Collaboration in the Third Culture

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Abstract: In *Film, Art and the Third Culture*, Murray Smith articulates and defends a naturalized aesthetics of film that exemplifies a "third culture," integrating the insights and methods of the natural sciences with those of the arts and humanities. By contrast with skeptics who reject the relevance of psychology or neuroscience to the study of film and art, I agree with Smith that we should embrace the third-cultural project. However, I argue that Smith does not go far enough in in developing this project. In defending the contribution of the natural sciences to film aesthetics as traditionally conceived in the arts and humanities, Smith focuses on only one side of the equation, unduly limiting the potential contribution of the arts and humanities to the scientific study of film. Using the example of emotional responses to fiction film, I propose that we adopt a more genuinely integrative approach.

In *Film, Art and the Third Culture (FATC)*, Murray Smith articulates and defends an approach to aesthetics generally, and film specifically, that exemplifies a *naturalized aesthetics*. Borrowing Snow's (2012) famous terminology, Smith takes the naturalistic approach to exemplify a *third culture* integrating "methods and knowledge drawn from across the humanities, the social and natural sciences" (Smith 2017: 4).[1] The contrast is with those who assume that the two traditional cultures—the humanistic on the one hand, and scientific on the other—are inevitably separate and distinct, operating according to their own principles and methods and producing their own kinds of incommensurable bodies of knowledge. Throughout *FATC* Murray is concerned to rebut various forms of skepticism about the third culture, especially skepticism from those within the arts and humanities. Such skeptics see film in particular, and art in general, as essentially cultural rather than universal phenomena, tied to the specifics of their time and place, history and ideology.

I am not a skeptic about the third culture. I agree with Smith that we should adopt an approach that construes "film art as a manifestation of a cluster of deeply entrenched, basic human capacities, and thus treats it as a phenomenon which is likely to be illuminated by various types of scientific as well as traditional humanistic research" (3). Smith is typically restrained in his critiques of skepticism, though his language is occasionally sharper. For example, he writes:

> Make no mistake: neuroscience will continue to spread into the making and the study of film and the arts in general. Film scholars and aestheticians can stay in their comfort zone and pretend it is not happening, or they can look outward with an open mind as well as a sceptical eye, assessing just what neuroscience might or might not have to offer our understanding of the arts. (85)

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all page citations are to *Film, Art and the Third Culture*.

As should be apparent, *FATC* is a manifesto in favor of the third-culturalist approach. It is directed most emphatically at those in the arts and humanities who resist the encroachment of scientific methodologies into their traditional terrain. Rather than ignoring the ever-increasing body of evidence produced by scientists who have turned their attention to film and the arts in recent years, Smith urges us to pay attention and see what we can learn.

Importantly, *FATC* exemplifies the approach it defends, demonstrating (rather than merely declaring) the value of integrating scientific evidence into a philosophical examination of film as art. Smith focuses on the aesthetic experience of film, a topic ripe for third-cultural exploration insofar as it is concerned with the human mind. It is hard to see what justification there could be for denying that the cognitive sciences are relevant to our understanding of mind in general or experience—including aesthetic experience—in particular. Smith maintains that a productive approach to the aesthetic experience of film requires what he calls (following Owen Flanagan (1992) a *triangulation* of evidence from phenomenology, psychology and neurophysiology. To take but one example, Smith weaves together scientific research concerning the basic emotions with an analysis of the ways very different filmmakers use facial expression to achieve certain effects. Without neglecting the specifics of each case and the different effects on the viewer, the discussion illuminates the ways in which filmmakers tap into common (perhaps universal) affective mechanisms. Marshalling multiple sources of evidence can only enhance one's appreciation of the phenomena.

As should be clear by now, my aim is not to raise skeptical worries about the relevance of scientific research to our understanding of film or art. Instead, I want to focus on the opposite end of the spectrum. Smith writes the following:

> It is … important to underline that within this framework the influence between the human and natural sciences runs in both directions: just as questions once thought the exclusive property of the humanities may be illuminated by scientific methods, so may scientific insights be prefigured, sharpened, and more deeply understood—in terms of their relations with human interests and values—by examining them as cultural phenomena, that is, as objects of humanistic enquiry. (5)

However, the case studies in *FATC* largely exemplify one direction of influence, from the natural sciences to the arts and humanities. This is because Smith's argument is primarily directed at skeptics in the latter disciplines. The strategy makes sense. After all, scientists have been much less dubious about a multidisciplinary convergence of interest in topics such as film perception and empathy than philosophers or film theorists have been.

An unfortunate consequence of this strategy, though, is the rhetorical diminution of the other side of the equation, the influence of the humanistic on the natural sciences. What contribution do theorists in the arts and humanities make in the third culture?

Smith writes that we play a role both at the beginning of a research project and in the concluding stages:

> [S]cholars in the humanities are typically best placed to identify the problems that need addressing, pose the questions to be explored, and clarify the concepts through which the questions are articulated and on the basis of which empirical investigation should proceed. … Moreover, it is within the humanities that the work of evaluation—moral,

political, aesthetic—is and must be undertaken; for science must bracket questions pertaining to these types of value in order to function as science. (4-5)

In suggesting that normative questions be bracketed, Smith aims to avoid an obvious but unfortunately common mistake: that scientific research aims ultimately to tell us why we evaluate artworks as good or bad. Wildly implausible claims, such as that neuroscience has discovered "laws of aesthetic experience" (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999), illustrate the sort of error Smith has in mind. A theory of how filmmakers generate certain effects by exploiting universal features of human psychology and physiology is (Smith rightly emphasizes) no substitute or instruction manual for art-making or art criticism.

At least partly to avoid such a misinterpretation of his argument, Smith advocates a "divide and conquer" strategy. In the humanities, we articulate the questions for scientists to explore and engage in various forms of evaluation. The scientists gather the evidence in light of the questions and leave the normative side to us. The segregation of tasks is explicit when Smith considers the role of philosophy—including his own work in *FATC*—in the third culture: "such a broad, collaborative enterprise allows for, perhaps even best flourishes in the context of, a division of labour in which it is the particular responsibility of philosophers to sift, interrogate, and synthesize the ideas, evidence, and argument relevant to particular domains of enquiry" (233).

In this baldly stated form, the division of labor is surely both unrealistic and undesirable. Though specialists should do what they do best, the objective of the third culture is integration. So there must be more give-and-take than these passages suggest. To explore how this might work, I will focus on the role of philosophers. How might we contribute to the third culture in a truly integrated fashion?

It is not enough for philosophers to identify and articulate problems and questions that are then taken over by empirical researchers, and then to interpret the results and consider the evaluative implications. This approach only exacerbates one of the sources of skepticism about the relevance of empirical research to philosophy, including aesthetics: namely, the apparently vast distance between the questions the scientists are studying and the questions we are interested in answering. This distance is typically even greater between philosophy and neuroscience than it is between philosophy and psychology.

To illustrate, it is useful to consider one of Smith's applications of scientific research, specifically evidence concerning affective mimicry, to film experience. Affective mimicry occurs when we unconsciously mimic facial expressions of emotion, generating a kind of emotional contagion wherein we automatically and non-consciously "catch" others' emotions. In line with the claims of neuroscientists, Smith assumes that mirror neurons—neurons that are activated both when we perform an action and when we observe the same action performed by someone else—provide the implementation mechanism for affective mimicry of basic emotions (99).

With this background in mind, Smith examines the climactic scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *Saboteur* (1942), in which the villain Fry (Norman Lloyd) dangles precariously from the top of the Statue of Liberty. "Hitchcock peppers the sequence with close-ups of the saboteur's expressions of pain and terror—shots that are apt to elicit mimicry on our part, so that we quite literally feel the saboteur's fear in some measure" (145). These feelings are in direct conflict with our attitudes toward Fry up to that point, which—particularly for contemporary audiences in the midst of the war—are likely to be unmitigated contempt, hatred, and so on. The automatic,

bottom-up affective mimicry creates a brief ambivalence, so that the "imagined satisfaction of running the traitor to ground and vanquishing him are undercut" (145). Smith speculates that Hitchcock might have wanted us to consider the complexities of defeating our enemies in war, but notes that the director later admitted that the scene did not work due to the sympathy generated for Fry.

[Insert a still from *Saboteur*]

As Smith notes, Hitchcock dispensed with any hint of ambivalence in the later *Lifeboat* (1944), eschewing any images of the German captain Willi (Walter Slezak) as he is pushed overboard by the other survivors.

Smith's argument is that Hitchcock exploits apparently universal features of human beings—especially affective mimicry of expressions of basic emotions such as fear—to achieve certain effects, which ultimately proved inappropriate politically and aesthetically in the context. "All in all, this is an argument that shows how an aspect of the biology of emotions is enlisted in a cultural and political cause. … We do not have to make a choice between an evolutionary, biological explanation, and a purely cultural one; and if we do make that choice then we weaken our explanation" (146).

Smith goes further, tying the research on mirror neurons and affective mimicry to the more complex experience of empathy. Smith argues that "vivid depictions of actions and facial expressions can scaffold more elaborate empathic imaginings," a process exemplified by the famous sequence in *Strangers on a Train* (1951) in which Hitchcock crosscuts scenes of Bruno (Robert Walker) frantically trying to reach a cigarette lighter through the grill above a drain so that he can frame Guy (Farley Granger) for the murder of his wife, with scenes of Guy urgently trying to complete a tennis match so that he can prevent Bruno from succeeding (180). Hitchcock shifts from close-up shots that display the desperation on the characters' faces, generating affective mimicry, to shots of their movements and actions, prompting motor mimicry.

[Insert stills from *Strangers on a Train*]

Smith writes, "These mimickings may initiate, support, and enrich our broader imaginative efforts, also prompted by the film, to understand what it is like to be each of these characters—that is, to be in their situations possessing their distinctive character traits, histories, and goals" (180).

In these two examples, Smith weaves the scientific account of mimicry with a description of emotional responses to provide a convincing analysis of the mechanisms by which Hitchcock achieves his effects. The argument that automatic mimicry plays a key role is broadly persuasive, but it raises several questions. First, it is unclear what the appeal to mirror neurons contributes. Even setting aside the various controversies over the existence and role of mirror neurons, they provide at best an implementation story for psychological processes—affective and motor mimicry and emotional contagion—that are already established phenomena. There is, of course, significant interaction between psychology and neuroscience, so a focus on one does not exclude the other; and it is helpful to understand the implementation of psychological mechanisms. Nonetheless, case studies such as *Saboteur* and *Strangers on a Train* provide more evidence for the significance of psychology to film aesthetics than of neuroscience.

Second, the relationship between mirror neurons and mimicry on the one hand, and empathy on the other, remains speculative. Smith suggests that mimicry can "scaffold fully fledged empathic imagining" (182). Although this is plausible, the precise ways in which automatic processes perform this "scaffolding" is unclear. Skeptics in the arts and humanities are apt to claim that empathy is too complex an imaginative response to be illuminated by low-level, automatic mirroring processes. More needs to be said to integrate the mechanistic explanation with more familiar approaches to empathic imagining.

This challenge highlights a gap between the scientific and the aesthetic that the mere application of the former to the latter cannot bridge. Deploying results from empirical studies is useful but limited, because it is not sufficiently directed at humanists' concerns. For instance, although evidence about affective mimicry often comes from the viewing of films, these are typically short clips from standardized databases that allow for the control of conditions (Deng et al. 2017). Furthermore, psychologists and neuroscientists use film clips in an effort to understand ordinary emotions; film is thought to be closer to real life than still pictures, and more likely to elicit the relevant affective responses (though see Uhrig et al. 2016). Needless to say, a Hitchcock thriller differs dramatically both from short clips constructed by psychologists and from everyday emotional interactions. If our aim is to understand the affective experience of films like these, we should not just resign ourselves to extrapolations from studies of something else.

What is required is a more robust collaboration with experimental scientists in developing studies of genuine potential relevance to our concerns. This does not mean that empirical results will answer philosophical questions. After all, many of our questions are ultimately normative. But if we are naturalists, and this is indeed the assumption of the whole third-cultural project, then we do not think that the normative exists in a distinct realm; values do not just drop from on high like a pair of stone tablets from a mountain. The normative cannot be isolated from the empirical. For example, what constitutes knowledge is a philosophical and normative question, and simply examining people's psychology or physiology will not answer it. But this does not mean that the question is unrelated to the empirical. For example, if empirical research indicated that human beings almost never meet the criteria set forth by a definition of knowledge, that should cast doubt on the definition. So we have a strong interest in developing experiments that are more likely to shed light on philosophical issues. I want to illustrate by considering work on fiction and emotion.

Philosophical discussions of fiction and emotion frequently draw upon psychological research. There are two familiar topics of debate subsumed under the rubric of the "Paradox of Fiction." One is descriptive: how should we classify affective responses to fictions? The other is normative: are our affective responses to fiction (however classified) irrational or incoherent in some way? The empirically-minded, following the consensus in psychology and neuroscience, have long held that responses to fiction are just ordinary emotional responses. Smith makes the same assumption, taking for granted that the "target or *object* of an emotion may be real or imagined" so that the "event eliciting an emotion may be actual or fictional" (162). He adopts a general account familiar from Jenefer Robinson (2005), according to which an initial "quick and dirty" affective appraisal is followed by various forms of cognitive monitoring, adding up to a dynamic process, an emotional episode. This account draws no distinction between emotions in fictional and other contexts.

I am not satisfied with this answer, for two reasons. The first is that the classification of emotional responses to fiction with other emotional responses is a *presupposition* of

psychological and neuroscientific research, not a conclusion. As I have already noted, most research on the emotions actually concerns representations, typically pictures and film clips constructed for experimental purposes. Though they are very unlike a fiction film, they are equally unlike "real life," and indeed the ecological validity of experimental work on emotion is an important question for theorists (see e.g. Levenson 2003). The second is that philosophers may have reasons to draw distinctions that psychologists and neuroscientists do not, at least not without prompting. In particular, we have an interest in the obvious *normative* difference between emotional responses to fiction and emotional responses in other contexts. This was, famously, the focus of Colin Radford (1975) in his "How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?" (Interestingly, Robinson herself takes our responses to fiction to be "cognitively irrational," though they are in another sense "emotionally rational.")

I do not agree with Radford's conclusion that our responses to fiction are "incoherent," but I do agree with his observational data: that in ordinary contexts, discovering that the object of our emotions does not exist would normally rule out the possibility of the emotion, whereas this is just not the case when we respond to fictional characters and events. Once I know that Santa Claus does not exist, I cannot (at least, not coherently) hope that he brings me gifts. My own view (Friend 2016) is that emotions in different contexts are subject to different *normative constraints*, depending on their relation to action. We are unlikely to find a simple bifurcation between responses to fiction and to real life, or what we believe and what we imagine. Instead, there is likely a spectrum of cases running the gamut from direct confrontations—where to be effective emotions must be responsive to the real features of the actual situation—through to pure fantasy, in which emotions are arguably unconstrained by the facts. In between we find a range of forms of imaginative engagement, from fiction to nonfiction to planning and so on, with our emotions in each case more or less beholden to how things really are or could be. The connection between emotion and the motivation to act is one that Murray himself discusses in considering the evolutionary origins of emotion (130).

In short, as a philosopher I am interested in the norms that govern our emotional responses in different contexts. Although this is a normative question, it is closely related to a variety of empirical questions, including the basic one of what sorts of differences there are in our responses in different kinds of context. As I have said, this is not a question psychologists and neuroscientists have typically been motivated to study on their own. However, as a model of the kind of third-cultural collaboration I would advocate, teams of philosophers and psychologists have recently run studies focused precisely on this issue, including studies that use short film clips (Cova et al. n.d.; Sperduti et al. 2016). In these studies, participants were presented with extracts of films that were chosen because they could be presented equally plausibly as either videos of real events or as fiction film clips. Across both sets of experiments participants reported greater intensity of emotion in the "fictional" than in the "real" condition. One set of researchers (Sperduti et al. 2016), using clips of four to five seconds, found no corresponding difference in autonomic arousal as measured by skin conductance. However, the other set (Cova et al. n.d.), using two-minute clips, did detect a physiological difference; the symptoms of sadness were more intense when the clips were presented as "real" rather than "fictional," in line with the self-reports.

[Possibly: insert diagram from Cova et al.]

These studies focus on the phenomenology and low-level physiological responses to short videos. It is interesting that there may be differences between the fiction and nonfiction cases. Such differences do not necessarily support a distinction in kinds of emotion (Cova and Friend forthcoming), but they do raise questions about what other differences we might find. For example, within the Robinsonian account of emotions that Smith adopts, we should expect differences between the two contexts in the neurophysiological processes underpinning cognitive monitoring. If Radford's observations are right (itself an empirical claim), cognitive monitoring will suppress emotional responses in some contexts when relevant beliefs are absent, but not in others. Why is that? When does it happen? What are the implications for the normative question of when emotions are appropriate or inappropriate in the absence of other cognitive states such as belief? This is the kind of question that only a truly collaborative approach is likely to answer.

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