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Storied Feelings: Emotions, Culture, Media

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Abstract: Mass mediated emotional experiences are central to late modern subjectivity. Narrative storytelling creates public sites where audiences encounter and negotiate shared sociocultural circumstances rendered in aesthetic terms. Popular narratives move us by providing access, through felt recognition, to aspects of our emotional existence that would otherwise remain inexpressible. Using examples from film, this chapter explores how emotions as public events, constituted as part of collectively experienced social, cultural, and historical conditions, are enacted or realized through narrative media.

Introduction

In the opening chapter to this anthology, Patulny and Olson describe late modernism as, on the one hand, 'increasingly *individualised* and *reflexive'* (p. 6; italics in original). Such growing atomization and self-managed introspection also alter emotions, which '*are more individualistic* in late modernity' (p. 8; italics in original). On the other hand, late modern identities are increasingly filtered through media, which have 'replaced the traditional institutions directing our emotions,' so that '*emotions are now mediated through mass media*' (pp. 11, 8; italics in original). I suggest that an inherent tension exists between these two broad paths – individualization and mediation – used to characterize late modernity.

Rather than individualistic, by definition mass media imply collective, shared culture sites, experienced as important social spaces by late modern subjects. Many media scholars have described the spread of mass media as a defining feature of modernity, beginning first with newspapers and, subsequently, film. Miriam Hansen has argued that cinema epitomizes 'a specifically modern type of public sphere,' born of the mechanisms of modernity and emerging along with modernism (Hansen 2000, p. 342). Cinema's qualities of mass production and consumption reflected modernity's new technological and industrial processes fabricating reproducible commodities – movies – in which numerous publics could partake, regardless of how dispersed or diverse such populaces were. Arguably, its own mass-based conditions of emergence rendered early cinema, and Hollywood in particular, well situated to express the preoccupations and experiences of

modern times. Developing generic forms such as slapstick comedy and action-adventure, the movies quickly became adept at entertaining the sensibilities of twentieth century modernity, approximating both its democratic processes of 'abundance' as well as its crises and dislocations (Hansen p. 341).

Contentions about the centrality of mass media for modernity include the notion that, in the face of declining historical sources of community, media came to play an increasingly complex and significant role in the shaping of sociocultural existence. In the late modern era of intensifying global mass information and communications, film, television, and computerized media continue as pivotal sites for collective experience and public exchange. Certainly, changing mass media technologies demand careful analyses of their particular functions and outcomes, each new form altering individual and social life in divergent ways. However, ever-changing technologies should not cause us to overlook mass media's broad public function as sites for negotiating shared cultural values or exploring contemporaneous social realities.

Although current audiences may be more fragmented than in previous decades, mass media continue to rely on substantial numbers of co-existing consumers, even as niche marketing and narrowcasting have emerged to address the diversity of late modern subjects. Further, beyond shared consumption all mass media require collective sociocultural and aesthetic competencies, in order for viewers, readers, or listeners to understand and appreciate mediated programming.

This chapter considers narrative media as 'a public space of social imaginings within a culturally conditioned aesthetic framework' (Gledhill 2000, p. 232). Mediated stories serve as public sites through which we attempt to recognize, make sense of, reject, or revise our contemporary social circumstances and identities. Narrative media express social relations aesthetically, by means of historically and culturally developed techniques that, to varying degrees of success, perform everything from the vast to the most intricate aspects of contemporaneous lived experience. One of the functions of fictional media, partly accounting for why we turn to it with such avidity, rests in its ability to bring into recognition aspects of lived existence that would otherwise remain unmarked or inexpressible. Prominent among the most resistant to articulation, emotions constitute a range of experience rendered expressible by narrative media, as 'a public space of social imaginings.'

Indeed, nowhere is late modern theory's contradiction between self-reflexive individualization and collective mediated experience more evident than in the arena of emotionality. The view of late modernity as dominated by individually managed emotions attributes a curiously large degree of autonomy to the otherwise extensive commodification of late modern citizenry. The danger in tying emotions too narrowly with atomized self-reflexivity is that we reinforce emotionality as private and personal, instead of exploring its manifestations as social and public practices. In contrast, how emotionality functions in mediated forms offers entry points for exploring emotions as broadly-felt sociocultural events. Especially in popular cultural modes, narrative media

comprise spaces where emotions are exercised in shared configurations via specific aesthetic processes.

Borrowing from contemporary affect theory, I outline emotions as felt experiences thoroughly entangled with the sociocultural. However, I argue that a productive conceptualization of emotionality within sociocultural terms has been largely overlooked in contemporary affective and cognitive theories, which tend to pursue individually harbored versions of emotions, whether embodied or in mind. In subsequent sections, I trace ways emotions are activated aesthetically in films, in order to express collectively recognizable feelings towards depicted social circumstances.[1] This is not to argue that audiences respond emotionally to represented events in uniform ways; that would no more occur in mediated conditions than in 'real' life. But mediated emotional experiences afford opportunities to recognize the ways we might, ought, or fail to feel towards aspects of social worlds we share in common.

Sociocultural emotionality

One of the motivations for the turn to affect theory has been to counter the conceptualizations provided by linguistic, psychoanalytical, and ideological theories in past decades. Affect theory serves to refocus attention on the material body, in particular, its visceral, autonomic, non-cognitive functions. Concentrating on embodied aspects of existence avoids poststructuralist conclusions that human activity can be reduced to language, discourse, and signification.

For example, in Brian Massumi's influential account, affect is equated with intensity and vitality in ways that are 'irreducibly bodily and autonomic' in nature, manifesting primarily in the skin, 'at the surface of the body, at its interface with things' (Massumi 2002, pp. 28, 25). Affect is a non-conscious state that registers the intensity of experience – its strength and duration – for a being that is not yet a subject.[2] Similarly, Deborah Gould considers affect as 'noncognitive, nonconscious, nonlinguistic, and nonrational' states that manifest as 'unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity' (Gould 2010, pp. 25, 26).

Massumi identifies emotions, in contrast, as the quality or content of an experience achieved by passing through semantic or semiotic processes, which include language, ideology, narrativity, and other forms of signification (pp. 26-27). In this view, emotions occur in the realm of meaning production through the 'sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience' (p. 28). The problem with signification for Massumi is that it freezes pre-subjective fluid processes into fixed, socially determinate positions. For her part, Gould argues that emotions are constituted when affective bodily intensities become transformed, through cultural mediation, into 'conventionally known and fixed' phenomena (Gould p. 27). The result is that emotion 'squeezes' affect 'into the realm of cultural meanings and normativity' (Ibid.). Thus, the new materiality remains 'relatively autonomous from the sociocultural' (Ibid. p. 31).

Rather than a drawback, I argue much value exists in affect theory's conceptualization of emotionality as socioculturally informed experience. The potential in affect theory's

rendering of emotionality can be located, precisely, in emotions' presence in the 'realm of cultural meanings.' Relationality with the sociocultural evades historical limitations in which emotions are connected too exclusively with either the mind as cognition or the sensating body. Affect theory's schema of emotionality, although intended as critique, works towards circumventing radically biological, psychological, or individualistic accounts of emotionality.

As noted, Massumi identifies narrative as a dominant system of signification. And indeed, emotions are pivotal to most forms of popular storytelling (Williams 2009; Pribram 2018). Compensating for the limitations of rational, articulable explanation remains a reason we occupy narrative worlds, with their emotionally resonant images, sounds, characters, and stories. Although not taken up to the degree merited, film and television exist as productive sites for detailed analyses of emotions as sociocultural phenomena. Popular culture's complex narratives rely on intricate emotional appeals in order to create their impacts and meanings, enabling people to recognize aspects of what they feel and, therefore, who they are. Conversely, popular narratives may be used to constrain or refuse various ways of feeling. One purpose of popular narrative is to move us by providing, through felt recognition, access to the quality, content, or force of an experience assessed as 'emotional.'

In defense of narrativity

One of the examples Massumi turns to, in order to differentiate affect from emotion, is narrative film. He proposes that the affective surplus of images can be located by

bracketing out all narrative elements, because affect 'resonates to the exact degree to which it is in excess of any narration or functional line' (p. 26). While the content that serves a film's narrative purposes relies on emotion, pure intensity manifests in images that exist tangentially to storytelling demands. In contrast, emotion occurs among people, learned from social practices via cultural content: 'indexing to conventional meanings in an inter-subjective context' (Ibid. p. 24). Narrative operations rely on emotional effects because they activate 'conventional meanings' received from social others ('inter-subjective context'). Similarly, Patricia Pisters identifies affect in film as that which has 'no narrative or logical function' (Pisters 2003, p. 75). Once narrative functions are circumvented, we encounter what remains as 'pure affect' (Ibid.).

However, affect theory underestimates the complexity of mediated narrative processes, first, because it is based on a reductive conceptualization associated primarily with plot and, second, because it assumes that aesthetic elements (image, sound) can be detached from narrative factors with near surgical precision. To the degree affect is identified *prior* to the exhaustion of narrative functions, the mediated feeling experience constitutes emotion, not affect. At stake is much more than a semantic distinction. If we accept the proposition that emotions are feeling experiences activated in cultural realms, then narrativity moves us by accessing felt recognition to the qualities of our social experiences. Exploration of emotions in mediated narrativity reveals the profound traces of inter-subjective (social, historical) contexts. However, I dispute that mediated emotions are as invariably conventional, fixed, or normative as affect theory proposes.

i. Mediated pleasure

In the category of narrative function, Massumi includes elements such as sequencing, continuity, linear causality and temporality, action, and reaction (pp. 26-28). While most narrative film and television encompass these elements, their deployment is neither fixed nor prescribed. For example, forms of temporality and sequencing are likely to be present; but they need not, and in many instances do not, take shape in linear fashion. Further, the elements Massumi singles out are, for the most part, linked to plot. Although emplotment (actions, events) may be the first property that comes to many minds when thinking about mediated stories, narrativity encompasses considerably more attributes, including characters, structure (the mode in which the story is told), geography (setting and spatial mobility), themes, genres, and tone.

Massumi turns to a 28-minute narrative film that aired on German television in the 1970s, which he summarizes as follows:

> A man builds a snowman on his roof garden. It starts to melt in the afternoon sun. He watches. After a time, he takes the snowman to the cool of the mountains where it stops melting. He bids it good-bye and leaves. (p. 23)

Massumi finds the film interesting because, at the time it aired, the snowman story frightened a number of young viewers, prompting a group of researchers to study children's emotional responses to it (Sturm and Grewe-Partsch 1987). The researchers evaluated nine-year-olds' physiological and verbal responses to the film determining, amongst other results, that the young respondents found the saddest scenes to be the most pleasant (Ibid. pp. 32, 33). Massumi points to a disjuncture here: on the one hand,

sadness as emotional response to the narrative; on the other hand, pleasure as autonomic, visceral reaction to the intensity of the experience. Because sadness can be regarded as paradoxical to pleasure, Massumi believes he has located an instance in which an affective surplus, in the form of pleasure, can be distinguished from the emotional effects of the narrative (sadness, fear).

Leys offers a detailed critique of Massumi's interpretation of the scientific results of Sturm and Grewe-Partsch's study (Leys 2011). Here, I focus on the implications from a media studies perspective. At the outset, cinematic emotion and affect need to be differentiated from their social counterparts. Media do not identically replicate our lived felt experiences nor is that their cultural usefulness. For audiences who seek out cinematic varieties of felt experience, more emotions register as pleasurable than in many socially experienced situations (fear and horror films, anxiety from suspense thrillers, sadness with the dramatic romance). One of the pleasures found at the movies is to be emotionally moved by experiences that would register as unenjoyable if encountered in our lived circumstances. Instead of a paradox, pleasant sadness can be understood as part and parcel of the snowman film's narrative operations. Dramatic structure guides emotional shifts. If fright is instigated by the snowman's threatened demise – melting – fear is alleviated through rescue by human benefactor. Subsequently, sadness is evoked when its human protector must leave the snowman behind because the two survive in different environments. Dramatic adversity is resolved, in that the snowman's demise ceases, but at the narrative cost of separation from its human companion.

The evocation of sadness depends on cultural inflections that infuse the narrative dilemma. Emotional impact relies upon viewers' culturally constituted ability to endow the snowman with an anthropomorphized identity and then link 'his' melting to death. Viewers of all ages also engage with the inevitability of separation between snowman and human protector; the characters have no option but to remain in the environments the film has established each belongs. The narrative dilemma draws viewers into a negotiation, exchanging the snowman's continued survival for estrangement. Pleasurable sadness, in storied terms, results when the pain of emotional loss at separation from a loved being co-mingles with the satisfaction that one's sacrifice ensures the survival of that which is beloved.

The snowman narrative illustrates that mediated feelings may register as pleasurable even when arising out of what is emotionally painful or conflictual. Instead of pointing to '*the primacy of the affective* in image reception' (Massumi, p. 24; italics in original), the snowman film challenges the notion that mediated pleasure can be extracted from its narrative contents or cultural contexts. Mediated emotions rely on communal comprehension of storytelling operations and felt commonalities created by social locatedness, in this instance, anthropomorphism, symbolism, weather phenomena, and ecological knowledge among nine-year-olds.

ii. Sound

Certain affect theory presupposes the divisibility of aesthetic elements from storytelling activities. Aesthetic elements reference modes of expression, which for film and

television include the work of the camera, sound, editing, and mise-en-scène. The supposition that modes of expression can be treated in isolation from substantive matter has a long history for various artistic practices, frequently formulated as a polarized 'form' versus 'content' relationship. In media studies, such debates sometimes take shape as an aesthetics contra narrative opposition, in which particular historical moments have tended to prioritize one over the other. However, the introduction of 'culture' into the theoretical mix complicates matters.

For affect theory, narrativity (including its emotional effects) exists in the realm of signification and, thereby, is compromised by normativity and stasis. In contrast, specific aesthetic elements are conjectured to have affective impact by functioning in a direct manner upon the embodied recipient. Thus mediated affect, surfacing as bodily intensities, remains unfiltered by narrative operations. For its part, cultural theory argues the indivisibility of content and form because both are products of and, as such, suffused with cultural implications. To 'divorce meaning from form' suggests that aesthetics are not shaped by cultural processes, which is to imagine them as somehow intrinsic and timeless (Bhaskar 1999, p. 399). Citing Bakhtin, Ira Bhaskar argues that the 'powerful deep currents of culture' are given palpable materiality through aesthetics (p. 401). Narrativity can only take shape by means of aesthetic treatment, calling into question any notion that style functions independently, because aesthetics carries with it the cultural values of its times. Cultural theory, then, insists on the indissolubility of aesthetics and narrativity, while affect theory searches for aesthetic escape routes from narrative conventionalities.

In his discussion of the snowman film, Massumi describes it as '[j]ust images, no words, very simple' (p. 23). However, the researchers who conducted the original study indicate that it was 'produced with sound but without words,' although they do not specify if the accompanying audio consisted of music, ambient sound, or a combination (Sturm and Grewe-Partsch p. 30). While the film involves no dialogue or voice-over, it cannot consequently be described as constituted solely by imagery. Linguistic elements such as dialogue do not mark the limits of audiovisual narrativity, which encompasses nonarticulated meanings that take form through the auditory, as well as visual, aesthetics of media, for instance, in the widespread use of musical scores. As Laura Marks notes, it is within 'the power of nonverbal sound to have meaning in ways that cannot be reduced to simple signification' (Marks 2000, p. xv). That nonverbal audio possesses the capacity to create meaning beyond 'simple signification,' suggests emotions evoked by music or ambient sound bring into being feelings that are not necessarily conventionally known nor fixed. Simultaneously, when meanings are elicited we find ourselves located, not solely in relation to affect, but experiencing emotion in the meaning-generating realm of culture. We turn to aesthetic forms because they comprise modes of expression for that which otherwise would go unrecognized or remain inexpressible, including large swathes of emotional experience and relations. One of the purposes of stories is to locate other means of conveying that which exists outside articulation and, as such, eludes named familiarity but, nonetheless, bears meaning, value, import.

To illustrate how audio conveys the inexpressibly emotional, I focus on an example of ambient sound from *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Its director, Steven Spielberg, emblematizes, and is partly responsible for, the most conventional forms of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Even so, his films display moments that exceed conventionality, opening us up to felt recognition of that for which we lack a name. Further, the film's early, graphic, twenty-four-minute battle sequence is explicitly set in a very specific narrative and historical context: the Normandy invasion of Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944. At the same time, the prolonged landing sequence is clearly intended to have visceral, sensate impact, with both audio and visual elements designed to overwhelm the recipient with feelings of horror.

Accompanied by some dialogue but no musical soundtrack till near its end, sound effects predominantly drive the landing sequence audio. The noise is chaotic, immersive, unrelenting; endless machine gun fire punctuated by the screams or moans of pain and death, as bullets repeatedly hit their targets. Ships arrive under a barrage of shots; soldiers jump overboard hoping to make it ashore alive. In the midst of this, a 28 second underwater sequence takes place, in which the noises of war give way to the monotonous hum of submerged hearing, muffling to almost inaudible the sounds of carnage. Underwater, soldiers jettison their rifles and helmets, struggling to get free of equipment now weighting them from resurfacing. The 28-second, underwater sequence is followed by quick camera moves in which, three times, we briefly resurface, only to go under again. Each time the camera rises above waterline, the assailment of noises abruptly recurs, then disappears as we sink once more. Camera movement and sound mimic the

struggle for survival as some men resurface while two are shot underwater, turning the sea red, and we watch one soldier quietly drown.

The above-water assault of unrelenting noise sets audience nerves on edge, providing a haptic effect clearly intended to analogize the barrage of bullets, slaughter, and fear soldiers encounter. Additionally, however, the movement between two audio spaces, above or below the waterline – one deafening, the other eerily hushed – creates emotional complexity that reverberates due to the established narrative and historical context. If, most fundamentally, the sequence depicts an imperative for survival, in which soldiers struggle to reemerge from the ocean, it also emphasizes the conditions for continued existence. Remaining in the quiet of the ocean guarantees certain death; returning to the cacophonous living means reemergence into the brutality of the battlefield, itself a world of death. The 28-second underwater sequence fashions a release from the relentless sounds of cruelty, the stench of slaughter and fear. The jarring juxtaposition presented by camera and sound, as we oscillate above and beneath waterline, probes whether that relief will be temporary or permanent. Hearing the remorseless audio as we reemerge pleads for escape from the clamor of war, so that death may seem the more peaceful prospect. And so we watch the soldier who drowns give up his struggle quietly, in a moment of horrific peace. The dislocations created by two distinct audio spaces express the conflicting conditions of death as quietude and lived existence as death, in *this specific* historical and narrative context.

Popular media are replete with instances such as these, moments of emotional value conveyed through aesthetics. If much of emotional life remains submerged from the expressible, audiovisual narrativity seeks means by which it may be glimpsed, overheard or otherwise felt. Marks observes that cinema occurs 'on the threshold of language' (p. xvi). Indeed, much of mediated experience takes shape well removed from that threshold. Making sense of emotions exceeds tracking ideological positions or rational, cognitive activities with which, as in much affect theory, emotionality has been too exclusively aligned. Accepting such a limited conceptualization means losing grasp of valuable social and mediated narratives of emotion when they do not appear in overt or easily accessible form.

Although emotions are activated, negotiated, and exchanged in sociocultural realms, they do not *require* articulation. We access emotions – feel them and express them – through pathways other than the specifically spoken, written, or thought. We experience emotions nonverbally as well as verbally, through images, audio, tone, texture, movement, and gestures more than they are retrieved as conscious awareness or partner with rational, contemplative thought. Sue Campbell contends that a handful of what she calls 'classic' emotions, such as love, fear, anger, and pity, are taken as paradigmatic of all emotional experience although, she strenuously argues, they are not (Campbell 1997, pp. 2-3, 6). Instead, the bulk of our emotions exist in 'nuanced, complex, or inchoate' forms that remain unspecified, in the sense of lacking labels or being available to articulation (Ibid. p. 3). Campbell offers up an alternative version to that of affect theory, one in which emotions signal intricate, elusive and, as their etymology suggests,[3]

constantly moving events, as they take shape, shift, combine, separate, disperse, and reform in boundless, fluctuating constellations.

iii. Images

Strands of affect theory that rely on film to elaborate their arguments predicate a good deal on the nature of 'the image.' Here again, how one performs the subtraction of an image, or elements within an image, from the narrative environment in which it nests, in order to arrive at a moment of pure affect, proves challenging. Even a still image may encompass narrative aspects. For instance, Wendy Steiner outlines the ways medieval Italian paintings incorporated narrativity prior to the advent of the Renaissance. Repeating the appearance of a particular character staged along a singular, unifying landscape such as a winding path and, later, using rooms within a single building to indicate 'the co-presence of temporally distinct moments,' painters created 'the multi-episodic narratives of pre-Renaissance art' (Steiner 2004, pp. 164, 160). The invention of vanishing-point perspective disrupted such narrative pictorial practices because the Renaissance model of perceptual realism demands a viewer who observes a scene 'from a fixed vantage point *at one moment in time'* (Steiner p. 158; italics in original). Thus, Steiner argues that historical conventions, not medium necessity, led to exchanging 'the nonrealist narrativity of the Middle Ages' for the 'nonnarrative realism' of much Western art, until the late nineteenth century (p. 162).

For film and television, it becomes even more difficult to imagine the absence of narrative inflection, except in the most experimental modes, given the embeddedness of

an image in the context of all surrounding shots. Usually the basic unit of 'image' in film is regarded as the single camera shot. Yet, even a still shot in the absence of camera movement exists as part of a series of images, instigating viewers to search for sequential, temporal, spatial, causal, symbolic or other relationality to the shots that precede and follow. Moving images, whether by movement of figures within the frame or via camera movement, are even more difficult to distinguish from storytelling aspects because, by definition, they involve passage across space over a temporal duration. At its most fundamental, narrativity may be defined as a peregrination, a journey from one place to another over a period of time, however small the journey or brief the temporal moment.

Discussing the film, *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes 1999), Pisters finds it unoriginal in story terms but more intriguing in its use of video footage associated with the teenage character, Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley) (Pisters 2004, p. 1). She argues the video sequences serve as 'a database of memories and impressions with no (narrative) coherence or logical development,' thereby liberating the video images from the cause and effect dynamics of narrativity and, in turn, freeing Ricky from the weight of typical characterization (pp. 1-2). Instead, he arrives at something akin to a pure gaze and a new, nonpersonal 'mode of individuation' (p. 2). I, too, found the film's home video footage haunting and evocative, lingering with me long after I first encountered it, especially the sequence in which the wind blows about a white plastic bag. Here, I revisit that scene but, in contrast to Pisters, in order to consider the ways the plastic bag sequence is narratively and culturally informed so that it expresses the otherwise emotionally

inexpressible, in a cinematic context that works to release the image and its emotional associations from stasis.

The floating plastic bag sequence surfaces twice in the film, both times positioned and supported by narrative aspects. On the first occasion, the scene plays on a video monitor in Ricky's bedroom for a minute and twenty-five seconds. It is anchored narratively by the presence, in the frame, of Ricky and sixteen-year-old Jane Burnham (Thora Birch), as the two sit in front of the monitor, their backs to us. The video plays in the background space between them, their figures in the foreground serving to bookend the sequence, while Ricky explains the footage's importance to him. On the second occasion, at the end of the film, the plastic bag sequence runs again for twenty-one seconds, situated narratively by voiceover from Jane's father, the now dead Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey). This time we view the scene directly, that is, without the intermediating presence of video monitor or characters, but with audio contextualization provided by Lester's voiceover. The reprisal of the floating plastic bag carries the key story function of coda, intended to encapsulate the entire film's emotional impact.

On both occasions, the sequence comprises a cinematic single image, shown without edits (with the exception of an eight second close-up of Ricky in the midst of the first shot). Yet the image also exhibits continuous figure movement – the nonstop floating of the plastic bag, leaves swirling on the sidewalk – along with unceasing camera movement, constantly reframing in order to follow the bag's actions. Movement often renders a richer, more complex image than a still shot, in this case performing a

peregrination that emphasizes the spatial features of location and mobility, as the bag tries to take flight or attempts escape. In its first showing, the bag appears to rise upward against the red brick wall, only to quickly fall back down to ground, as if trapped. On its second attempt, at the end of the film, the bag manages to scale the red brick wall, rising to the top of the frame before the image fades out, this time breaking free of its environs.

However, if one considers the bag's journey insufficient storyline to justify narrative status, the sequence has also been aligned, through visuals and audio, with at least three characters (Ricky, Jane, Lester). Additionally, cultural inflection permeates the scene in a manner fundamental to its evocative, haunting quality. Cultural suffusion occurs through one narrative property in particular: setting. Initially, the choice of location seems odd for something meant to be achingly beautiful. We view an apparently urban site, no horizon of sky visible, only a gray concrete sidewalk in front of a red brick wall. Dead, brown leaves twirl about on the concrete, although no trees are in sight. Against the familiar building materials of urban public space, the white plastic bag dances, as Ricky characterizes its movement. Of course, the plastic bag also belongs to this urbanized environment, a piece of litter carelessly discarded on the street, awaiting removal along with the dead leaves. The scene's efficacy depends on cultural recognition of public objects and environments we routinely associate with waste and paucity.

That we are intended, paradoxically, to view the sequence as beautiful is made clear by Ricky's introduction to the video, in which he asks Jane, 'You want to see the most beautiful thing I've ever filmed?' The scene's intended appeal is further reinforced by

Ricky's description as it plays on the monitor, his words closely echoed in Lester's later voiceover, in which they speak of *feeling* so much beauty in the world it overwhelms their hearts. Elsewhere in the film, Ricky references finding beauty in the ugly, boring, and ordinary rather than mistaking the ugly, boring, and ordinary for beautiful. We can appreciate the dependency on cultural context in making such a distinction if we imagine replacing the blustery plastic bag with a video sequence that follows a butterfly as it travels amongst the red roses of the Burnham's carefully tended garden. Related to the film's title, and associated most closely with Jane's mother, Carolyn Burnham (Annette Bening), the rose garden would not function in the same manner as Ricky's video because the narrative has activated social associations of the flowers in their suburban setting with sentimentality, façade, and denial. Instead, in the home video images we are presented with beauty located in life's less inviting, trivial, and discarded matter, which includes a number of the film's characters.

The process by which we see, and feel, the beauty in the wind-driven plastic bag commences from the normative, the clichéd, in order to reach a less familiar or 'already known' experiential quality. The red roses in the garden, set against an affluent suburban home with white picket fence, feel stultified, rigid, dead. An alternative version of American beauty is the correspondingly clichéd image of a naked, teenaged woman (Mena Suvari), served up on a bed of rose petals. This alternate American beauty turns out to be an equally empty fantasy, in this instance, linked to Lester's disastrously erroneous perceptions. Only by journeying through these versions – a peregrination

across conventional, false notions of beauty – are we able to grasp and appreciate Ricky's vision.

Pister's contention that Ricky's video footage is original, that he recognizes things differently, is correct. However, his home images do not function as some sort of pure gaze as she suggests; rather, they work in conjunction with other narrative and aesthetic elements. Ricky's experience achieves expression by moving from static, rejected images of beauty to finally reaching a visualization – his dancing plastic bag against a red brick wall – that is less well known, less familiar and, thus, freshly felt. Yet, it's not clear what that emotion should be called: beauty-in-waste; beauty-in-the-ugly. As Campbell suggests, we must turn to neologisms to point towards the expansive wealth of cognitively uncultivated terrain that our emotional experiences encompass. Even 'classic' emotions, such as fear and sadness which we possess the cognitive competency to name, do not exist as singularities. Instead, they are complex systems that can incorporate a near-infinite variety of felt experiences, contradicting the idea that we point to something specific, bounded or static when we reference emotionality.

The effectiveness of the plastic bag video cannot rely on Ricky or Lester telling us, in linguistic terms, that the sequence evokes an aching beauty. Their words may point the way, but the success or failure of accomplishing that objective depends on whether audience members directly *feel* its beauty. The notion of 'felt recognition' is activated in the study of melodrama as narrative and aesthetic modality (Gledhill and Williams 2018)). The *felt* of felt recognition references audiences undergoing an emotional

experience, rather than registering solely an intellectual understanding. Popular mediated narrativity involves processes of coming to care, of feeling the impact of something brought home. The *recognition* in felt recognition involves encountering aesthetic *realizations*, in the doubled sense of enacted and acknowledged. Mediated narratives ideally, and often enough in practice, offer up opportunities to engage with what feels fresh, unfamiliar, inarticulable. Amidst the 'functional lines' of accustomed plots and other conventions, we also seek out and consistently make new discoveries. Indeed, familiar narrative and aesthetic landscapes provide the groundwork for moments of unexpected felt recognition to emerge.

Conclusion

The examples explored from *Saving Private Ryan* and *American Beauty* represent brief excerpts from the totality of the films. Yet, they signal that moving pictures and sound hold the power to initiate an abundance of such moments. Audiences who co-exist in shared sociocultural worlds carry the competencies to recognize the emotional conflicts being staged or the emotional stakes under strain, even as individual felt responses vary.

Audiences seek out occasions to encounter unanticipated felt recognitions, contributing to the pleasures of mediated experience. Cultural meanings dominated by normative phenomena in stasis allows little room for the shocks, surprises, excitement, and thrills that draw audiences to popular storytelling. Yet, mediated felt experiences like excitement need to be accounted for: what do we care about, how do we come to care about it, and which emotions are enabled or excluded in that process? Freshly discovered

feelings provide audiences with cinematic pleasures, even when the emotions engaged are deemed painful, as in the cases of fear and sadness.

Excerpts from all three films discussed – the snowman story, the extract from *Saving Private Ryan,* and *American Beauty's* floating plastic bag – share in common narrative conflict as emotional dilemma. Whether taking shape as pleasurable sadness, peaceful horror, or discarded beauty, the three peregrinations encourage audiences to engage with emotions as complex forms of cultural existence. Mediated storytelling encompasses the pleasures of felt recognition – the moments that make us cry as well as laugh or smile – that we might not otherwise grasp about the worlds we occupy, the identities available for us to take up, and the social relations we enjoy or fail to attain. Narrative media create collective spaces which enable late modern subjects to entertain their socioemotional imaginings.

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[1] For the complexity of mediated emotions as sociocultural events, see 'How 9/11 changed the movies: the Tony Scott barometer' (Pribram 2016).

[2] Usually affect is described as non-conscious, beyond acts of 'mind' whether conscious or unconscious.

[3] 'Emotion' originates in the mid-sixteenth century as 'a public disturbance; a commotion,' taking on the additional meaning of social migration in the seventeenth century (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 2007, p. 821).