New Review of Film and Television Studies

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Online publication date: 15 November 2010

To cite this Article Kramer, Mette(2010) 'The embrace of Mother Nature: appraisal processes and the regulation of affect in attachment genres', New Review of Film and Television Studies, 8: 4, 412 — 435

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17400309.2010.514665
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2010.514665

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The embrace of Mother Nature: appraisal processes and the regulation of affect in attachment genres

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Except for a couple of articles from cognitive film theory, theoretical writing about film has shed little light on the underlying processes governing affective film experience in relation to attachment concerns. In this paper, I explore the relevance of neuro-psychoanalytic theory in laying down a framework for understanding the viewer’s experience of emotional episodes of loss primarily in romantic films and melodramas. As this paper will show, the pleasure of sad scenes – for instance, in the melodrama – has been explained by the use of ‘meta-emotion’ within a framework of cognitive appraisal theory. A personal experience in the cinema, however, has inspired me to discuss an overlooked contributor to emotional processes in sad experiences: specifically the topic of spectator affect regulation and its close relationship to physiology, bodily appraisal and attachment theory. This paper surveys some of the central concepts of ‘neuro-psychoanalysis’, which is an integration of concepts from psychoanalysis and neuroscience. I will show that it is useful to deploy the latest developments in neuro-psychoanalysis to understand the often-irrational fascination experienced by the viewer during episodes of loss in film and television.

Keywords: affect regulation; coping; appraisal; audio-visual media; perception; emotion; cognition; neuro-psychoanalysis

Canonical narratives are structured in ‘emotion episodes’; and ‘tension’, as argued by the psychologist Ed Tan (1996, 79), ‘is followed by relaxation’; the viewer only experiences intensive emotions to a certain extent before they are amplified to more tolerable levels. Films are emotionally regulative and signify the absence of the viewer’s enactive participation; filmic emotions constitute ‘action tendencies’ (Arnold 1960; Frijda 1986; Tan and Frijda 1999), which are behaviourally ‘cut-off’ compared with real-life emotional arousals (Currie 1995).

Let me give an example of such emotional regulation: in David Cronenberg’s thriller Eastern Promises (2007), which runs through this paper as the main example, the facial display of the central character, Anna, is what we could call ‘emotionally attuned’ despite that someone she cares for (the baby girl Catherine)
is in danger: Anna’s glance, which displays worry and determination, is directed at the baby in the villain Kirill’s arms and at his fierce expression. Anna’s face does not display fear as might be expected in these circumstances. The viewer affectively senses that the situation demands that Anna stays calm. She is concerned for the baby, whilst imagining what it would be like to be Kirill in his situation and even though her first inclination was to show fear; the best solution was to emotionally attune herself to Kirill’s mood in order to persuade him to hand the baby back to her; not to mention that if she did not stay calm she might wake up the baby, which could have unsettled Kirill’s sensitive and unpredictable temperament.

The emotions expressed by the fictional universe embodied by Anna’s character cue the viewer’s emotions in a regulative sense, through the importance of the scenario as well as through the facial display and actions of the characters, to help the viewer overcome the stress and regain control; in particular Anna’s profound empathy with the child and Anna’s and Nikolai’s controlled negotiation skills and emotional intelligence, tailored not to over-arouse Kirill, can be incorporated into the viewer’s own world of socio-emotional experiences and physiological, affective and cognitive coping potentials dealing with scenarios of loss, some unconscious and some consciously available, noticeably stressful episodes of ‘goodbye-ness’. Such processes of affect regulation are adaptive and fundamental to the capacity of higher ordered cognitive ‘mentalizing’ and management of stress (Bowlby 1969).

In Art and Intimacy (2000), the evolutionary theorist Ellen Dissanayake argues that art evolved from the special interaction between parents and their infants, especially the mother–infant dyad, and she draws similarities between the developmental course of an infant’s imitation and pretence and the way the arts present imaginative representations. Indeed, the mutual language of mothers and infants, which we commonly refer to as ‘baby talk’ and ‘motherese’, is a specialized, cross-cultural behaviour accompanied by looks and gestures (Trevarthen 1979; Dissanayake 2000). These unbroken moments of face-to-face communication, which are prominent in breastfeeding and cherished by mothers, are often accompanied by a higher-pitched voice than one would normally use. Newborn babies are sensitive to motherese when the facial expression and voice are the caregiver’s. These non-verbal attuned moments not only convey emotional information; they also allow for affective state sharing, which, when matched by another person (such as the caregiver), results in the state known as mutual attunement (Stern 1985; Trevarthen 1984) – a state that is prominent in securely attached infants. Emotional regulation processes originally spring from ‘affect attunement’, also called ‘empathetic responsiveness’ (Stern 1985, 138). It is made up of ‘extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional reactions’ (Ross Thompson 1994 in Fonagy et al. 2004, 94).

By attunement, the psychologist Daniel Stern (1985) refers to an alignment with internal states in relation to ‘the inter-subjective relatedness’ between the infant and the caregiver. However, the attuned mother does not merely mirror the infant’s state;
in order for synchronized attunement to take place the caregiver performs a critical regulative function as she has to ensure both ‘marked’ and ‘contingent’ behaviour as she is empathetically imagining the infant’s emotional state to ensure that she is not unnecessarily overwhelming the child with an extreme emotional display (Fonagy et al. 2004). Affect attunements are non-verbal reactions to the infant’s expressions and emotions, and as these expressions arise automatically as a result of the caregiver’s regulatory functions, they are not necessarily consciously accessible (Schore 2001).3

The attuned mother can self-correct by accessing her reflective function whereby she monitors not only her infant’s but her own internal signals and differentiates her own affective state. As a regulator of the infant’s arousal levels, she also modulates nonoptimal high levels of stimulation that would induce supraheightened levels of arousal in the infant. Thus, she regulates not just the type but also the intensity of socioaffective information within the dyad’s communication system. (Schore 2001, 20)

Attunement refers to how sensitive and responsive caregivers are to the child’s developmental milestones. On a sub-cortical level, below the brain’s cortex, affect attunement derives from a caregiver’s (primarily the mother’s) capacity to regulate an infant’s emotions, levels of arousal and physiology (Schore 1994). Attunement processes are traceable in the brain’s affective centre, the limbic system; the infant’s early attachment pattern plays a significant role in the way that the nervous system will respond in the infant’s subsequent social relations (Hart 2008, 34). Humans are born with a plastic nervous system that interacts with the individual’s relational environment. Personality is likely to depend on such social relations, especially the pattern of early relational interaction that the infant forms with its primary caregiver/s. Attunement is therefore sacrosanct when we want to understand fundamental emotional processes in social relations, and also how an individual adult viewer will respond in adult relationships and experience fictive representations of attachment needs.

These bodily and neuro-affective processes, I find, play a key role in how viewers automatically appraise and experience emotion episodes concerned (especially) with attachment needs, such as the loss of a child or the bereavement of a partner in film communicated through characters’ facial expressions of basic emotions, such as distress, fear and sadness.

As I have argued elsewhere, fiction, despite its shortcomings, can simulate positive and negative emotions in an adaptive play space offering reasonably safe avenues for the viewer to sit in and explore strategies dealing with perennial and evolutionarily adaptive problems, such as the obtainment of a partner or the loss of a bond, so often elicited in the ‘woman’s film’ (see, for example, Kramer 2007). In this paper, I suggest that engagement with film at best offers the spectator the possibility of regulating emotion within significant life events, say during certain life phases where some issues, such as bonding, are more relevant.

It is particularly in the context of attachment concerns – which exist as themes and key scenes in different film genres but are especially pronounced in romantic films and melodrama – that an opportunity exists for a rapprochement between film
theory and the modern synthesis of affective developmental neuroscience and psychoanalysis (neuro-psychoanalysis). Fictive scenes of emotional loss and union can be said to revitalize significant aspects of affective responses to attachment needs. Both positive and negative affective experiences of emotional reunion and separation are important for the organization of an infant’s self; both experiences have enduring effects on the child’s nervous system and the development of varied or limited subsequent social and emotional relations and reactions (Shore 1994, 103).

Scenes of loss and scenes of reunion recur in audio-visual media, and probably so because of their affective superiority (see also Tan and Frijda 1999). I shall, however, focus on separation and loss in this article and the idea that through the regulative strategies offered by film narratives modelled by fictive agents, viewers potentially can learn to manage their emotions in a self-soothing manner that furnishes adaptive value. The success and flexibility of the emotional regulation depends on the spectator’s coping reserves; how well the individual viewer appraises, say, a scene of loss or unreciprocated love in film is influenced by capacities present in the moment of film viewing; cognitive capacities will rely on bodily and affective resources that have developed in early life, especially the manner and the sense of attachment security through affective interaction between caregiver and infant and during subsequent romantic and affiliative interactions (Bowlby 1969; Stern 1985; Schore 1994, 2001). Of course, the effectiveness of the ‘fictive regulative lessons’ depends on the clear vision, the communicative skills of the director and the expressivity of the actors. Below, I wish to use the example of negative emotions in order to discuss how affective and cognitive processes co-interact and influence the experience and appraisal of scenes of emotional loss and unreciprocated love in attachment genres.

**Psychoanalysis and film theory revisited**

In the psychoanalytic approach to film spectatorship, prominent in feminist film or psycho-semiotic film theory, the default mode has been to link the cinematic experience with repressed early childhood experiences, such as the Freudian notion of Oedipal castration anxiety and the Lacanian mirror phase (Mulvey 1975). This tendency dates back roughly to the mid-1970s.

I will argue that the reason why the psycho-semiotic paradigm has missed the opportunity to account for the common emotions elicited in melodramas and romances is that feminist film theory has left out the perspective of biological attachments and how biological dispositions influence spectatorship. This theoretical void has deprived film students and scholars, myself included, of common-sense arguments about the power of the romantic and melodrama plot primarily over female viewers.

Most psychoanalytic–semiotic film theory, including the theories of prominent film theoretical figures like Laura Mulvey (1975) and Christian Metz (1982), is inspired by the work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and that of the psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan. But despite Freud having recognized the bond between mother and infant as ‘primary’ and ‘unique’ in the
forming of the infant’s future relationships (1945, 40), feminist film theory has not dealt with attachment concerns from a psycho-biological perspective. Instead, feminist frameworks have aspired to a critical interpretation of symbolic and cultural expressions as tools to articulate gender asymmetries and social structures in classical Hollywood narratives.

Psychoanalysis at present does not operate with the Oedipal dynamics to explain how the self develops in the young infant (Schore 2007). Psychoanalysis within film studies, however, continues using a scientifically outdated version of Freudian theory when it addresses the processes by which the viewer projects self-generated processes on to the screen, such as empathy (see Plantinga and Smith 1999, 10–13 for psychoanalytic critique). The newest neuroscientific developments in psychoanalysis, which focus on the body as a fundamental source for the development and organization of the self, should be integrated with film analysis and theory to explain how viewers might be fascinated with and emotionally aroused by narratives and fictive agents.

The neuro-psychiatrist Allan N. Schore writes:

The developmental sciences are now offering a rather detailed description of specifically how different types of early relational experiences positively and negatively impact evolving psychic structure, and that the neurosciences are currently delineating the structures and functions of the brain systems that process object relational information, mediate attachment, and underlie the mechanisms of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. I therefore have suggested [...] that psychoanalytic conceptions of psychic structure need to be consonant with what we now know about internal structure as it exists in nature, and that no current psychoanalytic theoretical model can be purely psychological, but must rather address both psychic function and biological structure. (2007, 1–2)

Such a synthesis, which brings the biological body into a psychological understanding of the mechanisms involved in spectator engagement, can shed light on the multifaceted process in which the spectator’s behaviour – the viewer’s psychological make-up, personality traits, experience and socio-emotional environment – shapes the way her mind-brain deals with emotions arising (Schore 2001). Evidently, incorporating the newest developments in psychoanalysis and neuroscience into film theory is an ambition that requires far more substantiation than this paper allows for. Yet my hope is that even a rudimentary sketch will convey the gist of my argument and allow me to integrate the new synthesis of developmental neuroscience and psychodynamics into film theory.

**Jenefer Robinson’s ‘emotional education’**

During my research into the idea of affective reactions to film characters and film scenarios in relation to affect attunement and attachment processes, I read the philosopher Jenefer Robinson’s truly important monograph, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music and Art* (2005). The book addresses central aspects concerning the relationship between affect, emotion and cognition and the
Robinson advocates for integrating ‘affective appraisal’ – also called ‘low level’ appraisal (Griffiths 2003) – in models of engagement with music and literature. Her position counters the traditional cognitive appraisal theories, which imply that appraisal processes are always constituted by (cognitive) thought processes or by a ‘judgement’ that is, that the fundamental component of an emotion is an evaluation, that is the viewer is angry at the villain in the film because the viewer believes that he has wronged the female protagonist.

Robinson lends her perspective from neuroscience following the work of prominent neuroscientists such as Joseph E. LeDoux (1996/1998), Jaak Panksepp (1998) and Antonio Damasio (1994). Her basic point is that a purely cognitive theory of appraisal would ‘leave out the emotionality of emotion’ of the experiences of art works since we can appraise events without consciously being aware of what triggered the emotional arousal; we might, says Robinson, have spontaneous and instinctive emotions through physical changes to events without any ‘cognitive contribution’. What Robinson is arguing for, following Joseph E. LeDoux (1996/1998), is that emotions are ‘instinctive’.

What I find particularly valuable about Robinson’s account is that she includes the individual ‘relational’ coping resources in the affective appraisal process of the arts (see also Arnold 1960) where some of these processes work in an automatic fashion – so-called ‘affective appraisal’ – that is, they are appraisal/judgement processes that take place beneath the individual’s conscious threshold without cognitive mediation, whilst other processes operate in a cognitive fashion dependent on higher cognitive processes. Robinson (2005) also sketches a framework for emotion as a ‘process’, as she is building her theory on the background of the last 30 years of research on emotion within neuroscience, philosophy of mind and social psychology. According to Robinson, contrast to cognitive appraisal theory, the core of the emotion process is consequently a ‘non-cognitive’, ‘coarse-grained’ and ‘affective appraisal’, which produces immediate physical and emotional reactions and slower ‘cognitive monitoring’ of the situation (2005, 59).

Robinson is interested in realistic and classic literature and calls for arts as an ‘emotional education’ – the author structures the text though formal devices so that readers along with the characters go through an emotional learning process where physiological and affective reactions together with cognitive monitoring enable the reader to learn from her affective–physiological reaction to form an interpretation of the text. The process she describes, I believe, comes very close to the often-therapeutic release many viewers experience with tearjerkers, as this genre allows for the possibility of vicarious emotion, producing a ‘good cry’ as a means to self-reflection. In particular, women may share in this process, since they respond more empathetically and with increased enjoyment to sad melodramas (Beth Oliver 1993). The sad melodrama is also linked to so-called ‘communal’, that is ‘feminine’ gender self-role perceptions (Oliver, Sargent and Weaver 1998). Robinson’s neuroscientific account is also valuable in understanding the irrational fascination we have with sad films, which might cue and activate automatic responses via various pathways in the brain that bypass conscious awareness.
Robinson’s view approaches mine, and she also uses the work of the affective neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, the neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux (1996/1998) to account for affective and cognitive appraisal, as well as Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman’s three-dimensional coping framework (1984), which I have used in my previous work (see, for example, Kramer 2007).

I wish, however, to expand on Robinson’s important account, which fits perfectly with recent ‘multilevel’ approaches to engagement with film narratives and characters coming from within the field known as cognitive film theory (Barratt 2005; Grodal 2006). The philosopher of film Amy Coplan (2006) has suggested, rightly I believe, that film is more successful compared to literature and music when it comes to generating automatic emotional arousal such as through the automatic process of emotional contagion. Following Coplan, film has a straight link from perception to emotion, and does not have to go via the imagination to engage us emotionally. Since audio-visual media is perceptual and emotionally privileged compared to literature and music (Coplan 2006), my proposal is that audio-visual media, such as film, speak directly to perceptual cues of affective appraisal, via facial expressions embodied in close-ups and point-of-view, which the structure of the canonical film is designed to regulate.

**David Cronenberg’s Eastern Promises (2007)**

Allow me to begin at a particular stage in my life to illustrate my perspective. Shortly after my initiation into motherhood, I was at the cinema for the first time since the birth of my son. My partner and I were watching David Cronenberg’s *Eastern Promises* (2007), in retrospect the film was possibly not the most excellent choice for a new mother as the film is a radiant thriller set in London about a depressed midwife, Anna, whose past experiences include abortion and the loss of romantic and paternal attachment. One night when Anna is at work, she witnesses the death of a young prostitute during childbirth. When the surviving baby girl, Catherine’s destiny, falls into the hands of a Russian Mafia circle, Anna is motivated to save her by maternal love, which combines powerfully with her role as a life giver and indeed her own attachment bereavements. Anna infiltrates the corrupt organization led by Seymour, a charismatic Godfather persona, in order to save the baby. The Mafia boss’ son Kirill, an unpleasant, sad and emotionally neglected figure, is assigned to cover up the Mafia’s sex trafficking and exploitation of women like Catherine’s mother. Kirill decides to throw Catherine into the Thames while the sympathetic Mafia driver, Nikolai, who forges an emotional bond with Anna, persuades him to change his mind.

Intuitively sensing Seymour’s sinister character as well as his paternal appeal to the father-deprived Anna, I had felt a sense of foreboding especially when Seymour comes to visit her at the hospital. It was during the drowning scene, still, that I became emotionally saturated and felt the classical physiological changes that make for over-arousal — sweating, startle and palpitations — as Anna in a semi close-up glanced at the baby wrapped in a blanket in the arms of the villain.
who displayed a negative face as he was debating with himself about her destiny. I had an instinctive feeling of danger and emotional emergency, which Robinson calls the raw affective appraisal route. I found it difficult to sit still and grasped my partner’s calming hand, using my other hand to cover my eyes, hoping that David Cronenberg, despite his reputation and track record as a director of horror films, would come up with a way to assuage my fright and end the emotional episode in a comforting manner as typically expected from classical film genres.

As I kept my cool, still holding my partner’s hand, my rationality reminded me of what cognitive film theorist Torben Grodal has called film’s ‘reality-status’ (2006) – the concept that this was ‘just’ a film – and even though the filmic emotions I had felt were genuine and my empathy for Anna’s situation embodied a concern for my own infant as our situations had overlapping factors, the film emotions were according to different standpoints in cognitive film theory, nevertheless relatively ‘safer’ than had I myself been standing at the riverside partaking in Anna’s fear of losing the baby (Tan 1996).

Had the film director not given me narrative closure or had I not rationally assessed the fictional situation through the works of the newest part of the brain (the neo-cortex) or reached out for my partner as a coping strategy, I might have followed the somewhat irrational intuition and fled back to our son, who was perfectly safe at home with the babysitter.

I have no way of describing that moment other than to say I was in the embrace of Mother Nature; I was perceptually cued by Kirill’s troubling face and a biologically relevant scenario of loss playing on the human capacity for universal emotions and empathize with Anna’s potential loss, in this case primed by my own motherly feelings at a deep level, which were readily available because of its universal concern but also because of my psychologically biological situation and stage of life. However, my cognitive assessment – or cognitive ‘monitoring’ as Robinson calls it (2005), and the regulative structure of the emotion episode in the film – played a critical role in my affective experience of the disturbing scene, as it allowed me to regulate my affective reactions in a safe place than in a real-life situation as well as evaluating cognitively why the scene had generated such a powerful reaction in me.

I will argue that, in such a situation, where the viewer is emotionally engaged with the seen, the viewer’s own coping system is operating in a co-regulative sense, determining the viewer’s levels of stress presented by the film narrative, but that the nature of the cinematic experience, shielded in the cinema seat, creates possibilities for ‘direct’ perceptual pick up (Gibson’s ‘affordances’ 1979) of relevant information that can have adaptive and regulative value.

Films – and in particular some genres – are designed to represent perennial and evolutionary problems such as loss and union of social and emotional bonds. They offer a built-in possibility for the viewer to stay within the emotion framework, where emotions can be felt and appraised in a shielded environment. This contrasts with real life, where emotional experiences and concerns can produce more devastating consequences. Films underscore meanings and offer
the viewer a means to physiologically regulate reactions, and to fathom what various reactions to a film scene might mean to the individual viewer.

The result was that, what at first felt like a stressful film experience to me, had a positive outcome. The film experience left me with an inbuilt learning capability that is close to what is known as ‘affective mentalizing’ (Fonagy et al. 2004, 96) – that is, an adult’s capability to regulate the infant’s affect while remaining in the affective state without over-arousing the child.

I believe this kind of affective and cognitive evaluation comes quite close to the attuned and safe relationship a caregiver has to her infant – the first steps into empathy, the building of resilience and mentalizing – that also reflects the auto-regulative function a therapist has to his/her patient.

**Why are we attracted to sad films?**

The problem is in understanding how it can be useful – and even pleasurable – for the perceiver to simulate and be captivated by a state of such dysphoric emotion such as the sad sides of melodrama.

Some researchers, such as Mary Beth Oliver (1993), link the positive enjoyment of negative emotions – for example, watching painful melodrama scenes or dreadful horror scenes – with positive ‘meta-emotions’. The term meta-emotion refers to the process whereby the viewer reflects upon first-order emotions in the sense that the engagement with negative emotions can have a positive outcome though having emotions about the emotional experience. In this way, negative emotions can be accompanied by viewer gratification and positive valence from a third person perspective.

As raised by Torben Grodal (2007, 101), meta-emotion theory in this form does not entirely take into account why negative emotions can be beneficial from a first-person perspective, say when the viewer ‘simulates in the first person and feel sadness’. Why would it generally be gratifying for the individual viewer to shed tears and empathize with the female character when she loses her loved one, which is what happens often in the melodrama and which David Cronenberg develops as a key scene in *Eastern Promises*? To understand the personal gratification, according to Grodal, we must acknowledge that individuals might understand a particular situation, thereby fulfilling personal goals. As explained by Grodal (2007), it is fundamental to understand viewer gratification from an ‘adaptationist’ perspective based on a view of the mind-brain as consisting of adaptations including positive and negative emotions that have evolved to solve perennial problems over our evolutionary history (Barkow, Cosmides and Tooby 1992) in the service of reproductive and self-preserving goals.

From such a framework, it makes sense to suggest that the viewer might seek to entertain negative emotions in light of her evolved, current, impending and competitive attachment concerns, say during certain life stages where some needs are more persistent than others in a reproductive and self-preserving sense. This is because negative emotions such as the cost of lack of protection in attachment
contexts over evolutionary time were ‘immediate’ and resulted in ‘death or reproductive failure’ (Chisholm 1999, 91; LeDoux 1996/1998). Dysphoric emotions like the grief we encounter in the melodrama can be regarded as adaptive states that serve as an important tool in coping with more problematic and challenging emotional issues (Grodal 2007; Kramer 2007). As expressed by the evolutionary biologist Randolph M. Nesse:

There are more negative emotions than positive ones – twice as many, by one count. The imbalance arises because people encounter only a few kinds of opportunity, and so – in the Darwinian sense, again – they need only a small number of positive emotions. Happiness, excitement, joy, and desire motivate people to take full advantage of each opportunity. Threats, however, come in many forms – predators, poisonous small animals, disease, exposure, exclusion from a group, loss of allies, loss of stored food, loss of territory, loss of a mate and on and on. Consequently, many distinct patterns of response have been developed to contend with those threats. (1991, 32)

In a similar vein, Anne Bartsch and Christoph Jäger have used meta-emotion theory to suggest that there is a possibility of ethical validation in the engagement with negative emotions: ‘They [sad films] make emotions intelligible and controllable for the viewer, and offer moral justifications for the experience and expression of emotions’ (2006, 195).

Emotions of the higher ordered kind would bring about an evaluation of the significance of the particular situation to the observer. For Torben Grodal, the first person and the third person perspective are intertwined in film viewing but meta-emotion theory only takes the third person perspective (2007, 101). The viewer is embodied in, however, the moment of viewing: she projects her own conscious and unconscious experiences say with similar experiences of distress on to the screen on the basis of her own body and mental apparatus. Her meta-emotions, emotions about the filmic experiences, say her empathy for Anna and the baby in Eastern Promises, is generated on the basis of those projections and her personal concern and engagement with the situation elicited on the screen.

Having emotions about an emotion is not a cognitive process entirely: it is also a form of affective and bodily coping. Meta-emotion theory has an affective component, as well as a cognitive connection as it links the emotional experience and physiological reaction with cognition, which feeds back to the experience itself, and can bring about an evaluation of the significance of the particular situation for the individual as well as be part of the cognitive, emotional and physiological modification. The viewer might notice the physiological response to the stimuli; which can make her think about how she feels – good or bad – about engaging with the character’s situation from the comfort of her cinema seat.

As argued by Robinson, following the work of the neuroscientist Joseph E. LeDoux (1996/1998), we can be emotionally aroused by events but not be cognitively aware of the processes that instantiated the arousal in the first place. In a Jamesian sense, it was my bodily reaction – and the salience of the film scene of loss – that cued me though feedback that the baby-drowning scene had significant value. As argued by the philosopher Jesse Prinz: ‘We come to be good
body-pattern detectors (through evolution and learning), because body patterns co-occur with matters of great concern’ (2003, 79).

In the latter cognitive sense, a painful scene from a melodrama or the nerve wrecking scene in *Eastern Promises* can be empathetically useful for the observer as a means of imagining what it would be like to be that specific person in that particular situation during a set of circumstances, but also as a means of reflecting on the scenario on the basis of one’s own physiological arousal in order to adjust one’s own emotions and behaviour. In that sense, the term meta-emotion appears to be equal to modern appraisal theory (see Bartsch and Jäger 2006; Bartsch et al. 2008). Most of cognitive appraisal theory has (Arnold 1960; Lazarus 1982) argued that appraisal can happen automatically and without verbal and cognitive intervention, which would include those raw instinctual appraisals that Robinson speaks about, and which I believe provide an individual with a bodily–affective distinction. However, cognitive appraisal theory has had some difficulties giving such affective dimensions to appraisal processes the credit contemporary neuroscientists, psychologists and some philosophers argue it deserves.

Cognitive appraisal theory

Appraisal theory is the most prominent theory to account for emotion. According to one of the first proponents of appraisal theories, the psychologist Magda Arnold, who has been called the mother of appraisal theory, ‘emotion is equated with the felt tendency toward anything intuitively appraised as good (beneficial) [for the individual], or away from anything intuitively appraised as bad (harmful) [for the individual]’ (1960, 182).

Appraisal theories generally posit that a process links a given event or situation (such as the loss of a partner or a child in the romantic film and in the melodrama) to an evaluation of a concern for the individual. Appraisal thus considers the process through which significance is determined, for example, the situational impact for the person’s concerns. That is, an emotion arises when the cognitive evaluation of an event is considered to be either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in this case for the individual perceiver; that is, the scenario brings about pleasure or pain or positive or negative valence (which Arnold called ‘intuitive appraisal’). That is, different individuals might have both overlapping and distinct appraisals to the same events despite that the event which triggered the appraisal could be said to represent universal and adaptive concerns that might roughly be the same for most people and viewers.

The psychologists Richard S. Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984) divide cognitive appraisal into three sub-levels. They call an environmental situation that is regarded as ‘positive, stressful, and/or indifferent to one’s own well being’ (Eysenck and Keene 2000, 491), ‘primary appraisal’. In contrast, ‘secondary appraisal’ is based on the ‘resources that the individual has available to deal with the situation’, including coping reserve. In the third form, ‘re-appraisal’, the stimulus situation and
the coping strategies are monitored, with ‘the primary and secondary appraisal being modified, if necessary, for a desired outcome’ (491) (see Barratt 2005).

In the integration of appraisal dimensions in meta-emotion theory, a crucial link is missing, that of the interrelatedness of affect and cognition, noticeably the link between coping processes, emotional regulation and bodily processes. A recent article by Bartsch et al. (2008) gives an inspiring overview of the relationship between meta-emotion, appraisal and media use. It introduces a catalogue of specific (presented in a ‘process model’) concerns and criteria for appraisal involved in meta-emotion in order to understand individual differences (Bartsch et al. 2008, 18). Using the research conducted by Beth Oliver (1993), the authors propose that individual dispositions are important to understand why some viewers might enjoy sad films, whereas others avoid this type of entertainment. If we look at the catalogue for appraisal and meta-emotion the authors propose that ‘controllability’ and ‘pleasantness’ are among the factors that will play a role in individual toning of the appraisals of media genres.

The degree to which people have control over and grasp emotional reactions – and how much negative arousal viewers can endure in the cinema – nevertheless depends on a number of physiological, affective and cognitive resources that are not mentioned in the model. Seen from a developmental perspective, emotional regulatory processes rely on bodily (regulatory) and cognitive (mentalizing) resources that we have derived during childhood and later experiences with caregivers, that play on personality traits, and those processes are most often absent from media psychology.

As Allan N. Schore argues, ‘early life experiences are particularly important in shaping the individual’s pattern of responsiveness in later stages of life’. These negative and or positive ‘events’ are socio-emotional interactions ‘shaped by the infant’s psycho-physiological dispositions and maternal care’ (Schore 2002).

Such ‘relational’ aspects of coping reserve and emotional reactions (Arnold 1960) are important as bodily coping is implicit in the immediate primary appraisal process, and is likely to influence both secondary appraisal and reappraisal.

**The ‘high’ and the ‘low’ ‘road’ to emotions**

To account for the affects felt during the viewing of the Thames scene, we can (roughly) align the ‘multilevel’ emotional routes I have just sketched with the neuroscientist Joseph E. LeDoux’s (1996/1998) descriptions of a ‘low’ and a ‘high’ ‘road’ to emotion, controlled by two separate pathways in the brain. LeDoux’s distinction is useful if we want to understand the irrational emotions associated with the paradoxical attraction to sad films, say the somewhat paradoxical case where we indulge in sad or frightening fiction and engage in dysphoric emotions.

The first of the roads, the low one, is the oldest in evolutionary terms and associated with basic emotions and primitive ‘perceptual processing’ (Griffiths 2003). On this level, we are dealing with high-speed cognition of the kind that evolved in response to, say unsafe situations in which quick assessment was vital
to survival in an environment. When LeDoux calls the low road ‘quick’ and ‘dirty’ (1996/1998, 164), he means that the signals it gives us are shallow but powerful – of the kind we needed in the ancestral world, where danger was more immediate (Kramer 2007).

This route gives us information promptly: the thalamus and the amygdala make us react instantly if, for instance, we hear a volley of shots or a scream, or see a fearful face. The sub-cortical route works below the level of our conscious awareness, dealing with perceptual impressions and helping us to emotionally assess situations. However, because the low road bypasses the cortex, we receive only a ‘raw’ or ‘coarse’ signal. In brain terms, during the viewing of the Thames scene, I was hijacked by the evolutionarily ancient alarm system situated in the brain’s amygdala and fuelled by the stress hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline rushing through my body and brain, alerting me either to flee or fight potential dangers (LeDoux 1996/1998).

In contrast, the rigid but more reliable thinking route (LeDoux’s ‘high road’) runs through the visual cortex in the back of the brain to the evolutionary newer area, the cortex. It is also this route that allows the spectator in the cinema auditorium to make a more nuanced assessment of the film medium’s ‘reality-status’ (Grodal 2007) as well as to acknowledge characters’ ‘non-real’ status (Barratt 2005). On this level, we can secondarily appraise (Lazarus and Folkman 1984) events and regulate emotions, just as I regulated my emotions; this can be done at a number of levels, by assessing the film’s marked and ‘unreal’ status and adjusting my expectations to those of the film’s narrative closure, as well as reaching for my partner’s hand as a way to cope with the situation. Implicit, however, in the secondary appraisal is a direct link to the process that constituted the individual toning of the primary appraisal in a developmental first sense, and to account for this type of ‘embodied appraisal’ (Jesse Prinz 2003). However, on the ‘low road’ level, we are not merely speaking of what the neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux (1996/1998) has called ‘natural triggers’, that is, the ‘genetic information about cumulative past experiences of our ancestors’ (Chisholm 1999, 89), say for fear.

In the words of psychologist Richard Lazarus: ‘emotions also include personal reactions to basic relational meaning which are adaptively significant’ (in Scherer, Schorr and Johnstone 2001, 110). Accordingly, to address which emotional response would be adaptive to attachment concerns and subsequent stress eliciting situations – that is, what LeDoux calls ‘learned triggers’ – we would, following the work of Allan Schore (1994), have to relate exterior situations (outside the body) to internal resources and motivations (inside the body and the mind-brain). In other words, in cinematic terms how the individual spectator appraises positive or negative events depends not only on the primary appraisal in relation to individual concerns, but also on which individual resources the spectator can foster to change the events (secondary appraisal and reappraisal). Those factors will be dependent on context and personality as well as accumulated socio-emotional interactions.
Affect regulation, as argued by Peter Fonagy et al. (2004, 95), is vital for communicating and forming interpersonal relationships: it is not only about altering emotions; it is about emotion amplification, for example, the ability to stay within an ‘affective state’ (Fonagy et al. 2004, 94). The bodily coping linked to affect regulation – and what we can call ‘embodied appraisals’ (a term coined by the philosopher Jesse Prinz 2003, 79–80) – comes developmentally before the cognitive management, and it is likely to influence future appraisal processes.

**Ronald de Sousa’s paradigm scenarios/affective and bodily appraisal**

By relying exclusively on a cognitive thought approach, we fail to address the individual, somatic-affective and social processes of the experiences of films that tone the individual experience. To account for the fascination of negative feelings in film generally, I have substituted for cognitive appraisal theory a multilevel approach. I posit that emotional regulation and appraisal interact and that appraisal outcomes are produced in correspondence with relational meaning and sometimes as a result of it and that it can be aroused by a number of factors and through different processes, where I shall focus on describing the automatic appraisal processes that can be said to calibrate emotional reactions from facial displays (Scherer, Schorr and Johnstone 2001).

To illustrate the complexity arising when the viewer empathizes with the different projects of the romantic or melodrama heroine, say when she experiences rejection of a romantic partner or dealing with the loss of a close attachment, I use what the philosopher Ronald De Sousa (1987) calls ‘paradigm scenarios’, which in my account refer to emotional episodes that have arisen repeatedly over evolutionary time or an individual’s life and which are represented and moulded in audio-visual media. In other words, paradigm scenarios are perennial adaptive and personal challenges, such as loss of a dear and beloved partner or infant embodied in affective appraisals. According to his terminology, paradigm scenarios are ‘little dramas in which our natural capacities for emotional response were first enlisted’ (De Sousa 1987, 85). Paradigm scenarios are concerned with two phases:

First, a situation type providing the characteristic objects of the specific emotion type, and secondly, a set of characteristic or normal responses to the situation, where normality is first a biological and then, shortly afterwards, a cultural (and social) matter. (De Sousa 1987, 181–2)

What is attractive and useful about de Sousa’s account in regards to affective appraisal is that he emphasizes both the social–emotional, individual and relational aspects and significance of the development of emotion. The concept of paradigm scenarios proposes that each arising emotion (De Sousa 1987) is ‘by definition adaptive to its paradigm scenario, because it is the paradigm scenario, which regulates the emotional repertoire’ (De Sousa 2010, no page indicated). De Sousa believes that each emotional episode has its own dramatic character of phenomenological significance for the individual. What de Sousa is expressing is
that paradigm scenarios are innate and/or learned (Carroll 1990); what he also is indicating is the evolutionary and personal significance of emotional events, as well as the adaptive and universal role of paradigm scenarios for the individual as they arise in early social and emotional interactions.

The developmental psychologist Daniel Stern speaks of such regulatory affective appraisal events as they arise in early infanthood (1985, 201), which come prior to and are allegedly more rudimentary than cognitive appraisals. ‘They appraise’, in Stern’s words, ‘the present’ (1985, 201–202). These appraisals can be divided into three groups, which are embodied in Lazarus and Folkman’s notion of the immediate evaluation of primary appraisals in an embodied sense (1984). According to Stern, they refer to ‘the perception of external stimuli, such as a sudden loud voice or sweet or bitter taste’, and the results of these appraisals are embodied ‘pleasures’ and ‘displeasures’/‘approach’ and ‘avoidance’ (1985, 201), which probably would feel like YES! or NO! to the infant.

A second form of affective appraisals is the ‘perception of internal stimuli that are specific to physiological needs and homeostatic regulation, such as ‘hunger, thirst, physical comfort and oxygen’ (201–202). A third type of affective appraisals concerns the ‘interpersonal goals that the young infant is designed by nature to achieve and maintain’. ‘These are the needs for specific social and emotional self-organization’, which are ‘essential for surviving in the social world’ (202).

The subjectivity and the relationship between the exterior world — that of the other — of paradigm scenarios is therefore fundamental for understanding affect in the appraisal processes. These scenarios work in the same way that a baby will search for cues in the facial expression of its caregivers. As shown by the psychiatrist Allan Schore (Fonagy et al. 2004), the neural circuitry of the developing right hemisphere in the brain, which handles the organism’s vital survival functions during the first years of an infant’s life, is important to the way the organism will cope bodily with stress and control emotions during the life cycle, say in later attachment contexts in adulthood — or when similar events are felt later in life during stressful encounters as bodily remembrance of past experiences.4

Affect and attachment theory

As the cognitive period has developed, cognitive psychology has made space for the study of emotional and affective dimensions of cognitive processes. The result has been the affective revolution based on an interdisciplinary science that relies on principles from neuroscience. Emotions are studied in their own right and not merely as by-products of cognition (Griffiths 2003).

The Lazarus–Zajonc dispute, for example, showed that while cognition is important, emotions are not automatically thought-driven and they can be activated before the neo-cortex is activated (Prinz 2003; Lazarus 1982; Zajonc 1984). Richard Lazarus argued that cognitive appraisal mattered in emotional experiences, but as shown in the ‘affective primacy thesis’ by psychologist Robert Zajonc (1980, cited in Eysenck and Keene 2000, 494), we can be exposed subliminally to stimuli but
have no conscious perception and ‘recognition memory’. Similarly, in a series of studies on fear conditioning, psychologist Arne Öhman (1986) demonstrated that angry faces are among the evolutionary stimuli capable of eliciting conditioned fear reactions even when presented below the threshold of our conscious awareness (summarized in Griffiths 2003, 44–5).

Cognition need not be deliberate, rational, or conscious but it must involve some minimum ‘mental work’. This ‘mental work’ may consist of operations on sensory input that transform that input into a form that may become subjectively available, or it may consist of the activation of items from memory. (Zajonc 1984, 118)

Appraisal outcomes, as explained by the developmental psychologist Klaus Scherer and co-workers (Scherer, Schorr and Johnstone 2001), may in fact be independent of conscious thought processes. As have been argued by Joseph E. LeDoux (1996/1998) and Allan N. Schore (2001), facial expression of extreme emotions, for say fear, can cement enduring ties between affective appraisals and facial templates, through various processes, such as direct association that includes memories of events. As Freud has argued, current emotional reactions are embodied in past events. LeDoux has shown that it is the emotional centre – the amygdala – in the limbic system that stores early emotional memories. Children do not have access to the memories that happened before they are around two or three years old, when empathetic care giving and attachment security are important. This is because the memory tank for factual and contextual information and memories in the limbic system (in the hippocampus) is not fully developed at that time. The amygdala is nevertheless fully developed in early childhood and busy making a track record of emotional associations that will be readily available and inextinguishable in later affective appraisal encounters as bodily reminiscences (Atkinson 1999; LeDoux 1996/1998).

The writings of the child developmental psychologist John Bowlby (1969) as well as those of the affective neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp (1998) are sacrosanct to discussions of attachment and affect regulation following the arousal of positive and negative affect (Mikulincer, Shaver and Pereg 2003). Both writers have proposed that affect and powerful affiliative emotions – both the positive and negative – spring from the source of attachment, which is an essential adaptation that is essential to continued existence (see also Tan and Frijda 1999, 56). For example, an infant’s reactive cry and separation anxiety experienced by a young infant is an adaptive response that is likely to ensure survival. A crucial example of such socio-emotional interactions is the classic emotional episode of loss and union/reunion represented in a number of films for adults and children from Imitation of Life (1959) to Lassie Come Home (1943) (Tan and Frijda 1999).

John Bowlby (1969) suggested that the mother functions as a regulative system to the infant. Bowlby’s research was partly based on the controversial bio-medical research on rhesus monkeys conducted by the psychologist Harry Harlow in a series of experiments in the 1960s. Harlow’s studies included caregiver separation and...
social isolation, which aimed to bolster the view that we need love and social contact in order to grow and live.

Bowlby and his close colleague Mary Ainsworth were among the first to acknowledge that caregivers and children construct ‘internal working models’ – also called ‘scripts’ of themselves, thereby conforming to theories of attachment interactions that will predict different patterns of relationship with attachment figures. Subsequently, Bowlby and Ainsworth predicted that children reconstruct those interactions in mental scripts when they engage in future attachments (Waters et al. 2002). Mikulincer, Shaver and Pereg (2003) write that:

Relatively secure individuals have learned that acknowledgment and display of distress elicit supportive responses from others. They have also learned that their own actions are often able to reduce distress and remove obstacles, and that turning to others when threatened is an effective route to enhanced coping. (87)

Bowlby and his affiliated researchers included cognitive variability in their research method (that is, behaviour that depends on the organism’s ability to adapt to changes in environmental circumstances) by assuming that infants’ internal representations of the outer world – and how flexibly infants respond to situations in the environment – depend on their attachment styles: secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized (Ainsworth et al. 1978) based on the attachment style of the parent, where ‘secure attachment’ is the most common type of attachment that includes responsible and regulated care giving and empathetic responses. Secure attachment gives a lifelong protection against stress and psycho-pathological disorders (Bretherton 1992; Schore 1994).

Children are not capable of regulating their own emotions, which is the reason why parents should be careful showing young children fiction about emotional loss without any adult guidance. During this early period, the ‘quality’ – that is the secure attachment of the infant provided by the responsible parent – of care giving is important, as the caregiver can co-regulate the infant’s developing autonomic nervous system. Loss of either a spouse or a child is often underscored by the use of close-ups in the romantic drama, the melodrama and in films for children (for loss in the children’s film, see Grodal 2009). Audio-visual media that address biologically relevant scenarios tap into processes of inter-subjectivity, which the spectator has derived from earlier socio-emotional attachments, and which is out of conscious awareness, and as such they therefore speak directly to a number of affective and automatic appraisal processes that would tap into the viewing experience outside the viewer’s cognitive control.

It makes good sense to suggest that there are moments of spectator engagement, say during specific life stages where some attachment concerns such as loss of an infant are more relevant to the viewer; in such cases where the empathetic engagement with the character’s situation is characteristic of a state of emotional flooding the spectator might over-identify with the character’s situation with the result that the relationship between the spectator and the character becomes a state of immersion and therefore lack affective regulation. Such states of emotional flooding
cued through facial displays in relation to the representation of emotional bonding can have a basis in childhood attachment interactions or current relationship patterns, the core of these affective appraisals can be unresolved internal conflict that travel via the associative route, primarily the subjective feeling of similar emotional episode and the memory of the caregiver’s ‘facial patterns’ and dealing with emotional issues, which is vital for how people learn to regulate strong emotions and act flexibly and sensitively in the social sphere (Schore 1999, 289).

My encounter with *Eastern Promises* could have been a case of what the developmental psychologist Martin L. Hoffman (2000/2003) calls ‘empathetic over-arousal’ had I not proved capable of controlling the distress cues at a tolerable level. This type of arousal of the appraisal systems can also result in ‘egoistic drift’, which, according to Hoffman, develops through a self-focused role taking wherein the observer’s own needs system acts in concert with the victim’s affective state. New parents might be particularly vulnerable to egoistic drift because of unresolved internal conflict and attachment patterns, or as they tend to worry obsessively about their infant’s safety, as demonstrated by their remarkable dreams and ritualized behaviour that can signify an overload in an otherwise functional alert system (Boyer and Liénard 2006).

We can argue that the facial display of pain and pleasure, so often embodied in a close-up in the woman’s film, has the means to embody similar affective appraisals laid down in the somatic and visceral architecture. Even when the secure attachment is in place, it is never perfectly synchronized, which means that all individuals depending on personality and socio-emotional experiences, will have their subjective and toned attachment scripts that they navigate from, and which are likely to influence them in the appraisals in ‘all time to come’ (Arnold 1960).

**Martin L. Hoffman’s empathetic modes**

If we go back to de Sousa’s paradigm scenarios, throughout our upbringing, we learn to associate certain feelings with certain situations or episodes. The learning process of associating certain emotion and action responses with specific types of situations can be bodily, affectively (and cognitively if the individual is aware of these processes) reactivated when a similar set of conditions arises; for example, when in the cinema we witness, say, a character’s facial display that betrays an angry or sad mental state or that the content of an emotion episode activates a set of affective associations via other routes. These feelings thus correspond in my view to reactivated affective and or cognitive appraisals that can arise from engaging with fiction.

Paradigm scenarios are consistent with Martin L. Hoffman’s account of empathy (2003). Hoffman’s account is ‘multidimensional’ and enables us to think further about how experiences and cognitive development across the lifespan influence how we can be irrationally and automatically aroused by paradigm scenarios. The facial display of emotions in characters play a significant role in the emotional engagement and the extent to which we feel
empathetic with characters as well as the degree to which the viewer is capable of controlling emotional processes involved in film viewing.

Hoffman explains that since our empathetic system is designed by Mother Nature to be a ‘powerful package’ to ensure survival in a highly social system (2003, 59), it both operates affectively and cognitively. This makes it a vulnerable system too that the perceptually privileged cinematic apparatus can take advantage of. Hoffman distinguishes among five modes of empathetic arousal in relation to distress such a pain or threat caused to other people (36–62). The first three modes: ‘mimicry’ (a form of emotional contagion), ‘conditioning’ and ‘direct association’ – are preverbal, primitive and automatic, and require only what Hoffman calls ‘surface cues’ to activate a response. Similarly, the early stages of empathy do not have a self–other distinction (Coplan 2006). They are nevertheless essential because they enable young children to react empathetically in an involuntary fashion that will continue throughout the lifespan. The last two modes – what he calls ‘verbally mediated association’ and ‘self- and other related perspective/role taking’ – necessitate language skills and more sophisticated cognitive development; for example, they enable us to empathize with someone who is not present.

I do not have space to explore Hoffman’s account further, but the empathetic modes are relevant to my argument in that they can operate alone or in combination. Consider then the degree to which the sad melodrama, which typically involves attachment, needs and concerns. In the classic Douglas Sirk melodrama *Imitation of Life* (1959) a facial close-up is used to underscore emotional meaning as the female character Sarah Jane is standing at her mother’s coffin in the typical melodrama ‘too-late-ness’, where there will be no time to remedy the pain she has caused the dead. According to Hoffman, the ‘conditioning’ mode depends heavily on the individual’s mother’s early verbal and facial distress, and can be reactivated automatically in subsequent behaviours when someone else triggers similar distress cues.

Positive coping in the romantic film and TV series

Torben Grodal (2007) has noticed that sadness in the melodrama, in contrast to that in the romantic film, often precludes the possibility of offering positive coping strategies. According to Grodal, sadness in the melodrama slows down mental and coping processes, as melodrama is often evoking ‘passive acceptance’. In this, it is unlike other negative emotions such as anger and grief. In the melodrama, as opposed to the romantic drama, active coping strategies are blocked, which allows for the possibility for the viewer to stay within the emotional process. If such over-arousal is monitored, however, aversive states can prove adaptive, as they may allow for a ‘closer look’ at the situation that instigated the suffering in the first place (Izard and Ackerman 2000, 258–9). How sadness is appraised – that is, which emotions the viewer chooses as the adaptive response – will as a result depend on the viewer’s ‘relational’ appraisal (Scherer, Schorr and Johnstone 2001, 8); again, this appraisal interacts with factors such as personality, context and experiences developed across
the lifespan, primarily in early and subsequent social and emotional interactions, where the bodily reactions form the biological basis for later cognitive evaluations.

Despite Cronenberg’s reputation as being unpredictable and an expert in distress, in *Eastern Promises*, he uses classical genre expectations when it comes to positive emotional regulation. This is a formal arrangement known from the romantic mainstream Hollywood comedy and drama. To illustrate why allow me next to give an example of a standard paradigm scenario in the woman’s film, that of mate de-selection due to commitment problems. Towards the end of the television series *Sex and the City* (1998–2004, season 5), Carrie repeatedly asks the big love of her life to commit, or if he cannot, at least to leave her alone so that she can move forward and start a relationship with her new partner. When she runs into him after some time has passed, he tells her he has been a fool in letting her go so many times. Considering that this is a man Carrie still loves, she treats him harshly, her furious expression warning him that this time is different, and her voice changing from soft to hard, as she is becoming frustrated and emotionally overwhelmed by the situation like a momentarily misattuned partner. However, taking into account her great love’s failure to commit over six years, Carrie is displaying a highly relevant concern for her self-preservation.

Carrie’s situation resembles a scenario most people have encountered. How the spectator appraises the scene nevertheless depends on her knowledge of the characters; at play also are the spectator’s own competences and experience of being idiosyncratically involved in a paradigm scenario of this kind, as well as how she emotes and assesses her own coping strategies in dealing with similar life concerns. In this scene, the spectator can simulate the couple’s mutual feelings for each other made possible by the use of the cinematic apparatus highlighting their facial expressions. But feedback devices, displayed through, say, a character’s facial close-up and vocal tone, can be seen also as activating ‘affect’ programmes that resemble the process of motherese, which coordinates complex bodily changes (Griffiths 2003).

Lazarus and Folkman’s notion of primary appraisal would assess Carrie’s situation as a case of mixed emotions – resulting in rejection of a partner – represented in unreciprocated romantic love. In secondary appraisal, the viewer acknowledges the value of Carrie’s anger in terms of self-protection. Carrie turns to her friends for a secure sense of belonging and they embrace, as it is Carrie’s last night in New York before moving to Paris; her company of friends therefore regulate the overall evaluation of the negative emotion linked to her repeated loss. Witnessing these benefits might open to the viewer an understanding of the adaptiveness of seeking comfort. This is a standard narrative strategy in the woman’s film, where the presence of the women’s group modifies negative emotions associated with the female character’s lack of long-term commitment, especially from a romantic partner (Kramer 2007). In this way, taking inspiration from Carrie’s behaviour, the viewer can become closer to her own affective reactions and in doing so expand her own horizons, and she may be capable of adjusting her own paradigm scenario. Yet whether the perceiver reappraises the scene in this way will depend heavily on her
own coping reserves and her current emotional state, not to mention how she copes with the distress cues activated by the characters’ conversation, their tone of voice and facial expressions; a number of affective appraisal cues will feedback to her overall evaluation of the experience, and accordingly influence her subjective experience, forming what Robinson calls the viewers’ ‘emotional education’ (2005).

As shown by the psychiatrist Peter Fonagy and his research group (Fonagy et al. 2004), there are individual differences in young infants’ development of empathy and mentalizing capabilities – due to the differences in their attachment process and experience with attunement. Mary Beth Oliver has linked increased levels of empathy with the enjoyment of sad films (1993). Interestingly, children with secure attachment styles develop more superior mentalizing skills compared to children with insecure attachment styles. They also generally have a better understanding of emotions and higher levels of empathy (Chisholm 1999). It might be that an increased level of positive enjoyment with sad films is linked to the viewer’s empathetic superiority and capacity to use fiction as a practising mode for affective mentalizing.

### Psychoanalytic film theory revisited

In conclusion, from the perspective of a multilevel appraisal model of emotions in film genres, it is easy to see how appraisal can work at different levels — some conscious whilst others are beyond conscious control; and we can see also how these levels may conflict with one another and be triggered and retriggered at different life stages, and with different outcomes for different personalities and attachment categories. From this perspective, too, clearly it is relevant to include bodily aspects of affect regulation, attachment theory and relational meaning when we are addressing the individual’s engagement and appraisal in film. Most importantly, we have at last a large amount of research from neuro-psychoanalysis to theoretically ground the biological and somatic basis of the development of the self. In this respect, the time is now right to integrate these findings into film theory, especially in the analysis of subjectivity and genres that represent attachment scenarios.

### Acknowledgements

In preparing this article I am indebted to comments on a paper delivered at the 7th international conference at the 7th Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image, University of Copenhagen, 24–27 June 2009.

### Notes

1. Mentalizing is the capacity to attribute mental states to other people and to understand one’s own mental states, see Fonagy et al., 2004.
2. Emotional regulation alludes to different stances of ‘neuro-physiological processes underlying emotional arousal and its management’, ‘attention processes’, ‘informational processes’, ‘internal cues’, such as the ‘internal indicators of emotional arousal’, ‘enhancing access to coping processes’, ‘helping to predict and control commonly encountered settings’ and finally ‘expressing emotions in a satisfactory way in
accordance with one’s own personal goals for the situation’ (Ross Thompson, cited in Fonagy et al., 2004, 94).

3. Attuned interactions provide knowledge in later childhood via intellectually challenging practices. For example, when a newborn is in a familiar situation, she hypothesizes about when climaxes of events or behaviour will occur on the basis of former attunement. Another sign of early emotional regulation, noticeably around the infant’s first year is the dynamic process of ‘social referencing’: in an unclear situation where the infant cannot decide what to do, he will search for signs in the caregiver’s facial expression to figure out how to ‘modulate his own behaviour’ (Gergely and Watson, 1996).

4. See ‘the somatic marker hypothesis’ in Bechara and Damasio 2004.

References


