

The filmic emotion. A comparative analysis of film theories

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Abstract: This article tries to explain the origins of the filmic emotion. Due to the lack of a widely agreed idea about the way film texts play with the emotional world of the empirical spectator, this work outlines the diverse arguments and approaches through which film theory has tried to explain the catalogue of emotions that a film can provoke in the spectator.

This review reveals a conflict between the theories oriented to the spectator and context, and the theories focused on the text. There are, in fact, two approaches to evaluate the emotional effects provoked by films: the cultural studies approach, which is based on pragmatics and gender oriented theories, and focuses on the social and subjective conditions through which cinema is experienced, and the approach of structural semiotics and cognitive theory, which focuses on the way a film text tries to direct the spectator's emotional experience. In the middle of these two approaches, the psychoanalytical theory conceives the filmic experience as a simulation of daily life.

Keywords: filmic emotion; psychoanalysis; cognitivism; cultural studies; reception theory; structural semiotics.

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Translation by **Cruz Alberto Martinez-Arcos** (University of London)

1. Introduction

It is well known that works of art provoke sensations in humans, that these sensations are varied, that there are individuals more willing or more likely than others to live this sort of somatic reactions involved in the aesthetic experience, and that this rare sensitivity can, to some extent, be increased, perfected, strengthened, carved, cultivated, refined, or in one word, educated. The realm of affection is, however, a very slippery subject that is difficult to grasp conceptually and, applied to the field of art, provokes heated debates and many misunderstandings.

Thus, it is not surprising that the emotions associated to aesthetics have been of interest to philosophy since it emerged. Plato, for instance, argued that the agitation provoked by works of art could lead the young citizens astray from the Republic, while his most gifted student celebrated the benefits of the tragedy, which is the dramatic form that given its ability to awaken compassion and fear gives, according to Aristotle, pleasure and understanding.

Approximations of this character have explored throughout history the emotions linked to other genres and means of expression, but it has been aesthetics, the branch of philosophy focused on the study of the essence and perception of beauty, the discipline that has pointed out with greater knowledge the pivotal role of emotions in the artistic experience.

Although they are of great interest, it would be very meticulous to address the conclusions that the philosophy of art and aesthetics has reached in the course of the years about its confrontation with art-originated feelings. The purpose of this article is more modest and only focuses on the case of film emotions. The aim is to describe in general terms the multiple arguments that film theory, in its various versions or lines of thought, has offered to explain the specific sensations that a film can provoke in the spectator. The main objective is to create a coherent and comprehensive approach for the origins of filmic emotions.

The literature on the subject, which has been published in the last fifteen years mainly by Anglo-Saxon scholars, confirms that we are dealing with one of the most studied subjects in the field of cinematographic reflection.

It is also a controversial and contentious subject that has the added virtue of revealing translucently the basic epistemological differences that exist today across the various schools of thought on film. So this comparative study, which focuses on the theoretical developments on filmic emotion, offers, as a result, a panoramic view of the current state of film studies.

2. Objective and methodology

This article is not about the film representation of emotions. The subject of emotional stereotypes that are portrayed audiovisually (a discursive phenomenon that semiotics has called sentimentalisation or passionalisation) is fascinating, but is outside the purpose of this article, which aims to clearly explain why we experience a wide range of sensations when we watch moving images on the big screen.

Given that, as previously said, there is no consensual idea about the way film texts activate, promote and manage spectator's emotions, this work reviews the concepts of filmic emotion that are used by the different film theories.

In order to offer the most comprehensive and synthetic overview, I will only address the contributions that are qualitatively relevant; in other words, I will review exclusively the theories, authors and works that, in the jungle of publications on film studies, have directed their efforts to clarify the nature of the filmic emotion. However, it is not only about pointing out the core ideas of these literary works on the subject, but put to compare and emphasise the different ways in which they explain the emotional involvement of the film spectator.

The interest to highlight the discrepancies and the lines of thought on filmic emotion has led me to start this analysis with the psychoanalytic theories of cinema, then to continue with the contributions of the cognitivist approach, then with the reception theory, pragmatics, gender studies and cultural studies, and finally with the proposals of the European structural semiotics. This review, obviously, is not chronological.

I would like to remark that a review of this nature is not always compatible with the contemporaneity of the bibliographic references. For example, the key idea that psychoanalytical film theory proposed about the way in which the pleasure and desires of the spectator are provoked by the film experience was published in the 1960s and 1970s, which forces me to go back to these historical sources of precarious novelty. Fortunately, this does not occur with the bitter disputes between the cognitivist and the reader-response theories about film interpretation and emotion, which have been published in the last two decades.

Given that this bibliographic review about the sensations experienced by the film spectator cannot begin without first explaining what we mean by emotion, I present a brief preliminary section on what psychology has concluded in this regard.

3. The psychological origins of emotion

Psychology has pointed out that emotion is a product of the convergence of physical and mental factors. It is, if you prefer, a mood or a complex emotional experience that includes certain state of consciousness (fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, hope, happiness and acceptance, according to the classical taxonomy of Robert Plutchik [1980]) and certain physiological reactions (changes in respiration and blood circulation, glandular secretions, muscular tension, facial changes, dilation of the pupils, etc.). Discrepancies among experts have emerged at the time of establishing the relations and links between these organic and psychological factors of emotion.

According to William James and Carl Lange [1] stimuli cause physiological alterations in our body which affect the state of consciousness. From this point of view (known as the somatic or peripheral theory of emotions of James-Lange) the timing of emotion involves two stadiums, one physiological and one mental (mood), linked by a cause-and-effect relationship. When one is insulted, for instance, our cardiorespiratory rate increases and our muscles get tense; then our brain interprets these bodily changes as “anger”, and feels ire. James used the classic example of the bear: when one sees a bear we instinctively run in the opposite direction and this is what triggers the sense of fear.

In the 1920s, the eminent American physiologist Walter Cannon and, in the 1930s, his disciple Philip Brad, demonstrated with lab tests three circumstances that disproved the conjecture of James and Lange. Cannon and Brad argued that:

- 1) It is not possible to distinguish one emotion from another based on body response. For example, the increases in heart and respiration rates are without exception physical symptoms of fear, anger and joy.
- 2) The individual is not always aware of the internal body changes, as evidenced by the fact that the contractions of the visceral organs such as the kidneys and liver are unnoticed.
- 3) The emotions suffered much faster changes than the ones occurring in the peripheral nervous system.

They also pointed out that the animals that were surgically disabled to experiment physiological sensations exhibited typical emotions. From all this, Cannon and Brad deduced that the alterations in the peripheral nervous system may not be responsible for emotions, and that the emotional

experience and the physiological activation do not occur in a cause-effect succession as James and Lange postulated.

Going back to the example of the bear, when we encounter the bear our nerve terminals transfer that information to two brain destinations: the cortex, where the processes of thought take place and which interprets that the bear is a threat and triggers without physiological circumlocutions the feeling of fear; and the thalamus, where there are several non-specific (not specifically related to a particular emotion) body changes, such as the feeling of stress (syncretism, in turn, of a sharp increase in the heartbeat, blood pressure, flushing, etc.) and the reaction of escape.

By integrating the role of the central nervous system, in particular of the thalamus, in the emotion, the research of Cannon and Brad allowed the transformation of the mechanical model of James and Lange into an interactive model where physical and psychological responses were simultaneously and jointly triggered.

Although with subtle differences [2], the hypothesis of Cannon and Bard is commonly accepted by psychology and is offered as an operational basis to explain the etiology or the causes of the phenomenon of aesthetic emotion. Now we know that this mix of psychological phenomena and body reactions is the response of our body to an internal or external stimulus. In the case under study, the trigger of the feeling or sensation is exogenous: we do not refer to the material and tangible object (the movie), but to the interaction of the spectator with the film text (his or her interpretation or reading). So far we agree that the discrepancies arise when it comes to elucidate how this audiovisual text promotes the emotions of its audience.

4. Theories on filmic emotion

4.1. Cinema as real life: the naïve realism

Neurobiology has revealed that our brain has neural circuits that release discharges of pleasure, and that certain intellectual faculties stimulate these neural mechanisms dispensing pleasure without the need of using electrodes or drugs. The director of the Centre for Cognitive Neuroscience at MIT, Steven Pinker, explains:

“A cheesecake is an explosion of sensuality without parallel in the natural world, because it contains mega doses of pleasant stimuli that we purposely prepared in order to push those buttons that trigger our pleasure. Pornography is a second technology of pleasure. In this chapter I will suggest that the arts constitute a third technology” (Pinker, 2007: 671).

If you prefer, the works of art, including films, work as “technologies designed to open the locks that safeguard our buttons of pleasure”. As it can be noticed, the approach of Pinker is

ontologically mechanistic, to the extent that the operation of the intellect in contact with the plastic arts, music, narrative fiction and humour is, so to speak, reduced to a kind of hydraulic model where a psychological pressure builds a safety valve that triggers an impulse in the physical machinery of the body. This paragraph serves as example:

“The technology of fiction expresses a simulation of life which involves an audience from the comfort of their cave, sofa or cinema armchair (...). When the illusions work, the question ‘why do we enjoy fiction?’ is not a mystery, since it is identical to the question ‘why do we enjoy life?’ When we get absorbed by a book or a film, we get to see landscapes that are breath-taking, we walk next to important people, we fall in love with charming people, we protect or loved ones, and we achieve impossible goals and defeat evil enemies. It is not bad for the price of a book or a cinema ticket!” (Pinker, 2007: 689).

From this point of view (“The characters of the world of fiction do exactly what our intelligence allows us to do in the real world” says Pinker), the pleasure of fiction becomes an effect of what is known as the willing suspension of disbelief, which is implicit in the reading contract accepted by the reader of fiction. The expression “willing suspension of disbelief” was coined in the early 19th century by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge for literary fiction, but it can be extrapolated to the cinematographic field to refer to the fact that the spectators of a film accept, despite they know for sure about its fictional character, the premises on which fiction is based in order to enjoy the pleasures of the text.

In fact, Pinker argues for a concept of film representation that is close to the pictorial ideal of the Renaissance where, in the words of Arthur C. Danto

“... the paintings were windows that offered the world, pure transparent openings through which one saw what would one would watch if one were outside, contemplating what the picture showed. The painting absorbed, therefore, the beauty of the world, ideally without adding anything to what one was watching, so to speak, through it” (Danto, 2005: 129).

This idea that the filmic emotion is directly proportional to the skill with which the movie imitates reality is very widespread. In fact, we should start our review by pointing out that there exists in film studies a body of opinion that supports this sort of naïve realism proposed by Steven Pinker from the field of neuroscience. In fact, there are many scholars who argue almost intuitively that films produce emotions on the spectators to the extent to what they are, as Douglas Sirk said it, an imitation of life.

Although focused on other kinds of issues, psychoanalysis gave theoretical coverage to this naïve presumption by bringing to light the equivalences between the film and dream experiences.

4.2. Someone else's dream: the psychoanalytical theory of cinema and emotion

Psychoanalysis highlighted the emotional experiences of spectators at a time in which the theoretical apparatus had focused its interest on issues of meaning, representation and ideology. As early as 1958 [3], Edgar Morin pointed out the fact that the film experience engages the subject's deepest layers:

“Spectators in the ‘dark room’ are passive subjects in their purest form. They can do nothing, they have nothing to give, not even their applauses. They are patient, and agonise. They are suppressed, and suffer. Everything happens very far out of their reach. At the same time, everything occurs in them, in their psychic sensibility, if we can put it this way. When the influences of the shadow and the double merge on a white screen in a dark room and the channels are blocked, the locks of the myth, the dreams, the magic are opened for spectators, who are sunk in their alveolus, an entity closed to all except to the screen, wrapped in the double placenta of an anonymous community and the darkness” (Morin, 1972: 14).

Outside of the abstruse terminology and vague pseudoscientific tone, Morin rightly identified that spectators are not limited to watch the film, but that they live it with neurotic feelings, as if it were a regression (later Felix Guattari developed this idea and suggested that the film is the “divan of the poor”). Morin also pointed out that the “magic of the film” lies in its ability to photograph not only our movements, but also our desires, which is the matrix idea that was progressively reinforced as Lacan's re-reading of Freud was taking shape [4].

Among the reasons that explain Lacan's influence in psychoanalytic film theory is not the slightest consonance or affinity that some of its most significant theoretical proposals had with the constitutive mechanisms of the film experience. For example, the Lacanian notion of desire, which does not involve desiring the other but “to desire other's desire”, seemed conceived ad hoc to describe the identification processes promoted by films. In parallel, his influential work on the mirror stage (which asserts that the *ego*, the notion that each person has of himself or herself, is forged at a young age [from 6 to 18 months of life] when the baby is reflected in a mirror, so that the subject is constituted “in and by a similar other”) was easily extrapolated to the psychic mechanisms activated by films.

Whatever the case, important French scholars have put under Lacan's conceptual umbrella the foundations of psychoanalytic film theory. These are some of the milestones.

In the early 1970s Jean-Louis Baudry (1975) studied the cinema apparatus, understood as the technological, institutional and ideological machine that produces in the subject important effects, which include some not at all trivial effects of psychological nature. According to Baudry, as a mechanical materialisation of Plato's cave, the film device immerses the cinema spectator in conditions of passivity and comfort that are similar to uterine isolation (the metaphor, as we can see, comes directly from the pioneering work of Morin) which reproduces the hallucinatory power of sleep and promotes regression. Thus the film transforms the psychologically and socially defined individual into a spectatorial subject.

By revealing the psychological mechanisms by which cinema becomes an efficient simulator that creates a deep impression of reality in the spectator, the work of Baudry gave a psychoanalytical character to the main thesis of naïve realism which contends that the film experience mimics life. With the so-called fiction effect, which is one of many effects promoted by the device that designates the sensation that spectators will experience when they think they are the ones producing what is on the screen, Baudry went a step further by adding that in the film experience, unlike in real life, some of our most accumulated desires are (illusorily or fraudulently) satisfied.

Christian Metz (1977) outlined better the cinema-dream analogy, the similarity between the cinema spectator and the subject who dreams. Basically, Metz argues that the dream and the film are stories told in pictures in which the unconscious desire is symbolic. The sense of reality and, therefore, its emotional counterparts are underlined in the film as a result of the identification mechanisms involved in the film experience. Returning to the first outline of Baudry, Metz points out two overlapping types of identification:

A) Primary identification with the camera or the act of watching which guarantees the spectator that illusion of ubiquity inherent to the "all-perceiving subject". Metz links the primary identification with the mirror stage described by Lacan: spectators identify with the view of the camera because in their early childhood they experienced an equivalent psychic process in which they forged their *ego*.

B) Secondary identification with the fictional characters that resembles the identification promoted by the rest of the means of narrative expression.

Metz added that identification is one of the sources of filmic pleasures, next to voyeurism (the observation of others from a safe place that provokes pleasure), fetishism (the credulity of the spectator to what he sees on the screen is essentially fetish) and narcissism (the "all-perception" felt by the spectator produces in him an emotional magnification).

In short, the Lacanian precepts help to reveal that cinema takes part in the desires of the spectator and gives him great pleasures. Without leaving the conceptual course of psychoanalysis, in this case of Freudian inspiration, the first wave of feminist theory denounced that in this way the institutionalised cinema reproduced the structures of domination. In a seminal essay, Laura Mulvey (1975) argued that men and women have different desires, that the cinema apparatus in its classical Hollywood version only gave form to phallogocentric desires, and that the spectator that was immersed in this model of film experience, which is structured according to a male gaze, cannot feel pleasure without reproducing the structures of patriarchal domination.

On these premises, psychoanalytic theory and its feminist branch (that soon rejected the Freudian principles that, transmuted in gender studies, reached the border of cultural studies) have evolved considerably in the course of the years and have investigated the pleasures and desires produced in the filmic experience, which has not ceased to raise considerable suspicions among those who see things differently.

4.3. Perceptual mechanisms and filmic emotion: cognitive theory

The cognitive approach, for example, has denounced the real low value and attention that psychoanalytic film theory gives to emotions. For Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (1999), two of the most recognised cognitivists, this alleged reluctance of psychoanalytic film theory to study emotions had its origins in the writings of Freud, who provides a comprehensive theory of instincts and sexuality, but leaves emotions in a second level of importance [5].

Plantinga and Smith have argued that the disadvantage of a theoretical approach based on instincts and libidinal impulses lies in its nullity at the moment of measuring the specific nuances exhibited by the filmically-reflected emotional situations. As result we have a set of analysis cut by the same pattern that invariably reveals the libidinal origin of filmic emotions, but does not examine the unique physiognomy and vibration that these emotions acquire in each case. “We lose the flavour of individual texts” is the expression rightly used by these authors.

In other words, psychoanalytic film theory has not been able to detect the identical series of problems faced by all films regardless of the tone of the films and, what is worse; it has underestimated the rest of significant parameters regardless of their relevance. Cognitive theory applied to cinema began to take shape in the 1980s with the focus put on correcting that diagnosis error.

Cognitivism is not a unified and doctrinal theory, but an eclectic constellation of proposals seeking alternatives answers from psychoanalysis and the film-linguistics to explain the way in

which spectators understand films. Regarding the audience described as captive, subjected and in trance by psychoanalysis, the cognitivist approach emphasises that the response of the individual to a film has largely a rational motivation. Regarding the idea that cinema is a grammatical system similar to a language (which is axiomatic for the film-linguistics embodied by Christian Metz), cognitivists claim that the decoding of the film text's formal components coincides *grosso modo* with the most basic patterns of human perception.

From this critical equidistance, the cognitivist approach formulates a novel idea about the emotional experiences linked to the vision of films. Although it acknowledges that there is a markedly personal trajectory that culminates in its neo-formalist theory, some of the numerous works by David Bordwell (1995: 149-166; 1996: 29-47; 2003: 39-92) have given support to this shift proposed by the cognitivist approach from the unconscious psychoanalysis to the conscious and pre-conscious processes that are involved in the filmic interpretation.

For example, Bordwell (1996: 29-47) presents in details the idea that film narrative offers a number of indications for “the production of meaning” that the spectator processes under a series of interpretive schemes, developing hypotheses that are confirmed, modified or suspended as the interpretation progresses. However, Bordwell does not examine the emotional response of spectators:

“As a perceptual-cognitive account, this theory does not address affective features of film viewing. This is not because I think that emotion is irrelevant to our experience of cinematic storytelling—far from it—but because I am concerned with the aspects of viewing that lead to constructing the story and its world. I am assuming that a spectator's comprehension of the films' narrative is theoretically separable from his or her emotional responses” (Bordwell, 1996: 30).

The most orthodox cognitivist authors not only resent this segregation, but also have focused, as I have said, much of their efforts on the study of the emotional responses of film spectators. The aforementioned compendium edited by Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (1999), which includes some of the first postulates of cognitivism, is a good thermometer to measure their contributions in this area.

The editors summarise in the introduction to the volume the three basic assumptions of the cognitive approach:

- The emotions provoked by films are rooted in the same type of processes that generate the emotions of the real world, with which completely oppose those who grant the “aesthetic emotion” a statute that is qualitatively different from ordinary sensations.

- Emotions are “physiological changes, feelings and thinking” (1999: 6).
- The understanding of the emotions of filmic origin emphasises the thinking part of an emotion, “with thinking consisting of the emoter's evaluation or judgment about the object of the emotion” (1999: 6).

So the investigations of cognitive philosophers have been directed to describe those objects or causes that, present in the filmic text, cause the filmic emotion. “Since emotions have reasons, or in more modern parlance, ‘objects’ or ‘causes’ embodied in the text, why not focus on *these* rather than on the subjectivity of the spectator or artist?” (Plantinga and Smith, 1999: 5).

Noël Carroll became a pioneer in this area with his determined study of the emotion-triggering mechanisms used by the horror genre (1990). His results were summarised and made applicable to melodrama and suspense, in a chapter included in the compendium of Plantinga and Smith (1999: 21-47), where he presents an overall profile of the relations between the genre conventions and the particular emotions they provoke.

Murray Smith (1995), on the other hand, undertook a deep re-reading of the axial concept of identification forged by psychoanalysis, which counteracted the notion of engagement. In his understanding, the spectator is aware of the constructed nature of representation, and that is why he is not cheated or subjected by the film’s narration, nor is “trapped” by the cultural proposals of such representation (1995: 41). Peculiarly supported by the proposals of Bertold Brecht, Murray argues (1995: 81-86) that the spectator keeps a rational and ideological distance from the filmic text, so that what he calls structure of sympathy [6] has three levels of engagement:

* Recognition, which refers to the spectator’s construction of characters based on the textual indicators.

* Alignment or Perceptual alignment, which, like Gérard Genette’s concept of focalisation, highlights the process through which the spectators are situated in relation to the characters, with regards to their *actions*, *knowledge* and feelings.

* Allegiance, which corresponds to the cognitive and affective commitment to a character’s values and moral points of view.

Opposing psychoanalytic film theory which proposes a direct correlation between the perceptual alignment and allegiance [7], Murray Smith insists on a qualitative leap that mediates between the perceptual alignment and allegiance: if to ensure recognition and alignment the spectator only has

to understand the features and mental states that define a character, then allegiance is evaluating them and responding to the emotionally (1995: 85). Thus, instead of being a consequence that is impulsive, unconscious and contrary to reason, the filmic emotion is part of the combined cycle of perception, cognition and action. The spectator empathises after a rational process in which he evaluates the actions of a fictional character in accordance with its moral and ideological principles.

J. J. Gibson's so-called ecological theory of visual perception has helped some of these cognitivist theorists to unravel the causal circuit that leads from the perceptual mechanism to the emotional response, and including the cognitive processing. To this end, to Gibson's idea that human perception is predetermined by a series of cognitive maps which are the sediment of the evolutionary process of our species, these theorists have added the narrative patterns of fiction film that the spectators acquire culturally since early childhood. Joseph D. Anderson (1996: 161-162) has summarised this sort of ecological approach to cognitive theory of film in three nuclear proposals:

- 1) For the spectator film viewing, from the perceptual point of view, is an illusion.
- 2) "The viewer voluntarily enters into the diegetic world of a movie by means of a genetically endowed capacity for play".
- 3) The film is a replacement or substitute for the psychic world.

After verifying that the perceptual illusion in which the spectator is submerged is caused by a carefully constructed mechanism [8], Anderson gives a detailed account of the cognitive principles that found the perception of the movement, depth, colour, image/sound sync, different sound effects, continuity, as well as the spectatorial immersion in the world of the diegesis. However, despite being one of the most cited and recognised texts of cognitive theory, this work remarkably neglects the emotional and somatic contrasts arising out of these cognitive processes.

Torben Grodal (1997) is much more insightful and incisive on the subject. He has examined the physiology of film reception, this emotional section of the film experience that even has somatic counterparts such as laughing, crying or goose bumps [9]. In his defence that the feelings and emotions are constituent elements of the fable as objective as the own cognitions, Grodal proposes the concept of aesthetic flow to refer to that chain linking perception, cognition, memory, affection and enaction, and illustrates the way in which the "narrative scene" of the canonical narration puts it into practice. He also examines the incidence that the identification mechanisms [10] and the conventions of some specific genres [11] have in the field of the affections of the spectator.

Greg M. Smith (2003) summarises quite accurately the virtues of the cognitive approach when he says that the study of the filmic emotions should address in details all the mechanisms that provoke them, from the lighting to the genre conventions, and including the production, the gestures of the actors, the camera work, sound, music, narrative resources, etc. Very relevantly, Greg M. Smith encompasses under the concept of *style* all these factors or agents on which the emotional reactions of the cinema spectator revolve, and proposes an integral approach that marks distances with respect to some of their co-religionists (Noël Carroll, Ed Tan and Torben Grodal are referred to explicitly) to whom he attributes more selective and partial approaches.

In his opinion, “Films do not ‘make’ people feel”, but “extend an invitation to feel in particular way. Individuals can accept or reject the invitation”. This invitation is not unique, but unfolds throughout the film in a succession of requests that the spectator accepts or rejects. The proposal of Greg M. Smith is to academically study [12] the film components of stylistic nature in which that sequence of invitations is materialised.

4.4. Identity, interpretative communities and emotion

Today, reception theory (also called the reader-response theory) challenges the hegemony of cognitivism in film studies in Anglo-Saxon countries. We are talking about a certainly uneven epistemological rivalry since the reception theory makes common cause with the positions of post-colonial theory, cultural studies, and the gender studies in which the 1980s feminist theory mutated, and even with the approaches of pragmatics, i.e. with the epistemological traditions that dominate in the present the academic centre of the humanities.

A direct and concise way to describe the contributions of reception theory consists in pointing out the relative position of its idea of the cinematic experience in relation to the positions of psychoanalysis and cognitivism, which as we have already mentioned are antagonistic. Indeed, reader-response theory is based on a double disagreement: psychoanalysis’ idea of the unequivocal nature of the film experience and the cognitivist idea of the a-historic, neutral and disoriented subject. Let’s see this in more detail.

According to psychoanalytic theory, the film apparatus is a kind of Orwellian Big Brother that imposes on the spectator somebody else’s dream. The hypnotic reception conditions emotionally hinder spectators until they are captivated by an experience that transcends them and is alien to them [13]. In short, for psychoanalysis the film functions as an overwhelming ideological machine that puts in scene an experience that is alien to the subject in the cinema theatre; it is a strange experience of diverse origins: can be the obsession of a filmmaker as argued by the most conventional psychoanalytic readings [14], the structures of domination of patriarchal society as

Laura Mulvey contends, or the practical exposition of the psychoanalytic theory itself as argued by Slavoj Žižek (1994a, 1994b, and 2000) [15].

Focusing on the actual impacts that film consumption causes, reception theory emphasises, on the contrary, the polyhedral character of the film experience: the meaning of the text is not imposed by any instance (discursive or extra-discursive), but is defined in each case (in each update or reading) in a conflict or negotiation which involves frameworks of reference, the motivations and experiences of the reader, on the one hand, and the *possible world* of fiction, on the other. From this epistemological prism, the meaning of the text is the distinctive experience of each reader. In the case of cinema, the viewing of a film becomes, opposing the ideas of psychoanalysis, a projective experience in which the spectators put into play their determining factors such as race, class, nationality, gender, and ideology.

Cognitivism, for its part, not only highlights the rational motivation of the emotional responses linked to film viewing, but also includes a notion of spectator as neutral, not contradictory, apolitical and universal, and unavailable in any case to the heterogeneous cultural determinations carried by the real-life empirical reader. In other words, the semantic update of the filmic text is regulated by a number of perceptual and cognitive common denominators shared by all cultures.

Thus, the emotional response from the spectator is the climax of the chain of inferences which, in the light of such universal codes of perception and cognition, the spectator makes by following the indicators offered by the filmic text.

Reception theory completely opposes the ideas of cognitive theory and claims the existence of sociologically and culturally differentiated forms of spectatorship that decisively influence the emotional effects of the films. Spectators become active and critical subjects that interact with the film text from a historically founded position according to a number of determinants that condition their reading and the emotions the text produces in them.

Films, in short, do not have a univocal or universal meaning, nor cause the same feelings in the public, but they are interpreted and, by extension, felt differently according to the diverse places in which they are screened, the historical moments in which they are seen, and the cultural positioning of the spectators (and the group they belong to) with respect to subject addressed in the film [16].

According to the logic invoked, the identification mechanisms proposed by the filmic text may enter in conflict with the attitudes, beliefs and ideology of certain “interpretive communities” (Stanley Fish, 1980: 15), with which the response in terms of emotion could be conflicting. This

demonstrates that reading, and the emotions it promotes, is potentially variable depending on the determinants that concur in each identity groups.

In the wake of the feminist critique that proposed the hypothesis that women's experience leads them to assess texts differently than men [17], the reception theory has pointed out that minority groups experience films in different ways. Janet Staiger has addressed in depth this subject in several of her books (1994, 1995 and 2000), and her latest contribution (2005) provides an overview of the subject and interesting notes on the specific case of the fan phenomenon and the links, sometimes conflicting, between certain communities (women, gays, lesbians, etc.) and the mass media. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (1999), on the other hand, review various studies that describe the peculiar way in which Jewish and Italian immigrants from New York, and Harlem residents experienced early American cinema.

Although they have not been recognised as its great influences, the premises of reception theory are consistent with the premises of *social constructivism*, which is a branch of psychology that contends that emotions cannot be understood outside the culture and modelling forces of society. These psychologists consider that the rules of emotion are learned in the process of socialization, so that they are at the service of the social functions and help us to take our place in society without conflicts.

For James R. Averill (1980), for example, the emotions are a kind of dramatic role that we play briefly: we know instinctively what sadness is, but we have learned when we must play this role. Hence that emotional experience must be examined according to the way in which a determined cultural group has constructed this emotion.

The response theory takes this idea into the practical realm of film interpretation: if a person has been socialised in an environment in which white policemen are frightening because they exert violence against black people, this person will fail to react with relief when in, for instance, *Starsky and Hutch* [18] the protagonists appear on the screen with their red Ford Gran Torino, even when the semantic framework of the film makes clear that these white policemen are good [19]. The cognitive and psychoanalytic approaches are unable to account for these "conflictual reception" that is highlighted by cultural studies and reception theory. According to Robert Stam (2001: 280-281), "The notion of spectator postulated by cognitive theory lacks appreciation for

the social and ideological contradictions, the notion of heteroglossia, these stratified, conflictive and 'multiple languages', that are located in the interior of the social formations". Stam himself, this time together with Ella Shohat (2002: 323), added that "the cognitive model cannot give space to what can be called 'racialized representations or 'cognitions with ethnic tendencies' (...).

The different reactions to the films are symptomatic of the different historical experiences and social desires”.

Whatever the case, the emotional susceptibility of the empirical spectator is a very difficult subject in which generalisations are always a worthless scrap of paper. Let's examine the reception of imperialist films in a colonial context that, according to the logic, should alter the process of identification by generating an anxiety that prevented the native spectator from “enjoying the delights programmed by the film”. However, Shohat and Stam (2002: 318) have repeatedly detected a sort of “schizophrenia or contradiction” experienced by African or Asian spectators who identify with the white heroes of Hollywood movies in which their communities are the subject of offensive representations [20].

The authors bring to the arena the statements made by Bertolt Brecht about his reaction as a spectator of *Gunga Din* (Georges Stevens, 1939). The German communist playwright confessed he was touched [21] by the scene in which the Indian whose name gives title to the poem by Kipling and the film adaptation betrays and provokes the death of his compatriots for the benefit of the British invaders. The authors conclude that even Brecht (the theorist of estrangement) was not able to “distance himself emotionally from the powerful imperial myths-creator machines”.

Not satisfied with this type of readings, the advocates of multiculturalism argue for less complacent interpretations: “Thus, the space of the spectator is a negotiable site of interaction and struggle that allows, for example, resistant and 'aberrant' readings, since the consciousness or experience of a particular public generates a counter-pressure to the dominant representations” (Shohat and Stam, 2002: 317). In case the idea was still unclear: “Given that the dominant cinema trades with heroes and heroines, minority communities are entitled to ask for a piece of the cake moved by a simple question of equality in the representation” (Stam, 2001: 314).

Showing its strategic alliance with the cultural studies, the numerous studies on media effects undertaken by reception theory not only classify as empirical this sort of conflicting or differing readings that challenge, even in the emotional field, the *pleasures of the text*, but also legitimise them conceptually, which takes away from the film any responsibility in the creation of meanings.

4.5. The emotion as discursive phenomenon: structural semiotics

Opposing this projective and discretionary idea of the filmic emotion proposed by cultural Studies, structural semiotics argues that all texts (including films) are educational in the sense that they offer the reader a series of, more or less precise, instructions about what to do to understand them in their proper terms. This implies that the meaning is only inscribed in the unique forms taken by each discourse, which are perceived (seen and heard) in the same way by any person.

This extreme point does not deny the polysemic character of the texts, their real capacity to produce plural effects of meaning, but narrows, restricts, and subjects it to “the mandates of the text”. In other words, the cultural objects say many things, some of them different depending on the time and/or cultural environment in which they are decoded, but they do not say just anything (not everything counts as a meaning of a discourse). Therefore, there are degrees of acceptability in the interpretations (there are not only texts of reference, but also interpretations of reference). Santos Zunzunegui puts it more serious:

“This implies that not all expressive decisions serve to transmit *any* meaning and vice versa. Or if one prefers to formulate it with a more emphatic expression: certain forms will never be carriers of certain meanings, in the same way that certain meanings will never be embodied in certain ways. As a consequence, I conclude, the meanings of a text are not (and cannot be) infinite” (Zunzunegui, 2005: 14).

This leads us to the idea, convincingly formulated by Umberto Eco (2000), according to which the reading is a process in which empirical readers intervene actively and bring to play their intellectual competence and capital, but they are also subject to terms, restrictions and constraints dictated by the text that precedes and prefigures the reading (the text has the reader, but not just any interpreter: only that collaborator and partner willing to comply with it proposes).

In this sense, according to structural semiotics, any discourse instructs its users not only about what they have to do, but also about what is not accepted as a pertinent exegesis. Texts, in the end, are protected against these aberrant readings highlighted by cultural studies, i.e. the readings not expected nor validated by the text, those readings that, from the viewpoint of structural semiotics, are not really proper interpretations but flagrant cases of, in the words of Umberto Eco, the *vindictive use* that a certain aggrieved community or minority makes of a text in which its identity is mistreated at the symbolic level.

In other words, from the structural viewpoint, there is no prudent or reasonable way to understand this intricate problem without assuming the interpretation vs. use dichotomy proposed by Umberto Eco (1987: 85-87 and 2000: 39-40), according to which the updating of a text can be implemented judiciously according to the semantic guidelines it carries (this would be the case of interpretation) or, on the contrary, disobeying them in order to deliberately attribute them a message that it does not say (from the artistic to the political and including the psychedelic broad range of uses cited by Eco [22]).

Applied to the case of film, the argument that emotion is a substantive part of the understanding of a film implies, for structural semiotics, the idea that not all the sensations or somatic reactions

experienced by the spectator are legitimised by the film. It implies, in other words, to be aware of the eventuality that in the interpretative cooperation inherent to reading what might be called aberrant decodings of emotional character can sneak in unexpectedly.

Thus, the “emotional use” of texts would correspond to those sensations experienced by the real interpreters in a self-induced manner, i.e. not expected or supported by the text, which is a complex and elusive area that covers a large catalogue of reactions derived from both ideological and psychological prejudices.

In summary, structural semiotics believes that this way of exegetical use carried by any semiotic object also includes guidelines that shape the emotional response of the reader, i.e. identical discursive indicators for the universality of interpreters who are informed about what the text expects from them in the field of emotions.

5. Provisional conclusions

This forcedly brief review of the theoretical reflections on the filmic emotion allows us to see that there is an irreconcilable bipolarity between reader-centred theories and context-and-text oriented theories. We have, in effect, two models or generic ways of understanding film decoding and, therefore, two ways of assessing the emotional effects of films:

A) One model that gives priority to the subjective and environmental conditions in which the film reception occurs, which is a hermeneutic protocol that, to varying degrees, is shared by cultural studies, response theory, pragmatics, and gender studies.

B) Another mode that focuses on the text and postulates an approach to the filmic emotion that follows the instructions proposed by the film to its spectators, an extreme that is, to varying degrees, shared by cognitive theory and structural semiotics.

In no man’s land are psychoanalytic film theory and the representatives of what is termed naïve realism who, in their own peculiar ways, consider the film experience like a simulation of life, so that the emotional impact on its audience derives from the same psychological mechanisms (although psychoanalysis particularly points out the mechanisms activated in the dreamlike trance) with which people face the world.

After having sketched this map, we should discuss the relevance of each approach, but this is a task that the length limits of this article do not allow us to undertake in this occasion. However, I would not like to end this article without putting on the table the idea that the existence of these discrepant or rebellious readings, also in the field of emotions, does not invalidate the fact that

these are misreading exercises, to use a term widely accepted in literary theory. The varied social uses of films are an exciting and very relevant theme, but I am afraid they go beyond the field of hermeneutics and the science of language and enter into the jurisdiction of sociology and political science.

The fact that certain communities are disturbed by a particular film while others rejoice with it [23] is essentially a sociological phenomenon. It is the task of the wise hermeneutist to explain whether these emotional responses that acquire such importance in the socio-political arena are justified or not in light of the effects of meaning expected by the text. In my opinion, there is no other formula to describe the unique conditions in which the elements of audio-visual expression guide the spectator in this cognitive and passionate path which we call film experience.

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7. Notes

[1] William James made explicit his ideas on emotion in his great work *The principles of Psychology*, published in two volumes by Harvard University in 1890. This book included his investigations, reflections and conferences for more than a decade (in fact, the contract for the publishing of the book was signed twelve years earlier in 1878). In 1884, the Danish psychologist Carl Lange reached, by his own means, similar conclusions to James's, and that is why the theory is attributed to both.

[2] The psychology of emotion has a third approach that emerged from the pilot study conducted by Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer (1962). These scientists administered epinephrine to two groups of people, and placed them in situations that encouraged them to feel sad or happy. The emotional reaction to the exciting effects was different between those who were informed of the substance and its effects (who, attributing their nervousness to it, did not indicate feeling particularly happy or angry) and among those who were tricked and told they were taking a harmless sight vitamin supplements, who concluded that their inflaming was due to an emotion, and thus, attributed it to the environmental circumstances of the moment (sadness or joy). This experiment, which rehabilitated the importance of the cognitive appraisal of the context in the psychological study of emotion, was continued by many other scholars that have created models about the way in which we process the situational indicators and react emotionally according to that judgment.

[3] Morin, E. (1958): *Morin, E. (1958): Le Cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire: essai d'anthropologie. Paris: Minuit* (is he references his translation into Castilian, 1972: *the film or the imaginary man.*) Barcelona: Seix Barral).

[4] Two milestones mark the division of the so-called *French Freud* regarding the Doxa of the original Austrian: in 1953 Lacan began teaching his seminar in the hospital Sainte-Anne in Paris, and in 1963 he founded the French society of psychoanalysis.

[5] For Freud, the instincts, particularly the libido and sex drive, are the main source of energy that governs the psychic economy. Emotions are liberation phenomena, forms of releasing and dissipating the psychic energy, so that if this is not properly sublimated or directed it can cause physical symptoms and affective disorders. With the instincts and sexuality at the centre of the psyche, emotions are relegated to mere symptoms of basic factors and, therefore, lack of any heuristic value and interest by themselves. In Freud's view, emotions are a sub-product of the instincts.

[6] This *Structure of Sympathy* alludes to the link that the spectator establishes with the possible world erected by the fictional narrative.

[7] Is the unequivocal case of Laura Mulvey who, as we have mentioned, equates the assumption of the viewpoint of classic film with patriarchal society's structures of domination.

[8] "Perceptions are probably not constructed; motion pictures most certainly are. Every element is scripted, designed, and choreographed; little is left to chance" (Anderson, 1996: 52).

[9] The book's introduction cannot be any clearer in this regard: "The film experience is made up of many activities: our eyes and ears pick up and analyse image and sound, our minds apprehend the story, which resonates in our memory; furthermore, our stomach, heart, and skin are activated in empathy with the story situations and the protagonists' ability to cope" (Grodal, 1997: 1).

[10] Here he detects three types of reactions: voluntary (telic cognition), semi-voluntary (paratelic cognition) and involuntary, like laughter or crying.

[11] He devotes a chapter to comedy, horror, thriller, melodrama and even the meta-fictions of avant-garde cinema.

[12] These are his words: "Nor do I attempt to provide a particular theory for how each cinematic component evokes emotion. I do not present a theory of music, followed by a theory of facial expression, followed by separate theory of camera framing, and so on. Instead, I present a theory of how the emotion system is designed to coordinate information from these subsystems" (Smith: 2003: 10).

[13] In this regard Noël Burch (1985: 131) equates the phenomenon of identification with the sadomasochistic technique of *bondage*.

[14] Psychoanalysis, in its successive versions, has insisted on examining movies as if they were dreams or dreamlike trances of the person responsible for its physical creation, who most of the times is considered to be the film's director.

[15] With the brilliance and persuasion power that characterises him, Žižek manages to demonstrate that certain films created by Hitchcock present Lacan's ideas more clearly than his own seminars.

[16] The empirical studies that support the relativity of film reception are countless. Some classic examples are: Valerie Walkerdine (1979), T. Liebes and E. Katz (1991) and Jacqueline Bobo (1995).

[17] Jonathan Culler (1982: 43-61) provides a good summary of the literature that supports this idea.

[18] Both the TV series created by William Blinn in 1975, and the homonymous film directed by Todd Phillips in 2004.

[19] This is a random example, given that it fits very well to the situation in which Shohat and Stam (2002: 323) describe in this paragraph that directly address this way of looking at things: "the fact that the appearance of a white policeman in a movie, for example, may trigger in certain 'interpretative communities' a sense of tranquillity and safeness safety that people feel when protected, but can bring bitter memories and produce a sense of threat in other communities".

[20] The authors mention the testimonies made by Frantz Fanon, a revolutionary theorist from Martinique, Haile Gerima, an Ethiopian-American film director, and Edward Said, Palestinian-American cultural critic, about the impacts that the Tarzan films series produced in them when they were young: “Gerima recalls the ‘identity crisis’ of Ethiopian children who applauded when Johnny Weissmuller cleaned the ‘dark continent’ of its own inhabitants: ‘Every time that an African person appeared threatening behind Tarzan we screamed with all our strength, attempting to tell him that ‘they’ were coming” (Shohat and Stam, 2002: 318).

[21] “I wanted to applaud and laugh at the appropriate moments. Despite I always knew there was something that was not tight, that Indians are not primitive and uneducated people, but a very old and magnificent culture, and that the Gunga Din could also be considered a traitor to his people” (Shohat and Stam, 2002: 321).

[22] Eco illustrates the differences between two semiotic records with an accurate example: “Proust could read the rail schedule and encounter once again in the names of the towns of Valois pleasant and labyrinthine echoes of the journey to Nerviano in search of Sylvie. But it was not an interpretation of the schedule, but a legitimate, almost psychedelic, use of it. While the timetable provides for only one type of ideal reader: an orthogonal Cartesian operator endowed with a keen sense of irreversibility of time” (Eco, 1987: 87).

[23] A good example here is the case of Mel Gibson’s *The passion of the Christ* (2004) that triggered the anger of the ultra-Orthodox Jews at the time that caused a Rosary of convulsive conversions to the Christian faith in American movie theatres.

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE IN BIBLIOGRAPHIES / REFERENCES:

Zumalde-Arregi, I. (2011): "The filmic emotion. A comparative analysis of film theories", at *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, 66, pages 326 to 349. La Laguna (Tenerife, Canary Islands): La Laguna University, retrieved on ___th of ____ of 2_____, DOI: [10.4185/RLCS-66-2011-936-326-349](https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-66-2011-936-326-349)

Article received on 17 January 2011; Accepted on 8 April and published on 15 April 2011.

Note: the DOI number is part of the bibliographic references and it must be cited if you cited this article.
