

Empathetic Space on Screen

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Constructing Powerful Place and Setting

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-66771-3 ISBN 978-3-319-66772-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66772-0>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017950725

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Cover design by Jenny Vong

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

A QUESTION OF DEDICATION

There is a quiet moment in an episode of the sitcom *Gilmore Girls*. A character looks in a mirror and contemplates the 50-ish face looking back at her and says thoughtfully to herself, “This is not what I really look like.”

This is true in a specific sense: we see ourselves through a tunnel of memories and moments and not as the simple physical version that someone else might meet for the first time. In fact, we do not just see ourselves this way: we often see those we love and hate through the same kind of tunnel of time, as a kind of alchemical amalgam of past and present. Are we wrong? Deluded? Living in a dream? Is this a flaw or a strength?

Aristotle says that a true friend is a mirror of one’s best self, but how is that mirror more true than the one hanging in the bathroom in *Gilmore Girls*? Because the mirror of the self is informed by history, by experiences and their emotional truth.

I experience this true mirror every day in my marriage to my wife. In a real sense I wrote this book through that marriage and its particular intensely shared tunnel of time and memory. After all, she and I have taught together for fifteen years now on three continents, in the beating monsoon rains of Cameroon, on hot sound stages in Hollywood, and in universities and film festivals all over Europe. Threaded through all that is the turns we took producing and directing three tough low-budget films. Meanwhile we’ve lived through and tried to grasp so many intense social and emotional experiences and crises that it is now frankly impossible for me to say how much of the work on these pages is hers.

But I do know her long experience in drama therapy, with the connection between life and drama, has fixed my attention for so long that this book's fascinations are, like my life, impossible to imagine without her.

And this I think helps explain that moment in *Gilmore Girls*. Our human facility for melding the inner and outer, the past and the present, gives us informed sight, and even a way to see into the future. Though my wife is of course quite beautiful, we've now been married for decades and so I do not see the same person others do. I see what my wife *really* looks like. Every day at a glance I see the woman who was stretching in a particular Thursday dawn along a river two decades ago, the person who once stood up to the Cameroon mafia to save a group of young teens she had been working with, the person who campaigned for Obama, the person who while pregnant with our first child and waiting for dinner in a very slow restaurant after having not eaten all day at a film festival began furtively eating the raw leaves of their decorative herb garden until I caught her. I see the woman who taught me lessons about teaching and psychology and anthropology in so many late night conversations and so many co-taught classes. I remember moments and gestures and acts of generosity that she can't, I can tell you about her help given to strangers and friends and family, memories that I know that if she even does recall she'll dismiss with a wave if I bring them up. I see her empathy, and with that I see how ours are joined. I have witnessed her best and most revealing moments and now I carry them like treasures.

And this is informed sight: this is the true vision of character, the truth of the social bonds underlying an actual person. These bonds create friendships and tie families together. These are the glue of a lived romance, that long braided commitment to a beloved who struggles with you through the valleys and deserts of time. This tunnel of character and memory is what makes up our social and empathetic dedications: like the character in *Gilmore Girls* suddenly realizes, I am a better mirror of my wife than the mirror hanging in our bathroom. I know her tendencies: because I know what she has done, I know what she is likely to do. No mirror has this information, no stranger knows these traits, these triumphs and travails. To see only the present moment shorn of the past is to be blind to the relational truth of people.

So while I can only hope my wife remembers only my all-too-few good moments, I can say this.

I see the truth of you, my love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As Manzoni says, “friendship does not pair us off into couples as marriage does; each of us generally has more than one friend, and so a chain is formed of which none can see the end.” A long chain of friends have made this book happen. I’m especially thankful to Nevina Satta, Anna Thomas, Andy Bienen, Salvatore Puledda, Gabrielle Kelly, Michael Silver and Jennifer Calder for their years and decades of conversations, encouragement and genuine friendship. Particular thanks to Lisa Perrott for her detailed suggestions and thoughts on this book. A huge *molto grazie* to Franca Marchi for the talks on Dante and for so much else: without her support this book would not exist. Effusive thanks to Francesco Casetti (for creating the teaching environs in Brescia, Lugano and Locarno where my wife and I have taught so happily for so long), to Max Locatelli, Elena Mosconi, Francesca Piredda, Marco Cucco, Gabriele Balbi, Giuseppe Richeri, and Ruggero Eugeni (for maintaining ideal pockets of teaching) and to Larry Paull, Barbara Boyle, Henry Bumstead, Dick Sylbert, Silvio Maselli, Daniele Basilio, Frank Patterson, Thom Mount, Carolyn Pfeiffer, Pat Olmstead, Mark Debacco and Paul and Diana Kessler for great days working together. To Liz Giuffre, JeanPierre Candelerio, Anna Stucchi, Mauro Magatti, Chiara Giaccardi, Anna Caccia and Ian Dixon for their support, to Michael Collier for crafting three wonderful Breadloaf writer conferences, and to my students in Lugano, Locarno, Brescia, Apulia, Royal Holloway, China, Cameroon and Hollywood.

To the teachers I admire who taught with passion and insight: the marvelous Bernard Williams, the generous Joe Volpe, the rigorous

Paul Shrader, and the patient and generous Dan Kleinman, Lewis Cole, John E. Hare and Brendan Ward. A special thanks to James Shamus who took a chance on an immature young student and let me intern and even briefly work for him so long ago at his great company Good Machine. To Lina Aboujieb at Palgrave Pivot, who saw promise in a short Pivot project proposal and for her patience and encouragement, and to Heloise Harding for all her focus and attention. It has been a marvelous experience working this first time with an editor and editorial assistant who really care about helping hapless academics and about producing real work. A grateful thanks also to the hardworking crew at Springer: *molto grazie* Vanessa Mitchell, Aishwarya Balachandar, Tabea Gueers and Prashanth Ravichandran for the many painstaking corrections. Particular thanks to Chiara Giaccardi for inviting me back in 2011 to speak about my concept of Dantean Space at a 2012 ECREA conference she helped organize at the Università Cattolica.

As an effort to bridge film craft and cultural theory, this book owes much to the many highly-accomplished film craft folks who I've been lucky to work with over the last twenty five years. A more concrete acknowledgement to them makes up this book's Afterwards.

Finally, it seems important to acknowledge some of the great theorists whose life—work inspires us all. I'm thinking here particularly of singular inspirational thinkers such as A.C. Bradley, Gaston Bachelard, Erich Auerbach, E.R. Dodds, and Svetlana Alpers. But most of all to Herbert Marcuse, T.J. Clarke, Carol Gilligan, Martha Nussbaum and those who work on a collective level from the Situationists to the Marxist collective Plan C. These are people who strive to create a knowledge that does not just enrich but that activates, a cultivation of the self where the self extends out beyond today's crippled confines. They embody a long tradition of intellectuals, artists, writers and filmmakers who have chopped vigorously into the alienation, cruelty and false social necessity that crushes down on us all like a great, terrible iceberg, flattening our capabilities and chilling our spirits. They realize with urgency that the task is not to understand our culture but to carve out new spaces of mutual care and richness.

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CHART OF TOPOLOGY

Chart of topology for the myths, plays, novels, films, TV shows and video games we shall be considering in this book.

Chart 1: The Three Forms of Emotional Entanglement in Stories, Films, TV & Videogames

1. DISPASSIONATE
space & characters

2. DRAMATIC
space & characters

3. DANTEAN
space & characters

Story Character's Objectives

External goals
ie, Kill The Monster,
Rob the Bank,
Win The Race,
Defuse The Bomb,
Find The Killer Survive

External & Internal Goals
ie, Find love, Prove Yourself,
Get Rid of Guilt Escape the
Past

External & Internal Goals
(usually dantean goals are
about facing a traumatic
from the character's past.)

Characters

Powerful with little vulnerability Sympathetic, Vulnerable Sympathetic, Vulnerable

Emotional Involvement

Low and Adrenalynic

High

Very High

Emotional Entanglement Between Character and Space

Little entanglement (since Character is not deeply drawn) Deep Entanglement

Use of Spectacle

Strong but Unemotional Spectacle Low Spectacle Strong Emotional Spectacle

Exemplary Genres

Action-Adventure, Thriller Drama, Dramedy Drama, Horror

Chart 2: Examples of the Three Forms of Space in Stories, Films, TV & Videogames

1. DISPASSIONATE Space 2. DRAMATIC Space 3. DANTEAN Space

Classical Stories

Hercules, Agamemnon Achilles, Medea Oedipus, Penthius, Ovid's
Narcissus & Echo, Dante's Characters:
(i.e. Francesca, Ugolino, Capaneus)

Popular Literature

Sherlock Holmes, James Bond Most Characters Miss Havesham in *Great Expectations*
Poe's "The Tell-tale Heart" &
"The Black Cat", Camus' *The Fall*, Dostoevski's *The Demons*

Narrative Films

Superman, old James Bond Terminator, Speed, Taken Most dramas and comedies
IE, Casablanca, Gran Torino, etc. *Amelie, Aliens, The Dark Knight, Gravity, Psycho, The Third Man, The Official Story*

Documentaries

Manny *Supersize Me Cutie & The Boxer* *Tarnation, Elena Waltz With Bashir*

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