Welcome to Dantean Space!: Empathy and Space in *Singin' in the Rain, Legally Blonde, the Pursuit of Happyness* and *Aliens*

In cinema and television empathetic settings stand out above all others.[1] Think of the now iconic gooey dripping tunnels that Ripley stumbles through in *Aliens* (1986; see Fig. 1.2), or the delightful melancholic wonderland of Paris so winningly animated by the winsome protagonist of *Amelie* (2001) (Fig. 1.1). Other examples come to mind—the sewers of *The Third Man* (1949), or Norman's bird-decorated parlor in *Psycho* (1960), or the dark Gotham of certain *Batman* movies, or certain moments in *Homeland* (2011–), *Mad Men* and other television shows. Because we lack a clear account of the power of setting and space we are reduced to describing such narratives as 'atmospheric', 'emotionally moody,' or perhaps somehow illustrating a 'romantic aesthetic', but can we define them more concretely? Why do these settings stand out so memorably in narrative history when so many others, however spectacular and breathtaking and adrenalynic, start to fade from our view as the end-credits roll up? Could we dissect their craft and story techniques, show an underlying unity and even illustrate how and why they differ from other uses of narrative space? In short, what makes these particular spaces so powerful and iconic?

We set out to answer these questions and begin by showing how one unifying aspect of these iconic settings sets them apart from ordinary cinema settings. While the settings of most films pass by as an unintrusive backdrop, or erupt into view as an excuse for adrenalynic escapades or sometimes simply as eye-candy, and therefore have a weak relationship to the film's protagonist, all of the story settings we have mentioned above

Fig. 1.1 Publicity material for the film *Amelie* (2001) showing her ensconced in her bedroom, one of the film's Dantean spaces

are entangled with the emotional struggles of their story's protagonist in a common, specific and identifiable way. We will argue that there is a narrative architectural form, one we will call *Dantean space*, that unifies them all. Understanding this powerfully empathetic resonance of place, protagonist and viewer has many implications, not least of which is that, by focusing on such narratives we begin to also understand the other less powerful forms of space and place in films and television. We learn that there are in fact *three* distinct forms of narrative architecture, three forms that make for viewers a kind of ascending ladder of emotional and empathetic   involvement with protagonist and setting. In this book we will describe this topology of forms, showing how it manifests in many different examples, after which we focus on the possibilities of Dantean space.

Any successful account of how empathetic space function in story has to carry implications for all narratives and to offer useful tools for many groups. A useful, robust theory would allow us to excavate the

Fig. 1.2 Ripley, protagonist of the film *Aliens*, enters her Dantean space (*Aliens*, 1986)

machinery of empathy and empathetic space, linking a kind of narrative space that appears across different myths, narrative paintings, novels, films, television shows and commercials. It would allow us to identify variations of empathetic space, drawing out certain underlying narrative structures, revealing the cues, materials and production design techniques commonly used to create these kinds of spaces across media forms. It should also reveal the social implications, if any, of these forms.

That is the goal of this book. This understanding should be useful not only for theoreticians of cinema and television but also provide insights for practitioners in all forms of narrative, including film, literature, plays television and video-games. Tactics found in one form should be replicable in diverse ways across others, and a history of this machinery should begin to be visible. Understanding the empathetic power of a sixteenth-century sculpture or a nineteenth-century painting might reflect and reveal the craft techniques of contemporary empathetic films.

But most of all, any account of empathetic space has to begin with the phenomenon of that rush of feelings we associate with such empathetic

moments: it must first set out to identify the phenomenon to be studied. It must offer a phenomenological account that can identify empathetic reactions, group them and give underlying causes.

WHEN THE SETTING MOVES US: EMPATHY AND SPACE AS CATEGORIES

Since we are talking about the specifically *empathetic* use of space we should first distinguish both empathy and space. Films will often use *space* to express something about the story or plot, in some instances without empathetic content. My own favorite example comes in the musical number 'Dream of You' in the musical *Singin' in the Rain* (Fig. 1.3). The scene opens on a room of mostly men, talking relatively quietly to each other, all in black and white tuxedoes. Suddenly our starlet and romantic interest, dressed in a scanty pink outfit, bursts out of a huge pink cake and behind her a gaggle of chorus girls (all wearing pink) invade the room and start throwing pink confetti, then swing round the room dancing in synch and singing loudly as a band strikes up a jazzy medley. Now the characters must shout to be heard over the musical number.

The director, Stanley Donen, and his team have very cleverly dramatized a major plot-point—the film industry's sudden and bewildering

Fig. 1.3 *Singin' in the Rain* (1952): Narrative space without empathy

shift from silent to sound film—by a color change mixed with movement and acoustical change. Thus a technical and social transition which was truly an earthquake for the industry is here represented spatially by a transition from black and white to color in the frame as well as an acoustical shift in volume and atmosphere. However, despite all this machinery of spatial spectacularity there is nothing empathetic in the shift: like most others of its time, this marvelous musical is still a rather dispassionate film, meaning that it does not explore the deep emotional lives of its characters but rather entertains us through spectacular feats, in this case of choreography and music. Our heroine's pink outfit does not make her more empathetic, nor does it signify any deep emotional conflict between her and her love interest.

Compare this scene, though, to a similar invasion of pink into a similarly sombre room. In the film *Legally Blonde* (2002), our ditzy bright main character Elle Woods sits down in her first Harvard Law School classroom and, while everyone else in the room is dressed in sombre colors and opens a laptop, she pulls out a pink heart-shaped notebook and a pink pen with fluffy pink feathers (Fig. 1.4).

Fig. 1.4 Elle's props, spirit and affect empathetically contrast with the cold space of her Law School class in *Legally Blonde*

This contrast introduces a long-running spatial conflict in the film. Because Elle's fun, funny pen and notebook reveal her inner life (her bubbly love of frivolity and her joy in spreading social silliness), they heighten her own antagonisms with the serious space and social group she is entering: immediately we feel this contrast is certain to cause cruel judgements and conflict for her, as in fact it does. These oppositions will run through the realms of Harvard Law School, the film's later law firm spaces and are then fully realized in the sombre space of the court in the film's finale. And so crucial emotional allegiances are being introduced by this fluffy pen and heart-shaped notebook: while we laugh at the surprising and spectacular contrasts, this costume and prop choice makes Elle's character empathetic in four ways. First, it reminds us of how earlier in the film she used her oversized fashion style to help other characters be less serious and thus happier. Second, we see her own faith in herself. Third, we see the coming storm of conflict between her inner and this new outer reality, and fourth, we see her growing underdog/out-group status foreshadowed for the remainder of the film. Unlike the example of *Singin' in the Rain*, here our emotional allegiances are being triggered and shaped by carefully-opposed spatial elements. In both examples *space* is being manipulated, but only *Legally Blonde* uses the spatial change to convey emotion and to evoke our empathy.

Let us now compare two examples where *empathy* is strong but is realized in very different ways. Consider just the trailer for the highly empathetic film *The Blind Side* (2009), a film so full of empathetic moments it is often labelled a 'weeper', but yet where the empathy has no spatial embodiment. There are many empathetic moments in the two-minute trailer—the moment Sandra Bullock's character stops the car to ask the black teenager (who is walking along the road shivering in the winter night) if he has somewhere to go, the moment she puts him up at her house, the moment she learns he has never had a bed, the moment he is ignored at his new school by the little kids, the moment he scores the touchdown and begins to be a hero to the school, and so on. But though this drama is full of strongly empathetic moments, there is nothing especially spatial being done to heighten or embody them.[2] Here empathy is largely expressed through the dramatic interactions and revelations of the actors while the backgrounds serve only as backdrops supporting the plot.

Contrast this with the use of empathetic space in the biopic *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006). This film centers around Chris, a proud yet poor black man who is determined to create a better life for his 5-year-old son Christopher Jr. and himself by, struggling through an unpaid internship at a stockbrokerage firm while he loses a series of apartments and temporary jobs. Chris and Christopher finally end up being thrown out of their apartment with their belongings locked inside. When little Christopher starts banging on the door trying to get back in, Chris nearly loses it and for the first time in the film physically shakes little Christopher, yelling at him to stop complaining.

In the next scene they end up sitting downcast and depressed on a bench in a subway station. Christopher Jr., usually so upbeat, is now incredibly discouraged, so his father invents a game. Chris pretends they have a time machine and gets his son to imagine they have sent themselves back into the world of the dinosaurs. Now Chris convinces his son that a nearby public restroom (see fig. 1.5) is their cave where they should hide for the night from the dinosaurs. The son falls asleep in his arms as Chris stays on guard, preventing anyone from coming into the restroom. When someone outside bangs on the door, Chris carefully covers his sleeping son's ears with his hands, braces his foot against the door, and silently begins to cry (Fig. 1.6).

Here, unlike in *The Blind Side*, space is being used in clear opposition to other spaces in the film to significantly connect the space to the characters' emotions and problems. The public bathroom space, so cold, hard, rectangular and confining and so flatly lit (Fig. 1.5), is a stark contrast to the way we imagine the boy pictures his caveman cave. That unseen fantasy that took them into this space represents the dad's love and the boy's innocence, but this real room represents not only their loss of any private spaces of their own but also their desperation, the shark that might eat the child's innocence, the hard reality thinly papered over by the dad's quick-thinking ploy and the child's fertile imagination. And then, when an unseen person outside tries to get in, the sound effects of the increasingly insistent banging on the door and the jiggling of the doorknob represent the father's mounting panic, being now both part of the space and also a trigger and a stand-in for the fears he has hidden for so long behind a wall of smiles, stories, fantasies and lies. The fragility of this wall, now about to break, is suggested in the paper towels that he has torn from the dispenser and carefully laid under his son, a

Figs. 1.5 and 1.6   Chris cradling his sleeping son in a public restroom in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006)

thin boundary emphasized when Chris, fearful his son will awake, has to cover the boy's ears with his hands to keep him from hearing the rattling of the door and his own sobs. This space, while neorealist, also vibrates with the unseen fantasy-cave that little Christopher has created with his dad's help, making this restroom into a projection of the dad's harsh truth and the boy's innocent fantasy, of their homelessness and mutual care, and of the external and internal conflicts of the dad. By knowing this narrative history we see not just a public bathroom but a space imbued with a father's struggle, love, and fears and a child's innocence

as it is threatened by a temporarily staved-off trauma. Here it is the *space* and not simply the dynamic between the characters that provokes our empathy.

EMPATHETIC SPACE DEFINED

At this point we might define the nature of *empathetic space*. An empathetic space exists in a moment of a story that arouses some intense level of empathy in us and where the space is somehow expressing that empathy by embodying the hopes and/or fears of the character. In general, the space becomes more intensely empathetic the more it expresses the emotional conflicts of a character.

One last step is needed before we focus on how empathy can be expressed through space in a narrative: first we must understand how empathy itself functions in narrative.

OUR ENGAGING TENDENCIES: EMPATHY, CHARACTER AND SPACE

What are the underlying story techniques that create empathetic reactions? By beginning with some moments in films like *The Blind Side* or *The Pursuit of Happyness* where we feel a deep and vivid feeling of sympathy, pity, love or yearning for a character or characters, the kind of 'lump-in-the-throat' moment where some of the audience is crying and others are holding back their tears, we can begin to draw out some commonalities, in particular the deployment of a series of dramatic tricks that reappear again and again in scenes that provoke our empathy.

THE MACHINERY OF EMPATHY: TEN STORY TACTICS THAT TRIGGER OUR EMPATHY

We offer the following incomplete list of story tactics, naming some of the stories we look at in depth in the chapters ahead. We tend to feel intense moments of empathy towards characters who exhibit one or more of the following attributes and situations:

1. **They are worth pitying.**
   Legally Blonde, Macbeth, Saving Private Ryan, 50/50, the boy in *The Blind Side,* the child in *The Pursuit of Happyness, Hiroshima*

Mon Amour, Piaf in *La Vie en Rose*, *The Secret Garden*, the child in *The Official Story*, Sy in *One Hour Photo*.

2. **They have done nothing to deserve their emotional pain.**
50/50, the boy in *The Blind Side*, the child in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, the child in *The Official Story*, *La Vie en Rose*, *One Hour Photo*, *The Secret Garden*.

3. **They are trying to bear up and go on despite their emotional pain.**
Macbeth, *50/50*, the father in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the boy in *The Blind Side*, the anti-hero of *Gran Torino*, *La Vie en Rose*, *One Hour Photo*.

4. **They are an underdog in some struggle they are unlikely to win, a competition in which someone else has far better resources and chances to win.**
Legally Blonde, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *Little Miss Sunshine*.

5. **They achieve or finally fail to achieve something that they have long struggled for.**
Legally Blonde, *Amelie*, the father in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *La Vie en Rose*, *One Hour Photo*, *Little Miss Sunshine*.

6. **They are deeply and increasingly in conflict with very intimate vulnerabilities, struggling hard for the first time in their life to somehow resolve them in order to achieve their objective.**
Macbeth, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Twilight*, *Amelie*, *The Pursuit of Happyness*.

7. **They have a heart in winter that begins to warm: i.e., they have had no intimacy or social contact for a long time (usually having closed their heart thanks to some big trauma) and now slowly begin to take intimate risks by reaching out to someone or to some community.**
Amelie, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the anti-hero of *Gran Torino*, *La Vie en Rose*, *One Hour Photo*, *Witness*, *The Secret Garden*.

8. **After a long period of hiding their feelings inside, they finally reveal their deep vulnerabilities, fears and intimate secrets to someone.**
Hiroshima Mon Amour, *50/50*, the father in *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *Amelie*, *La Vie en Rose*, the anti-hero of *Gran Torino*, *The Graduate*, *Pleasantville*, *One Hour Photo*, *Witness*, *The Secret Garden*.

9. **They have been abandoned, which has affected them, and they are reunited with someone who cares about them.**
   50/50, Amelie, the boy in *The Blind Side, La Vie en Rose, Pleasantville, One Hour Photo, The Secret Garden*.
10. **They do something good for someone other than themselves.**
   The friend in *50/50, Amelie, The Blind Side, Gran Torino, The Pursuit of Happyness, Pleasantville, Twilight, The Secret Garden*.

We can make a few distinctions about this list.

First, it is cumulative: as our examples have already shown, often there is more than one empathetic cue working at once in a story.

Second, there is an entire form of story that uses very little of this machinery and does not try to move us to the cathartic emotional experiences of empathy: in Chap. 2 we consider the negative, non-empathetic and invulnerable examples of the classic Superman, Sherlock Holmes and the original James Bond.

Third, there is a clear division in the list between characters who struggle with themselves and characters who struggle with another character or with a community.[3] For example, the first six tactics all make us care for the singular personal struggle and pain of the character: we might call them *tactics of compassionate empathy* since they draw compassion from us for the character herself. But it is important to see that while tactics 1 through 6 can be about a character in emotional conflict with herself, tactics 7, 8, 9 and 10 are different in that they aren't just emotional struggles with oneself but are empathetically *dyadic*: i.e., they involve taking emotional risks and forming a bond with an other. Dramas using these tactics necessarily drag the character into the social realm.

Fourth, we will argue that the tactics are listed roughly in order of increasing emotional intensity; the examples we focus on in this book suggest that the most affecting scenes tend to use the later tactics, with tactic 10 tending to be the greatest trigger of empathy. We come to care deeply for a character who cares for others, particularly if this comes at a personal cost, and this electricity of empathy is quite strong. Even if we never do anything to the benefit of anyone but ourselves in life, it seems that as audience members we love to see others do something good for someone else.

To mark this distinction, we suggest that tactics 7, 8, 9 and 10 be understood as *tactics of communal empathy*, as distinct from the compassionate empathy we feel for a singular character wrestling with her own self and not reaching out to others. This distinction is important for our

book because *compassionate* empathy links the examples in Part II while the overtly social form of *communal* empathy is central for the characters of ecstatic space discussed in Part III.

<div align="center">THE COMMERCIAL POWER OF EMPATHY</div>

The Edeka 2015 Christmas commercial[4] illustrates a strong dramatic use of empathy tactics. The story of this short commercial is very tight: an old man gets messages from his family that they are all too busy to come for Christmas, and so he sits alone in grief, triggering our empathy through tactic 1 (Fig. 1.7).

Each of the unavailable family members, scattered across the globe, then receives a message that he has died, and in grief and shock and with some guilt they all arrive for a memorial at his house: we feel their regret and guilt. Now in a dramatic reversal, the living grandfather then steps from around a corner and says gently "How else could I get you to come?" They burst into joy and we leave them sitting around the Christmas table reunited as a family. We see in this minute and a half the adroit use of empathy tactics 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and we finish our tight empathy arc with a cathartic use of tactic 10.[5]

There is a structural strategy beneath the way this tight story deploys our list of tactics. It begins with compassionate empathy tactics to tie us to the inner problems and pain of an individual character. Then after that empathetic bond is established, the story invokes the communal tactics of showing different characters doing good things for each other and then being brought together. As we shall see, this device of starting with

Fig. 1.7   Edeka 2015 Christmas commercial

compassionate empathy to make us care for individual characters and then building towards communal empathy and a cathartic climax is a very common structure for building empathy in stories.

COMPARING CHRISTIAN IN *FIFTY SHADES OF GREY* WITH EDWARD IN *TWILIGHT*

As we shall see, the machinery of empathy underlies our empathetic bonds to characters, and the relative lack of this machinery in certain kinds of stories and characters helps define a whole category of narrative space. For example, take the difference in our emotional investment in the big confessional scenes of two different protagonists: Christian the billionaire sadist in the film *50 Shades of Grey* (2016) and Edward the vampire in the film *Twilight* (2008).[6]

We begin with a negative example of a film with no commitment to empathetic bonds. The film *50 Shades of Grey* turns on the question of whether the young, vulnerable, virginal, sensitive and middle-class Anastasia should commit to a BDSM (Bondage, Domination, Sadism and Masochism) relationship with the handsome, sexually experienced, BDSM-oriented Christian. Christian's most vulnerable moment*s* comes late in the story when he finally confesses to Anastasia his most intimate secret: he cannot change because he is an orphan whose mother was a prostitute and crack-addict who died when he was just four years old. Clearly, we and Anastasia are supposed to feel pity for him at this confessional moment, but in fact we don't. Why not? It is not that we do not believe him: so far he has been very honest. Instead our indifference results from the fact that this Edgar is a sadist who recognizes this but yet, like some story-book villain, makes no attempt to change, to fight his sadistic impulses and attempt to develop an intimate, romantic, negotiating character (i.e. to have a character arc) that will meet Anastasia somewhere in the middle.

We can note three aspects of Christian's emotional coldness. First, he is unsympathetic in what he wants: that is, to torture and dominate Anastasia. Second, he is an unconflicted character: his conflict is entirely external in that he wants her to observe the strict emotional and power rules of his BDSM contract, and makes this confession essentially to convince her that he is unable to change so she should stop nagging him about it. Third, his backstory feels too generic for us to care: we learn nothing else about his mother or his childhood, making the backstory seem a blatant attempt by the writer to use empathy tactic number 1,

perhaps slapping it on late in the writing process to make Christian more sympathetic: it does not seem integral or organic to the drama. We do not simply gather this from some perception of bad writing: we gather it from the invisibility of any real vulnerability in sadist Christian anywhere in the story. For all the allure of his power and handsomeness and promise of experiences, Christian is a dispassionate character, unable and unwilling to form deep social bonds and indifferent to Anastasia's vulnerabilities and emotional needs. As she finally realizes when she walks out of the relationship at the end of the film, there is no way into Christian's inner life, or even any assurance that such a life exists. He can never join her in any inner circle of intimacy.

This sadist differs in some specifically empathetic ways from *Twilight*'s Edward, the handsome and powerful high school vampire who loves the film's protagonist, Bella, but fears that his vampire nature will make him suck all her blood and kill her. In their big tryst scene (i.e., their scene of revealing vulnerabilities and asking for commitments), he warns his beloved to run away, and in fact does his best to show Bella that their love is a terrible idea by revealing his fearsome strength, his predatory power and his addiction to blood. He does this all not to impress but selflessly, out of concern for her and despite his strong desire and love for her. He is also taking a much bigger risk than Christian in making his confession: Edward has spent many lonely lifetimes hiding his identity for fear of being hunted, and so unlike Christian's admissions about his crack-addicted prostitute mother, Edward reveals his vulnerabilities and entrusts his beloved with a dangerous truth that puts him and his vampire friends and family at risk.

Notice how this scene makes Edward empathetic to us in many different ways. First, here we have the use of many compassion empathy tactics—we and Bella feel empathy for him when we learn that this young vampire has been desperately lonely for centuries, waiting for someone like her (tactics 1 and 4). And we also feel compassion when we see that Edward is tormented by a real and painful inner conflict—being in love with Bella but also desperate to kill her and suck her blood (tactic 7).

At the same time, we also feel communal empathy for him: he is opening up to Bella in a way he would never do with anyone else (tactic 8), *and* he is acting for Bella's own good, trying to scare her off even though he wants desperately to be with her (empathy tactic 10: doing something good for someone else at some real cost to himself). By contrast, Christian would never try to frighten Anastasia away in order to

save her from his own desires, another sign of the poverty of his character and a reason why his spaces are so emotionally and empathetically empty.

In general, the form of a character defines the form of space in a story. As we will see, the empathetic Edward allows the craft team of that film to create an emotionally rich space in *Twilight*. By contrast, the dispassionate Christian produces the very flat spaces of 50 *Shades*: empathetic spaces cannot be built up around non-empathetic characters.

These examples let us sketch out the spatial topology of narrative that we will develop in the next two chapters.

TOPOLOGY: THREE FORMS OF CHARACTER AND THEIR CORRESPONDING NARRATIVE SPACES

The long array of dispassionate characters stretches back to the beginnings of the Western storytelling tradition. Consider for example the classical example of Hercules and his episodic adventures killing the horrible beasts of his world. More recently there is the classic 1950s Superman, that ever-confident, goodnatured emblem of mental hygiene whose psyche seemed free of all blemish. Think then of James Bond unflappably racing through his adventures in 22 films from the 1960s through the 2000s without a single doubt, guilt or emotional difficulty. Think of other emotionally impervious and invulnerable superheroes like sunny Thor in the film of that name (2011), or the traditional Sherlock Holmes, appraising every detail of a crime scene with Aspergian calm. And of course the FPS (first-person shooter) video-game landscape abounds with such characters. These dispassionate protagonists—usually male heroes—have no emotional vulnerabilities or struggles. There is another commonality: in these narratives the main character is pursuing *external* objectives that have no empathetic relation to these settings, which is why they never move us deeply. As a result the missing pleasures of empathetic bonds are here replaced by the pleasures of thrilling spectacle: Setting and narrative space tend to serve as pure spectacle and protagonists generally move through dispassionate spaces.

By contrast, most film and television narratives are powered by a *dramatic* protagonist, that most common form of protagonist who has both an *external and* an *internal* struggle. As they wrestle with psychological conflicts, identity crises and intimacy issues, these characters are usually found in a *dramatized space*. This is a place that is related to the plot, in

the protagonist's *external* goal, but is *not* deeply expressing her[7] *inner* objectives and struggles: as we can see from our example of *The Blind Side* above and also from the setting in the film *50/50* below, setting here no longer plays the role of empty spectacle, as this can distract from the dramatic struggle playing out in the protagonist's character-based conflicts. Nor is space used to create empathy the way the bathroom did in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Fig. 1.8).

Many films in the drama and romantic comedy genre fit this model: think of *50/50* (2011), *Spotlight* (2015), *Room* (2015) or *The Intern* (2016). Think here too of the relatively unspectacular sets of most television comedies and dramas, of for example *Transparent* (2014–), *Silicon Valley* (2014–), *Black-ish* (2014–) or *Louie* (2010–). In all of these narratives spectacle may occasionally appear but it is not central to the storyline. This is not simply a question of budget but of foregrounding the emotional conflict playing out between the characters. Experienced filmmakers are aware that a spectacular setting can distract from or overwhelm certain kinds of story-lines and scenes. Here while the *characters* can be highly empathetic, their *spaces* are not.

Fig. 1.8 The film *50/50* (2011) utilizes dramatic space: Ordinary locations with low spectacle. Empathy is instead created first by compassion for the main character, who has to deal with cancer, and then by the efforts of his friend to help

Thirdly, there is the most powerful empathetic form which we see in films like *Amelie*, *Aliens*, and *The Third Man*, forming the narrative space which we call *Dantean space* since, we will argue, it was largely invented by Dante Alighieri in his *Divine Comedy*. In this aesthetic form a character is both *within* a place but is in a dramatic sense also within *herself*. That is to say, the story's setting has become a projection of the character's inner emotional drama, thus allowing us a powerful empathetic access to her inner emotional conflict through sensory, visual and aural means. The image from *Aliens* (Fig. 1.2) illustrates this: as Ripley descends from clean well-lit geometric spaces into the dark, dripping intestinal passages of the *Aliens*, she is also descending into a direct confrontation with her own past, with the death of her daughter, with her own fears of sex and rape and pregnancy and her fears of the organic reality of her own body. The tunnels reflect both her inner and her outer journey and struggle. The same can be said for Amelie, for Norman, for Batman, for the heroine of *Gravity* (2013), and also for so many of the characters we meet in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. They all feature a Dantean space, an aesthetic form where the setting is filtered through and entangled with the emotional aesthetic and point of view of its protagonist. As a result, the setting takes on a dramatic significance that is at the same time emotionally charged, being grounded in the past traumas and joys of the protagonist, and this makes the protagonist a powerful emotional glue between the viewers and the settings of the story.

A film can utilize a location as either a *dispassionate* space, a *dramatized* space, or a *Dantean* space, depending on the nature of its protagonist's dramatic struggles. As we will see in Chaps. 2 and 3, each of these forms is animated by a corresponding form of protagonist. This matters because the first form, dispassionate space, uses no or very weak forms of empathy, while dramatic space uses empathy as a tool of the drama but rarely as a tool for crafting the space: here the machinery of empathy often defines the conflicts between characters but does not find expression in the story space that envelopes them. By contrast, in our third form of space, setting becomes a kind of window into a character, and for that reason Dantean space is itself deeply and powerfully marbled with the tactics of empathy.

This window-like nature also reveals another aspect of Dantean space. While dispassionate and dramatic spaces can both work on different levels of narrative time, revealing the past, playing a role in the present or foreshadowing the future, a Dantean space serves all three roles at once.

It does this specifically because it is a layered character space: it reveals the deep roots of an individual's actions and shows how deeply they are inscribed in character. Take a film like *Amelie*. Essentially every single frame of the film is steeped in Amelie's sensibility, revealing that as an adult our protagonist still lives in the world she saw as an eight-year-old when her mother died violently besides her and her father showed her no physical affection.[8] As we can see from her room in figure 1.1, we feel that part of Amelie is still trapped back in her childhood in the very moment of her mother's death. To see this world of her childhood extending into every moment of her adult life is to see and feel the effects of the earlier time's events on this adult woman: the shade of the past is drawn over the adult Amelie's bedroom just as it characterizes her present-day yet dreamy Paris, telling us that she is still in some sense experiencing the world like a lonely, dreamy child.

Additionally, her charmed bedroom and charming Paris also tells us about what Amelie is likely to do in the future precisely because these spaces are imbued with her own character, with her tendencies and thus her own coming conflicts. These spaces tell us, for example, that she is going to approach every problem she faces with a sense of shy but playful whimsy and a childlike sense of justice and sharing, and that she will identify with anyone she meets who seems withdrawn and vulnerable and childlike. After she has had an episodic series of these adventures, her romantic interest Nino finally shows up: she finds him busy saving the abandoned photo-booth pictures of other Parisians, working as a costume skeleton in a fairground ghost train and showing a puckish joy and interest in the tiny captured moments of ordinary people. Nino is the only other character who shares both Amelie's childlike characteristics and her jouissance; it is important that he also sees Paris as she does, as a playground of flaneur habits, that like her he helps people he doesn't know, that like her he helps people he doesn't know, has a fondness for role-playing, and notices human singularities. Their character parallels and mutual compatibility all foreshadow their final romantic struggle and union: after seeing how their empathetic tendencies all overlap, we feel at the end that we know the future of this relationship, and we empathetically approve. In this sense the film's delightful, childlike, charming, nostalgic Paris is a field of their joint homologies and longings: while grounded in her past it vividly points forwards in the narrative, prophesying their future relationships, conflicts, quirky affinities and romantic choices, to become an empathetic web drawing and keeping

them together. And being a space of an empathetic nature, it enlists us in *Amelie*'s struggles and then in her romance.

And so throughout the film we never leave the tunnel of Amelie's character, of her memory, fears, hopes, and innocence. To enter and stay in this narrative space is to stay within Amelie's singular experience and bond to her sensibility in an empathetic way. And because such spaces are so highly singular, they accomplish what Ralph Acampora (2006) posits (in a very different context) as a fundamentally compassionate act: our exposure to such surprising and fascinating interior sensibilities undercuts our ordinary assumptions that there is only one world, that there is only our own sensed world, and this realization of difference necessarily opens up "the possibility of other *Umwelten*–foreign, yet potentially familiar, forms of worldhood."[9] In this way Dantean spaces broaden both our concept of the Other and our ability to project our empathy into others. While Keen (2007) may be right to be suspicious of the claims of various empathy advocates, there is increasing evidence (Burke et al. 2016; Johnson 2012, 2013; Djikic et al. 2013) that exercises in imaginative narrative projection do actually affect and broaden our ability to empathize with others. In other words, while this is a narrative and not a sociological investigation, it necessarily takes us into core questions of the porous borders between readers and viewers, texts and narratives, and places and politics.

Book Outline

But before we face those questions we first have to understand empathetic space in some depth. While Part I illustrates our overall approach, Part II pursues the examination of empathetic space across many Dantean examples, genres and forms of narrative. And here we identify a number of variations of *empathetic narrative space*. The first is '*shaded space*' a place where the death of a loved one has come to shade a character's entire world. The second is '*tryst space*', where the emotions of a romantic relationship have become spatialized in a non-generic way that expresses the characters of the couple. A third form, which we find in films ranging from the Death Star of *Star Wars* to the hotel rooms of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, is '*alienated space*', spaces that show some social or emotional disjunction among characters or within a character. Some alienated spaces are placeless *non-spaces*, in the sense defined by the French sociologist Marc Augé in his analysis of airports and hotel

lobbies. Another form of alienated space is '*showcase space*': similar to non-space in projecting a character's alienation, this form is marked by new consumer goods and walls lacking in any human mark, the kind of stage and production design often found for example in the television show *Mad Men* and in films from *Playtime* to *Pleasantville*. A third form of alienated space shows the violation of Oldenberg's Third Space theory, where in shows like *Homeland* or in *Star Trek: Discovery* (CBS, 2017–) we cannot distinguish workspace from homespace or cannot easily find any third-space zones of social life, as we find on the Death Star and in other alienated narrative spaces. We call this form '*work-house space*' to indicate how the pressures of instrumental work have crowded out the needed aspects of home and play from a character's living-space.

This overall analysis reveals some crucial aspects of Dantean space. For example, because Dantean spaces echo with the traumas that originate the story and because they often appear in a story when the character can no longer avoid or control her trauma-caused emotions, they are usually the site of the greatest dramatic tensions in a story. For this reason they are also often the site of the unresolved gender tensions in a protagonist. This is why they make great forensic tools, great red flags, for both writers and theorists. To illustrate this, our last chapters consider the strong social and political implications in this account.

Following on the heels of the analysis of over twenty examples of Dantean space, we begin Part III by asking "Is Dantean space bad for us?" After all, in a majority of the examples we consider in Parts I and II we find characters who are isolated, trapped within themselves by themselves. That marked commonality raises questions like: what are the effects of consuming narratives that deploy Dantean space? Despite its empathetic power, could Dantean space be a peculiarly alienating form of narrative space? Does traditional Dantean space inscribe a specific sense of self and of personal responsibility? Is it a coincidence that Dante's originary landscape is so marked by alienated, atomized and misanthropic characters? Does this form of narration teach us to see ourselves and others in a specific and anti-social way? After all, this aesthetic model of memory was in Dante's poem originally a moral model, one that wed personal history to responsibility and a code of punishment. Could it also have been both central to the development of the western bourgeois subject and also be destructive of social bonds that we value and desperately need today?

In our conclusion we ask if and when empathetic space might actually be good for us. The final chapters use our elaboration of story craft and social theory to highlight a newer variant of Dantean space, a form of storytelling that appears in such striking examples as the novel and films of *The Secret Garden*, the film *Amelie*, and the next-gen video-game *Wrath of The White Witch* (2013–), an innovation that has produced the rather unique emotional response of making its players cry. These narratives exhibit the youngest form of space which we call *ecstatic space*, a socially shared space of enchantment and healing, a form that suggests how story space might generate both socially-shared goals and emotions and a new sense of self. And so we end by seeing how these spaces all illustrate an ethics of care rather than Dante's moral commitments to guilt and bitterness: this leads us to ask whether such examples of ecstatic space might model a new and highly-empathetic public commons. Looking forwards to the future uses and manifestations of empathetic space, we ask if such spaces cannot only mimetically model our inner lives but can also actually extend out into the real world, charming and enchanting it in a way that produces a caring social commons.[10] Certain examples (sculptures by Bernini and examples like *The Third Man* and *Amelie* in cinema tourism) reveal a triangle of emotional entanglement of viewer, protagonist and place. Could such cases link mass-produced emotions to the nature of place? Could we use narrative to entangle people with real places, thus constructing a new shared space and social commons?

And so at the end of our journey, our tale about tale-telling ends by revealing a new path for escaping alienation, escaping our older more gendered forms of both story and political communication, pointing towards a path for escaping Dantean space.[11]

CRAFT THEORY: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Before we begin on this journey, it might be worthwhile to describe our methodology. Though the final intent is to treat story and story space as social phenomena and to analyze them within the frame of cultural theory, we have begun by using certain common dramatic screenwriting terms, such as character and objective, to define a topology of forms of narrative space, avoiding at the outset even the simplest sociological concepts such as identity and subjectivity. The intention is to ground our analysis within the very Aristotelian methodology used by those who

devise our novels, plays, TV series and films. Our justification for it is simple: when you set out to theorize about any field or activity, it is best as a rule to stay initially as much as possible within the working vocabulary of that field instead of immediately importing concepts from another body of work. In this way you are more confident of capturing the essence of that field's activities. And so in Part I we first focus on the Aristotelian and craft methodology that underlies the story phenomena we are trying to explain.

We then use that methodology—which we call Craft Theory—to reveal the logic, practice and impact of story space. In Part II we use this approach in a close reading of many examples of story space across many media. Here too we assume that Aristotle's story theory is central to the narrative design of the majority of today's narrative filmmakers and television creators, and so we seek to ground our theoretical tools in that body and history of theory. However, this book certainly does not assume that Aristotle's theories comprehend all useful thinking on aesthetics and culture: once we have deconstructed the phenomenon through its own terms and aesthetic history, we relate these craft techniques to the work of theorists of social space such as Augé and Oldenberg and to other social theories, such as recent work on hauntology by Fisher and others.

Finally in Part III we synthesize this craft-based approach with other historical and theoretical investigations in order to reveal the larger critical implications of these forms of space. In fact we argue that the insights extend not only across all forms of narrative, encompassing theater, literature, web series and video-games, but also have implications for how the self and the social are themselves constructed.[12 – 16]

The Heart's Cave

Finally, this journey into empathetic space is a journey away from realism into guilt, into bitterness, and sometimes into the sight of the innocent. And hopefully this journey will help reveal not only our empathetic vision but how empathy is central to our lived lives and social structures.

As I hoped to hint in the book's dedication, empathetic space is a space informed by character, meaning it is a present informed by our experience, using the past to ground and deploy our present fears, hopes and dreams. Usually empathetic space in its most common, Dantean

form helps us see the risks and rewards of people and situations. But sometimes the present becomes so steeped in and clouded by the past that it occludes aspects of the present, and so this capacity of ours can often lead to delusion and breakdown, becoming a journey into dream and nightmare, into illusion and delusion, into a subjective vision clouded by a trauma.

And yet, though empathy carries many risks, and though some of us avoid empathy like the plague and try to cut it out of ourselves because it makes us vulnerable and commits us to others, the capacity to experience it is actually crucial for our singular and collective survival. Empathy is more than a bridge between drama and life, more than a morality and a technique for creating social bonding, more than just the radar and record of intimacy and vulnerability, and far more than a collection of aesthetic tricks or storytelling tropes. Although, as storytellers have shown, it is also a mental tool that can break under stress, leading to all kinds of interesting aesthetic results, and the pain of empathy can lead us to hide in a cave of the heart for all our lives, that risk does not define this risky access to the world. In ordinary life empathy is a powerful and predictive tool for us. It is the best way we have to shine a light into the other, and then shine it back into ourselves. Empathetic space is not just the cave of the heart; we possess this tricky, slippery and frankly, dangerous aesthetic form because it is an essential form of knowledge.[17]

Notes

1. This book builds on work I've presented and published in the past. The first is "Dantean Space and the Cities of Cinema", which is reprinted in the book *Media and the City* published in 2013 by Cambridge Scholars Press. I first presented that essay at the Ecrea "Media And The City" Sociology Conference in Milan in February 2012 and, in refined form, at the European Conference on Aesthetics in Prague in 2013. The second essay, "Narrative Space in Films and Videogames", was presented at the international Media and Sociology conference "Spectacular/ Ordinary/Contested Media City" at the University of Helsinki on May 15–17 2013. The third essay, "Dantean Space in The Gendered Homes of the Television show *Homeland*", was presented at the Feminist Media conference "Console-ing Passions 2013" at De Montfort University in Leicester, England. The core argument in this essay was also presented at the 2013 MLeague International Symposium "Media and the City" held at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada and a Dantean Space analysis

of Batman and superheroes was accepted for presentation at the 2016 Superhero Identities Symposium at the ACMI in Melbourne Australia organised by Angela Ndalianis and others.

2. Even in the moment where the boy walks through the cold, the cold is not dramatically visible but is present only through his shivering performance.

3. We might also note that the first three tactics mark relatively passive characters while the rest of the list mark active characters.

4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_B6wQMd2eI, accessed May 1, 2017. Consider also the Wells Fargo Commercial "Learning Sign Language" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxDsx8HfXEk: accessed May 1, 2017). It too uses dramatic space, and also rises towards a catharsis of empathy tactic # 10 while first using tactics 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7 to make us care about the characters.

5. For another empathetic commercial see Apple Computer's "Frankie's Holiday" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxDsx8HfXEk: accessed May 1, 2017).

6. (We find it useful to compare these two films because compare them because *50 Shades* began as a piece of fan fiction on the *Twilight* website and resembles that film's structure in many ways.)

7. Note on general pronouns: since there is still no commonly accepted solution to the question of the right pronoun to use to cover general cases, throughout this book I have chosen to use both male and female pronouns to describe general cases.

8. Many moments of post-traumatic stress disorder are doubtlessly Dantean moments. But the broader definition of Dantean moment should include, first, the sense of being not only psychologically damaged by that earlier moment but even sensuously stuck in that earlier surrounding. An experience of betrayal can be so severe that a person is forever phobic about commitment, but this phobia isn't the same as the sensuous memory of the warm white sands under your feet as you rose over the rise on the beach and discovered your lover in the arms of the lifeguard. Second, it admits the possibility that one's whole personae is in a real sense unable to go beyond that stage of life, but an individual can remain childlike in his needs and cares and outlook, like Amelie, even though this is not necessarily bad or something to be cured. These two aspects distinguish Dantean moments from the psychological experiences of PTSD, though certainly the phenomena often overlap in drama and life.

9. Acampora (2006): p. 12.

10. The commons is a long-standing concept in economics and sociology and refers to spaces, whether actual or virtual, that are held in common usage by a community and that are subject to social conflicts requiring some

regulation or standards of use. Under some definitions, both the internet and the earth's sky are examples of zones that are social public commons. Among the many theorists in this area is the economist Elinor Ostrum, who won the Nobel prize in 2009 for her work on the commons.

11. There are other approaches as well that this study owes a debt to but which its approach differs from. Many efforts to analyse narrative space have deployed either the approach of Bakhtin (which puts time and the plot at the centre of analysis) or of Lefebvre (which posits sociological use as the determiner of meaning). Both of these approaches stress the social uses and categories that a space connotes. Another approach, especially common to film and television studies, has been to focus on the geographic mis-en-scène and framing of a space. Clearly in this study we are beginning at a different point: we propose that *character* be considered as a central if not primary indicator and determinator of a story's space's meaning. While of course acknowledging the crucial importance of other approaches, we propose ours has a number of useful dimensions. We continually try in these pages to relate theory to practice: we try to follow—and to reinforce and clarify—the methodology of the subject matter under examination, which is a fairly important justification for any methodology.

12. For example, on the construction of race, place and narrative space on sitcoms, see D'Adamo (2017).

13. By focusing only on empathetic space, we try to work phenomenologically up from character and focus on a certain emotionally powerful phenomenon in the viewer. Moreover, we do not argue that all narrative space is empathetic: we do not claim that narrative space always functions to express character, or that it always expresses the story's core conflict. Instead we try to identify stories that provoke no or very little empathy and to explain why and how they work so differently and why they attract such a different viewership. For this reason we place narrative space within a threefold topology that reveals a gamut of empathetic machinery at work in our stories. We feel this helps explain the roles and links between character, plot, emotion and place in specific examples. Initially we leave other forms and categories out of our analysis except where they enable powerful insights on specific noticeable tropes of empathetic space across many different examples. Here we deploy the spatial insights of Augé, Oldenberg and others.

14. Our hope is to be part of the project that Keen speaks of, to help fill in the current "gaps in our knowledge of potentially empathetic narrative techniques" (Keen 2007: p. x), even if we generally do not follow her excellent direction into analyzing how in-and out-group status can affect a particular aesthetic effort at creating bonds of empathy. Aside from some beginning work in our final chapters, we in general do not explore the role of these empathetic tactics across the boundaries of gender, race,

nationalism, age and so forth (the focus of, for example, Hollan and Throop 2011). This book is only a step in that direction, proposing an initial methodology and a focus on the specific narrative phenomenon of empathetic space.

15. Although we argue that Dante's work is an excellent way into empathetic space, and at times we make the historical claim that he was pivotal in the spread of empathetic space, this book is in no way intended as a work of Dante scholarship: there are far more scholarly road-maps available for that journey (see, for example, Durling and Martinez 1997; Kameen 2009–2010; Pearl 2009; Pertile 2007). Our main goal is pragmatic in nature and not entirely unlike those often made for the chronotope. That concept is considered useful to the extent it is productive for sociologists and semioticians. Perhaps, we propose, if a study is *also* pragmatically useful and insightful to the *makers* of narrative, that is in and of itself a kind of additional evidence for claiming to reveal some deep structure of narrative. Perhaps we need a new standard of truth and communication in a specific kind of narratological studies, one we call Craft Theory Studies, which overtly links the methodologies of the makers and the explicators of narrative. That is at least the additional standard we strive for ourselves in this study.

16. This work also builds on concepts I have suggested in earlier work. In one (D'Adamo 2015b) I proposed the existence of an "intimacy corridor" that was produced when a character in a set script (whether a singer, a newscaster or a subject of a documentary) broke down and left the script. In another essay (D'Adamo 2015a) I suggested we need various concepts, such as that of "inter-emotions", to describe the phenomenon of emotions and emotional memories that can break away from our Cartesian tradition and reveal how these phenomena exist not so securely in a subject's or a singular character's experience but rather across subjects and in the social realm. Expanding on Aristotle's brief intriguing comment that a true friend is a mirror of your best self, I proposed we recast the emotional language of aesthetic constructions in a more Heideggerian fashion. While avoiding that claim directly (I develop it in forthcoming work), this book is an initial attempt to establish a foundation for those investigations and has implications for the study of social bonds.

17. Dedicated to Joe Volpe for being such a generous teacher.

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