *Solaris*, I learn that we humans take ourselves with us,

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<sup>498</sup> Currie (2016, 650).

<sup>499</sup> Carroll (2008, 220)

<sup>500</sup> Carroll (2008, 222)

<sup>501</sup> Stolnitz (1997)

wherever we go, there is no escape; watching Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, I learn that we humans see everything as a tool; and watching Mark Sandrich (and Fred Astaire's) 1935 film *Top Hat* I learn that we humans love how we move. From the genre-defying *My Dinner with André*, I learn that we humans find the meaning of life by thinking about the possibility that life may not have meaning.

The sceptic's worry that pursuing humanistic value, i.e., deliberately seeking to illuminate the human condition, must limit or prescribe filmmakers' genre options is unfounded. As with any work of art, the power of film to provide insights into the human condition is not limited by genre or style but only by the creative abilities and receptive sensibilities of 'we humans' – both makers and viewers.

### **Objection from the Status of Human-Condition-Related Sentences**

'By stating not just *that* we gain illuminating insights into the nature of the human condition but providing some specifics as to *what* those insights are, you raise the question: just what kind of sentences are these, which articulate thoughts about the human condition?' After all, the sceptic says, isn't "We humans are fools" a truth-evaluable claim, and haven't we just come full circle back to good old-fashioned propositional knowledge of the kind that truth-theorists (or narrow-scope cognitivists) were championing at the very beginning of the investigation. The wolf may now be wearing humanistic sheep's clothing, but isn't this just an alternative way of couching the idea that there is some kind of 'artistic truth'?

The sceptic raises an important issue here. Let us consider three responses. First, one could bite the bullet and agree that humanistic value is indeed a kind of propositional knowledge about the nature of the human condition. But this would be to ignore the relation between what the nature of the human condition *is* and what the human condition *means* to us human beings. It would also presume that the 'knowledge' discovered is empirical which would re-ignite all the earlier unresolvable worries about the impossibility of providing justification and responding to Platonic challenges. The sceptic might press harder and insist that 'what the human condition *means*, must surely reduce to what the human condition *is*'; but if that were the case then the philosophies of language and value will just be species of metaphysics, and it is not clear that this is a route that any but the most hardened of naturalists would like to go. Not least because it would deliver elimination without illumination.

Second, one could think of "we humans are fools" and other such articulated sentences as avowals, and thus epistemically privileged because they are either self-justifying

or do not require justification, as one might think about such cases as, “I love you”, “I believe/do not believe in God”, “I have a splitting headache”. One would need to consider how the first-person plural “we humans...” works, given avowals are typically taken to be first-person singular statements, but intention announcements like “We will be vacationing in Scotland next year” might point the way. We might also think that such sentences are elliptical for “I believe that we humans are fools”, or “I now realise that we humans are fools in a way I have never realised before.” Given that avowals might be either self-warranting truth claims, non-truth-evaluable expressions, or non-truth-evaluation articulations of commitments, I see no principled problem with understanding “we humans are fools” as arguing for something along the lines of the latter two choices, recognising that articulations of what is learnt about the nature and meaning of the human condition are non-empirical and non-truth-evaluable sentences does not thereby undermine on their importance, insightfulness and thus merit, for the speaker/learner.

Third, one could recognise these statements as articulations of rules or rule-like commitments, which – according to the later Wittgenstein – are not truth evaluable.<sup>502</sup> This is because they are being used to *articulate* rules (which themselves are neither true nor false) and/or are ‘framework’ propositions (which often go unspoken, in the normal course of our lives, but yet are totally taken for granted in how we live our life.)<sup>503</sup> In the case of rules, we might use the sentences, ‘Bishops move diagonally’ or ‘Being further forward than an opposition defender when the ball is struck is being in a offside position’ to make an empirical claim about the rules of chess or football. Both are empirically true now, but the football one is false as an empirical description of the rules in, say, 1960. We can also use these sentences for teaching or heuristic purposes in which we are articulating some of the non-truth-evaluable, a-temporal, constituents that make chess, and football what they are. Our use of these sentences is, in the latter situation, is like the rules themselves, neither true nor false.<sup>504</sup> As with the metre rod in Paris, one can say “This is a metre long” and be making an empirical claim, or one can say the same sentence, not in a truth-evaluable way but as a way of identifying something that sets the standard for what it is to be, one metre long. When doing the latter, it becomes a conceptual and not an empirical matter that anything that is the

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<sup>502</sup> Wittgenstein (1969, Paragraphs 94-102, and 341-343)

<sup>503</sup> See Moyal-Sharrock and Brenner (2005, Part I, 31-100)

<sup>504</sup> Cf Witt “[T]he same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing;” “If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet false;” and “[T]he *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.” Wittgenstein (1969, Paragraphs, 98, 205, and 341)

same length of the Paris rod, is itself a metre long. It is what it *means to say* that one's sled, *Rosebud*, is a metre long. When we say, "We humans are fools" we are not, on this Wittgensteinian understanding, making an empirical claim, we are articulating something – something learnt from a film – that we take being a human being to mean. Furthermore, in connecting this sentence to a film – and/or saying we have learnt this from a film – we are pointing to an example of this specific humanistic value, that others may take up, when they watch it. To ask about the truth of this sentence is to make a category mistake.<sup>505</sup>

Whilst there is much more that can be said about these various options, it simply suffices for the purposes here to point out that there are both Wittgensteinian and non-Wittgensteinian routes to be taken in arguing for the status of the sentences that articulate insights into the human condition. The real value of sceptic's point, at this juncture, is to show that comprehensive answers to these questions cannot be dealt with, without engaging with questions that go to the heart of debates in the philosophy of language. That said, I take it this modest attempt to point in a few potentially viable directions, pushes the discussion on, and points to areas for future investigation.

#### **4 Humanistic Value and Value Interaction in *Jud Süß* and *Jew Süß***

Do *Jud Süß* and *Jew Süß* have humanistic value, and if so, what is the relation between this value and the film's dramatic and stance-based cinematic values? And how might we think about the question of value interaction given these three newly identified values?

Viewing the film transparently, I can find no humanistic value in *Jud Süß*. The film offers nothing to this 21<sup>st</sup> century viewer that prompts or illuminates an insight that might begin with, "we humans...". This is because it presents and champions, without qualification, the thesis that Jews may look like ordinary Germans, but this is part of the trickery they are using in their attempt to 'take over' and, as such, they must be expelled and/or killed at all costs. It blocks the very idea of a meaningful insight into a shared human condition, expressible as "we humans...". It denies there is such a thing. The film does, however, have historical value, insofar as it provides plenty of evidence of anti-Semitic Christian German attitudes towards German Jews at the time of its making.

*Jew Süß* can also be characterised as having historical value as it provides evidence for the prescience of the producer's active concerns for the fate of Jewish people at the time,

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<sup>505</sup> See also Gibson (2007, 60-69) for more the relevance of the Paris metre rule and the idea of works of art, themselves as samples.

and his determination to raise a warning flag. One might think this points to some degree of humanistic value for *Jew Süß* given its attempts to illuminate the insight into the human condition that, “we humans are all human”. The film fails, however, to illuminate this – on a transparent viewing – for at least two reasons, both of which are connected to the work’s stance-based cinematic value. First, what might otherwise be an insight one might garner from the film is repeatedly trumpeted didactically as if it were information, a trivialising filmmaking choice. In the opening scene of the film, Süß’s childhood teacher says to him, “Whether you live here [in the Jewish ghetto] in poverty or outside the wall, you will always pay the price of our heritage. Perhaps someday the wall will crumble like the wall of Jericho and all the world will be one people.”<sup>506</sup> The second sentence of this dialogue is repeated on a written title card at the end of film. “We humans are all humans” is not allowed to be an insight that is illuminated for, and found by, the viewer; it is reduced to a chanted thematic statement repeated at regular intervals throughout the film. Compare this with the difference between coming to know that we all die (which is a fact that one learns at some point as a child) and coming to realise (perhaps in virtue of having a fatal illness and finally recognising the applicability of this universal fact to oneself) that one *really is* going to die. Only the latter is an insight into the human condition. The more *Jew Süß* insists on its supposedly humanistic point, the more it fails to deliver it.

Second, for all its decency of purpose, the English film’s story fails to be coherent. There are too many inexplicable changes to, and choices by, the characters, which undermine the very possibility of having a transparent viewing. This is not helped by the crucial plot point in which Süß learns that he is not actually Jewish which turns on the discovery that his real father is not his presumed father, because his mother had an affair. Given that one’s Jewish identity is determined matrilineally, this is, at best, confusing, and at worst, wrong. Thus, the potentially powerful story point – that a non-Jew would embrace martyrdom as a defiant act in support of a persecuted people – is undermined. The failure of integration that diminishes the film’s stance-based cinematic value, also undercuts the possibility of both its humanistic value and its dramatic value. Value integration is a given, not an optional extra.

Both films do, however, have some dramatic value because each does make *some* sense of its climactic action, Süß’s execution. I would argue that in the German film, however, this act is not particularly hard to make sense of, given it is presented as the righteous punishment of a rapist, and political conspirator. (Though it is not, of course, the

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<sup>506</sup> Tegel notes that this “liberal plea for toleration ... is in contrast to the better known Jewish belief of the chosen people, a belief, however, too close to the German idea of a Volk” (1995, 225).

righteous punishment for anyone in virtue of their religious identity, two ideas the film seeks to conflate.) As such the film is of modest dramatic value. Whilst, in the English film, Süß's principled self-sacrifice is an act that is hard to make sense of intrinsically, but even more so as the transitivity of sense-making suffers several breaks. So, although the dramatic argumentation aims for a higher bar in *Jew Süß* than in *Jud Süß*, it fails to reach it. Cinematic value and dramatic value are mutually implicated; one does not argue *to* value integration but *from* it.

Any consideration of cinematic, humanistic, and dramatic values, and the ways in which they might be integrated varies depending on the granularity of one's consideration. We can engage, both transparently and opaquely, with a film at different degrees of fine-grainedness. Taking a cinematic stance towards *Jud Süß* and *Jew Süß* and looking at their content at the coarser end of the sliding scale of granularity, we can consider the films as having the same content in virtue of both being biopics of a real-life adviser to the Duke of Württemberg during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The films have entirely different content, however, if we think of the German film as the being about how the good people of Württemberg overthrow a dangerous fifth columnist, and the English film as about, say, how the good people of Württemberg are corrupted by succumbing to their basest anti-Semitic beliefs, etc. Both films have various themes in common – the attitude of Christian Württembergians and Jews to each other during that period (as seen through 20<sup>th</sup> century sensibilities), and the precariousness of Jew/Christian relations – whilst, at a more fine-grained level their themes – the danger posed by Jewish people, and the danger to Jewish people – are at odds.

Developing one's ability to identify and appreciate stance-based cinematic value, allows us to understand how a film's dramatic and humanistic values are achieved. This involves recognising and appreciating what might be called a filmmaker's creative understanding of their own craft; something that is itself not static. This includes appreciating how the choice of camera shots can the impact story meaning and character relations;<sup>507</sup> how audio-visual resources can exploit misdirection to create surprises; how not using music can work as well as using music to solicit emotional responses; how the character whose story it is, need not carry the film's point of view, and so on.

Finally, there remains the questions: does having such-and-such a value entail or preclude having so-and-so a value and do the relations between values conform to the so-

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<sup>507</sup> See my Harrison (2022 fc) article on how understanding the difference between single and two-shot reaction shots helps one clarify the seeming story ambiguities in King Vidor's 1937 *Stella Dallas*.

called ‘valence constraint’, i.e., does more of one value mean (only) more of another and not potentially more or less of another. This way of conducting the interaction question, as happens in discussions about aesthetic cognitivism can, at best, only achieve the answer ‘Yes and no, on some occasions’. The interaction question is, I would argue, a red herring, one comparable to asking: is Jane’s value as a daughter interrelated to her value as a person, as a teacher, as a sister, as a gardener, as coupon-clipper, an Elvis fan, and as a someone doing 15 years for bank robbery. It is not clear what we are asking, or why.

A more interesting question is, I would propose: given that the three values we are considering are all values of the same work, yet an understanding and appreciation of stance-based cinematic value requires an opaque engagement with the work and reactive critical inquiry, whilst dramatic value and humanistic value do not, does this point to something of interest for philosophers of film? I leave this point as a signpost for future investigations. I simply add, to conclude this consideration of value interaction, that in my own experience, reflection on value interaction does not normally increase or decrease a film’s entertainment value, but does increase a film’s value as a something life-enriching; a value I would describe as the film’s cinematic value – artistically construed.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

This dissertation began with recent comments by film directors Scorsese and Coppola on the value of films as a source of revelation and enlightenment.<sup>508</sup> Doing justice to both sides of the Scorsese vs. Marvel battle requires grappling with the question at its heart: can we learn from films and if so, how do they teach us? I have argued that the current paradigm for discussing the so-called ‘cognitive’ value of art will not help us answer this question in a satisfactory way; we need different resources.

When Scorsese celebrates the way in which films can illuminate, “the complexity of people and their contradictory and sometimes paradoxical natures, the way they can hurt one another and love one another and suddenly come face to face with themselves”<sup>509</sup> I take it he is saying that films can illuminate insights into what the human condition, insights into what it means to be human. According to Scorsese, for films to be ‘cinema’ is for them to have

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<sup>508</sup> Cf. also Swedish film director Roy Andersson’s (2012) claim about *Amarcord*, *Andrei Rublev*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, *Barry Lyndon*, *The Battle of Algiers*, *The Bicycle Thieves*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Intolerance*, *Rashomon*, and *Viridiana* that “These movies make us wiser.”

<sup>509</sup> Scorsese (2019)

humanistic value. I have argued that a film can have this without having to have ‘cognitive’ value; and indeed to claim that humanistic value is cognitive value would be to miss the point being made and its value.

Moreover, in attempting to identify, articulate, and defend *that* we learn, *how* we learn, and *what* we learn from films, I have argued that we can liberate this issue from the question ‘what makes a film a work of art?’ because on all major theories, the films discussed here – like all the films standardly considered in this and related debates – *are* art. I have also demonstrated that there is no connection between the learning issue and the need to presume so-called ‘medium-essentialism’ because filmmakers exploit a range of audio-visual storytelling techniques and resources some of which are, and some of which are not, unique to film. This has made it possible to recognise that the notion of cinematic value can be construed in three different ways: as an aesthetic, artistic, and a stance-based value; the latter being the value of the ways in which a film’s content, its form, and its themes and/or theses are integrated. When we take a cinematic stance, in order to learn, recognise, and come to appreciate (and find rewarding) how films integrate their content, form, themes and theses, into a singular whole, we learn what it takes to support a film’s theses (whether those theses are correct or not), and thus we not only achieve knowledge about how a film is made, and what gives it stance-based cinematic value, we learn potentially instrumentalizable beliefs that, if desired, might – but need not be – put to the test empirically. Additionally, as a separate matter, I have recognised that films exploit dramatic argumentation to make sense of what their characters do; and that this provides us with the kind of criterial understanding that is ‘baked into’ our linguistic practices and that is part and parcel of our ability to make sense of intentional actions in general. When a film enables sense to be made of actions that are hard to understand (in general or when done by situated agents) films also have dramatic value.

Stance-based or integrated cinematic value, dramatic value, and humanistic value are possibly but not necessarily interdependent; a film’s having one value does not entail it has either one or both of the others. One might wish to argue that films which integrate their content, form, themes and/or theses, thereby increase their dramatic and/or humanistic value but, as we can see in the case of *Jud Süß*, claims about value interaction are deeply problematic and generalisations across examples, even more so. If, and how, stance-based (or integrated) cinematic value, dramatic value, and humanistic value are or might be related, is a question for a different occasion. That said, I hope to have shown by example, here, that aiming to justify the viability of one of the ‘isms’ that frame the current value interaction

debate, may well be a philosophical red herring. After all, the dramatic value of a film may be substantial on the first viewing, but minimal on subsequent ones, whilst its humanistic value may increase with viewings.

Instead, I suggest we think of these three, newly identified values under the rubric of ‘cinematic humanism’. The ‘humanism’ in ‘cinematic humanism’ also acts as a reminder – I trust – that fiction films are made by people, for people, and about people, and not by, for, about, some supposed ‘subjectivities’ of the kind proposed and favoured by those engaged in doing film or grand Theory (and its successors). Nor indeed are films made by, for, or about those other reductive stand-ins for people, the ‘mind/brains’ preferred by some (but not all) cognitive film theorists.

Finally, in moving beyond the cognitive, with cinematic humanism, I hope to have simultaneously gestured towards the wider applicability of these newly recognised and appreciated values for future philosophical investigations into other works of art, and other art forms. Perhaps the paradigm shift I am advocating will encourage new opportunities to understand and appreciate the significant in significant form. In the words of film director, Michael Hanneke:

In all of my films, I always strive to be a “humanist”.

In my view, if you are seriously interested in art, there just isn’t any other way...

An art form devoid of humanism is a contradiction, it does not exist.<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> Quoted in Sinnerbrink (2011, 115)

Epilogue

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And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling.  
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer  
By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
Once or twice, or several times, by men who one cannot hope  
To emulate – but there is no competition –  
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

T.S. Eliot from *East Coker, Four Quartets*<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> Eliot, T. S. (1969, 182)

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