

Evaluating The Prospects of the Third Culture: Some Thoughts on Murray Smith's Naturalized Aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Murray Smith's proposal of building 'the third culture', a research paradigm that unites sciences and the humanities. While I am sympathetic to Smith's proposal, exemplified in what he calls naturalized aesthetics, I argue that it is lacking in two respects: by not giving a proper account of the spectators' moral engagements with films, and by ignoring a wider social nature and cultural embeddedness of spectators' artistic experiences.

Keywords: Film, Moral emotions, Murray Smith, Naturalized aesthetics.

1. Smith's Research Paradigm

And since human nature is by nature social and cultural, so our experience, psychology, and neuropsychology must in important ways be shaped by the social forces and cultural traditions in which we operate.

(Smith 2017: 79)

A lot of criticism has been directed at Murray Smith's project of building "the third culture", a research paradigm that unites natural sciences and humanities.¹ Exemplified in his account of naturalized aesthetics, Smith applies the principles of the third culture to his analysis of film, looking to explain how "distinctive aesthetic and artistic phenomena emerge from the general features of evolved human behavior and cognition" (2017: 154). Philosophers in particular were of the opinion that Smith has not done enough to show the place of aesthetics within the third culture. Most of the criticism echoed David Davies' views, according to

¹ See in particular papers addressing the book in *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 2, 2 2018.

which relying on insights from natural sciences is either irrelevant (in that it does not tell us anything new about art) or misdirected, as it does not address those questions that we ultimately want to know, namely, questions regarding norms and values that underlie our artistic practices.

On my part, I was not too concerned with Smith's apparent failure to address these questions, praising a vast amount of insight from natural sciences he brought to his analysis of film, and taking it for granted that the philosophical project of accounting for the normative aspect is not jeopardized by his call for the third culture. I am still of that opinion, even if criticism directed at Smith is not declining—consider, for example, the latest charges at it issued by Malcolm Turvey (2025) who remains seriously pessimistic, though not entirely dismissive, of the prospects of natural sciences to settle some of the key issues within our artistic practices. Regardless of the plausibility of some of the claims he is making, I am still of the opinion that philosophy (and the humanities more generally) work better when combined with other disciplines, mostly for reasons Smith emphasizes.² However, what now strikes me as an issue for Smith's project relates to what I identify as certain omissions within his naturalized aesthetics, which, I argue below, may undermine naturalized aesthetics' capacity to address "practical, theoretical and critical activities undertaken by aestheticians" (Smith 2017: 220).

The omissions I have in mind concern (i) art's relation to ethics, i.e. the extent to which our experience of art, what Smith calls phenomenological aspect, or "how we experience things" (Smith 2017: 11), is colored by a particular moral feel and arguably impacts, and is impacted by, our moral sensibility; and (ii) the social dimension within which our artistic engagements take place. To be fair, as evident in the opening quote, Smith addresses both, ethical and social aspects of our artistic practices, but in neither case does he go as far as he might have—and as far as we might want to go, if we are to understand art "as manifestation of basic human capacities serving fundamental needs" (9). To the extent that Smith is concerned with understanding how "our biologically evolved dispositions" (2017: 159) relate to our artistic experiences, more place should be given to the ethical and social aspect of art and our artistic engagements, given the amount of evolutionary evidence according to which our ethical reactions, as well as our propensity for sociability, have evolutionary basis.³ Let me elaborate.

Not only it is hard to ignore the extent to which ethical questions make the nuts and bolts of narrative art, but the process of moral monitoring seems to be, if not crucial, then at least very important, in our engagement with narrative art and in the act of art criticism and art evaluation.⁴ From the perspective of art makers, addressing particular ethical issues can often take the central stage in their work, and if Smith is right to emphasize the extent to which artmakers mobilize our evolutionary wired emotional tendencies or cognitive capacities, addressing

² See in particular the list of reasons he discusses (84-85).

³ For reasons of space, I can't defend this view here; my approach to these issues is shaped by Patrica Churchland's (2011) research, and, more recently, by Hanno Sauer's (2024) account of the genealogy of our morality.

⁴ The view originates in Noël Carroll, who argues that reading a novel is "generally a moral activity insofar as [...] it involves us in a continuous process of moral judgment" (Carroll 2001: 285). On Margrethe Bruun Vaage's account, this is a dominant view within cognitive film studies: "Moral evaluation has been seen as foundational to our engagement with fiction—it is postulated that the spectator works as an untiring moral monitor throughout her engagement with a story (2016: 1).

instances in which they mobilize our ethical concerns also seems crucial for the project he develops in naturalized aesthetics. We should therefore see whether naturalized aesthetics can tackle the complex relation between art and ethics, i.e. the manner in which ethical consideration feature in our artistic experiences. Surely, Smith does engage with some of the ways in which ethical considerations enter the picture, primarily in discussing emotions, and particularly in his account of empathy. While my aim here is not to challenge his classification of empathy, and I do not discuss the necessity of empathy to morality (or its possible detrimental effect), I explore the role of ethical processing or moral monitoring in our artistic experiences to show that Smith's naturalized aesthetics does not go far enough in recognizing its impact on our engagement with art.

Second, Smith's project falls under individual aesthetics: much like Descartes, who worries about our epistemic agency by contemplating on the evil demon or the misfiring of our perception secluded from the world in his armchair, so too does Smith focus on individual spectator, preoccupied with explaining the aesthetic experiences she has in light of her evolved, human nature, but indifferent to her social and racial background or gender. In adopting this approach in her studies, Margrethe Bruun Vaage claims such a spectator is "abstract theoretical construct [...] a methodological assumption [...] based on the idea that there is such a thing as an intended response to a film" (2016: xiv-xv). Now, while in many ways such methodological construct is common in philosophy, I wonder whether it features well within naturalized aesthetics. In other words, what is missing from Smith's account is the impact of social nature of our artistic engagements on the formation of our aesthetic agency and on the phenomenology of our aesthetic (artistic) experiences. For sure, Smith urges us to recognize the importance of "the interpersonal, social dimension of human cognition" (2017: 50) and he provides an impressive overview of literature on the evolutionary basis of our culture. However, there is a sense in which his aesthetic agent resembles more the methodological construct that Vaage speaks of, than a social being influenced by various social factors and factors related to gender, class or race.⁵ My aim is to show that, given the ambition of naturalized aesthetics and its commitment to triangulation, Smith needs to pay more attention to actual spectators, rather than to abstract, theoretical construct that may well serve methodological purposes, but distracts from actual problems.

2. Art and Ethics: Beyond Emotions, Pass Empathy

The movies are moral through and through.
(Carroll 2013:104)

A substantial part of *Film, art and the third culture* is devoted to emotions, particularly to empathy, and one of the central claims that Smith explores concerns the ways in which films attract the audience by portraying emotions and by inspiring emotions for the characters. Relying on cognitive psychology and neuropsychology, primarily the research on mirror-neurons, Smith does a great job in analyzing

⁵ Putting all of these aspects under the notion of 'social' is not the most precise way to handle this argument, but, for reasons of space, I will talk of the 'impact of the social nature of art on a spectator's phenomenological experience', hoping examples will clarify the point I'm making.

movie-making techniques employed by filmmakers to emphasize characters' emotions, and to show how spectators get emotionally entangled with the characters' emotional states. And needless to say, those familiar with Smith's other work, primarily the hugely influential 'structure of sympathy' developed in great details in his *Engaging characters*, know just how deeply concerned he is with the intricate nature between spectators' ethical concerns and moral sensibility, and their experience of art. And yet, there is a sense in which his naturalized aesthetics, entangled as it with empathy and concerned with representation of emotions, does not pay proper attention to ethical segments of our artistic practices, or the ethical evaluations that viewers make in the process of engagement, where such evaluations are to a great extent the result of our evolved nature, much like our emotional or perceptual ones are.

Consider Smith's analysis of *The Brave One*, which is positioned within the chapter in which he discusses films' capacity to portray particular emotional states, and to do so through "*the totality of the film itself*—the story as it is realized through performance, cinematography, editing, and so forth" (Smith 2017: 211, emphasis original). There is much to recommend here, not only Smith's elaborations on film's distinct capacity to convey the depth and phenomenology of emotional states in ways language can hardly match, but also the implication of his analysis for film's cognitive value, its capacity to show us something about other human beings, about their (and by extension, our) emotions, and about human position in the world.⁶ To the extent that Smith's concern here is to show how films represent particular, individual, singular emotional trajectories, he is right to argue that "the emotional journey that [*The Brave One*] depicts cannot be adequately described using the shorthand of our ordinary emotional vocabulary" (Smith 2017: 211). I agree, but what I would add is that the same is true with respect to what the film does to our moral sense, our sense of right or wrong, and to how it engages us by demanding us to consider such questions. In other words, the claim can easily be made that 'the ethical journey that the film depicts cannot be adequately described using the shorthand of our ethical theories' and that therefore, *the totality of the film itself* does a great job in enlisting our moral response. And, let me add, here within lies a lot of its allure, as does its grip on the viewers. None of that allure however is discussed by Smith—rightly so, perhaps, given the chapter's concern with other themes—but the overall lack of acknowledgment of our ethical aspect of filmic experiences is evident throughout the book.

One reason as to why more attention should be paid to ethics concerns its evolutionary roots: given the centrality of evolution in Smith's account, it is somewhat surprising that our ethical responses to art are ignored. Arguably, the talk of ethics and morality is too extensive to be neatly packed in a naturalized account, and perhaps we may not even have sufficient evidence to argue that our ethical impulse (for the lack of a better word) is to be traced to our evolution.⁷ In addition,

⁶ I emphasize this due to my commitment to aesthetic cognitivism. While Smith does not engage with the cognitive aspect of art, he includes literary Darwinism (LD) as part of his naturalized aesthetics. It would be interesting to see his views on how LD fares with respect to debates on the cognitive value of art.

⁷ Interestingly, Patrick Hogan (2022), whose theory about emotional responses and empathy to literary works is strikingly similar to Smith's theory, is a fierce critic of evolutionary theories and their explanatory power, relying on other mechanism (mostly emotional) to explain the roots of our ethical engagements with works of art and real-world issues. For reasons of space, I will not engage with his theory here.

ethical responses vary greatly—perhaps such variations are too extensive to allow for a single unified theory of how our evolved nature gives rise to our ethical concerns, moral judgments and reasoning, and to explain how these concerns shape our responses to films. However, if our evolutionary designed cognitive and emotional make up is indeed as central to our artistic experiences as Smith argues it is, then the question of evolutionary roots of our ethical responses to art should be considered. Carroll and Vaage explain why.

Consider first Carroll's theory. Dismissive of the notion of empathy, mostly because "it is exceedingly ambiguous and ultimately too confusing" while it also means „many different things to different people" (2013: 61), Carroll offers an alternative explanation as to why we are taken in by fictional characters and why the emotional responses we develop for them are 'the ties that bind us' to the work. Yes, emotions matter, and likely so in quite the way Smith explains, but what Carroll emphasizes and what is underdeveloped (and unaddressed) by Smith is the evolutionary basis of our moral interest for the characters, an interest triggered and sustained by the particularities of narration. As Carroll argues, at least some of the ties that bind us with the characters have their roots in the particular set of *moral* emotions that films elicit, where these emotions are not necessarily inspired by different kinds of empathy that Smith elaborates on, but by the way in which a given film invokes our basic, evolutionary designed sense of morality related to four different ethical concerns: human welfare, issues of justice, communal life, and purity.⁸ In other words, even without putting ourselves in Erika's shoes, or imagining what it feels like to lose someone we love, or experiencing the horror she experiences when she and David are attacked by perceiving her facial expressions, we can 'feel for her' because we recognize the moral harm done to her. By putting her character in a narrative scenario in which she is attacked, separated from the loved one, and in pursuit of justice, filmmakers inspire our moral sense, which to a great extent determines our engagement with the work and the sympathy we feel for Erika—and, let me add, influences spectators' response to the emotional trajectory that Smith argues this film delivers in the quote above. Ethical response is, on my view, at the core of this emotional trajectory.

My argument is inspired by Vaage's analysis of the importance of our evolutionary shaped emotions in our engagements with rape-revenge fantasies.⁹ In her profound analysis of the spectators' (primarily female) experience of rape revenge, she draws on moral psychology and evolutionary psychology to explain how our evolutionary designed emotions of rage and a desire for vengeance shape the phenomenology of our filmic experiences and inspire the pleasure that these brutal movies provide. *The Brave One* may not fall neatly under this category—Erika is not raped, and the film does not take a turn from realism to science fiction as do films that Vaage is interested in. Also, while Erika experiences a lot of redemptive anger, it is not her anger that is central to the story—as Smith argues, it is her sense of alienation. I would suggest however, and this is why I think Erika fits

⁸ See Carroll (2001; 2013). Carl Plantinga develops a similar account of how our emotions are triggered by narrative patterns that feed into our basic *moral* concerns; in some of his work he relies on Jonathan Haidt's distinction between other-condemning emotions, other-praising, self-conscious and other-suffering. (Plantinga 2018: 45).

⁹ Vaage (2024). See also Vaage's (2016) account of how the evolutionary based emotions of in-group loyalty impacts our engagements with antiheroes.

Vaage's paradigm, that Erika's attempt to come to terms with her vigilantism is central to the story: alienation that Smith discusses develops as a consequence of traumatic experience she suffered, first in being a victim and losing her finance, and then in becoming a vigilante, whereby she not only feels she has lost herself (as if her true character died in the attack) but is forced to face the other within herself (and act which seems just as traumatic for her as she no longer recognizes herself). On my suggestion, one cannot get the story if one does not consider the moral aspect of Erika's position, as that position is crucial for understanding Erika's actions, her alienation, her reflections in the voice-over and the kind of relation that develops between her and a detective who lets her have her revenge on her tormentors and protects her from facing legal consequences of her actions. More precisely, one can follow the story and see Erika take her revenge, but without acknowledging the moral issues that the film is raising, it seems implausible to say that one has really experienced the complexities of this film or its emotional trajectory. A spectator's aesthetic experience is too entangled with ethical concerns regarding the moral status of Erika's actions and if one misses those concerns, one has not engaged with the film in all of its complexities, and it is unlikely that such a viewer will register the emotional trajectory Smith discusses or understand its roots.¹⁰

This reasoning, about the importance of ethical concerns that impact our experience of films, applies to other examples that Smith discusses. Consider *Half Nelson*, a film which does not present an obvious moral dilemma or a moral challenge, but depicts a slow deterioration of Dun's character, caused for the most part by his drug abuse. Smith, rightly, highlights this film's capacity to portray a particular kind of emotional state (metaphorically captured by the title itself). Again however, on my view, this emotional state is bound with deeper ethical concerns that arise (for the viewer more than for the protagonists) in the course of watching. The film does not show how Dun's downfall began or how the particular social factors brought Drey's family to its knees; rather, it follows the characters around, portraying them in the aftermath of these events, referencing the wider familial and social context within which they have to operate. It is precisely in doing so that the film makes us wonder about the social conditions and personal choices that determine our lives and shape our character, asking, perhaps when is a particular way of life worth living, and showing us—to use Wittgenstein's notion of how to do philosophy—the frailty of our existence. The 'half nelson' emotion, I feel, develops as a consequence of recognizing one's limits to live the life as one wants to. Recognition of existential and social issues the film addresses gives rise to spectators' emotions and that is why we can praise the film for depicting it in such a vivid way.¹¹

¹⁰ As an aesthetic cognitivist I would argue that the film shows how trauma can affect one and change one's character (given Smith's insightful analysis of the ways in which narratives can foster what he calls "extended imagining" developed in ch.7, he might agree). Readers interested in this question can benefit from Vaage's (2024) account, focused on her belief that rape-revenge can be politically important given what it says about the trauma of rape and female rage. I come back to this below.

¹¹ My analysis here echoes Peter Lamarque's (1981) account of the paradox of fiction, according to which, when we have emotional reaction to fictional characters, we react to distinctive thoughts we develop in response to a particular kind of description provided by the work's creator. I want to emphasize the relation between emotions and ethical con-

Ethical concerns are also lurking in *The International*, another of Smith's examples. As the film unfolds, it becomes obvious that Salinger's dilemma—to play by the rules or to go outside the law—has less to do with the generic conventions of action movies and more to do with inviting viewers to consider the issue for themselves, particularly against the brief but captivating dialogue between Salinger and Wilhelm Wexler on the futility of individual actions in the face of organized criminal actions which operate under the pretense of political and social institutions—for otherwise, how are we to account for the final moments of the film, which, in the form of newspaper titles, show us that Salinger's choice indeed was futile, as predicted.¹² Perhaps the point of Salinger's anger, constantly emphasized in the film through dialogues and Clive Owen's facial expression, serves more as an invitation to the viewer to share in that ethical questions than to empathize with his moral righteousness. On my account, it is the acknowledgment of these issues that inspire an anger-like emotions in viewers more than facial mimicry of close up shots of Owen's character.

Carroll and Vaage offer convincing accounts of how ethical evaluations matter to our viewing experiences, but I want to suggest that our ethical concerns matter even if we do not consider them to be related to moral emotions developed for the characters. Arguably, as Carroll's (and Plantinga's 2018) analysis makes clear, films are for the most part narratively structured so as to invoke relevant *moral* emotions. My intuition however is that we have interest in films even when emotional relation toward the protagonists is less dominant: as I argued elsewhere (Vidmar Jovanović 2023) cognitive interest in the story, inclusive of the ethical issues that it raises (together with the overall aesthetic desire to experience aesthetic experiences) may be just as powerful a glue as interest in the characters. It is in this respect that moral monitoring is important—not because it is related to moral emotions per se but to our cognitive interests in ethical concerns (where this interest again has evolutionary roots for reasons discussed by Vaage and Sauer and it surpasses emotional ties developed to secure the alliance with the characters).

In claiming this, my intention is not to discuss whether our interest in stories is itself evolutionary based and whether it has adaptive benefits, or to debate the relation between emotions and ethics; only to argue that we cannot ignore ethical concerns when we discuss the nature of our engagement with films within the paradigm of naturalized aesthetics.¹³ In the next part I offer further reasons for this claim.

cerns, in the sense that particular ethical concerns that the film inspires in the spectator contribute to the emotions she develops (Ben ze'ev's (2000) account of emotions supports the link I'm making here). I think this argument works even if the recognition of these issues and development of emotions is simultaneous and the two are mutually reinforcing. What matters for my account it that ethical issues matter for the kind of aesthetic experience we have, and for the way in which we respond to the film.

¹² Emphasizing the ethical aspect of the film fits with the architecture featured in the film, which is central to Smith's analysis. If the architecture represents a perfectly designed spider web that Salinger is trying to escape, then, on my view, that spider web is the perfectly designed system of corruption that an individual cannot escape and within which individual struggles' are futile—hence the reference to Ela's role in investigating IBBC bank in the film's closing sequences, an endeavor we now know to be futile.

¹³ Given Vaage's notion of fictional relief, one may argue that her account does not support the claim I am making here; however, in her work on antiheroes and on female avenger,

3. On The Social Character of Our Filmic Experiences: Beyond Individual Aesthetic Agent and Spectator as A Construct

Artistic practices play a central role in sustaining white supremacy.
(Clavel Vazquez 2023: 677)

The social turn in aesthetics takes several different forms. Following Nicholas Wolterstorff (2015), we can explore social practices of art and forms of art meant to be experienced in company with others. Following Nick Riggle (2022), we can recognize the importance of our aesthetic life, and see how it impacts an individual and her wider social surrounding. It is also illuminating to consult the work of Anthony Cross (2024) and explore our aesthetic communities and the phenomenology of our joint aesthetic experiences—with respect to film, Julian Hanich (2017) explores how movies unite otherwise diverse spectators and keep them committed to the same object. On the other hand, we can follow Patrick Hogan (2016) and explore how individual aesthetic preferences and one's overall capacity to make aesthetic judgments are determined by the publically available artistic examples, and how they relate to our affective memories and emotional attachments. Interesting also is the account of Rebecca Williams (2015) and other scholars who explore fandom and explain how participation in the fan community relates to one's sense of ontological stability and formation of one's identity. And once we are considering the relation between art and identity, a particularly concerning claim comes from scholars working at the intersection of aesthetics and critical race theory, according to which “artworks wield significant power in consolidating patterns of oppression by providing dehumanizing narratives that shape how racialized agents are perceived, how their actions are interpreted, and how they engage with sociohistorical circumstances” (Clavel-Vazquez 2023: 677).

For reasons of space, I can't engage with any of these claims in particular; but I rely on the general idea underpinning these accounts—that of the importance of recognizing how the social dimension impacts our artistic experiences—to draw attention to another aspect of our art practices that remains undeveloped in Smith. What I have in mind concerns the way in which an individual's experience of film (Smith's phenomenological level) is determined by various processes that go on in one's social environment and in our aesthetic/artistic interactions with others. One consequence of these claims, which is not my main concern here, relates to the evolutionary roots of human sociability and the question of art's contribution to it. Perhaps Kant was right in arguing that we have a natural impulse to sociability and that art has a significant role in bringing people together (analogous to the role that taste has for communal moral progress). Pursuing this line would bring us back to issues of evolutionary roots of our artistic practices and to the question of their presupposed adaptive function. For all the criticism issued at this line of research, I side with scholars who think that our aesthetic impulse is not accidental and who invite further research on the question of art's origin. Here however I leave that aside and turn instead to another consequences of the social nature of our art practices.

As numerous philosophers and scholars—think of bell hooks (1992), Paul Tylor (2016), Dan Flory (2008), James Harold (2023)—indicate, our affiliation

Vaage makes a point of insisting on the ethical dimension of these works, thus indirectly supporting my claim.

with a particular social and/or racial group has a huge impact on how we approach and experience art. Harold (2023) shows one way in which this matters, in discussing audience's role in constructing meanings. Relying on Jaqueline Bobo and hook's analysis of Black female spectators' experience of *Color Purple*, he shows how, due to the portrayal of black women in cinema, these spectators are not getting the same kind of enjoyment (or meaning) from movies as white audience and need to adjust their interpretations through the process hooks calls oppositional viewing.¹⁴ Similarly, feminist critics have often discussed differences in engagement with films such as *Thelma and Louise*, where some saw the two heroines as "toxic and immoral" while "female respondents expressed a desire to be like them" (Vaage 2024: 101). With respect to films that portray rape, it seems that male audience mostly fail to register the seriousness of sexual violence, some even to the point of voyeuristically enjoying an act of rape itself, which drastically contradicts the experience of female spectators. However, even with such cases we cannot discuss a difference between 'male and female experience', since spectator's race can also be a relevant factor, as Vaage's (2024: 114) analysis of black female spectators' experience of the portrayal of a rape of a white woman in *The Accused* indicates, as can the race of the fictionalized rape victim (as indicated by Vaage's (2024) analysis of *The Nightingale*).

Arguably, these examples show that the patterns of empathy cannot be neatly formalized along the lines suggested by Smith, since spectators will focus on different aspects of film and interpret them differently, to a great extent due to their race, sex, gender, nationality, etc. In light of such diversity of spectators' responses to films, it is questionable if the model designed by Smith, regarding the patterns of perceptual and emotional engagement with the film, can ignore social, racial and other kinds of features, such as gender, of the spectators, and of the fictionalized agents. More to the point, while my intention in the previous section was to show that there is a deeper connection between our ethical concerns and our artistic experiences, and that this connection should be accounted for by naturalized aesthetics due to its commitment to evolutionary basis of our mind, here I point to some of the issues that arise given Smith's commitment to 'the spectator' as a methodological construct, i.e. given the fact that he is downplaying the influence of social, racial etc. factors on our engagements with films. This shows that Smith's insights into 'how films work' cannot be taken as the norm of our viewing experiences in the sense that individual differences in processing films can matter more than naturalized aesthetics at this point recognizes and accommodates.

The question we are left with is, can we have any general theoretical account of how films work, or whether we can only address individual spectator (or groups of spectators who are sufficiently similar with whatever aspects we think are im-

¹⁴ We can extend this argument and suggest that the experience of Black audience may differ from the experience of White audience, with respect to *The Brave One* and *Half Nelson*, as in both cases the criminals are black. As Flory's (2008) analysis suggests, following substantial research in race theory, such depictions of black criminals reiterate racial stereotypes while not properly enabling white spectators to understand realities of the everyday experience of black people. As quotes above suggest, some scholars think of artistic practices as having "a central role in the construction of our social world" (Clavel-Vazquez 2023: 677), including its racial hierarchies. For reasons of space, here I can't engage with this claim but it is important to emphasize that, if correct, it supports the view that our emotional reactions to fictional characters depend on our sociohistorical position, as well as on the position of characters depicted.

portant for addressing our artistic experiences) in relation to particular films. The first option is faced with the obvious problems of having to properly determine factors which are relevant for such an account. The second, which privileges particularism and rejects the notion of ‘the spectator’ as methodological construct, flies in the face of the most of research in humanities, where we are interested in understanding our experiences at the level which moves beyond individuality and particularity and strives towards generality and universality. So how are we to solve this problem? On my suggestion, by addressing it from the conceptual tools provided by the third culture.

4. Pictorial Experience and the Standard of Correctness

[Varied academic traditions] agree that screen stories can play a significant role in moral learning. The challenge at this point is not only to progress in determining how and when this occurs, but to do so through the synergies that may arise from cooperation between the disciplines and approaches. May the discussion continue.

(Plantinga 2023: 14)

The examples I used above to challenge Smith’s individual spectator concern the variations in response to one and the same film, primarily those that arise in light of spectators’ different social, racial, gender and the like affiliations. Here I extend this problem to show that, notwithstanding the problems with naturalized aesthetics, the kind of pluralistic research paradigm that Smith suggests might be crucial if we are to solve some of the practical issues that arise in our artistic practices. My overall goal however is not to criticize Smith for failing to address these issues—after all, they run much deeper than a single aesthetician and film scholar can consider—but to show that these concerns can only be resolved within the research paradigm of the third culture.

The practical issues that I have in mind concern cases in which films (and other works of art) contribute (intentionally or not) to various kinds of social injustice. Whether this happens because works of art represent various kinds of stereotypes and prejudices, or because they invite sympathy (alignment) with one group of spectators at the expense of another one—as Flory’s work on disgust and racism shows, or hooks’ work on black female spectators—it is not uncommon in our artistic experiences that the aesthetic pleasure of one group is won at the cost of objectification, sexualisation, shame or humiliation of another, as in case of ethical and epistemological misrepresentation of racialized fictional agents.¹⁵ To the extent that films shape our cultural landscape, and given that our cultural landscape is one factor that contributes to formation of our moral outlook, films could (again, intentionally or not) contribute to maintenance of ethically problematic attitudes. Cer-

¹⁵ Consider a rather drastic example of this case. In commenting his students’ experience of *The Adventures of the Huckleberry Finn*, John Wallace writes: “My own research indicates that the assignment and reading aloud of *Huckleberry Finn* in our classrooms is humiliating and insulting to black students. It contributes to their feelings of low self-esteem and to the white students’ disrespect for black people. It constitutes mental cruelty, harassment, and outright racial intimidation to force black students to sit in the classroom with their white peers and read *Huckleberry Finn*” (1992: 17). While such evaluation of students’ experience seems horrifying, there are (black) critics and professors who praise the novel for its contribution to the way in which students engage with the question of race and their racial background (see David Smith 1992).

tainly, they could also contribute to the maintenance of positive ethical values, those we have reasons to promote, but that is a welcome option which necessarily comes hand in hand with the one that concerns me here, that of films contributing to moral corruption, much like Plato feared that art might. This option is important not only within our philosophical discussions; it is one that has serious social and political significance (as evident primarily in contemporary measures implemented to restrict art's alleged negative impact, such as cancel culture, destruction of works, censorship, dismissal of some works from public spaces, etc.).¹⁶

In claiming this, I step into what (in philosophy) goes under the problem of immoral art, and inspires a well-known value-interaction debate; and as aestheticians know all too well, that debate has a long, long history in philosophy, but it has not yet produced any conclusive conclusions. Recently, this problem gave rise to numerous empirical research on what Berys Gaut calls causal question, the one asking if “exposure to works of art tends to affect us morally—morally to improve or morally to corrupt us” (2007: 6).¹⁷ And while there are different judgments of whether or not this research in fact solves the problem of immoral art, there is a sense in which we now have a slightly better understanding of why some people (and which people) succumb to art's bad influence.¹⁸

The reason I am pointing to this has to do with Smith's ambition behind the third culture. On my suggestion, the question of how black/female/gay/Muslim spectators appreciate films such as *Do the right thing/The Girl with the dragon tattoo/Philadelphia/Sorry, haters*, cannot be answered solely by humanistic methods, and neither can the question of value—the great white whale of all humanism, and the common complaint against Smith's proposal by those who consider value to be solely the domain of humanities. As I argued elsewhere (2021), in discussing aesthetic cognitivism and the causal question, theories which fail to address how people actually react to cognitively valuable movies or morally problematic ones, have to consider the actual research on these matters, for otherwise, all we have are unverifiable philosophical accounts which may completely fail to correspond to the actual political, social and ethical issues that arise from these problems.¹⁹ Smith's triangulation method seems well equipped to help us settle at least some of these issues.

Perhaps we can only know if female anger and development of anger in spectators in rape revenge can be used for political purpose of reducing violence against women as Vaage suggests it might, once we have neuroscientific data on how dif-

¹⁶ I take this as one of the most pressing examples of the ‘practical issues’ that Smith wants naturalized aesthetics to settle (another one might be the question of AI art) but since he does not provide a list, I can only guess, given currently prevalent debates in philosophy of art.

¹⁷ Building on Paul Taylor's account of aesthetic depersonalization, Clavel Vazquez extends the causal claim into political domain by arguing that „different ways in which artistic representations structure our perception and engagement with racialized others means that art has the power of either reinforcing dehumanizing racial scripts or opposing racial hierarchy” (2023: 683). On my view, the crucial issue is understanding factors that determine which option will prevail in any given situation and why.

¹⁸ Consider for example an extensive work by Huesmann, L. Rowell (2003, 2006). Though not above criticism (see Ferguson 2013; Piotrowski and Flikkers 2019) the research is helpful in exposing some of the factors that contribute to moral corruption.

¹⁹ To give but one example, the amount of critical disagreement on whether Huck Finn inspires racial attitudes in white audience supports the view that theoretical discussions alone will hardly settle the issue; unfortunately, this does not stop certain politically motivated movements from banning the book from education, trashing its value and preventing audience's access to it.

ferent brains (male, female, homosexuals, heterosexual, brains shaped within particular ethical, political etc. environment) process such films, and understand why. I side with Smith in believing that we do need natural sciences and humanities working hand in hand to answer such questions. In that sense, I am optimistic about his third culture, even if his naturalized approach is not inclusive enough to resolve the questions he himself wants his approach to address. That however is not intended as a criticism—naturalized aesthetics, like any other line of research has yet to grow and I side with Smith in claiming that we should support its development.²⁰

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