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Narrative Permeability: Crossing the Dissociative Barrier in and out of Films

Arthur Heiserman and Maura Spiegel

I

But forget culture and theories and philosophies for just a moment, and think of film, just film—think simply of the personal experience of film: . . . Why is it both strange and familiar? What does its separateness and closeness reveal? . . . It appears that film, in some of its forms, can rejig our encounter with life, and perhaps even heighten our perceptual powers.

Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy*

We had the experience but missed the meaning.

T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

A small seismic shift in the literary-critical ground can be registered as a movement toward unapologetically instrumentalizing narrative, exploring its productive and creative social uses. This microgeological adjustment may in part be attributable to the fact that we have exhausted, for the moment, the study of narrative's pernicious effects—as well as its impotence. Not long ago, Arthur Frank offered a generative model of critical engagement that emerged from his work on illness narratives. With the term “thinking *with* stories,” he proposed that our work as readers is less to offer an interpretation of the text than to make *use* of it. “To think with a story,” Frank writes, “is to experience it affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one's life.”¹ In that a story is not a static object but exists amid multiple relationships, Frank urges us to recall that telling or reading someone else's story is a way of rethinking our own, of locating, feeling, and putting our thoughts to things that are happening to or

inside us. What is it that happens when we turn our attention from how the story works to how it works on *us*—not an abstract us, but us in our particularity, reader A, or reader B, or a specific group of readers who work together, for example, on an oncology unit?² In Frank's formulation, "thinking *with* stories" requires a nearness that is not projection, which is itself an accomplishment or acquired skill. This kind of reading demands an achieved mutuality and relatedness; it is "primarily a response that is, in turn, responded to, and that cycle of response is dialogue."³

This paper will propose a comparable mode of engagement with narrative film, through the decentered co-perspectives of a psychoanalyst and a professor of literature and film. To this proposition an understandable objection might be, but that *is* what we do *already* when we watch movies, we read *with* them, we feel what characters feel, and we "instrumentalize" the experience as entertainment, catharsis, or food for thought or conversation. Indeed, a further objection would hold, along with countless theories of film reception, that movies suture or interpolate the viewer into their logic, that viewers cannot instrumentalize films since what films do is instrumentalize *us*. Our objective here is not to "correct" film-reception theories, but rather to expand the perimeters of what we notice—of what we talk about when we talk about movies.

One of the unsung attractions of movies is that they can provide us with a kind of affective workout; they can exercise our emotions. This "exercise" is not simply a matter of catharsis, although that is sometimes part of it. Rather, like some chimerical PET scan, movies can light up parts of ourselves that have been dark for a while, and if we observe which parts of ourselves have been illuminated, we may discover a thing or two about where we are tender or in need of some attention; we may locate neglected or dreaded parts of ourselves that we might not have noticed otherwise. In another and familiar analogy, movies, like dreams, can produce affects that do not have a logical or obvious connection to their trigger; and as with dreams, if we attend to them creatively and skillfully, they may have unexpected things to tell us. Movies can give us access to ourselves; they can, in fact, be *useful* in this regard, if we take time and attend, and if we develop techniques or skills for doing so.

Frank's approach to illness stories points to a kind of co-narrative produced by text and reader, and this has affinity with what we are here exploring in the dynamic between film and viewer, the complexity of what occurs (and occurs effortlessly) when we watch a

film. To begin, as we become intellectually and emotionally invested in a film narrative, we get caught up in empathizing and identifying with the characters and the action on the screen. Emotions are elicited that feel very real to us—as they are emotions with depth, emotions we have felt before and thus emotions with a past that are inexorably attached to specifics within our own lives. They are emotions that have been processed and understood, to one extent or another, within the narratives of our personal histories. In as much as we do, or are able to, identify with and bring our own life experiences and stories into relation with the film's narrative, we are inevitably engaging in a dialectic with the film. In other words, the narrative that is unfolding on the screen and our own personal narratives are, in a very real way, running side by side during the viewing of the film, with each informing, commenting, and, ultimately, enriching each other by their similarities and differences.

Janet Staiger offers a related approach to the film viewer's experience, one that rejects the idea that the viewer plays a passive or manipulated role in the process. In her book *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, she argues that "meaning" is not fixed within a film, but rather, viewers activate meaning in their interaction with the film through what she terms "negotiations."⁴ The context for the film becomes, in Staiger's analysis, the viewer's life and experience. The "perversity" of viewers is that they use films in their own ways; films cannot program their audiences, nor has film theory found a way to account for or adequately describe audience responses.⁵ "Context," Staiger writes, "is more significant than textual features in explaining interpretive events."⁶

Rather than positing an abstract ideal viewer, Staiger, Daniel Frampton, and a few others share with us an interest in the experiential and idiosyncratic meanings that films provoke—and how we may find ways to access those meanings. Films take us through the paces of many turns in our emotional lives. If the dominant movie experience is an affective one, we want to suggest that the enormous emotional power of film does not necessarily overwhelm or banish critical thinking, but that it can in fact advance it. Frampton proposes that film viewing *is* a form of thinking, or what he terms "affective thinking," thinking *by way of* or *through* affect.⁷ Very simply put, what produces a response that holds interest for the viewer can move him or her to further reflection.

II

Crumbling the Dissociative Barrier

Occurrences of intense emotions elicited in watching movies are routinely given attention and exploration in the psychotherapeutic consulting room. Some patients talk about movies as they do dreams, replete with dramatic moments, cross-identifications, associative linkings, and symbolic systems. Movies provide excellent grist for the therapeutic mill. Outside of the therapeutic context, however, serious and productive reflection on the viewer's affective reactions can also take place. Here is an example of what a ten-minute writing exercise on "a scene you can't forget from a war film" elicited. The writer, himself a therapist, comments on a scene from Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*:

The scene that I can't get out of my head in that film is when the brick wall separating the Germans from the Americans suddenly collapses. The scene follows the American patrol slowly and cautiously entering a bombed-out northern French town; as they tread their way, they are focused on where the enemy may emerge out in front of them. Eventually they pause in the remains of a structure; some sit, put down their guns, others remain standing and poised, when without a shout or a murmur, an entire side of the building collapses exposing a group of German soldiers, also in a moment of repose, sitting and standing at and around a table. What gets to me is a combination of the shock of something dreaded in such immediate proximity, but unseen, combined with the humanization of that dreaded enemy in a posture and attitude the same as the Americans. When the wall falls it is as if they are looking at one another in a mirror. Maybe its uncanny-ness is that an experience and fear that you conceptually and spatially distance from yourself is all of a sudden nakedly before your eyes, and the confusing blend of emotions that can mentally and physically freeze you are the simultaneous identification, the likeness, and the hatred of the enemy, that warded-off, defended against, hated other. I feel what particularly sticks and what's haunting is being frozen by the non-fittingness of these two different attitudes. But it's also about the crumbling of the dissociative barrier.

Like the scene described in this passage, films can allow us, by providing a narrative in some instances parallel to our own life experiences, to remove the dissociative barrier—and sometimes to gain access

to dissociated affects such as fear, dread, lust, longing, or shame. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry notes the experiential difference between “an image” and “a perception,” the latter possessing a “vivacity” that an “image” lacks.⁸ In this paper we are interested in distilling the process wherein the leap is achieved from mere image to the vivacity of perception, in which sometimes happens in watching a movie or in reflecting upon it in writing or in telling afterward—where perception becomes more explicitly an active process of construction.

What we are proposing is one kind of recalibration of film analysis that also has something in common with the psychoanalytic approach to dreams. Dreams are communications we have with ourselves; and like films, they provide one experience in having them (while dreaming or watching) and a quite different one in recounting and interpreting them. We explore the “meanings” of our dreams through attention to the affects that attach to them. Films, like dreams, are saturated with latent meanings—perhaps different for each of us. If we examine those passages of a film that take hold of us, we may find ourselves able to crumble one or another dissociative barrier. Film viewers can, we believe, more fruitfully interact with the film experience through more detailed inquiry into their affective reactions.

III

[T]he spectator is drawn into a creative act in which his individuality is not subordinated to the author’s individuality, but is opened up throughout the process of fusion.

Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*

How is it that we are able to experience such powerful emotions during the viewing of a film, emotions that are so much a part of who we are yet that we seldom access, and even have difficulty accessing during most other times? While viewing a film we cry, we become fearful, we feel love and longing, anger and hatred, and everything in between; all sorts of basic emotions come more readily to us. The elicited emotion may be one that has been close to the surface, and therein produces a sense of relief or catharsis when it is finally and fully felt and expressed, or it may be one that catches us by surprise, our having had little knowledge or appreciation of its power. Potentially, some emotions, such as jealousy, envy, hatred, or lust, may be

experienced as disruptive, and certainly would be unwelcome were we to feel them in the midst of our daily, non-movie-watching lives. Whatever the reason for any given person, in viewing a film we are somehow able to give ourselves greater leeway and freedom in experiencing a wide variety of emotions. Film can bring into experience affects that are difficult to formulate and access on our own, and at the same time, while watching a film we afford ourselves the luxury of examining our own subjectivities, and sometimes, as we hope to demonstrate below, we do battle with our own static selves.

Although films cannot speak back to us any more than a novel or any other text can, as our own narratives are brought into relation with a film's narrative, we generate thoughts and feelings that provide a broader context and possibly a broader meaning than the film's narrative is in and of itself creating. In that process the viewer and the filmmaker create each other as subjects that have not existed up until that point in time. The filmmaker does not, of course, create in any way the viewer's history or historical narrative, yet what the film does elicit in the viewer may be thought of as the present moment of the past—but a past in a new context with new possibilities and, perhaps, more varied and intensely felt emotion.

Viewing, in this sense, can become a creative act. Furthermore, if our own narrative is in some sense activated by the film narrative, our hesitancy to confront certain issues might be lessened. This activity can occur and is perhaps more likely to occur in the context of the flow of another narrative in which solutions are expected and found. In addition, the film is not asking anything demonstrative of us, and this can be freeing. We do not have to take care of the film; it will continue and be fine without us, unlike other relationships that evoke feeling. And we can love it or hate it without repercussions; our reactions are ours alone to perceive.

In her book *Crying at the Movies [A Film Memoir]*, literary critic Madelon Sprengnether notes the special conditions that make film viewing conducive to affective responsiveness: "The movie theater is just safe—and just scary—enough to breach our ordinary defenses, permitting a relaxation of the boundary between conscious and unconscious awareness."⁹ She continues, "For adults the movie theater also recreates the world of play we once knew as children—where we could act out the full range of our wishes and impulses, without fear or consequence."¹⁰

So, in this privileged context, we can, if so inclined (and we believe we generally are), explore ways in which the film narrative both

coincides and *contrasts* with ours, and in doing so come to appreciate how our own narratives can be relatively fixed or rigid. As our narratives and the film's narrative converse, we can hear and see how the filmic story may address our anxieties and dilemmas differently, and even how the film narrative may solve our conflicts in alternative, possibly more creative ways.

Films usually provide a story in which a character works through and out of an intensely difficult and emotional set of circumstances. Inasmuch as the viewer identifies with the circumstances and dilemmas of a particular character or the theme of the movie as a whole, the viewer continues to trust that the intense emotionality of the experience will find resolution in the flow of the narrative. With the passing of time (and the conclusion of the film), a creative resolution, if not a solution, will occur. *Any* creative resolution to tension engages us, gives us pleasure, and although it will not necessarily change a viewer's life to view an alternative resolution to a familiar conflict onscreen, emotions that have been held at bay, unfelt and unexpressed, do seem to find a release point or gateway to expression with the aid of the parallel narrative. Emotions are somehow able to ride out of the darkness on this other narrative.

Sprengnether recounts the not so uncommon experience of being taken by surprise when, in middle age, she finds herself sobbing uncontrollably while watching a film, in this case, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*. After two or three repeat experiences of breaking into sobs at the movies over the next few years, she comes to recognize that this powerful response is part of a "process of deferred mourning" for the death of her father by drowning when she was a child of nine.¹¹ "Crying at the movies, I have come to understand," she writes, "was a way for me to begin to feel the pain of my father's death. The loss I could not acknowledge in my own life I could recognize and react to onscreen. It was as though the sadness I had buried when I was nine years old lay deep within my psyche, waiting for its shadow image to appear in the dreamlike space of the movie theater."¹²

Hence, not only does our reading of a film's narrative transform it, but our taking in of the film narrative can also in some sense transform us. The following is an example from the therapeutic context, written from the therapist's perspective:

A young man in his late forties had been working for some time in psychotherapy with his ambivalent feelings toward his father, who was on occasion loving but typically distant and seemingly

indifferent to his son. This resulted in a tendency to have alternately idealized and disparaging images of his father. He began a psychotherapy session after seeing the movie *In the Line of Fire*, the story of an aging Frank Horrigan (Clint Eastwood), who is the only secret service agent still on active duty who had served on JFK's secret service detail the day he was assassinated. The plot follows Horrigan as he is taunted by a psychopath for his failure to sacrifice himself to save JFK, and who informs him of his plan to assassinate the current president. Alone in his conviction that the threat is real, Horrigan finds himself isolated and, finally, relieved of duty. The film climaxes when, acting alone and against orders, Horrigan saves the president and kills the assassin—getting it right this time. “I saw this stupid action movie and I don't even like action movies,” the patient began. He reported being most struck by Clint Eastwood's character's struggle to find a motivation as a secret service agent to protect the president of the United States from an impending assassination attempt. He came close to tears as he characterized how Eastwood's character seemed to be out of sync with the self-interest and cynicism of the present time, as though the core of his emotional life lived some place in the past. “I became so furious when Clint Eastwood's boss had taken him off the case; he walks out of the building and gets into his car with nothing to do and no place to go. His reason for being has just been taken away from him and he is in a world and in a time, the present, that has no bearing on his life—he has no bearings in this world.”

This film for this viewer, as perhaps for many others, is about the loss of the idealized father, or more specifically about how and whether to keep the presence of a loving and protective father alive. For this patient, the surprising moment of release of affect is a moment that had been sitting there waiting to be had—without a narrative for having it. One of the most powerful aspects of how we engage in film is that we experience a sense that we are dismantling the walls that circumscribe what can become our static self-identities, along with our potentially static values and morals, through the recognition of a subjectivity up on the movie screen that is other than ourselves. A final “case study” offers us a glimpse of how a film experience can help to shift or “rejig” a person's rigid self-narrative:

A woman who grew up in a fairly austere household where public image and personae were always important lived under considerable

moral pressure to express the proper emotions at the proper times. As the mother in particular modeled this behavior to her daughter, her daughter nevertheless always sensed how her mother both needed and shunned caring and concerned emotional responses from her. Rarely could she get through a day without worrying and feeling some degree of guilt over what came to be a long series of medical conditions sustained by her mother. When she would phone or visit her mother, it would take considerable effort that was more often than not unsuccessful in easing any of her mother's anxieties and ailments in any way. More typically a phone call would be answered with a "so where have you been?" type of response. In having recently become a mother herself, the patient described a scene she was deeply struck by from the film *Terms of Endearment*. In a hospital bedside scene, the young mother (Debra Winger) is succumbing to breast cancer. Her two young sons are ushered into the hospital room, essentially to say good-bye. The younger child is weeping and expresses tenderness toward the mother, but the elder son, a boy about 11 or 12, expresses only anger at her. The patient was most struck by the mother's response to the angry son; at first she tries to defend herself from his accusations, reminding him of good times they've had, things she's done for him, but finally she tells him very pointedly, "I know you love me. Remember that I know you love me." The patient pointed out that her own first reaction to the child's anger was disapproval toward him: How could the son of a dying mother be so inconsiderate and selfish? And then, with the help of Debra Winger's response, the patient's response shifted from disapproval to something altogether different. Through the film-mother's response, she was able to see that the angry son was still a loving son. She moved to appreciating the freedom the older child was allowed to express and to live within the moment of what he was feeling rather than having to tailor his expressed emotions to the needs and mandates of the mother. He was not under any kind of moral scrutiny nor was she feeling a lack of caring and concern from her son despite his expressed anger. And simultaneously, she was moved by the mother's empathic response to the son's anger and its source in his feelings of abandonment and loss. The patient gained, through interrogating her responses to the film, a different understanding of her own story. It struck her that as a mother she could actually not subject her children to the emotional confines and binds that she found herself in. She could continue in a life as a mother without feeling and potentially inducing guilt.

For this particular viewer, this film played out an alternate narrative of a familiar set of emotional postures. What we can recognize as a conventional melodramatic maternal deathbed scene designed to draw tears accrues a noncliché significance for this viewer, whose identifications are fluid, vacillating between mother and son. "The scene kept playing back . . . like it wanted to tell me something," the patient observed.

Movies, however, as suggested earlier, can foster the emergence of emotions without provoking any insight whatsoever. The entertainment experience can perfectly reverse the logic of what has been proposed here; movies can take potentially potent, disorganizing, and disruptive emotions and package them so that they are limited and manageable. In other words, movies can process feelings so that they lead us away from rather than toward any fresh awareness or expansiveness that might break down a role we have unwittingly cast ourselves in. Being passed over at work or jilted in love and the emotions those themes stir up, for example, have to be handled by defensive psychological maneuvers in order to maintain smooth daily functioning. When watching similar scenarios on film or television, the pain or joy or discomfort can in one sense be entered into, but in a calculatedly superficial and nondisruptive way. Feelings like competitive jealousy or lust, which in real life have the potential to shatter relationships and lives, can be viewed and in some measure felt—with some modicum of horror perhaps, but the stronger emotion may be one of relief, in that these experiences are being averted in your own life—at least for the moment.

Yet on the other hand, part of the safety the viewer enjoys is based on the sense that the affective world of the film or of its characters, no matter how disturbing, is not static or inescapable, and this sense of safety can be productive. If there are feelings we do not want to get involved in for fear that we will be stuck with them forever, movies allow us a fluid and dynamic engagement with them. The story's movement (and in some cases its superficiality) can ease defenses. This is significant because powerful emotions can stall or put an end to creative and imaginative thought.

Through writing or in some other way revisiting specific feelings experienced while viewing, we attempt to relay the encounter and to grapple with locked-up or dissociated emotions. In many cases, rigid self-narratives are jogged loose, allowing for both a more creative reconsideration of who we are and what is contained in our emotional world. Perhaps films offer distance by which we can bring some kinds

of emotions back into our experience. Films can provide a venue and opportunity to create narratives that *bring into existence* what we encounter day in and day out.

Film viewing is a multivalent experience; as critics have long recognized, our visual, auditory, esthetic, physiological, sociocultural, gendered, linguistic, contextual, cognitive, and affective responses to film cannot be explored through a single model or paradigm. All of these factors figure into the viewer's emotional response—and soon neuroscientists may map out just how mirror neurons figure into our affective response to film—that is, how most of us are hardwired to automatically resonate with any and all emotions we observe. Attending to our involuntary *feeling-with* the movie is certainly rich terrain. Philosophers of film have observed that *identification* is too crude a tool to explain our emotional engagement with characters, and indeed we assume a wide variety of attitudes toward the fictional characters we see on the screen, with our promiscuous affective connections and aversions. Clearly, a more nuanced account of viewer involvement with cinematic characters and the films in which they appear is required. What we are proposing here is that our involuntary and automatic *feeling-with* the movie be taken as a subject of no less weight than an analysis of the film's own content, and that we as viewers be seen as inseparable from the film's various texts.

NOTES

1. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 23.
2. We refer here to work being done in the Program in Narrative Medicine at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons under Rita Charon's direction, where twice a month a group of doctors, nurses, social workers, medical residents, fellows, and sometimes medical students gathers to read aloud texts they have written about clinical experience. Recently, this group has spawned a bigger group, initiated by Fran Heller and Patricia Stanley, that includes patients and family caregivers.
3. Frank, "Asking the Right Questions about Pain," 219.
4. Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, 43.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 30
7. See Frampton, *Filmosophy*, 164.
8. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 162, 163.
9. Sprengnether, *Crying at the Movies*, 11.
10. *Ibid.*, 12.
11. *Ibid.*, 11.
12. *Ibid.*

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