

### **Mixed Feelings: Conflicts in Emotional Responses to Film**

Some films scare us; some make us cry; some thrill us. Some of the most interesting films, however, leave us suspended between feelings – both joyous and sad, or angry and serene. This paper attempts to explain how this can happen and why it is important. I look closely at one film that creates and exploits these conflicted responses. I argue that cases of conflict in film illuminate a pair of vexing questions about emotion in film: (1) To what extent are emotional responses rational, or in need of rationalization?; and (2) What relationship is there between emotional response and value (moral, filmic, or otherwise)? Conflict, I argue, can be revealing, and can help us better understand emotional responses to narrative film<sup>1</sup> in general.

The paper is divided into four sections. First, I sketch a theory of emotional engagement that makes sense of the notion of a “conflicted emotional response” to a film. Second, I turn to a particular case of a film that produces this sort of conflict, Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), and show that the conflict engendered by that film is both more significant and less unusual than it may appear. In the final two sections, I argue that there is no need to rationalize or make consistent such mixed emotional responses, and that there is real moral, aesthetic, and cognitive value to be had from such conflict.

#### **1. Outline of a theory of emotional engagement with film**

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<sup>1</sup> I confine my discussion to conventional narrative film, whether fiction or documentary, and not on the avant-garde or other non-narrative forms. Such films of course can and do provoke emotions, but not through story-telling, which is the focus of this paper.

There are two principal approaches to the philosophy of emotion: cognitivism, among whose proponents we might count Ronald deSousa and Robert Solomon, and the James-Lange theory, named after William James and Carl Lange, of which Jenefer Robinson and Jesse Prinz are two of the best known contemporary advocates.<sup>2</sup> The former approach emphasizes emotions for which cognitive judgment is essential, including complex, culturally specific emotional concepts. On this view, emotions require beliefs that are congruent with the feelings appropriate to the emotion: for example, fear requires the belief that the object of one's fear represents a threat. The latter emphasizes the primacy of physiological aspects of emotion and treats cognition as secondary; this leads these theorists to emphasize emotional experiences that involve more feeling than judgment. For example, Jenefer Robinson famously maintains that startle is an emotion, despite its automaticity and independence of higher-level cognition.<sup>3</sup> Our purposes in this paper do not require that we make a choice between these two theories (although the differences between the two will be important in how we handle certain details – we return to this later).

We need not make a choice for two reasons. First, for all the differences between the two approaches, there are many similarities.<sup>4</sup> The cognitivists grant that physiological response is an important part of emotional experience, and the Jamesians agree that emotions can and often do lead us to cognize the world differently. They agree that in a wide range of cases, bodily feeling and belief are both very important to emotion. Second, the kinds of emotional conflicts that are of interest here can arise under either theory: for the cognitivists, it arises as a

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the debate, see John Deigh, "Concepts of Emotions," in Peter Goldie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 17-40.

<sup>3</sup> See her "Startle," *Journal of Philosophy* 92 (1995): 53-74.

<sup>4</sup> This is further evidenced by the existence of some hybrid views, such as Peter Goldie's. See his *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

conflict between judgments, and for the Jamesians, it arises as a conflict between bodily feelings that have opposing valences.

Whatever we take emotions to be, there can be little doubt that films provoke them. It may appear that there is one objection to this view, but this appearance is the product of a misunderstanding. One might think that Kendall Walton's make-believe theory or certain variants of simulation theory (such as Gregory Currie's) which categorize certain of our responses to films (and other fictions) as "quasi" or "imagined," would deny that we can feel genuine emotions in response to films.<sup>5</sup> However, neither Walton nor Currie believes that films cannot produce emotional responses, or that the emotional responses they do produce are somehow unreal. Walton and Currie do doubt whether these responses are the responses that we sometimes take them to be, and they also maintain that we can imagine having an emotion without thereby having the full-blown emotion. To take Kendall Walton's well-worn example, when Charles watches a film about a homicidal green slime, and the slime turns to the camera as if lunging directly for him, Walton maintains that Charles does not fear the slime. He make-believelly fears it, and he "quasi-fears" it ("quasi-fear" is what Jamesians would call fear – the physiological component *sans* the relevant belief), but he does not genuinely fear the slime itself. So many read Walton as claiming that films cannot make us afraid, or feel any genuine emotion. However, this is not quite right. Walton's claim is much more specific: that Charles is not genuinely afraid *of the slime*, because the slime exists only in the fiction, and Charles knows and accepts this. Charles might be really, truly afraid of something else; or he might have some other related emotion. His quasi-fear might prompt him to think of some other, real object,

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<sup>5</sup> See Gregory Currie, "The Paradox of Caring: Fiction and the Philosophy of Mind," in Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (eds.), *Emotion and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 63-77; Kendall Walton, "Fearing Fictions," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 5-27, as well as his *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 195-204 and pp. 241-249.

which he could focus on fearfully. Quasi- and pretend emotions *might* lead to real emotions in the same way that imagining what another person is feeling can lead us to feel sympathy for her.<sup>6</sup> So nothing in simulation theory or make-believe theory suggests that film cannot create real emotions in viewers.

Emotion in response to narrative film is often, though not always, focused on characters. We respond as we do because we imagine the experiences that the characters have, and because we come to care about what happens to them. Particular theories of character-based emotion, such as simulation theory, have proved highly controversial, but (I shall argue), there is little doubt that emotions felt on behalf of or in sympathy with a film's main characters is one central driving force of our emotional responses. We can begin to understand emotional engagement with narrative film by first looking at how we experience these films in imagination. For imagining is the first step in emotional engagement.

Richard Wollheim made a well-known distinction between two kinds of imagining: central imagining, in which we take the point of view of a character in the story; and acentral imagining, in which we take up the perspective of an onlooker.<sup>7</sup> Gregory Currie makes a similar distinction between primary and secondary imagining, and so have others.<sup>8</sup> Central (or secondary) imagining is imagining from the point of view of a character in the fiction. Films can prompt us to do this by showing us what the character is looking at and listening to. In a very early scene in Fritz Lang's *M*, we watch Frau Beckmann cook and clean; while she does, she frequently glances at the clock, and when we hear steps on the stairs, she runs to the door

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<sup>6</sup> I argue for this in more detail in "Empathy with Fictions," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (July 2000): 340-355.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Wollheim, *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Gregory Currie, "The Moral Psychology of Fiction," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73(1995): 250-59; Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

and opens it. We naturally infer that she is anticipating her daughter's return from school at any moment, despite what we see in cross-cutting: that her daughter Elsie has just met a stranger. We imagine Frau Beckmann's point of view on these domestic events. We imagine what it is like to be her, or at least what it would be like to be in her situation.

There is some debate about which sorts of shots promote central imagining in film and which do not – the importance of the point of view shot is particularly hotly contested.<sup>9</sup> In the scene in *M* just discussed, we see a variety of kinds of shots: a number of medium shots, where we see Frau Beckmann from the front; but sometimes the camera is behind her, showing her as well as part of what she sees. When she looks at the clock or down the stairs, we see a still point of view shot, and then generally a shot showing her expression. Central imagining in film is prompted by a variety of techniques. (And the full range of shots that are available today were of course not possible in 1931.) But shots that show us Beckmann's face, so that we read her emotional state, as well as shots that tell us what she is looking at (the clock, the stairs) are important in helping the viewer imagine her situation.

Acentral (or primary) imagining is a little different. This is imagining a scene not from any particular person's point of view, and perhaps from no point of view at all. The opening scene of *M* begins with a black screen, and we hear the sounds of a child singing an ominous song about a murderer (based on an actual children's song about Fritz Haarmann, a serial killer caught in 1924<sup>10</sup>). Then we see an overhead shot of a courtyard, looking down on a group of schoolchildren playing a game and singing. The camera pauses and then slowly moves to the side and up to show an adult observing. The initial point of view in this scene belongs to no

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<sup>9</sup> See Gregory Currie, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 174-76; Murray Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-86; Jinhee Choi, "Leaving it up to the Imagination: POV Shots and Imagining from the Inside," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 17-25.

<sup>10</sup> See Anton Kaes, *M* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), p. 10.

one; no character hears or sees what we do, and we are not offered the perspective of the children either. We imagine that children are playing a game, and perhaps we imagine seeing and hearing it from a neutral observer's point of view, but we are not given any character's point of view until we transition to the next scene.

If most or all of our imaginative attention in film were acentral in this sense, our emotional responses to films would likely have little to do with the situations and attitudes of specific characters. However, there is good reason to think that central imagining is a very important, perhaps the primary, mode of imagining narrative film. While we certainly do engage in acentral imagining, narrative films prompt us to do a great deal of central imagining as well, and such imagining serves as the basis for a wide range of emotional responses.

Central imagining is sometimes conflated with narrower notions, such as *identifying* or *empathizing* with characters, and sometimes with a specific model, simulation theory, which is borrowed from the philosophy of mind. And identification and simulation have been widely criticized as models of imaginative engagement with artworks.<sup>11</sup> Objections to identification are largely based, as Berys Gaut has pointed out, on a caricature of the view: identification should not be understood literally, as a complete matching of mental states, but rather as an *overlap* between some of the viewer's thoughts and feelings and the character's.<sup>12</sup> There are also objections to simulation theory based on the mental mechanisms that it posits.<sup>13</sup> But we need

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1990), pp. 88-96; and his *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 342-56.

<sup>12</sup> Berys Gaut, "Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film," in Carl Plantinga and Greg E. Smith (eds.), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 200-216.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Aaron Meskin and Jonathan Weinberg, "Emotions, Fiction, and Cognitive Architecture," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 43 (2003): 18-34.

not worry here about the mechanisms involved; it is not necessary to see *how* central imagining works to see *that* it works.

Nor does central imagining require what Murray Smith called “allegiance” with a character, a phenomenon that involves a change of attitude or values on the part of the audience.<sup>14</sup> Smith denies that central imagining (his term is “alignment”) leads to allegiance, and argues that most films that promote alignment with a character do not lead allegiance with that character. Smith’s distinction depends on a crucial difference between the two phenomena: when I align myself with a character, I track their thoughts, observations, and emotions, but I do not *endorse* them. Allegiance involves endorsement, and I can withhold my endorsement. There are doubts about whether alignment and allegiance are so easily separated.<sup>15</sup> But at any rate, we need not have allegiance with a character in order to care for them. Emotional involvement with fictional characters does not require endorsement, though that may sometimes occur.

Central imagining facilitates our understanding of the characters, and that understanding tends to promote emotions towards the character. Sometimes the emotions we feel are the same or very similar to the emotions that the character feels; but sometimes our emotions differ from the emotions of the character in significant ways. (We often have information that characters do not have.) Imagining a character centrally puts us in a position to feel empathetic, sympathetic, and even antipathetic emotions for her, depending on the character and her situation. In setting us up to imagine a character centrally, films also prescribe or direct how we respond to that character emotionally.

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<sup>14</sup> Murray Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-227.

<sup>15</sup> See my “Infected by Evil,” *Philosophical Explorations* 8 (2005): 173-187.

There is, then, a further question about what it is for a work to *prescribe* or *direct* an audience to respond in a certain way to a film. After all, one person may find a work hilarious, while another finds it sad, and a third is unmoved. Often (and this is the case with *M*) the emotional responses that a film prescribes will be different at the time and place of its initial release than when it is viewed by audiences on video or in re-release decades later. But the problem is even deeper, because it is not clear what it even *means* for a film to prescribe a response. It is one thing to say that a director or screenwriter intends for the audience to feel a certain way, and another to say that the film itself directs the audience to respond in that way. It seems strange to think of films as having the kind of agency required to direct or prescribe.

Berys Gaut takes a strong view about artworks' ability to prescribe a response.<sup>16</sup> According to Gaut, it does not matter whether in fact audiences do respond as they are prescribed, or whether the author *intended* for the work to prescribe the response. The work *itself* prescribes responses to the events, characters, actions, and situations that it describes, even if no one ever actually responds that way. Part of understanding a work is understanding what attitudes it prescribes towards its central characters and events.

Noël Carroll's account of criterial prefocusing can help us to understand how this happens.<sup>17</sup> According to Carroll, narratives trigger emotions by recreating the conditions that having the emotion would create. And films do this much more immediately than, e.g., literature, by playing directly to our eyes and ears. That is, having an emotion has particular, relatively predictable effects on our attention and perception. When we are afraid, our pupils contract, and we attend to objects in the environment that are conceptualized as threats; when

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<sup>16</sup> Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 182-203.

<sup>17</sup> Noël Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Emotion," in Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (eds.), *Emotion and the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 190-214.



we are happy, our pupils expand, and our environment appears brighter than it would otherwise. The film camera can approximate these conditions, zooming in closely with a trembling camera to prompt fear, or dollying out and filling the frame to light to suggest joy. Similar effects can be achieved with sound (think of the *Jaws* theme). Criterial prefocusing takes advantage of the perceptual/attentive character of ordinary emotions in order to put viewers in the situation they would be if they already felt the emotion; this in turn can trigger the viewer to have the emotion itself.

When criterial prefocusing is coupled with central imagining, we use the character's experiences and position, and the pieces of the environment to which she attends in order to generate our own emotional responses, which may or may not be identical to the character's. It's a kind of emotional reverse-engineering. In seeing how the world would look if I were sad, I become sad.<sup>18</sup> (Again, exactly which filmic techniques produce the look and feel of a given emotion remains a difficult question.)

This cannot be the complete picture, however. Criterial prefocusing works shot by shot or scene by scene. The question of what the film *as a whole* prescribes us to feel is a more difficult one. Just because we are made to feel joy or triumph for a character's achievement in one scene, we are not thereby entitled to conclude that the film as a whole asks us to feel that way. What a film prescribes us to feel must be a complex product of what are prescribed to feel in each scene. But we cannot arrive at this product simply by aggregating these individual responses; we must interpret the film as a work of art. If critical pluralism – the view that there is more than one correct way to understand an artwork – is true, there is no way to say what a

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Eckman has shown a very similar result with facial expressions. If we make the facial expression characteristic of an emotion, we also tend to experience other bodily changes typical of that emotion. See "Expression and the Nature of Emotion," in Klaus R. Scherer and Paul Ekman (eds.), *Approaches to Emotion* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1984), pp. 324-28.

film, taken as a whole, prescribes us to feel.<sup>19</sup> To say that a film prescribes a specific attitude seems to presuppose that there is only one correct interpretation of any work. (It is not necessary that we have easy epistemological access to the right interpretation, just that there is only one we could know.) This is a problem I return to in the next section.

On the other hand, this problem rarely confronts the average viewer when she goes to see a film. In the large majority of cases it is quite clear what the film means us to feel about its characters. There is no serious question about whether we are meant to cheer for Rocky Balboa or Apollo Creed in *Rocky* (1976). However, there are a few interesting cases where a carefully constructed film prescribes ambiguous and conflicting responses to the main characters. Influential examples include not only *M*, but also Mike Nichols' *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966), Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), and Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* (1997). These films refuse to offer us a traditional protagonist with whom we can sympathize and for whom we can hope; or they do offer us a sympathetic protagonist, but that sympathy is counter-balanced by a sense of alienation from or disgust towards the protagonist. Such films prescribe conflicting responses to their characters.

## 2. Conflict and Fritz Lang's *M*

Not just any two differing emotional responses count as *conflicted* in this sense, of course. Any narrative film will evoke a variety of differing emotions over the course of the film. Normally, these emotions flow together following a more or less predictable arc, for example, from hope to fear to triumph. And many films also evoke multiple emotions more or less at the same time, but directed at different objects: one feels concern for a hero's safety, and at the same

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion, see Robert Stecker, "Interpretation," in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 244-45.

time resentment towards the villain, for example. But such differing emotions are not in conflict because they are separated temporally or intentionally.

The sort of emotional conflict I have in mind is one in which the work as a whole directs the audience to feel more than one emotion at a time towards the very same object (typically the main character or central event), and where these emotions have opposing valences (such as sadness and joy) or invite inconsistent judgments (e.g., that an event is both fortunate and to be regretted). So understood, cases of emotional conflict are relatively rare: the conventions of Hollywood film favor relatively clear and unambiguous sympathy with the protagonist's emotional responses, and often the mere fact that a film belongs in a particular genre dictates which emotions it is proper to take towards the main character or event.<sup>20</sup> Satires provoke ridicule and sometimes disdain; comedies sympathetic affection; tragedies fear and pity. Films thrive on conflict, but most conventional narrative structures require resolving this conflict, and by the end few films leave us feeling truly conflicted about how to feel about the characters and situations they depict. (In fact, sometimes a film that produces conflict is deemed a failure for that reason – it seems to want us to like a character, but it ends up provoking contempt.) In other cases the prescribed emotional responses are complex and layered, but not quite conflicted: we feel both disgust and pity towards the Monster in Kenneth Branagh's *Frankenstein* (1994), but the scale clearly tips in favor of pity.

The films that prescribe, that set out to generate, emotional conflict, are interesting: why would they want to do this, how could such mixed responses be desirable? There is perhaps no more famous and influential example of a film that leaves us feeling uncertain how to feel than

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<sup>20</sup> See Noël Carroll, "Film, Emotion, and Genre," in Plantinga and Smith (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 21-47.

Fritz Lang's first sound film, *M* (1931), which is often regarded by critics as the greatest German film ever made.<sup>21</sup>

Fritz Lang himself also regarded *M* as his best film. It is of interest for many reasons: it makes striking use of the combination of sound and image (it is the first film to use the operatic technique of *leitmotif*), seeming at times to privilege sound *over* image; it has been understood both as an argument for and against the death penalty; it has the outward appearance of a serial-killer thriller/mystery, a sub-genre that was familiar in 1931 and is still popular today, while subverting the traditional ending; and it is seen by many as an analysis of the dissolution of the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism.<sup>22</sup>

The plot of *M* is suggested by its original title, "Murderers among Us" [*Mörder unter uns*].<sup>23</sup> Most of the film consists of two parallel searches for a serial killer and (it is implied) pederast, Hans Beckert, played by Peter Lorre. The official search is conducted by the police, and it employs the methods of modern criminology, including handwriting analysis and fingerprinting. The second search is conducted by a group of gangsters whose criminal enterprises have been disrupted by the police search; the latter search makes use of beggars and a network of street informers, and it is this search that succeeds first. Though Lang always denied it, the film's story has been widely seen as a comment on the case of Peter Kürten, the serial killer of Düsseldorf, who was arrested only a few months before filming began; the film was released in the weeks between Kürten's trial and his execution. A great deal of the

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<sup>21</sup> See Todd Herzog, "Fritz Lang's *M* (1931): An Open Case," in Noah Isenberg (ed.), *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 291-309, esp. p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> See Herzog (op. cit.), Kaes (op. cit.), and Tom Gunning, "M: The City Haunted by Demonic Desire," in his *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), pp. 163-199.

<sup>23</sup> Kaes (op. cit.), p. 15.

contemporary discussion of the film focused on its apparent connection to the Kürten case, and in particular the film was cited in discussions for and against the death penalty.

However, the element of the film that is most remarkable for our purposes is the film's emotional relationship to its main characters. The film has a huge cast of mostly unnamed characters, and the camera roves all over the city. For much of the film, our imagining is acentral. But there are perhaps four characters whom we are prompted to follow and attend: Frau Beckmann, mother of Elsie, who is murdered in the opening sequence; Lohmann, the police inspector; Schränker, the gangster; and Beckert, the murderer.

The Beckmanns' story frames the film. Elsie's murder (though it is not Beckert's first) begins the film, and Elsie's mother features prominently in the opening sequence. Curiously, she disappears from the film after Elsie's death. But she returns in the final minute of the film, when, in mourning, she delivers its final lines. So Frau Beckmann serves as a kind of bookend to the film, but we spend little time with her, and so she is not the target of our central imagining (at least for the bulk of the film). She provides a moral, but not an emotional, center to the film.

The chief police inspector, Karl Lohmann, is the protagonist of a later Lang film, *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), but he has a much smaller and less sympathetic role here, and is not shown in a flattering light. The gangsters chant "Loh - mann" in a teasing tone - and it is clear he is not respected by ordinary citizens either. (There is a scene mid-way through the film in which Lohmann is shot from below as he sits back in his chair; we look up from under his desk at his gut - the effect is rather unpleasant.) We do not get much opportunity or incentive to imagine his inner life. His opposite, Der Schränker, is the lead gangster. Schränker is portrayed as ruthless villain, and a murderer himself, not as an object for the audience's concern and attention. He is also given relatively little screen time, at least until the final scene.

The killer, Hans Beckert, appears only briefly (mostly in shadows and mirrors) in the first part of the film, and has little dialogue until the penultimate sequence of the film. Nonetheless, he is the character who comes closest to being the film's protagonist, and is certainly the target of our central imagining more than any other character. For the first part of the film, we seem to be prompted to fear and loathe Beckert. In his first appearance, we hear him, but we see only his shadow over the word "Mörder" on a police warning poster, as he leans down to talk to the little girl, Elsie Beckmann, whom he later kills. Elsie and her mother are portrayed sympathetically, and though the murder is not shown, the camera lingers on Elsie's ball and balloon, which have been left behind. Next, we see Beckert's hands, but not his face, while he writes a letter. The first time we see his face, we see it in the mirror, as he makes grotesque faces while another character (shown in cross-cutting), a police expert, offers a psychological profile of Beckert based on his handwriting. It is not until the extended sequence in the second half of the film, when the gangsters pursue and ultimately abduct him, that we are able to see him at all for any length of time, and by this point, Beckert is more easily seen sympathetically, as he is hounded by ruthless criminals. From this point on, we also are shown more of the events of the film from Beckert's point of view.

The penultimate sequence in the film, the gangsters' kangaroo court, complicates our emotional relationship to Beckert. It is critical to the film's confounding our usual preference for seeing Beckert as either monster or victim. The scene begins with Beckert being shoved, backwards, down a flight of stairs. Then we are offered a long, silent point of view shot that pans slowly (more than twenty seconds) across the cellar, where we see hundreds seated, staring at Beckert. Most are men, but a few mothers are represented as well. A trial begins, with Schränker acting as both judge and prosecutor. The sequence is long and detailed. Through much of it, Beckert pleads directly to the camera, or just beyond it, to the gangster jury;

he fills the frame. When shown the balloon that he bought for Elsie Beckmann, and, later, photographs of the children he has killed, he reels backward, terrified. Beckert is panicked; he shouts, trembles, his eyes bulge; finally, he collapses on the ground, and his defense counsel takes over. His defense is compulsion: he is driven to kill by an external force, a demon that haunts him. He only feels relief from this pressure when he kills (he rolls his eyes in ecstasy as he recounts this), but he does not recall the killings.

Beckert's claim not to be in control of himself is reinforced visually: he is presented as a puppet. Three times during the scene an arm reaches out to take hold of him from outside the frame: first the blind man, who identifies him by touch; second, the lawyer, who reaches out to reassure him; and finally Lohmann, who pulls him up, bringing the kangaroo trial to a close. These movements suggest that Beckert is manipulated by unseen others, reinforcing his claims of helplessness.

But there are also elements in the sequence that suggest sympathy with his victims, and which prompt anger towards Beckert. For example, the reaction shots of the gangster jury include an extended shot of a pair of women (it is not clear if they are mothers of murdered children) clinging to one another, sad and angry. And Beckert's claims of madness and compulsion are hard to square with his actions in an earlier scene, when he writes a letter to the police, taunting them.

The final scene of the film complicates matters further. After the police seize Beckert and end the kangaroo trial, we are shown two shots: first of a law court, where judges sit and we hear the phrase "In the name of the people." Then we are shown a shot of grieving mothers in black, including Frau Beckmann. She says: "This will not bring our children back. We must keep a close watch on our children." Then, over a black screen, she calls out: "All of us!" Most critics and audiences find the ending quite puzzling. Though most assume that Beckert was

sentenced to death, nothing is made explicit. And the moral Beckmann offers seems shallow and a bit tacked-on. The final scene does little to help us figure out how we should feel about Beckert.

The first half of the film prompts us to fear and to loathe Beckert, but it accomplishes this while Beckert himself is largely offscreen. Much of our imagining in the first part of the film is acentral (though there are important exceptions, as with Elsie and her mother). Those chasing Beckert (Lohmann and Schränker) are not presented as objects for our central imagining, so the film curiously does not do much to prescribe strong antipathetic feelings towards Beckert. And when Beckert does take center stage in the second part of the film, *M* does a great deal to produce ambivalent responses in its audience. In the end we loathe Beckert, and we also pity him.

That the film prompts conflicting responses is further evidenced by the Nazi responses to the film. Goebbels loved the film, and thought that it was an eloquent argument for the death penalty. He believed that no one could see the film and have sympathy for Beckert. A few years later, however, footage from the trial scene was used in a Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda film, *The Eternal Jew* [*Der ewige Jude*] (1941).<sup>24</sup> The fact that Lorre, who was himself Jewish, portrayed a child killer in what the producers took to be a sympathetic manner, was intended to suggest the moral corruption of Jews in general. The Nazi propagandists seemed to be deeply confused about how to feel about the film.

In setting out the film this way I have of course endorsed a particular interpretation of the film, and others read it differently. Some even read the film as unambiguously endorsing a sympathetic feeling towards the murderer. There are two responses to this line of thinking: first, the sum of evidence in the film, as I have tried to suggest, tends to discredit this theory, and

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion, see Kaes (*op. cit.*), pp. 71-73.



indeed insofar as there is a critical consensus about *M*, it tends to endorse the view that the film's sympathies towards Beckert are divided, or perhaps suspended.<sup>25</sup> Second, one might agree that both interpretations are plausible, so it is simply indeterminate what the film is supposed to make us feel. If this were the case, then the ambivalence that accompanies *M* would not be as unusual as we had assumed: many films would have multiple plausible interpretations, some of which have us admiring a character and others of which have us hating her, and all such films would then leave us conflicted.

### 3. Rationalizing emotion

The first question one might ask after watching a film like *M* is whether one's conflicted responses towards Beckert need to be resolved somehow. Must one obliterate the pity to make room for the loathing? Is it in general *required* that opposing emotions towards the same object be made consistent? Or, more weakly, do we have any *good reason* to want to resolve the tension inherent in the opposing emotions that films like *M* can produce?

Certainly there are many real-world contexts in which it would be a very good idea to resolve conflicted feelings. If the presence of such conflict could inhibit our ability to choose whether to perform an action – should I attend my uncle's dinner party, given my ambivalence about his moral character? – then we have reason to work through these feelings, and try to bring them to some kind of conclusion. But feelings about fictional characters or even about entire artworks rarely present us with this kind of dilemma. We might wonder about whether to see the film again, for example, but decisions about what films to see, or what DVDs to buy, are relatively trivial, morally and prudentially speaking, and have little real import in the vast

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<sup>25</sup> See the surveys of critical opinion in Herzog (*op. cit.*), pp. 303-306.

majority of cases. Practical reason normally does not give us a very strong reason to resolve our conflicted feelings about films.

There is of course the possibility that the conflict may be experienced as psychological discomfort. Conflicted feelings can be unpleasant, and can cause worry. We can, then, work to resolve the conflict because we wish to avoid the attendant discomfort. Some of us might desire to decide, once and for all, whether we ought to pity Beckert or not, because we find the uncertainty bothersome. Ted Cohen has written about the widespread desire to make one's aesthetic likes and dislikes consistent – to like the appropriation of folk music in Copland if one likes similar uses of folk music in Liszt, or to at least to be able to explain why not.<sup>26</sup> And there may be something similar going on with conflicted feelings about a single artwork. Perhaps some of us will desire to know how to feel about Beckert. But not everyone will be so troubled. The psychological suffering (if it can be called such) is so slight in the typical case that it can hardly be described as giving us a *reason* to resolve the conflict, particularly if (as I argue in the next section) that conflict generates something of value.

The problem is a little more difficult for cognitivists than it is for Jamesians. If the cognitivists are right, then to have conflicting emotions towards an object is to have conflicting, and thus inconsistent, beliefs. And that would give us some basis to think that there is a *rational requirement* to make our emotions, and thus our beliefs, harmonious. *M* prescribes that we both loathe and pity Beckert. Perhaps to loathe someone implies a judgment that the person is unworthy of mercy, and to pity someone is to think them worthy of mercy. In this case, it seems that we do indeed have a contradiction, and thus a strong rational requirement to

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<sup>26</sup> Ted Cohen, "On Consistency in One's Personal Aesthetics," in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 106-125.

abandon or revise one of these emotions. (That is, assuming we are metaethical cognitivists, and agree that normative judgments are beliefs in the strong sense.<sup>27</sup>)

However, even contradictory beliefs may co-exist in situations of limited confidence. It is not inconsistent to believe with 0.5 confidence that it will rain tomorrow, and also to believe with 0.5 confidence that it will not. And the conflicted loathing and pity that films like *M* produce are half-hearted, or uncertain. (That is why it sometimes makes more sense to describe us as suspended between emotions than as feeling both.) We are not certain that Beckert deserves mercy; we are not certain he deserves punishment. We are made to feel the strength of the evidence that supports each of these views. *M* does not prescribe two emotions that cannot be consistently held at the same time, since our confidence in each is less than full.

It seems to be the case that we are not normally rationally required to resolve conflicted emotions about film. We may have some reasons to want to resolve them (if they cause psychological discomfort, or if we have to make decisions about what films to see or to recommend), but these practical reasons are relatively weak. Still, the absence of a compelling reason to resolve emotional conflict is not the presence of a reason to hang onto it. Unless there is something valuable in emotional conflict, many of us may choose to avoid films that produce it.

#### 4. The value of emotional conflict

Emotional responses to works of art are widely held to be valuable cognitively, morally, and aesthetically.<sup>28</sup> They can be cognitively valuable for a variety of reasons. They can help us

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<sup>27</sup> For example, expressivists such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard think that normative judgments are beliefs only in a derivative sense. Primarily, they are expressions of attitudes. See Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Gibbard, Allan, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

to better understand and even control our own emotions. Jenefer Robinson, for example, has argued that through the appreciation of art we both experience emotion and make that emotion the object of our contemplative attention.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, we change our conceptions of the world and our attention to it. Others argue that central imagining of characters in artworks can confer phenomenal knowledge of what it is like to live a certain kind of life, or to have a kind of experience.<sup>30</sup> Emotional engagement is an important part of this knowledge; phenomenal knowledge is a source of emotional response, but caring for the character and her situation can also be a motive for prolonged central imagining.

Emotions in response to film can be *morally* valuable for similar reasons: knowing what it is like to be another person can make us more sensitive to moral particulars, can give us the skills to cultivate moral virtues, and more. Martha Nussbaum writes (discussing literature, but we might claim the same for film):

The point is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly – whereas much of our actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is, thus, in a certain sense, not fully or thoroughly lived.<sup>31</sup>

If art can make us *feel* what another's life is like, then this knowledge has obvious moral value. Noël Carroll argues that works of art can clarify our moral beliefs through engaging us

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<sup>28</sup> Of course, philosophical agreement on these points is not universal. Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen, for example, dispute the claim that artworks are valuable because of what we learn from them. See Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, "Fiction, Literature, and Value," Chapter 17 of their *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 440-456.

<sup>29</sup> Jenefer Robinson, (1995). "L'Education Sentimentale," in Stephen Davies (ed.), *Art and Its Messages: Meaning, Morality, and Society* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press), pp. 34-48; and Chapter 6, "A Sentimental Education," from her *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 154-194.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Matthew Kieran, "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism," in José Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner (eds.), *Art and Morality* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 56-73.

<sup>31</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," in her *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 47.

emotionally with characters. They offer insight into the meanings of moral principles, “possibly spotlighting a heretofore unrecognized application of their precepts.”<sup>32</sup> He calls this view “clarificationism.”

All of these cognitive and moral goods might also be counted as aesthetic goods. Cognitivism and ethicism are, respectively, the views that cognitive and moral goods in art constitute *pro tanto* aesthetic merits.<sup>33</sup> And we may in addition count the *pleasure* of the emotional responses themselves as an aesthetic good. The triumph one feels at the end of a film in which the protagonist overcomes adversity is a source of enormous pleasure and energy. Even negative emotions, as has often been noted in the cases of tragedy and horror, can be a source of pleasure in experiencing art, though it is quite hard to say why this is so.<sup>34</sup>

In each of these cases, however, it may be a bit harder to see why two or more conflicting emotional responses would have value. Conflicted feelings leave us feeling as though we do *not* understand the character or the events; conflict does not clarify moral principles, so much as muddy them; and conflicting emotions often cause frustration rather than exhilaration. If conflicted emotions are valuable, it must be for somewhat different reasons than emotions are usually thought valuable.

Conflicted emotions in response to art are valuable, I think, because they remind us of our epistemic limitations and of the messiness of moral and social life. People are hard to understand and moral problems are very hard to resolve, sometimes intractable. Often we fail

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<sup>32</sup> Carroll, *op. cit.* (1998), p. 327. See also his “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002), pp. 3-26.

<sup>33</sup> See Berys Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art,” in Levinson, *op. cit.* (1998), pp. 182-203; and his “Art and Knowledge,” in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 436-450.

<sup>34</sup> The literature on both topics is large. On tragedy, see Alex Neill, “Tragedy,” in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 363-74; on horror, see Carroll, *op. cit.* (1990), pp. 159-194.

to know how to feel about others. It is not always clear whether our failure to understand and to resolve our ambivalence about how to feel about someone or something is our fault – a result of our epistemic limitations – or the consequence of living in a world where answers to such questions are simply not available, even in principle.

A certain amount of skepticism about the possibility of knowing whether to loathe or pity Beckert is *healthy*. It is healthy for some of the same reasons that Russell thought that studying philosophy is healthy: it humbles us; it exposes our limits.<sup>35</sup> Problems like the ones presented in *M* about moral responsibility and free will are not easy ones, and that a film prescribes that we be suspended between attitudes is instructive. Perhaps there is no right answer about how to feel towards people like Beckert, or, more weakly, perhaps we are rarely in a position to know it. Trying to imagine Beckert's inner life is a project that is bound to fail (at least for most of us), so it would be a flaw if the film made doing so easy. There are sound philosophical reasons to doubt whether all our moral questions have answers, and good epistemic reason to doubt that ordinary people can always find them even if they do exist. Mixed feelings, in the end, are the appropriate response to an uncertain world.

Conflicted emotions in response to film, then, are valuable as a skeptical antidote to the whitewashed epistemic optimism of most films (and indeed most art) in which we are very clearly instructed whom to hate and whom to admire. James Shelley has argued, in his analysis of the pleasures of tragedy, that we can find relief in being forced to face the harsh realities of tragic events, because it takes psychological effort to push aside the evidence in favor of this stark conclusion.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, skepticism and uncertainty may be difficult to accept, but facing

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<sup>35</sup> See Bertrand Russell, "The Value of Philosophy," Chapter XV of his *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912).

<sup>36</sup> See Shelley, "Imagining the Truth: An Account of Tragic Pleasure," in Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 177-185.

these stark notions, too, can be a source of pleasure and aesthetic worth. It takes some effort to maintain the illusion, required in imaginatively participating in most film's emotional arcs, that there is a straightforward right and wrong way to respond to these people and situations. (Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* is specifically meant to undermine and complicate our simple emotional responses to other films in the Western genre.) There is some *relief* in acknowledging to oneself that the world is not a simple place, and that serious moral problems do not always have simple answers.