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The uncertainties of mood: Reflections on Brad McGann's *Possum*

Mette Hjort

In an article entitled "Five Parameters for Story Design in the Short Fiction Film," Richard Raskin (1998) argues that "depth" enhanced by "simplicity" is a factor that enables film stories to function optimally. Raskin provides three definitions of depth:

One way in which we experience depth in a short film is in the form of inner space within characters. ... A second way in which depth can be understood is in terms of the depth of emotion the film inspires in us. ... Yet a third way depth can be understood is in terms of underlying meaning, or openness to interpretation (199, 201, 203).

I am primarily interested here in the second definition of depth, which I take to concern the way in which narrative structure and visual style are designed to provoke certain emotions in viewers. Although emotions have emerged recently as key features of cinematic narration and response, little attention has been paid to the idea of emotional depth that Raskin foregrounds. What is more, the task of specifying exactly what emotional depth amounts to proves to be anything but simple. Is emotional depth a matter of the experience of certain kinds of emotions rather than others? Do the relevant emotions have to be experienced at a certain level of intensity to qualify as a form of depth? Or is emotional depth a question of provoking emotions that are rarely experienced and that somehow belong to the kairotic, rather than the more mundane moments of existence? Perhaps emotional depth arises

when cinematic texts help to chart new emotional terrain, thereby guarding against what Susan Feagin (1997, 60) calls “emotional myopia.” Emotional depth in that case would be intimately connected with the expansion of our affective repertoire, one of the functions, ideally, of artworks in Feagin’s view.

That emotion is a constitutive feature of cinematic narration and response is a point that has been developed variously by influential film scholars. In *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, Murray Smith (1995) convincingly shows that the representation, recognition, and experience of emotion are central to the forms of engagement and make-believe that cinematic fictions encourage. Noël Carroll (1997, 191) makes a related point when he claims that “emotions are the cement that keeps audiences connected to the artworks, especially to the narrative fictions, that they consume.” Carroll’s (1997, 191) claim has a polemical thrust, for he goes on to insist that the emotions in question are “generally garden-variety ones--fear, anger, horror, reverence, suspense, pity, admiration, indignation, awe, repugnance, grief, compassion, infatuation, comic amusement, and the like,” that is, the very emotions that are trivialized in psychoanalytic accounts, where pride of place instead is given to “certain generic, ill-defined forces like desire and pleasure.” In his ground-breaking work on emotion and film, Carroll has provided fine-grained accounts of the nature and function of these garden-variety emotions within cinematic fictions. In *The Philosophy of Horror; or Paradoxes of the Heart*, for example, Carroll (1990) explores the relation between emotion and genre, arguing that it is a feature of horror fictions to be structured

by the very categories that are constitutive of the two emotions, disgust and fear, that together comprise horror. In his more recent study, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, Carroll (1996) examines carefully the complex relations between point-of-view editing and emotion. He argues, more specifically, that cinematic narration frequently makes use of the point/object shot “to supply the viewer with the cause or object of the character’s emotion in order to specify that emotion in a fine-grained way” (131). Carroll’s account assumes that agents have certain innate abilities to discern the general categories of emotion that facial displays express. By identifying the object or cause of the emotions expressed by a given cinematic character, the point/object shot in many cases enables viewers to attribute specific emotions, rather than a general cluster of emotions, to the fictional characters in question. The concept of emotion, it would seem, helps to explain a wide range of cinematic phenomena: why agents are inclined to care about fictional characters, generic differentiation, and the logic of specific visual constructions.

Now, what is striking is the fact that influential theorists interested in the constitutive role played by emotion in film have paid no attention to the concept of mood. This lacuna is somewhat surprising, if only because the cognitive psychologists on whom film theorists draw repeatedly insist that the differences between mood and emotion are significant enough to require discussion. The idea that moods are recurrent features of everyday psychologies, but play no role in cinematic fictions seems counter-intuitive. Far more compelling as a starting assumption is the idea that a detailed

exploration of the differences between mood and emotion in the context of film will help to shed further light on the psychology of cinematic spectatorship. In what follows, I would like to begin to explore the significance of mood for film in a brief discussion of a recent short film entitled *Possum* (1997), directed by the New Zealander, Brad McGann.

According to both Raskin and the authors of the press kit promoting *Possum*, Brad McGann is intensely attuned to questions of emotion. Raskin, for example, takes *Possum* to be a prime example of a film capable of generating a deep emotional response in the viewer. And the press kit claims that *Possum* "is a film about the subconscious and the primal relationship between people and their environment." *Possum* is further said to reflect the filmmaker's "continuing interest in making films about the outsider and the *emotional quest* [my emphasis] for a sense of place and belonging." I would like here to suggest a shift in emphasis, for I want to argue that *Possum* is a film designed, not only to generate specific emotions, but, more importantly, to provoke a certain *mood*. In my view, it is this consistent emphasizing of mood that accounts for some of the film's most striking visual and narrative features. What is more, it is the complex interplay between mood and emotion, with a privileging of mood throughout, that ultimately contributes to the sense of affective depth that we associate with this film. In *Possum* crucial information is repeatedly withheld, making it impossible for viewers to identify the specific objects and causes of characters' emotional responses. The result is a deeply distressing mood, and this mood is provoked in a largely cumula-

tive manner that deliberately blocks all forms of cathartic resolution. The sense of depth in this case is quite literally the result of an ever-expanding affective abyss linked to diffuse moods, rather than specific, identifiable emotions. *Possum*, I would suggest, affords precisely the kind of affective experience that corresponds to the idea of depth identified above. For example, the affective experience encouraged by *Possum* is importantly marked by increasing and largely unrelenting intensity.

Before analyzing the role of emotion and mood in McGann's short film, it is necessary briefly to identify the key differences between emotions and moods, as they have been described by cognitive psychologists. The most important difference concerns the question of intentionality and its relation to moods and emotions. According to cognitive conceptions of emotion, the vast majority of emotions have objects and are therefore intentional states or attitudes. William Lyons (1980), for example, claims that emotions typically have both formal and particular objects, the formal objects being general evaluative categories, and the particular objects the specific situations that prompt the mobilization of these categories. Moods, on the other hand, "are often objectless, free-floating" (Jenkins & Oatley, 1996: 125). That is, it is frequently difficult to identify the precise cause, and hence object, of a mood. In this sense, the temporality of moods is quite different from that of emotions, for whereas emotions in many cases can be accurately traced to a particular cause at a precise moment in time, the exact causal and temporal origin of moods tends to be obscure. Another important temporal difference between moods and emotions has been noted

by Oatley and Jenkins, who rightly point out that moods tend to last longer than punctual emotions. Indeed, moods can last “for hours, days, or weeks, sometimes as a low intensity background” (125). Moods, it appears, tend to be “produced in a cumulative fashion over time” (Davidson, 1994: 53), whereas emotions are prompted by punctual evaluations of specific situations. In most cases, punctually experienced emotions subside as soon as agents cease to direct their attention toward the relevant formal and particular objects. Moods, on the other hand, can assume a somewhat autonomous existence and can be more difficult to influence and manipulate than emotions. The very possibility of controlling or manipulating emotions hinges on an agent’s ability correctly to identify the evaluative categories and particular situations that together cause the emotions. Inasmuch as moods lack the intentional dimensions of emotions, they are much more difficult to control. Finally, according to some theorists, such as Ekman and Davidson (1994), emotions and moods serve quite different functions. Davidson claims that whereas the “primary function of emotion is to modulate or bias action,” the “primary function of moods ... is to modulate or bias cognition” (52). Emotions, that is, provide a punctual motivation for action, while moods color our general view of the world. Davidson thus defines the general relation between emotion and mood as follows: “Moods provide the affective background, the emotional color, to all that we do. Emotions can be viewed as phasic perturbations that are superimposed on this background activity” (52).

The narrative strategy in *Possum* is to encourage viewers to focus on notions of threat, while withholding the kind of information that

would make possible a precise identification of the source of imminent danger. In a couple of key sequences *Possum* provokes certain negative emotions, such as pity or fear, by confronting viewers with particular situations that are presented as somehow tragic or dangerous. But these emotions, which have precise, identifiable objects, are used primarily to channel the viewer's thoughts in a certain direction and to instil certain expectations. Most of the sequences in *Possum* promote ambiguity and subtextual complexity, and are designed to block intentional emotions and to contribute instead to a brooding sense of generalized anxiety, that is, a mood.

The evocation of intentional emotions occurs primarily in three scenes: the opening scene in which Little Man (Martin Taylor) comes upon a trapped and dead animal together with Dad (Stephen Papps); the crisis scene in which Missy (Alexia Verdonk-schot) teases, and is bitten by Kid (Eve-Marie Brandish); and the disclosure scene in which Kid is discovered dead, caught in a trap like the wild animals with which she identified. There are a number of important differences between these emotion-provoking scenes and the mood-enhancing scenes. The characters' emotional displays in the former scenes are less ambiguous than in the latter, where facial expressions tend to be puzzling or non-communicative and to resist an interpretive activity involving fine-grained emotional attributions. In the emotion-generating scenes, the emotions expressed by characters are linked to the kinds of objects that typically and conventionally cause the emotions in question. The situation is quite different in the mood-enhancing scenes, for here it is frequently a

matter of aligning an emotional expressivity with situations that, in the absence of further explanation, seem unlikely to cause the emotions expressed by the characters. And what is withheld is precisely the information, or the explanation, that would forge a fit between the expressed emotion and its cause.

Not surprisingly, the opening sequence plays a framing role and thus emphasizes intentional emotions, rather than objectless moods. The viewer witnesses a series of shots of tall trees and a man and young boy walking in a forest. These shots are accompanied by bird song combined with non-naturalistic sound from an unidentifiable source. A subsequent shot reveals a dead rabbit, and as the viewer contemplates the image, the following thought is articulated by a voice that is readily attributable to the young boy: "Dad says the shock of the trap killed him. Their hearts stop beating when they know they've been caught." The shot of the dead animal is followed by a reaction shot of the boy looking mournful. His grief at the situation is underscored by his downcast eyes and deep sigh. The acting and editing here clearly identify the dead animal as the cause of the young boy's sadness. What is more, the fit between the expressed emotion and its identified cause is conventional and unproblematic: the sight of a furry dead animal is the kind of thing that upsets young children. As the father says "come on" and urges the boy to follow him, the child contemplates the trees and internally whispers the following words: "sometime a possum get caught too." That the phrase somehow points to subsequent events



Shot 3



Shot 4

in the narrative is a hypothesis that the viewer may be quick to formulate. The child's expressed emotions, combined with the ominous whisper, serve to construe the punctually represented situation and the larger context within which it figures as one involving death and related emotions. By the end of the opening sequence, the viewer's thoughts have been turned toward death and violence as a result of a fine cinematic use of the language of emotion. Any sadness that the viewer might feel during the opening moments of the film will be prompted by a particular evaluation of the dead animal and the boy's response to it. At the same time, the viewer has reason to expect that the kind of negative emotion experienced at this point will be reanimated by subsequent events. What the precise object of these subsequent emotional episodes will be is, of course, unclear. And the narrative strategy of *Possum* is precisely to leave the viewer guessing as to the nature of the victim and the source of the threat, for in the ensuing scenes, with the exception of the crisis scene, and the scene in which Kid is found dead, the emphasis is placed fully on ambiguity. As the early negative emotions subside they are replaced by dark, distressing moods that are fueled importantly by

an anticipation of violence and a distressing inability to localize its vehicle or agent.

In *Possum*, Brad McGann employs at least three strategies to provoke and continuously foster a dark mood of generalized, objectless anxiety. The strategy of norm flouting is used early on in the film and involves the staging of emotional displays that seem somehow to conflict with, or to be poorly aligned with, the situation that prompts them. I am thinking, for example, of the scene in which Dad, Little Man, and Missy are seated at the table eating dinner. Missy runs her finger around the edge of her glass while looking intensely at Little Man, who observes her with a look of calm concentration. The emphasis is on virtually immobilized figures and subtle expressions. When Missy suddenly sticks out her tongue, Little Man unexpectedly erupts into loud hysterical laughter, which in turn prompts the previously surly, non-communicative father to pound the table with his fist. In the absence of



Shot 12



Shot 15



Shot 16



Shot 17

further information, the sudden outburst of loud, hysterical laughter seems like an inappropriate response to Missy's behavior, just as the father's angry fist fits poorly with the situation, at least as it has been presented to the viewer. What we have here is the foregrounding of a problematic relation between unambiguous expressions of hilarity and anger, on the one hand, and their particular causes or objects, on the other. The viewer's perception of a clash between the emotional displays and their apparent causes has the effect of highlighting the viewer's lack of information about the relevant family and its internal dynamics.

The second strategy involves, not the flouting of normative relations between emotions and their causes, but the staging of essentially *ambiguous* emotional displays. In this case it is a matter of the viewer being unable to identify the relevant emotional displays with any kind of precision. An example of a fundamentally ambiguous emotional display is Little Man's smile in response to the sequence of events that includes Kid being teased by Missy and the father slamming a hammer onto a metal *Possum* trap. On a first viewing, it is impossible to tell whether the smile expresses a sense

of sympathy for Kid, a gleeful delight in having stayed out of the conflict, or a mocking attitude towards the father's outburst.

Dark, objectless moods are further fostered by a third strategy, which involves systematically withholding emotional displays in situations that appear to be highly charged emotionally. This strategy hinges on a highly restrained, *non-communicative* acting style, which is expertly executed by, in particular, Martin Taylor (Little Man) and Stephen Papps (Dad). An example is the scene in which Little Man and Dad exchange looks as the child prepares to sleep.



Shot 69



Shot 70

The viewer's growing sense of foreboding is in no way alleviated at this point, for while the exchange of looks and absence of explicit verbal communication create an atmosphere of emotional intensity, the facial expressions deliberately withhold information about the characters' inner states. As a result the viewer is unable even to begin to chart the emotional landscape in the scene in question.

The three mood-inducing strategies employed in *Possum* have the overall effect of placing the viewer in a situation of profound uncertainty. The viewer is systematically made to understand that he or

she lacks crucial information about the nature of the characters' interactions and the forces that determine their lives. The negative emotions prompted in the viewer during the early moments of the film set the stage for a generalized anxiety that is fueled by various forms of uncertainty. The film is unrelenting in this regard, for it deliberately deprives the viewer of the kind of cathartic moments traditionally associated with tragic narrative. At no point is the viewer able to determine the cause of the crises and tragic events that plague the family. Instead, the viewer is left to choose between a number of possible causes, including supernatural forces and sexual transgression. That is, the narrative strategy adopted makes it impossible for the viewer retroactively to identify the underlying cause of the anxiety experienced in the course of the film. The viewer is thus denied the possibility of transforming a dark, objectless mood into a clearly defined emotional state with a precise starting point and conclusion. And this privileging of mood over emotion clearly identifies Brad McGann as a quintessentially modern practitioner of tragic fiction.

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