

Eyes Wide Shut: Towards an Aristotelian Film Theory

Abstract:

This article argues that Aristotle's theory of drama as developed in his *Poetics* could serve as the foundation of a comprehensive theory of the art of cinema. Everything that Aristotle says about literary drama also fits film drama -- the only exception being their respective means of expression. Aristotle claims that drama should be expressed by the means of words rather than nonverbal sound and visual images. The order of priority among the perceptual elements of drama is reversed in film: the essential means of expression is the non-verbal acoustic and visual image while the verbal expression is secondary and not essentially cinematic. This sends us back to the drawing table in order to finish Aristotle's job, once the changed epistemological conditions (through the invention of film) allow us for the first time the critical examination of the non-verbal elements of drama. Just as he did, we have to educate the audience how to become independent from the "here and now" of cinema and be able to watch film drama with our eyes wide shut.

*The tragic fear and pity may be aroused by the spectacle; but they may be aroused by the very structure and incidents of the play - which is the better way and shows the better poet. The plot in fact should be so framed that, even without seeing the things take place, he who simply hears the account of them should be filled with horror and pity at the incidents; which is just the effect the mere recital of the story in Oedipus would have on one.*¹

In the past two decades film scholarship has been caught in an intellectually productive standoff between so-called Grand Theory and what I will call common sense criticism.² The explicitly anti-theoretical stance of common sense critics did not prevent the advocated of common sense from putting up their own grand banner spelling out the seemingly antithetical concepts characterizing their approach: cognitivism or neo-formalism³. The conflict between these scholarly camps might even remind one of the dynamism between continental and analytic philosophy: indeed, “Grand Theory” is often inspired by thinkers with a secure place in the pantheon of Continental philosophy: Marx, Freud, Lacan, Althusser, Derrida, and Deleuze. The film scholars of the various academic schools, each correlating to a big name, intimately inhabit the entangled conceptual webs

¹ Aristotle, Poet. 1453b1-6, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

² D. N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

³ See for instance David Bordwell, “A Case for Cognitivism,” in: *IRIS* 9 Spring, 1989, p. 12.

spun by these masters. From the point of view of the other camp, however, it seems like those scholars are too entangled in their masters' theories than to be able to consider films for themselves. At least, that is how the common sense argument goes.⁴

The common sense approach of the neo-formalist or cognitivist camp can be summed up aptly by the motto of Bordwell's comprehensive book on the evolution of film style: "You can observe a lot by watching." ("Observations on film art" is also the name of Bordwell and his partner Kristin Thompson's influential blog on cinema).⁵ *Nota bene!* Year after year I kept watching and watching this motto while loyally teaching Bordwell's book but – baseball being right in my European blind spot – I actually read the name "Yogi Bear" every time I should have correctly observed "Yogi Berra." Only when actually copying the quotation in an attempt to debunk Bordwell's presumption about the desired ideal of theoretically innocent observation, did I discover that my European bias landed me in a dyslexia persisting for more than a decade. Kudos for the Grand Theory camp! My misreading actually produced a productive reading of the cartoon character created by Hanna-Barbera, whom the baseball star Berra sued for naming the bear that was smarter than the average bear in such a way that it implicated and (supposedly) defamed him.

The cartoon bear assumed a depth in my false reading that it did not have before its mimetic link with baseball's most famous philosopher; and the link was enabled only by the fluke accident of my incorrect observation. Yet, of course, my misreading might

⁴ See also Noël Carroll, *Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991)

⁵ David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1997). The blog is at: <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/> [last accessed 29 August 2015].

have not been an accident at all, but the result of the not so innocent phonological framing of my attention by Hanna-Barbara. Mister Berra based his case on a theory of framing which supposedly proved the intent to defame him. Hanna-Barbera's defense, in turn, was based upon formalist anti-theory, insisting on the innocence of the phonological coincidence. Berra must have experienced the frustration of the Grand Theorist not being able to prove that he is not reading more into the film than what in fact is there formally to be observed when he dropped the suit. Yet, in a sense, both sides are right: Berra's theory of his mimetic identity with the bear is not based solely upon the film in itself, even if the little I remembered from the film (basically the name of the bear) spontaneously led me to Mister Berra.

In teaching close reading of film dramas, I find that the neo-formalist approach has proven to be of practical use -- but only up until a point. In the beginning of a close reading film seminar, I usually push the neo-formalist method, suggesting that students let their observations carry them passively in order to detect what acoustic, visual and kinesthetic signs strike them enough to warrant an assumption of recurring patterns of sound, sight and movement. All I require is that these data are strictly non-verbal, which includes the purely acoustic or purely visual aspect of speech, for example, the repetition of a verbal expression in the status of a sound pattern or as a visual pattern. (for instance, Orson Welles's character Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* "speaks" like a fish silently moving his mouth in the scene when Charles Heston's character, Vargas, tries to frame him by wiretapping.)

I clearly communicate that my normative claim on them to collect only non-verbal sensual data already puts them in a theoretical frame according to which verbal

expression is subordinated to non-verbal expression in film drama. But this could still be just an application of a norm of the neo-formalists because the verbal quality of speech is strictly speaking a non-sensual construction, therefore, is not positively, factually there. Then, once the students come up with their observations, I ask them to stop assuming the innocence or spontaneity of the patterns they observed. Instead I ask the students to think about them as the acoustic, visual, kinesthetic framing of their attention directed by their own character.

Students are told that it is crucial to let the sensual data strike them innocently at first, at least for two seemingly contradictory reasons: for the sake of subjectivity as well as for the sake of objectivity. The subjective reason is the creative originality of their interpretation. An original and creative close reading of a film drama is enabled by the spontaneity of the initial selection of what strikes, puzzles, irritates, delights, tortures, bores or tickles each individual. As opposed to the medium of literature, there are infinitely more combinations of sensory data involved in films. Put differently: the rhythmic occurrence of sensual data that specifically captured your attention will personally speak to you: only to you will it reveal why you tumbled upon it, as if accidentally. I tumbled upon the poetic truth of the mimetic identity between the cartoon bear and the baseball star, not by the fluke accident of seeing the visual pattern as spelling out “Yogi Bear,” but by the trajectory of my upbringing (unfortunately, entirely lacking baseball) feeding into the logic of my character that provides the hardwiring for my observations.

The other reason to observe innocently at first is for the sake of objectivity. By not allowing any of your own intentional framing while you are observing, you are

politely, not forcibly, giving a chance for the sensual data to come forth in the acoustic, visual, and kinesthetic design that might be the framing by the filmmaker. In case of my dyslexic incident, my attention was framed by the studio of Hanna-Barbera, who made the mimetic linking of Berra and Yogi Bear stick so well through the sound image that one name automatically evoked the other and vice versa. Someone tumbling into a particular sensual frame is never an accident; it is a moment of mimetic recognition.

When I teach *Touch of Evil*, it is always someone with a strong local accent who is struck by the acoustic pattern of Quinlan's speech (carelessly annunciated native English), as it is contrasted with the pattern of Vargas's formal annunciation of school-learned English. The observations about the characteristic sound patterns of the protagonists can be converted into an interpretative design not by a haphazard whim, but, it turns out, according to the dramaturgical rules of none other than Aristotle. After my students have gone through their inversely ascetic exercise of letting the physical stimuli impress them, we start to look at the dramaturgical elements by identifying conflicts, reversals, and recognitions – and all the other Aristotelian elements of drama.

As it happens the most prominent overarching visual pattern of *Touch of Evil* is architectural framing and electric wires feeding right into the film's dramaturgy: Quinlan, the bad cop with the killer instinct, frames the bad guys; the good cop, Vargas, wants to frame the framer. Ultimately, the theme of framing amounts to a meta-poetics of film directing that the common sense film critic might be uncomfortable with; yet it is powerfully supported by Orson Welles's brainy documentary, *F for Fake* (1974), an explicit theory of the art of directing as conning.

You can only lose your innocence once, so I encourage my students to watch the film again in what one might call a schizophrenic state: let the physical patterns and the dramaturgical patterns approach each other but with the awareness of their incommensurability. That is to say, I encourage them to look deliberately, not innocently, for the less obvious physical (acoustic, visual, and kinesthetic) patterns following the clues of their dramaturgical patterns, but with the skeptical weariness of lost innocence. This self-conscious and hesitant balancing between, on the one hand, being impressed passively mimetically and, on the other hand, bringing forth one's own theory actively is what I call critical thinking pertaining to film. What I (and, hopefully, the students) will have learnt from this kind of exercise in close reading is that film drama can best be understood with the theory of someone who obviously did not know film: Aristotle. How so?

Aristotle made the first attempt to draw a conceptual map of the life of the mind by systematizing disciplinary and expert learning as well as epistemologically more relaxed practices of judicial and political deliberation and, not least, the arts. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle claimed that the poetic work is first of all associated with and originates from mimetic learning, an inborn competence that is uniquely human: "Imitation," Aristotle claims, "is natural for man since childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation."⁶

Even more importantly for us, Aristotle emphasizes that drama has evolved

⁶ Arist. Poet. 1448b8-9.

historically from the vulgar (folk) art of mime throughout time in a process of ennoblement. The poetic work of drama has been gradually transforming itself as a product of learning according to a mixture of *technē* (craft), luck (stochastic guessing, trial and error, and estimation)⁷ and habit (via mimicry)⁸. When the dramatic genre had matured sufficiently through a combination of improvisation and craft, and became ennobled and serious enough to fulfill its potential, it was time to reflect on its rules that were more or less obscure not only for its audience, but also for its creators. (The thought that an art reveals its essence not at the beginning also struck Nietzsche and eventually was picked up by Gilles Deleuze in his work on cinema).⁹

Aristotle's *Poetics* enters the scene when drama has finally come into its own and is established as a discipline of expert learning that is able to give a critical account of the mimetic arts, most importantly drama. (Aristotle reports a similar story involving the vernacular practice of public deliberation and the critical discipline of rhetoric, reflected, of course, in his *Rhetoric*.) Aristotle was noted to have a special interest in the development of drama; he was a serious collector of documents related to it. He was close enough in time to be able get data about immature stages of the development of

⁷ I have analyzed the notion of stochastic rationality in Aristotle's thought at greater length in my "Between Mimesis and Technē: Critical Thinking and the Cinematic Image" (forthcoming).

⁸ 'It was through their original aptitude, and by a series of improvements for the most part gradual on their first efforts, that they created poetry out of their improvizations.' Arist. Poet. 1448b22-23.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 43.

drama, but of course not as lucky as we are as film drama is concerned.

In his famous reflections on style in motion pictures, Erwin Panofsky remarks that we are in an unparalleled situation concerning the art of cinema, because we have lived through its origins or at least find these origins fully documented.¹⁰ Panofsky also notes that film drama has not come into its own at the time of his writing. The art historian sees the origins of cinema as a kind of “folk art” based upon its early association with crude humor, horror, and pornography. Yet, despite the fact that film drama has evolved into its genuine form with postwar modernist cinema, critical reflection has not managed to comprehend film drama theoretically the same way Aristotle’s *Poetics* comprehends literary drama (note that I am not talking about film in general or as a medium; I am talking about film drama, a dramatic work of the cinematic art.) In other words: film drama has long become “ennobled” in the way Greek drama eventually was; yet we lack a theory that would allow us to grasp the trajectory of this evolution in clear and distinct terms.

I wish to argue that Aristotle’s theory of drama, as developed in his *Poetics*, could serve as the foundation of a comprehensive theory of the art of cinema. In fact, everything that Aristotle says about literary drama also fits film drama -- the only exception being their respective means of expression which is due to the incidental fact that only the verbal element of Greek drama could be recorded. In the first part of this paper, I shall briefly reconstruct Aristotle’s analysis of drama and offer some preliminary comparisons and contrasts with film drama. I then develop a more extensive account of

¹⁰ Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in Daniel Talbot (ed.), *Film: An Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 15-32.

what an Aristotelian film theory should look like, before returning the pedagogical perspective with which this paper began: I also wish to suggest that film can play a special role in liberal education in a double sense: it can also be helpful in furthering liberal citizenship, a claim I will make by discussing the recent Hungarian film Bence Fliegauf's *Just the Wind*, 2012. The conclusion draws these arguments together and suggests some further lines for research.

Aristotle on Drama: Literacy as a Normative Project

To begin with, literary drama and film drama have the same principal parts: 1. *mythos* (play), 2. *ethos* (character), 3. *dianoia* (the characteristic design of thought), 4. *lexis* (speech), *melopoiia* (sound) and *opsis* (visual effects). The soul of literary and film drama, claims Aristotle, is *mythos*, which is usually translated as “plot;” however, I will refer to it as “play.” The play is the persuasive configuration of incidents of human life. The other two elements that Aristotle finds constitutive of drama are *ethos* and *dianoia*. *Ethos* (character) refers to the moral inclinations of the play actors. In film drama, any image presented with significant duration –landscape, cityscape, soundscape, an object, a song, etc. – can potentially and ideally express *ethos* (an example might be the acoustic image of the characteristic manners of speech in *Touch of Evil*). *Ethos* determines the incidents of the play through its expression in a deliberative design (*dianoia*). The most important elements of *dianoia* both in literary and film drama are *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune) and *anagnōrīsis* (recognition). The persuasive design of incidents (*mythos*) must

follow, according to Aristotle, from the character (*ethos*) of the play actors and their characteristic manner of deliberation (*dianoia*). Mythos, ethos, and *dianoia* together form the conceptual apparatus of drama (what I shall call dramaturgy), but *dianoia* also serves as the interface between the purely conceptual and purely perceptual dimensions of the drama.

According to Aristotle, *mythos*, *ethos*, and *dianoia* are the essential parts of drama for the reason that together they have the capacity fully to articulate the drama at the conceptual level. And this is the crux of Aristotelian poetics: the mark of genuine drama lies in the liberation from the concrete occasion of the poetic utterance, namely, from acoustic and visual and kinesthetic embodiment (mime). Drama, Aristotle claims, should be able to exist in the mind independently from sensory data. In his *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, Aristotle indicates that verbal mastery lies in the production of vivid phantom sensations in the absence of sensory data. The poetic aesthetic experience therefore differs from the sensual aesthetic experience in the fact the stimuli involved in the poetic experience are phantom stimuli, not physical ones.

However counterintuitive it might seem, this criterion of genuineness is a normative criterion not only of literary but also cinematic drama. Genuine film drama exists independently from images, as also shown in seminal writings on film, such as those of Gilles Deleuze or Stanley Cavell.¹¹ These authors evoke cinematic examples by verbalizing them as opposed to relying on stills, as has become conventional in film scholarship in general. In fact, pedagogically, I find their example highly useful and

¹¹ See in particular Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, and Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

commendable. I teach my students to pick cinematic, that is, non-verbal designs for examples upon which to ground their arguments, but then articulate them verbally as well as they can. This practice can gradually enable us as students of film to create a critical vocabulary that is capable of giving an intelligent verbal account of cinematic designs such as, for example, the characteristic look of recognition on an actor's face, which is but the visual design of *anagnōrīsis*, one of the two most important elements of cinematic dramaturgy.

Aristotle's crucial claim – namely, that the essential means of dramaturgical expression lies in speech (*lexis*), while the non-verbal acoustic (*melopoiia*) and visual (*opsis*) images are secondary and non-essential to drama – is strikingly normative. It contradicts the common sense of his time, given that drama in Aristotle's age is experienced as an acoustic and visual performance. In other words, the normative claim that anything but speech is incidental to drama squarely contradicts the empirical evidence of the everyday experience of the Athenian going to the drama festival to be swept up by music and dance as well as the speeches of the actors and the chorus. Aristotle's fellow audience members experience drama in performance where speech might as well be taken as a subcategory of the acoustic effect – as spoken/sounded words. So what, then, is Aristotle doing? He effectively sets norms in his *Poetics* in order to educate the audience of drama to the effect of changing its habits of oral culture and assume new habits of literacy. Aristotle insists on a definition of drama as a literary form independent of its being performed. You can notice the same normative claim in his *Rhetoric*, where he says that genuine persuasion is carried solely by speech (*lexis*) and

should not rely on the psychagogic power of non-verbal expression such as for example appearing in court in tattered clothing and thereby manipulating the jury.

The twin normative claims of Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, which interdict the use of any effect of non-verbal persuasion, are the battle cries with which Aristotle declares a culture war between orality and literacy (in fact, he shifts the frontlines in order to replace the existing culture war between rhetoric and philosophy with the war between the cultures of orality and literacy). The *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* deliver a normative push to institutionalize literature and literacy among the still mostly oral conditions of everyday life and learning in Aristotle's time. Aristotle thus formalizes disciplinary education in the humanities (or, as he says: in topics pertaining to human affairs, which therefore can admit opposite ends). He completes what Socrates and the Sophists had started: the institutionalization of what is, in effect, liberal education as the interface between the mimetic and stochastic vernacular learning of the artist, child, and the folk without formal education, on the one hand, and the expert learning of specialists enabled by the first technical revolution of alphabetic recording.¹²

A warning is due here that this explanation breaks with the generally accepted reasoning that the interdiction of acoustic and visual expression in the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* is about the rationalization of poetry and rhetoric through the interdiction of using emotions in persuasion. Most scholars of Aristotle's *Poetics* interpret the interdiction of non-verbal expression as Aristotle's attempt to rationalize poetic utterance

¹² I develop this argument about liberal education being a contained, productive conflict between vernacular and formal learning in my book *What is Liberal Education?* (forthcoming).

by disembodied it. Their argument is based upon a Platonic dichotomy between emotions and reasons – but, as a number of scholars have argued convincingly, Aristotle has overcome this dichotomy both in his *Poetics* and in his *Rhetoric*.¹³ He claims – and this is crucial -- that emotions have a rational design and reasons have an emotional design. It is his concept of *dianoia*, the explicit connection between poetics and rhetoric, which reveals that emotions and reasons are but two sides of the same coin whose interface is deliberative design.

Therefore, I believe, Aristotle does not fight Plato's fight against emotions and emotional manipulation, but, following Socrates, sets us on a new path of bringing mimetic and analytical learning into an institutionalized conflict – which precisely, I would argue, *is* liberal education. This is made possible by, on the one hand, the evolutionary leap of mimetic learning manifest in the mature poetic forms like drama, and on the other, a revolution of expert learning induced by the technical invention of the digital (alphabetic) recording of speech. Only what can be recorded, can be efficiently contemplated analytically. At the time of Aristotle, only human speech could be recorded among the perceptible elements of drama. Therefore, it is for the sake of critical learning that he interdicted those elements of drama that cannot be made the object of analytical contemplation, as it is not possible to record them.

¹³ See for instance John M. Cooper, “An Aristotelian Theory of Emotions” in his *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Towards an Aristotelian Theory of Film Drama: The Non-Verbal Design of Ideas

There is a whole new situation, as soon as all perceptual elements of drama (*lexis, opsis, melopoia*) become subject to recording through the invention of film. We are back at the drawing table, so to speak, in order to finish Aristotle's job of theorizing drama once the changed epistemological conditions allow us the critical examination of the non-verbal elements of drama as well. Moreover, just as he did, we have to educate the audience how to become independent from the "here and now" of cinema and be able to watch film drama with, so to speak, our eyes wide shut.

What is then the difference between literary and film drama if they appear to share all the important conceptual features? Their difference lies in the order of relevance between the use of verbal (*lexis*) and non-verbal (*opsis, melopoia*) expression. Aristotle says that drama should be expressed by the means of words rather than nonverbal sound and visual images. The normative claim of the suppression of everything but the verbal image is where the theory of film drama departs from the words of Aristotle's theory, but not from its spirit. In fact, the theory of film drama keeps mirroring Aristotle's theory of literary drama as a kind of negative imprint. In other words, Aristotle unwittingly demarcated the place of film drama within his *Poetics* as the negative imprint of literary drama.

Let me put this more directly: the order of priority is decisively reversed in film. The essential means of expression is the non-verbal choreography of acoustic, visual, and kinesthetic imaging, while the verbal expression is secondary and not essentially cinematic. Therefore my normative claim mirroring Aristotle's normative claim

concerning literature is that the quintessential cinematic quality lies in *dianoia* (deliberative design) expressed through nonverbal sound, visual, and kinesthetic images. In other words, the cinematic lies in the non-verbal design of ideas. Speech as a verbal acoustic image in film drama is but the subcategory of acoustic image and serves only as a non-essential means of naturalism, simply because drama is about incidents of human life which are naturally accompanied by speech.

The trajectory of literary drama is from, first, performed mime as in: vulgar, non-verbal, embodied audio-visual, kinesthetic design to, second, recorded (literary) drama as in: ennobled disembodied verbal design. Drama thus evolves by a reversal from its exact opposite – speechless mime –into a form that persuades through words only, not through the acoustic, visual and kinesthetic senses addressed by theatrical staging. Eventually, speech got disembodied from mime, the natural mimetic combination of movement, sound, and sight. Verbalization occurred first as the song of the choir, then, as speeches delivered by individual actors, who gradually took over the deliverance of the whole dramatic plot enabled by the juxtaposition of dramatic speeches in the form of dialogue.

The stages of the development of film drama are thus the following: first, recorded and thus disembodied mime (visual kinesthetic design) with no kinesthetic synchronization between sound and sight; secondly, incongruous (failed) synchronization of recorded, therefore disembodied, visual mime with recorded, thereby disembodied, verbal design (silent film titles) and with performed embodied, but incongruous acoustic design (scored or improvised music) resulting in an overall design of radical discontinuity; thirdly, congruous kinesthetic synchronization of recorded audio with visual images that together manage to implicate recorded but fully embodied verbal

design (speech) -- yet only as a subcategory of sound and sight (not sticking out, but smoothing in) resulting in the overall design of perfect continuity. Thus, film has arrived full circle to the origins of drama in mime except that, this time, it is recorded mime. Modernist cinema starts the new trajectory from vulgar cinematic mime to ennobled film drama through the disruption of the continuity design principle that promotes mimetic pleasure.

It is important to note that, according to Aristotle, literary drama originally had no verbal expression, just music and mime -- not unlike the so-called silent films whose least cinematic parts are the written titles. On the other hand, speech as a means of naturalism -- as an acoustic accompaniment of the moving mouth -- is a condition of the mature cinematic form. However, the use of words for the purposeful revelation of information pertaining to what I have been calling the play is not cinematic.¹⁴

Although the first principle of the specific theory of film drama is but the negative imprint of the first principle of Aristotle's specific theory of literary drama, their contradiction is neutralized through a prior principle of Aristotle's general theory of drama. The very first principle of drama in general is that it has to be possible to enjoy with eyes (and ears) wide shut as a purely conceptualized phenomenon when recollected in tranquility, to allude to Wordsworth's expression. This general Aristotelian principle holds true equally for literary and film drama, especially modernist cinema.

¹⁴ Aristotle interdicted narrativity in drama, claiming that everything had to be expressed through dramatic action -- but this should be the topic for another article on film drama. Arist. Poet. 1460a5

Now, in close reading of the kind I have described one can follow the very trajectory of the evolution of film drama from mimetic appeal to moral appeal within the cinematic image. Enjoying film drama eyes wide shut means to be able to go beyond its mimetic pleasures by turning its sensual appeal into moral appeal. This is the same exact normative demand that I argued was set by Aristotle's *Poetics* for the audience of drama festivals. Let me try to show how this actually works with a brief example, using a recent, extraordinary film, *Just the Wind* (2012) by a young Hungarian director, Bence Fliegauf. This lyrical film ballad is based on actual events in Hungary in 2008-2009, when several Romany families were attacked (with Molotov cocktails and guns). There were 55 victims in all, six people were killed. Fliegauf himself describes his work as "social cinema with hints of a dark psycho-thriller;" he also insists that the film "describes the life of the European pariahs: the Romanies."¹⁵ The film follows the life of one family for a day: a middle-aged mother trying to get by with menial work, while also caring for her father, a studious teenage daughter and a younger boy who skips school and focuses instead on not simply everyday survival, as is gradually revealed, but on keeping his family alive. At first, the boy seems to confirm stereotypes about the Romany, playing hooky and stealing, but only until at one point we realize that he is in fact busy building a safe bunker-home away from the family's actual home, where he – alone in his family – expects murderous intruders. In the Aristotelian time frame of

¹⁵ <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/focus-bence-fliegauf-just-wind> [last accessed 28 August 2015]. Fliegauf has also recounted that he felt compelled to make the film after having nightmares about the killings – in particular a recurring image of the flash of a gun in the night.

roughly one day a hand-held camera follows these three characters exclusively, with some balladic shots of rural life in between.

I am not concerned directly here with the social and political aspects of the film, though these are of supreme importance, to be sure. Rather, I draw on this film in particular to bring out the idea that film, as a medium, technically relies on kinesthetically synchronized visual and acoustic sensory data in its communication, yet also has the power to create phantom sensations in the other senses. Paradoxically, phantom sensations feel more visceral, more real in fact, than actual sensations. In particular, what *Just the Wind* taught me is that showing skin can go under your skin.

There is a lot of naked skin in *Just the Wind* -- but not for the usual effect of sex appeal; rather, naked skin creates a kind of moral appeal. The film's visual framing by images that associate naked skin and the threat of the invasion of this natural interface between self and non-self turns sex appeal into a sense of vulnerability, a moral appeal for responsible action. Examples are a lecherous school intendant's hovering over the teenage girl's naked skin, the flies crawling on the face of the Romany children, the fly-like bullet-marks on the face of the victims shown on a computer screen and at the end in the morgue. Several times I felt the urge of touching the face of the screen-people to move the pervasive flies away -- as if I myself had gotten under the Romany girl's skin but without her fatigued tolerance of irritation that keeps her passive in the face of an invasive threat. In recollection *Just the Wind* as a whole becomes the meme (the iconic image etched in our memory) of flies crawling on a child's tender face, who is too weary for self-defense. The soundtrack contains both natural and electronically mimed insect buzzing. Toward the end of the film, the increasingly invasive electronic buzzing is

synchronized with the teenage girl innocently squatting down too pee in the forest on her way home. Every time I show this film, the audience is in sheer terror at this point – the image touches a nerve other than the ones the audio and visual stimuli fell on. The audience experiences a visceral phantom sensation of extreme vulnerability clearly distinguishable from the visual and acoustic data, since we only see the girl's face.

The first image of naked skin in the film, the entwined limbs in the still dark home in the beginning of the drama, has neither sex appeal nor the appeal of vulnerability; it does not elicit any other response but puzzlement and prejudiced suspicion. What are we seeing? A pile of limbs in a single bed... What does this mean? Why are they all in one bed? In fact, the image is a film historic meme or gif, a variation of the title image of Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959) – which is itself a variation on the image of the entwined limbs of the Pompeii couple excavated on screen in Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (1954). Of course, the evocation of the piled ashy limbs should have warned me, but not even my genuine grief over the Holocaust could prepare me for the reversal of pitying others to fearing for my own. Pity always presumes some distance; at least in Greek tragedy, we are ultimately just spectators. Fear, on the other hand, becomes immediate, but is self-regarding (and it can of course also drive out pity altogether, as Aristotle warned).¹⁶

When the image of the entwined limbs returns, this time not at dawn but at sunset by which time we know well that the killers attacking is a clear and present danger, there is a dramatic recognition of my own family, my own attachment literally embodied in the

¹⁶ Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 217.

attached limbs. I recognized a mimetic likeness that seemed improbable the first time the image was presented. The question of mimetic likeness has been superseded for moral likeness through the recognition of the audience, as Stephen Halliwell argues: already in Aristotle's time, tragedy was emotionally strong enough that it could evoke feelings for women and non-Greeks even if performed by Greek male actors.¹⁷ But, as always in Aristotle's account of the emotions, both pity and fear are cognitively grounded and ethically charged.¹⁸ We cannot help but *learn* through pity and fear.

The atavistic fear of the possible threat coming from strangers initially was suppressed in connection with the Romany family and transformed into pity by my intellectual self-discipline as a well-meaning liberal empathy (or perhaps, put differently, feelings of political correctness). Yet the love the Romany family displayed for each other all through the film is gathered up in the repetition of the image. When the image is repeated I become trapped under the skin of the Romany mother who is too fatigued to recognize the imminent danger that threatens *my* children. The happy puzzlement of sorting out limbs – every morning when my children despite having their own beds end up unknowingly imitating the necessary domestic habit of the poor family with only one bed – turns into horror when I see it threatened on screen.

The different pathos the image carries at first and then the second time for the audience demonstrates the trajectory of moral evolution from physical to moral-aesthetic experience. It also shows a growing appreciation of the lives on screen: when the image returns at the end of the film, the audience puts a much higher price on the lives being

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

threatened. The audience travels through the tragic trajectory of Oedipus: I thought I knew who I was; I am the person who is safe in her home with her family, king of my castle-- wait, no, I am not, who I thought I was because love means the possibility of loss. Yet in this cathartic moment induced by the reversal of pity and fear I went through a moral education. I have learned to fear the loss of the Romany mother as my own -- as opposed to just pity her for it.¹⁹

Amélie Oksenberg Rorty argues that fear and pity are distinguished among the emotions in Aristotle's theory of drama, and that fear is the most civic of emotions, as it makes us reflect on our bonds to others.²⁰ I agree that fear is the real teacher of civic values, and not pity. Pity allows for a kind of hypocrisy of empathy, as the latter necessarily still means (and keeps) distance. Fear, however, although self-regarding in itself, can teach courage. Courage is (as Socrates argued) the knowledge of what is worth fearing. My fear taught me to value the Romany family's love for each other as my own. The courage that emerged from cathartic fear taught me the invaluable precious worth of the lives -- actual lives of fellow human beings -- that unlike mine are in danger (and exhausted through poverty and daily struggles for a decent life amidst prejudice and hostility that can take a deadly form). So at the end it did not matter that my fear was self-regarding, because the intensity of this self-regarding emotion tricked me into learning courage, which is not self-regarding and is ready to act on behalf of others --

¹⁹ In that sense, I argue, I have also moved beyond what Kendall Walton in an influential article called "make-believe fear". See Kendall Walton, "Fearing Fictions," in: *Journal of Philosophy*, 75 (1), 1978, pp. 5-27.

²⁰ Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, "The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy," in: Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

since luckily I am not worn out by poverty. The cinematic image acted as a site of learning in which the audience could develop appreciation for the lives of others.

Fliegauß has given us an argument (*logos*) expressed in a visual (*opsis*) design (*dianoia*) which I used as the concrete ground from which to leap off into the genuine “eyes-wide-shut” reception of the film. This leap is the metaphor for moving with the dramaturgical move of reversal (*peripeteia*). *Peripeteia* is the reversal between external and internal, perceptual and conceptual, strange and familiar, fear and pity, ethos and pathos, self and non-self. When the mimetic play of reversal trapped me in the skin of the stranger, my passive pity (*pathos*) for her and her loved ones changed into the active fearing (*ethos*) for my own children. This transformation of fear and pity is what Aristotle, in the end, means by catharsis. Aristotle realized that it is only the passive state of pity that one can feel for those to whom one has no (familiar) attachment when they are in state of misfortune. When, on the other hand your own loved ones are in the state of misfortune, you do not feel passive pity, but active fear (or perhaps anger or grief).

Aristotle’s insistence on the superiority of the dramatic play that is the combination of reversal and recognition involving strangers recognized as family members and vice versa and his peculiar insistence on the unique role of fear and pity in drama indicates that Aristotle saw catharsis (the very function of drama) as a means of political education. *Just the Wind* made my eyes wide shut in order that I can be transported from my passive – and somewhat hypocritical – empathy for strangers through the self-regarding fear for my own to leave me with courage – which is the urge to protect values whose loss I have learned to fear.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to make a contribution to the long-standing debate as to what is specific about film. I have sought to move beyond the somewhat stalemated debate between Grand Theory and common-sense criticism and, in concentrating on film drama, advanced the argument that Aristotle's thoughts in the *Poetics* as well as the *Rhetoric* retain a surprising (or, perhaps, for some not so surprising) relevance. The point has not been to say that we simply can project insights gleaned from Aristotle one-to-one onto film drama; rather, the essential elements of drama analyzed by Aristotle are importantly re-ordered in film drama.

I have also suggested that, just as drama had developed into a sophisticated art form by the time Aristotle was writing, we are in a position of looking back on film drama's evolution away from film as a kind of "folk art" (Panofsky) or as a site of pure mimetic pleasure. Shifts from continuity to discontinuity editing, for instance, alongside many developments in modernist film-making have made it ever clearer that although verbal elements are not essential to film, film nonetheless involves the *design of ideas*.

Films like *Just the Wind* draw us into complex arguments with non-verbal images of various kinds. Film drama, I argue, therefore can help with liberal education in both senses of the term: film can encourage critical thinking, based on what Cavell called "the critical description of cinematic events;"²¹ it can also help develop courage, that is that knowing what is worth fearing, through critical thinking unfolding from the cinematic

²¹ Cavell, *The World Viewed*, x.

image. Just as Aristotle saw tragedy playing an important role for ancient democracy, film drama, for us, can be meaningfully integrated into proper liberal education (not least since, as many college and university teachers find every day, it is much easier to draw students in via film drama than other media).