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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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## Table of Contents

<b>Claire Anscomb</b> <i>The Epistemic Value of Photographs in the Age of New Theory</i> .....	1
<b>Marco Arienti</b> <i>Some Concerns with Experientialism about Depiction: the Case of Separation seeing-in</i> .....	19
<b>Marta Benenti and Giovanna Fazzuoli</b> <i>Experiencing the Making Paintings by Paolo Cotani, Marcia Hafif and Robert Ryman</i> .....	35
<b>Larissa Berger</b> <i>The Felt Syllogism of Taste – a Reading of Kant's Sensus Communis</i> .....	55
<b>Nicolò Pietro Cangini</b> <i>Prose and Life. A Comparison between Hegel's Aesthetics and Romantic's Poetics</i> .....	78
<b>Pol Capdevila</b> <i>Poetics of History in Contemporary Art</i> .....	93
<b>Stephen Chamberlain</b> <i>Literary Realism and the Significance of Life</i> .	122
<b>Melvin Chen</b> <i>To Chuck or Not to Chuck? Túngara Frogs &amp; Evolutionary Responses to the Puzzle of Natural Beauty</i> .....	153
<b>Zoë Cunliffe</b> <i>Epistemic Injustice and the Role of Narrative Fiction</i> ....	167

<b>Laura T. Di Summa-Knoop</b> <i>Defining Fashion: Novelty, Play, and Identity</i> .....	180
<b>Daniel Dohrn</b> <i>Art avant la Lèttre</i> .....	204
<b>Nemesio García-Carril Puy</b> <i>Against Hazlett's Argument: Musical Works Qua Types are Modally Flexible Entities</i> .....	212
<b>Lisa Giombini</b> <i>Material Authenticity in Conservation Theory</i> .....	235
<b>Vitor Guerreiro</b> <i>The Unity of Our Aesthetic Life: A Crazy Suggestion...</i>	260
<b>Eran Guter and Inbal Guter</b> <i>A Critique of Langer's View of Musical Temporality</i> .....	289
<b>Valentina Hribar Sorčan</b> <i>La Vie et la Mémoire</i> .....	308
<b>Eda Keskin</b> <i>Everyday Aesthetics and Empathy Development</i> .....	329
<b>Lev Kreft</b> <i>From Universalism to Singularity, from Singularity to Moralization</i> .....	343
<b>Gloria Luque Moya</b> <i>Experiencing the Extraordinary of the Ordinary</i> .	359
<b>Jerzy Luty</b> <i>Do Animals Make Art or the Evolutionary Continuity of Species</i> .....	381
<b>Giovanni Matteucci</b> <i>The (Aesthetic) Extended Mind: Aesthetics from Experience-of to Experience-with</i> .....	400
<b>Philip Mills</b> <i>The Politics of Poetic Language: An Analysis of Jean-Luc Godard's Alphaville</i> .....	430
<b>Washington Morales</b> <i>Naturalization and Reification of the Human Global Subjective Experience in Some Forms of Scientific and Technological Art</i> .....	444

<b>Ancuta Mortu</b>	<i>Aesthetic Cognition and Art History</i> .....	459
<b>Dan O'Brien</b>	<i>Cubism and Kant</i> .....	482
<b>Una Popović</b>	<i>The Birthplace of Aesthetics: Baumgarten on Aesthetical Concepts and Art Experience</i> .....	507
<b>Matthew Rowe</b>	<i>Minimalism: Empirical and Contextual, Aesthetic and Artistic</i> .....	524
<b>Salvador Rubio Marco</b>	<i>Manipulating the Spectator's Moral Judgments: a Criticism of the Cognitivist Approach in Cinema</i> .....	544
<b>Marcello Ruta</b>	<i>Hermeneutics and the Performative Turn; The Unfruitfulness of a Complementary Characterisation</i> .....	557
<b>Sue Spaid</b>	<i>Are Art and Life Experiences "Mostly Perceptual" or "Largely Extra-perceptual"?</i> .....	598
<b>Daniela Šterbáková</b>	<i>John Cage's 4' 33": Unhappy Theory, Meaningful Gesture</i> .....	620
<b>Polona Tratnik</b>	<i>Challenging the Biopolitical through Animal-Human Hybridization</i> .....	643
<b>Andreas Vrahimis</b>	<i>Aesthetics, Scientism, and Ordinary Language: A Comparison between Wittgenstein and Heidegger</i> .....	659
<b>Weijia Wang</b>	<i>Kant's Two Approaches to the Connection between Beauty and Morality</i> .....	685
<b>Ken Wilder</b>	<i>Rosalind Krauss: From 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field' to the 'Spectacle' of Installation Art</i> .....	698
<b>Mark Windsor</b>	<i>Tales of Dread</i> .....	722
<b>Lorraine Yeung</b>	<i>Art and Life: The Value of Horror Experience</i> .....	737

# *Manipulating the Spectator's Moral Judgments: a Criticism of the Cognitivist Approach in Cinema*

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ABSTRACT. In cognitivist film studies, Carl Plantinga has put the focus on the particular relationship between moral judgments and nonmoral judgments regarding the reaction of the audience towards fictional characters in film. For Plantinga, "it is the capacity of filmic narratives to manipulate the spectator's judgments that provides films with much of their rhetorical power, because humans have a tendency to confuse moral and nonmoral judgments". One of the main examples in Plantinga's argument is the film *Legends of the Fall* where "The filmmakers employ varied strategies to effect this allegiance, providing us with many reasons to both like and sympathize with Tristan [the main character] despite his moral flaws". Nevertheless, Plantinga has to consider that, without detriment to many people Tristan becomes a figure to whom they lend their strong "allegiances" (using Murray Smith's term) and even a masculine ideal, "the film fails to win the allegiance for Tristan of some audience members".

My criticism starts at this point, on the problems that I find in Plantinga's use of "manipulation". What is the cognitive status of this kind of failure to win allegiance? Moreover, is that failure suspending or blocking the possibility of an aesthetic experience for the spectator of the film? Not necessarily, in my

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opinion. I am not completely sure that Plantinga would be able to take account of this failure and consciousness of manipulation in his cognitivist frame. In a positive vein, I will suggest a complementary (if not alternative) approach based on the concept of aspect seeing, blindness towards aspects, dimensional understanding in aesthetic disagreements, etc., which is also able to assume the 'thinking/feeling' pattern, in order to offer a more fine-tuning of the different cases that Plantinga considers under the label of "manipulation".

Cognitivism and analytic aesthetics have been mainly responsible for the attention that has turned towards the role of affect in film and literary studies in recent decades, as part of the general idea that bracketing cultural, psychological, and moral considerations is no longer an option in the study of works of art.

In film studies especially, cognitivist theorists (such as Murray Smith, James Wood, or Carl Plantinga) have investigated the engagement and responses of spectators to the characters in fiction. One of the main contributions of Plantinga's approach, in my opinion, is to reinforce the idea that there is no rational relationship between the spectator and the film (and with works of art in general) if we work regardless of the spectator's emotional reactions. In fact,

We make our way through the world by processing stimuli and responding to it in a constant interplay of thought and feeling. Affective charges direct us in one way or the other, draw our attention to one aspect of the world or another, attract us to something and repel us from something else. Thinking and affect are coupled, such that the appropriate way to consider most human thought is to build affect into

it. (Plantinga 2010, p. 48)

Carl Plantinga has put the focus on the particular relationship between moral judgments and nonmoral judgments regarding the reaction of the audience towards fictional characters in film. For Plantinga,

it is the capacity of filmic narratives to manipulate the spectator's judgments that provides films with much of their rhetorical power, because humans have a tendency to confuse moral and nonmoral judgments. (Plantinga 2010, p. 34-35)

In other words, spectator attitudes towards characters are not fully rooted in moral criteria, even if audiences tend to interpret their judgments as being supported by a legitimate moral force. In fact, "moral approval of a character might be considered to be something like an emotion or an intuition rather than a conscious and deliberate evaluation." (Plantinga 2010, p. 46) Thus, "manipulation" is a notion that Plantinga uses with a not necessarily pejorative (or negative) meaning.

One of the main examples in Plantinga's argument is the film *Legends of the Fall* (Edward Zwick, 1994). The story of the film is a conflict between two brothers, Tristan (played by Brad Pitt) and Alfred (played by Aidan Quinn). In that story, Tristan is connected with beauty, passion, vitality, health and courage (and also cruelty, violence and vice). Alfred, by contrast, is a more moral person, but lacks Tristan's vivacity and charm. In fact, Alfred says in a certain moment of the film: "I followed the rules, and

they loved you more". Indeed, Tristan is able to arouse the love of their relatives and close people, while Alfred cannot do that. A main narrative strategy of the film is simply based on projecting on the audience that inclination which Plantinga (after Smith) explains in terms of "allegiance". For Plantinga,

The filmmakers employ varied strategies to effect this allegiance, providing us with many reasons to both like and sympathize with Tristan despite his moral flaws. (Plantinga 2010, p. 50)

In this case, we cannot claim that allegiance is granted to Tristan by moral judgment alone, because

audiences [...] have been influenced by many nonmoral factors, from the filmmaker's techniques of storytelling and style, to cultural assumptions about heroic, 'natural' masculinity, to associations of Tristan's behaviour with nature and natural beauty. (Plantinga 2010, p. 51)

Nevertheless, Plantinga has to consider that, without detriment to many people Tristan becomes a figure to whom they lend their strong "allegiances" (using Murray Smith's term) and even a masculine ideal, although "the film fails to win the allegiance for Tristan of some audience members" (Plantinga 2010, p. 50), and Plantinga refers to some responses to the film on [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) as a proof of this.

My criticism starts at this point, on the problems that I find in

Plantinga's use of "manipulation" especially in those cases of failure to win allegiance. What is the cognitive status of this kind of failure to win allegiance? Is it the result of a purely rational decision? It seems that from the cognitivist approach the answer has to be 'no'. Plantinga seems to take care of this problem underlining that

It is not that clear thinking demands the bracketing of emotion, or that emotion is by definition irrational, but rather that the usual way that we interact with the world just is affective, and that what might be called 'thinking/feeling' can sometimes be irrational, sometimes not. (Plantinga 2010, p. 48)

Of course, following the cognitivist way of thinking, being inclined to consider Tristan's character as an unattractive character who is not morally justifiable because he is full of sexist prejudices cannot just be the product of a moral judgment, but of a mixture in a complex 'thinking/feeling' soup. Nevertheless, in this case, the 'thinking/feeling' package that elicits the failed allegiance for Tristan may be globally rational (not at all irrational), even though it integrates emotions.

Plantinga says that

The point of this brief exposition on the film is not to condemn its rhetorical use of sympathies and allegiance, although I find them troubling, but rather to explain their functioning. (Plantinga 2010, p. 50),

but I am not completely sure that Plantinga would be able to take account of this failure and consciousness of manipulation in his cognitivist framework. The problem of Plantinga's cognitivism is not that it would reject the explanation of this fact, but rather that his theoretical model does not place great importance on that fact and thus on the explanation of these kinds of facts. In other words, cognitivism does not go far enough when answering to the question: "Why can I not see *Legends of the Fall* as an epic film?" or "Why can I not see Tristan as an epic hero?"

I think that Plantinga's cognitivist approach set aside to explain the cases of failure to win allegiance is susceptible to criticism from three particular angles:

- 1) the moderate moralism underlying Plantinga's explanatory model; it especially concerns the balance between aesthetic values and other values (including moral values)
- 2) the atomistic conception of the "thinking / feeling soup" derived from the distinction between likings / sympathies / and allegiances
- 3) the effects of the manipulating device in the aesthetic experience of the spectator of the film

Close to my criticisms, I will propose an alternative (maybe complementary) approach based on a theory of aspects. The main idea of

that theory could be briefly summarised in the following way: understanding a work of art (or a part of that work) is being able to see it through the appropriate aspect. This paper is not the place to develop that theory, but rather to show its alternative power alongside to the particular elements of my criticism.

Now let us consider a more concrete example from *Legends of the Fall*. In the second homecoming, Tristan appears

riding home before the picturesque mountains of the Montana Rockies and feature rising swells of orchestral music featuring rich tones of brass, followed by tracking shots of joyous family members and friends rushing to meet him. (Plantinga 2010, p. 50)

Of course, the intended effect of narrative and filmic operations here is to excite the ‘thinking/feeling’ package of the audience in favour of a sympathetic attitude towards Tristan’s character in that sequence and ultimately in favour of the allegiance of the audience to Tristan’s character in the general frame of the film. Nevertheless, I myself, as well as many people, cannot see *Legends of the Fall* as a metaphoric tale on the *wild side* of the human being, or as a tribute to the old Indian beliefs valid for the 20<sup>th</sup> century where the exalted image of Tristan may fit in.

At this point, in order to explain that fitting in (at least in the cases of achieved allegiance), Plantinga deploys the distinction between *liking* / *sympathy* / and *allegiance*:

Liking and sympathy can be short term and rather shallow. Allegiance, however, is a deeper and more abiding psychological relationship with a character [...], it can overlook character flaws and unsympathetic actions, to a degree. [...] Spectator allegiance may not be generated solely by the spectator's moral judgment that the character in question is currently behaving well, but just as much by the estimation that he or she is 'fundamentally good' (whatever that may mean to the spectator) [...]. (Plantinga 2010, p. 42)

Briefly, after Plantinga,

Thus, we might say that allegiance is long term relatively speaking, and more centrally depends on the viewer's moral evaluation of a character, while sympathies may be a short term and more likely to be independent of moral evaluation. (Plantinga 2010, p. 41)

Plantinga's way to distinguish allegiances from sympathies and likings referring to their rigid dependence on moral evaluation is suspiciously coherent with his moderate moralism, as we will see in a moment. If we assume the thinking-feeling soup thesis of the cognitivist approach, then my general failure of allegiance to Tristan's character has to be made of thinking-feeling soup and the unsympathetic second homecoming also has to be made of a thinking-feeling soup. But Plantinga's model seems to tend to an atomistic structure in the interplay between the short term and the long term, on the one hand, and the interplay between aesthetic values and moral values, on the other, which makes it difficult to show how every phase is

something *thought* and *felt* at the same time, even in the cases of partially or totally failed intentions. It is not clear if I can conclude the immoral rating of Tristan's character *because* of the failure to feel sympathy for him, or if my progressive lack of sympathy for Tristan's actions and Tristan's look seals the possibility of feeling the final allegiance as nothing more than a verdict or a rational corollary.

Ultimately, it may be alleged that the concept of 'meta-emotions' proposed by Plantinga in other texts (Plantinga 2009, for example) could come to his aid: "The spectator may respond emotionally to his or her own prior responses, thoughts, or desires while viewing a film. Such emotions may range from shame and guilt to pride and a strong sense of self-satisfaction." (Plantinga 2009, p. 73). However, I think that that concept of "meta-emotions" would only be useful for a very restricted range of cases of "manipulation".

Returning to the *Legends of the Fall* example, it may be the case that I momentarily feel sympathy (or an euphoric state of mind) during the sequence of Tristan's second homecoming. Of course, I am not indifferent to the development of the story and the accompaniment of the characters (Tristan mainly) during the film, and maybe I am also sensitive to the young beauty of the character played by a handsome Brad Pitt, but in the end I feel deep shame remembering that feeling after viewing the bloody and cruel ending of the film. Maybe that particular case can be easily explained in terms of primary-emotions and meta-emotions. But let us now think of other possible cases: for example, my experience as a spectator of the film involves a continuous building up of evidences pointing to a ridiculous and

pretending effort to erect an epic hero for the audience. Then, the fanfare accompanying Tristan as he rides along with his long hair flowing in the wind sounds to me pompous and pretentious. And there is no room for a primary-emotions and meta-emotions structure in this case. Even Plantinga seems to slip a confessed argument in that way when he says:

This epic film [*Legends of the Fall*] is a good example of an adaptation that attempts to preserve too much of a novel. Too many melodramatic events in a relative brief presentation can seem faintly ridiculous. (Plantinga 2010, p. 49)

In fact, the way to define allegiances in that cognitivist model is *a priori* determined by Plantinga's moralist approach. Plantinga agrees with Smith's moralist thesis that "non-moral factors may modify and inflect but not *establish* or *transform* our allegiances" (Plantinga 2010, p. 41). Thus, the priority conceded to moral values is something generally established by the theory and at the same time it taints the moral component of the concept of allegiance. I think that this kind of approach distorts from the beginning the interplay between aesthetic properties and aesthetic values and other sorts of properties and values (including moral values). Instead I prefer the approach of moderate autonomism insofar as we have to evaluate case per case the range of an aesthetic feature in order to know if it can blind (or not) the moral values (or other kinds of values, such as the cognitive values, for example) of a work. And clearly that evaluation is not something of the nature of a *calculus* for the part of the spectator, but something *felt* (almost

partially). A critical judgement, on a case by case basis, is able to decide that balance, and to provide effective reasons in favour of it. There is not a definitive and general solution to be gained from the aesthetic theory or the philosophy of art concerning that problem.

Finally, Plantinga's cognitivism has perfectly assumed that those aesthetic values are in part dependent on the story telling procedures, but also on the cultural and personal influences. Concerning the first of these, that is, the story telling procedures (the close up, for example), am I able to become aware of the *manipulating device* and, at the same time, to participate to some degree in the effect of the *manipulating device*? Of course, to be aware of those telling procedures is not necessarily preventing us from having a genuinely aesthetic experience; in fact, that awareness may enrich (or not) an aesthetic experience when watching the film, and just in some extreme cases it can ruin the main intention of the film. The semiotic myth of the incompatibility of being aware of the illusion and participating in the illusion effect has been one of the most pervasive generalizations in the film theories since the sixties. But the aesthetic values are also dependent on cultural and personal influences. Some of them are part of our current baggage as spectators and can directly influence the moral judgments about the film, or they can modulate the specific role of aesthetic values. Evidently, Donald Trump would be more easily inclined to see Tristan as an epic hero than I would. Of course, I am able to understand the proposal by someone who asserts to see the film that way, and I can even understand how certain elements of the film would fit in that interpretation, and all that without being able to see the film that way automatically.

I cannot stop seeing *Legends of the Fall* as a very *dirigist* discourse based on a very vehement soundtrack, an overloaded story, an inane epistolary structure and the abuse of pretentious *atrezzo*, wardrobe and hairstyling at the service of the star-system. And so thus, I cannot stop seeing the film as morally flawed, insofar as it involves such values as cruelty, revenge or sexism (to the extent that the feminine roles are ballasted by their availability for men and a prior right to happiness always conceded to them by men).

In a positive vein, a complementary (if not completely alternative) approach based on the concept of aspect seeing, blindness towards aspects, dimensional understanding in aesthetic disagreements, etc. is able to assume the 'thinking/feeling' pattern, in order to offer a more fine-tuning of the different cases that Plantinga considers under the label of "manipulation". When I *see* (in an *aspectist* use of *seeing*) Tristan's attractive/moralism or Tristan's unattractive/immoralism in the film, the broad concept of *seeing* is able to assume the fact that it has to be something *experienced*, and experienced as a 'thinking/feeling' phenomenon, but at the same time, it opens up the possibility of different layers and dimensions of understanding (including pejorative and non-pejorative manipulations, and even the awareness of manipulation).

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