During the 1980s, the cognitive study of film, afforded impetus by a contemporaneous ‘Cognitive Revolution’ sweeping through varied disciplines, emerged as a distinctive strain of theoretical inquiry within film studies. The prime movers of the cognitive approach to cinema – David Bordwell, Noël Carroll, and Edward Branigan – initially drew upon research from perceptual and cognitive psychology, cognitive philosophy, and narratology in investigating the spectator's comprehension of cinematic texts. Another flurry of cognitive inquiry followed in the 1990s, with film theorists Murray Smith, Torben Grodal, Joseph Anderson, and others illuminating the spectator's mental and emotional processes by appeals to neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and other humanistic and scientific disciplines.

This research, and the cognitive endeavour more broadly, has served partly as a corrective to certain theoretical notions propounded by Grand Theory – chiefly those concerning identification, illusionism, and subject-positioning. But the cognitive programme has also explored terrain that Grand Theorists have left uncharted. Cognitive theorists have explored the evolutionary importance of facial expressions of emotion (Smith 2003); the ways eye movements in cinematic performance hold and direct interest (Bordwell 2003); why different media elicit different kinds of emotional response (Frome 2006); how films are tailored to an ecologically constrained perceptual system (Anderson and Anderson 2007); the role of reconstructive memory in the viewing of ‘puzzle films’ (Barratt 2009); and numerous other aspects of spectator cognition. The objects of enquiry are various, and the preceding sample indicates something of the diversity of the cognitive programme.

Just as poetics reject the notion that neoformalism constitutes a theory of cinema, so cognitivists assert that the cognitive approach hardly provides a single theory, much less a Grand Theory, of cinematic phenomena. It is, as one theorist notes, ‘by no means a monolithic enterprise’ (Smith 2007: 65). Rather, cognitivism is at once a set of assumptions, a perspective, an approach, and a programme of research. Cognitivism does not currently stand as a single, unified theory of cinema partly because its proponents conceive of the phenomena they study differently, and they do not always converge upon mutually held beliefs. More properly, Noël Carroll (1996a: 321) argues, the cognitive endeavour ought to be understood in terms of a ‘series of small-scale theories’ organized around questions of film communication, rather than a single monolithic theory accounting for all aspects of cinematic experience. Cognitive film theory comprises a cluster of piecemeal inquiries whose contribution to film theory is registered in a variety of ways – by mid-level arguments set forth about individual phenomena; more encompassing theses (e.g. concerning medium-specific properties, or culturally shared spectatorial processes); and the falsifying or qualification of existing theories from psychoanalysis, semiotics, and other reigning theoretical paradigms within film studies.

Cognitive film theorists, then, are unified by a set of shared assumptions. What precisely are the assumptions that glue the cognitivist programme together? Apart from a collective conviction that empirical scientific method can profitably elucidate cinematic experience, several broad assumptions guide the cognitivist's inquiries:

1. Many of the skills and procedures involved in film viewing are precisely those that we use to function in the everyday world. Cognitivists assume, as a point of departure, that spectators rely on everyday perceptual and cognitive capacities in comprehending and responding emotionally to the fictional world of the film. Film viewing involves fairly automatic, non-conscious – or bottom-up – activities, such as perceiving figures in space and reacting to physiological stimuli; it also engages us in cognitively more complex, top-down operations such as constructing plot events, storing information in memory, and forming empathetic attachments with characters. At both levels of processing, the capacities by means of which we process and react to textual elements are identical to those that orient us within the real-world environment. In postulating this default premise, cognitivism flies in the face of psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship, which divorce film viewing from ordinary perception and cognition. Cognitivists demystify the concept of the spectator as it is conceived in psychoanalysis. The notion of the 'positioned' spectator locked into a passive, trance-like state is disdained, as are standard psychoanalytic metaphors identifying film viewing with dreams and illusions. Far from a regressive, irrational, or passive activity, film viewing in the cognitive programme is conscious, dynamic, and guided by an irrediscibly 'rational' drive toward information-gathering and affective experience. As Torben Grodal (1997: 10) observes, film is not an illusion... on the contrary, film is part of reality' (italics in original).
A psychoanalytically inclined theorist might reply that film viewing differs from our everyday activities in quite striking ways. Theatrical film screenings foster a highly controlled environment—the lights are dimmed, the viewer is riveted to a single vantage point, her activity is regulated by cultural customs and routines of behaviour (e.g., we refrain from singing in a screening situation). Nevertheless, cognitivists don’t deny that film viewing is a particular, often highly ritualized form of experience, and they mount research questions pertaining to the perception, comprehension, and affective arousal of cinematic texts (e.g., how we perceive threedimensional objects from a two-dimensional image; how we grasp disturbances, such as flashback sequences, in a linear flow of events; why we respond emotionally to events and characters we know to be fictional). Most basically, films do not call forth some anomalous perceptual and cognitive machinery that is then ‘switched off’ when we step out of the theatre. Our everyday capacities are all we have to work with, and our responses to cinematic fictions are governed by the same cognitive architecture that guides us through our real-world encounters.

2. The human mind is not a blank slate, and film spectators are psychologically predisposed to undertake certain textually-encouraged procedures. Many cognitive film theorists hold that spectators bring to the film event not only highly developed procedures for perceiving and comprehending the environment, but also certain active predispositions that crucially shape uptake of narrative action. For instance, Joseph Anderson (1996) argues that spectators engage with fiction films through a kind of voluntary imaginative play, whereby the fictional realm is bracketed off, or framed, from ‘the normal flow of events’; Anderson asserts, moreover, that human beings are fitted out not only with ‘the capacity to play, but an active disposition to play’ (1996: 116). The spectator is predisposed toward other activities too. Film-makers routinely marshal devices designed to evoke our ‘identification’ with characters, but Murray Smith (1995) and Torben Grodal (1999) suggest that the viewer’s inclination to empathize stems from innate psychological dispositions. Ed Tan (1996) argues that the human mind is naturally predisposed toward the kind of emotionally saturated experiences that are habitually served up by popular cinema. And as ‘meaning-seeking creatures’ (Anderson 1996: 49), we’re prepared a priori to undertake perceptual tasks, comprehension procedures, and other information-gathering activities demanded of us by narrative films. In the shadow of psychoanalysis, cognitivists hasten to stress that these kinds of viewer predispositions are rational, goal-oriented, and consciously acted upon.

In the view of ecological cognitivists, the predispositions that shape our viewing habits have probably been hardwired by evolution. Far from a tabula rasa, the spectator is pre-programmed by biology to execute certain types of activity. The phenomenon of play, the tendency to empathize, the effort to construct narrative meaning, even the act of film viewing itself—none of these practices is wholly culturally acquired, but rather has evolved biologically through a process of natural selection. Cognitive film theorists such as Anderson and Grodal posit adaptive functions for the activities that characterize film viewing—imagining, empathetic identification, emotional response—all of which, they argue, have evolved in different ways to enhance our fitness in the environment. Once again, a postulate of the cognitive approach runs afool of psychoanalysis—differing sharply from the cultural relativism of subject-position theory, the evolutionary strain of cognitivism posits that the human mind has been ‘formatted by evolution’ (Grodal 1997: 278) and cannot wholly be explained in terms of social constructivism.

3. Audience response in the cinema is not attributable to either the spectator or the artwork alone, but arises from the direct interfacing of viewer and text. Contrary to the notion that texts deterministically ‘produce’ specific responses in viewers, cognitivism highlights the purposeful agency of the film spectator. Perceivers form judgements, construct expectations, store information, and engage in a host of other perceptual and cognitive tasks—moreover, we have noted, they are biologically pre-wired to do so. Yet, cognitivists argue, spectators’ responses are typically aroused somehow, and this arousal is provided by various kinds of stimuli situated throughout the text. Neither the film’s patterning of stimuli nor the spectator’s activity proceeds arbitrarily. Seeking to elicit certain responses (e.g., narrative comprehension, antipathy for an antagonist, a physiological reaction) and guided by the assumption that spectators of all cultures share basic perceptual and cognitive capacities, film-makers construct the artwork in ways designed to directly tap the spectator’s cognitive architecture. Film-makers thus adopt the mantle of intuitive psychologists, fine-tuning textual elements so as to facilitate (or in some cases, thwart) the cognitive uptake of the spectator. Spectators, on the other hand, actively seek cues or prompts within the artwork that authorize those activities to which they are naturally disposed (e.g. imaginative play, acquisition of knowledge, emotional investment, and so forth). Thus, as one theorist notes, ‘although the viewer plays an active role, that role is guided by the film’ (Tan 1996: 42).

Many of the theories we have examined in this book—structuralism, apparatus theory, Screen theory—presuppose deterministic structures within the text, but the piecemeal inquiries launched by cognitivists explore a continuum between text and spectator. At one end of the spectrum, researchers have examined the textual strategies that film-makers mobilize in order to elicit and direct spectator response—the way a music cue serves as an emotion trigger, for example, or how tactics of plotting wrong-foot the spectator’s assumptions about narrative events. Theorists researching
at the other end of the continuum have investigated the spectator's biological potentialities, that is, the biological endowments that may be tapped and exploited by film-makers for particular effect—our capacities of visual cognition, the tendency to flinch at sudden loud noises, an ecologically practical capacity to imagine, and so on. Much cognitive film theory oscillates between the twin endpoints on this continuum, indicating how 'audience response lies at the intersections of individual and general spectator characteristics, specific context, and textual cues' (Plantinga 1999: 382).

For the cognitivist, the default assumptions outlined above, and the piecemeal theories exfoliated from them, are open to empirical confirmation. If many theories of film are given to speculative theorizing (e.g., positing abstract theories of the structure of the subject or society), cognitivists mount explanations that are empirically verifiable or falsifiable. As assumptions, the cognitivists' tacit agreements serve as points of departure, not as irrefutable empirical facts. This apparent equivocation ought not to be taken to signify, on the cognitivist's part, a lack of confidence in empirical data or inductive reasoning; rather the theorist proceeds cautiously, testing data against 'difficult' cases, and formulating scientifically plausible and potentially corrigible arguments. In such ways, cognitivists seek to avoid the perceived totalizations, miscalculations, and obscurities exemplified by many of the theories we have so far encountered in this book.

**Narrative comprehension**

What is the nature of the spectator's response to cinematic texts? If the viewer is an active, thinking, perceiving entity, what procedures characterize the act of film viewing? We will concentrate here on narrative comprehension, though it should be emphasized that cognitive film theory investigates a host of other viewing procedures too—cinematic perception, emotional response, spatio-temporal orientation, and so on. Cognitivists do not share a consensus for how spectators 'cognize' film narratives, but one influential characterization is set forth by David Bordwell (1985). Disclaiming the subject-position theory that viewers are passively 'acted upon' by a controlling text, Bordwell advances a constructivist account of spectator activity, arguing that spectators dynamically construct the story by responding to cues woven throughout the film. Cues nudge the spectator to execute various operations. These operations include certain high level mental processes such as inference making (i.e., deriving assumptions from available data), hypothesis framing (constructing probabilistic explanations about past events, known as curiosity hypotheses, and predictions about upcoming events, known as suspense hypotheses), and information processing (e.g., storing or encoding salient data in working memory). All these top-down processes function to plug gaps in the film—spectators draw on memories, form inferences, and generate hypotheses to fill in story information that the text skips over or purposefully withholds.

At a broader level, such activities are governed by various types of schemata, structured knowledge frameworks with which the spectator comes to the film. Most films cue the viewer to apply both real-world schemata (e.g., cultural 'competencies,' learnt knowledge about social routines and behaviours) and schemata derived from other artworks (e.g., knowledge of canonical story structure, prototypical genre tropes, etc.). These broad schemata are activated and refined by the film's cues, and together the schemas and cues shape the spectator's inferences, expectations, and predictions. Moreover, Bordwell reminds us, film viewing is a goal-oriented activity. Not only is the spectator spurred to active participation with and by the text, but, Bordwell argues, she is 'already tuned' for such activity before the film is underway (1985: 34). Cues are sought phenomena; unity, coherence, and closure are looked-for attributes; information is readily grasped and finessed by applied schemata. In no sense, then, is the spectator positioned, tutored, or rendered passive. Furthermore, Bordwell's contention accords with the cognitivist premise that spectators are biologically predisposed toward the sorts of mental activity that cinematic narratives routinely exploit.

Bordwell (1985) chiefly theorizes about the cognitions entailed by fiction film, but the processes he itemizes govern comprehension of non-fiction films too. To illustrate this, and to demonstrate that the spectator can be mentally energetic even in passages of short screen duration, we might consider a brief moment in Eric Steel's documentary *The Bridge* (2006). Telephoto footage picks out a male figure standing by the side of the Golden Gate Bridge, overlooking the San Francisco Bay. The man empties a bottle of beer, releases the object into the bay, and looks down at the water. Interspersed with this telephoto footage are talking head interviews with friends of a man named David, who had committed suicide by jumping from the Golden Gate Bridge. The witness testimonies partly overlay the caught telephoto footage, acting as a kind of voiceover. Our cognitive processing of the sequence is shaped by contextual data—the film has earlier presented telephoto images of regular pedestrians; it has also furnished telephoto shots capturing suicidal acts at the bridge, a factor that brought some controversy upon the film. (Another source of controversy stems from the film-makers' apparent passivity, observing suicidal agents without intervening in their fatal actions.) *The Bridge* itself documents the suicides occurring at the bridge over a 12-month period.
Our inferential activity is set further tasks by the telephoto footage. The man casts the beer bottle over the edge, and observes its long-drawn passage into the water. Thanks to intrinsic norms set up by the film (e.g., figures poised at the edge may jump), and to the schemas and hypotheses it evokes, an otherwise innocuous gesture suddenly seems disturbingly portentous. Immediately we try to ascertain a plausible motivation for the action we have witnessed – the man drops the bottle into the bay, but why does he drop it? Any inference here is likely to be arranged on a continuum between a wholly innocuous motivation and one that services a more purposeful goal. Again, foregoing cues guide our expectations. If we hypothesize that the onscreen figure is David, then we are likely to search for behavioural cues that anticipate his act of suicide.

This sequence consumes very few seconds of screen duration, but it marshals our inferential mechanisms into action, pushes us to frame hypotheses, and generates cognitive uncertainty. First, we infer coherence between witness testimony and caught footage – the man on screen is the same individual being discussed by interviewees. Our hypothesis here is guided by schemas of documentary narration, as well as by an effort toward meaning and unity. (As noted, we form and suspend another, more cautious hypothesis too.) Further hypotheses proliferate with the discarded beer bottle. Perhaps the loiterer is simply dispensing of waste, but a more likely inference has him judging the distance from bridge to bay. (That he leans over the bridge to witness the object’s trajectory kindles this latter inference.) Why should he want to calculate the distance of the drop? Does he plan to trace his own tragic descent into the water? Perhaps, on the other hand, he is simply a casual bystander. Moreover, if the onscreen figure is David, are we about to bear witness to the suicide invoked by the framing testimonies? And if he is not David, who is he? Why does the narration seem to linger on his actions?

Resolution of this cluster of hypotheses is furnished when the figure mounts a bicycle and tapers off into the street. Now our main hypotheses are short-circuited; the tactics on which we hung our assumptions shown to be false cues; and our hypotheses and predictions – is the loiterer the victim described by stricken friends? will he jump into the bay? – demystified. If the scene has aroused dysphoric (i.e., negative) emotions in the viewer, these are likely to be replaced by more positive affective states (e.g., relief that the male figure comes to no harm).

Still, cognitive effort does not wane with the thwarting of our main hypotheses. We must untangle our association of loiterer and suicide victim. Indeed we must disqualify any assumption that the witness testimonies relate referentially to the caught footage (in this instance, at least). Our most provisional assumptions are to be retroactively worked upon – the dropping of the bottle, for instance, ought not to have been construed as
ominous. Furthermore, the sequence instils and reinforces a set of tacit expectations in the viewer, elaborating an intrinsic norm, namely, that the narration will salt misleading cues among more reliable ones. Expectations will be exploited, sometimes violated. Suspense hypotheses will be evoked and invalidated. *The Bridge* lays out stark subject matter, but it engages us in an almost ludic narrational stratagem, drawing us into an activity whereby we try to determine the suicidal agent from the regular passer-by. Here is one source of the film's controversy, yet in such ways the film-maker self-consciously provides us a glimpse of his own dilemma — all of a sudden everyone is apt to look sunken, tearful, putatively suicidal; equally, all are apt to appear untroubled, healthy, and robust. Faced with such ambiguous behavioural cues, how could the director and his crew have reliably intervened in the fates of the suicidal victims?

Non-fiction films call upon different kinds of schemata than those cued by fictional works, but both modes of cinema ask the spectator to make inferences, frame and test hypotheses, synthesize incoming data, and map abstract structures onto the work. These activities do not constitute a specifically 'cinematic' or 'aesthetic' mental set, but are routine practices guiding comprehension in our everyday traffic with the world. As in our real-world encounters, cognition of the scene in *The Bridge* is moulded by goals — cognitive effort goes toward unifying ambiguous textual elements into coherent, meaningful relation, dovetailing the scene within the film's wider context. We apply schemata derived from prior knowledge (e.g. we animate some concept of suicide, along with a set of expectations pertaining to documentary narration); we probabilistically rank several top-down hypotheses; and we re-examine data encoded in working memory. All these higher level processes sit on top of a non-conscious visual system that mostly, according to Bordwell (1985), Anderson (1996), Tan (1996) and others, perceives and organizes visual data 'directly', in bottom-up fashion. Notions of viewer passivity hold little water in cognitivist accounts of spectatorship. Even in concentrated bits of action, spectators summon and sharpen a multitude of perceptual and cognitive skills.

**Identification**

One major facet of the spectator's activity — identification — remains to be accounted for. What, precisely, does identification in the cinema amount to? What does the spectator identify with? How crucial is this phenomenon to narrative comprehension? Theories of identification are a cornerstone of the discipline's major paradigms (see, for instance, Chapter 4 of this volume), but many cognitivists find the language of identification vague and ambiguous. 'Identification', as a term, has been burdened with manifold referential meanings — spectators identify with themselves, with the Other, with the camera, and with the gendered gaze. They succumb to the cinematic apparatus' illusionistic and ideological identifications. And they proceed through the work passively, constrained by the deterministic perspectives of an invisible observer. Not surprisingly, this 'hypodermic' model of identification finds no favour within the cognitivist programme. Its assertions of textual determination butt against the spectator-text interplay set forth in cognitive theory; its insistence on the illusory capacities of the medium presupposes an easily duped, submissive spectator; finally, certain premises lack empirical foundation, and seem out of step with actual experience — identification with the camera, for instance, would seem to entail that spectators shuttle between distinct vantage points with an agility quite beyond the bounds of normal human action.

Contemporary cognitive theorists have argued that, insofar as cinematic identification occurs at all, it does so in relation to fictional characters. Still, Noël Carroll (1990) and others suspect the term 'identification' of being baggy, elastic, and loaded with psychoanalytic implications. Theorists have thus directed their efforts toward forming finer-grained characterizations of cinematic identification. Gregory Currie (1997) argues that spectators imagine, or simulate, the mental states of characters, 'trying on' the fictive agent's beliefs and desires. Spectators run these simulated states 'off-line', 'disconnected from their normal sensory inputs and behavioural outputs' (1997: 144–5). Whereas fleeing from a frightful creature would be a normal 'behavioural output', our off-line simulation keeps us riveted when the yawning jaws of an onscreen monster thrust toward us. Currie's theory of off-line simulation accords in important ways with the concept of imaginative 'play' advanced by Anderson (1996). Similarly, Grodal (1997: 226) suggests that spectators 'bracelet' identification with characters as a game-like activity. Foregrounding the primacy of *imagination* enables each theorist to register striking alternatives to hypodermic models of identification. If psychoanalytic viewers are seduced into illusory identification, cognitivist viewers purposively enter into imaginative simulation. The imaginative spectator does not mistake the fiction for reality, nor believes herself to be the character — the act of identifying with characters is voluntary, rational, and framed mentally as an imaginative activity 'from which we can bar our' (Grodal 1997: 102). Moreover simulation has practical value, since, as evolutionary psychologists would argue, the capacity to imagine has evolved biologically for the purposes of adaptation and survival.

Many cognitivists deploy the notion of 'identification' because it operates as a blanket term covering too diverse a range of practices, but how do cognitivists defend the concept of 'imagination' or 'simulation' against similar charges? Chiefly by particularizing, or distinguishing between,
different kinds of imagining. Elaborating distinctions proffered by Richard Wollheim (1984), Murray Smith (1999a) suggests that the viewing of fiction films involves both central imagining (imaging 'from the inside' the experience of a particular character, or empathizing with her) and acenbral imagining (imaging an experience from 'outside' any character's perspective, akin to a sympathetic response). Psychoanalytic theory, without adopting this parlance, throws its weight onto central imagining – the positioned spectator grows susceptible to the text's operations by centrally imagining the protagonist's experience. Yet central imagining is only part of the picture. As Carroll (1990) notes, the spectator's thoughts and emotions frequently do not chime with those we attribute to the character. We feel concern for the oblivious swimmer about to become shark bait, but concern is not what the swimmer feels – she feels elated, unaware of the predator advancing toward her (Carroll 1990: 90). Appropriate responses to character-centred fictions involve both central and acenbral forms of imagining, Smith argues. The analyst seeks to characterize the spectator's imaginative activity in particular cases, and to examine the means by which the text causes particular kinds of imaginative response. Discriminating varieties of imagining allows the cognitivist to posit more nuanced, finessed responses than can be suggested by catch-all terms like 'identification'.

Given the difficulty in wresting the term 'identification' from its psychoanalytic associations, Smith (1995) proposes that theorists substitute 'identification' with the term engagement – the better to suggest responses to a range of character types, not merely to those agents with whom we share affinities. Smith posits three levels of character engagement, collectively comprising 'the structure of sympathy'. Recognition pertains to the assignment of unique, individuating traits to characters, and to our reidentification of agents across a duration; alignment refers to the range and depth of access to characters, in terms of their actions (our spatio-temporal attachment to them) and their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings (our degree of subjective access to a character's internal states); finally, allegiance denotes the spectator's evaluation of characters, which serves as the mainspring of emotional response. The three levels of engagement interact, though by distinguishing among them Smith achieves a more precise handle on the factors shaping our engagement than does the relatively fuzzy notion of identification. Smith nuances his model of character engagement with a further set of distinctions. In the process of central imagining, spectators embody both voluntary responses such as emotional simulation ('imaging from the inside' the affective states of characters) and involuntary ones, such as affective mimicry (non-consciously mimicking character emotions, spurred on by facial and bodily expressions) and autonomic responses (as when loud, unexpected noises or sudden movements trigger physiological reflexes).

How does Smith's cognitive model of character engagement improve upon existing theories of cinematic identification? First, the spectator in Smith's account executes a host of imaginative operations, but Smith takes care not to substitute one type of determinism with another – that is, whom we 'identify' or engage with is not wholly prescribed by the phenomenal spectator. Rather, Smith's structure of sympathy describes psychological processes that are fostered – though not wholly determined – by various kinds of narrational structure. Engagement thus springs from two interfacing, dynamic phenomena – the spectator and the film's narration. (Anomalous here are involuntary, autonomic responses such as the startle reflex, which are prompted by sensory triggers within the text.) Second, Smith provides a more textured portrait of character engagement than is achieved by the equivocal notion of identification. Specifying distinct levels of engagement allows Smith to elucidate the text's regulation of spectator responses; it also enables a firm purchase on the wide range of viewing procedures that engagement entails. Furthermore, Smith's model flouts the notion propounded in folk psychology of a singular, unchanging identification – in Smith's account, engagement is a plural phenomenon inasmuch as our responses to a particular character are apt to change over time, and because 'we may engage simultaneously with different characters in different ways within a given sequence in the film' (1995: 93). Like other cognitive theorists of film, Smith seeks to supplant the contested notion of identification with a cluster of naturalistic, finely-specified concepts (such as motor mimicry, emotional simulation, and autonomic reactions).

What textual and psychological factors lead us to form particular evaluations of particular characters? How does allegiance operate in films that encourage identification with wrongdoers? What mechanisms cause our judgement of agents to shift? Smith, along with other cognitive theorists, has probed these questions and proffered explanations, the nature of which will emerge in the following analysis of Tim Burton's Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (2007), a film that ruffles the spectator's sympathies in various ways. Our analysis of the film moves between psychological and narrational processes, for as we've noted the mental and affective uptake of films relies on commerce between both phenomena.

**Perverse allegiance and Sweeney Todd:**
**The Demon Barber of Fleet Street**

A soft-hearted barber, Benjamin Barker (Johnny Depp), is falsely arrested and dispensed from his family and London milieu. Escaping from prison 15 years later, Barker – now under the alias of Sweeney Todd – returns to the capital and determines to wreak revenge on Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman),
the sadistic magistrate responsible for his imprisonment. The landlady presiding over Todd's old barbershop, Mrs Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter), reveals that Todd's wife Lucy has died and his daughter Johanna (Jayne Wisener) is captive in the decadent Turpin's residence. Along with fellow traveller Anthony (Jamie Campbell Bower), Todd devises a plot to extricate Johanna from the magistrate's clutches; he also plots bloody retribution against Turpin and his oily henchman Beadle Bamford (Timothy Spall). When a business rival, Pirelli (Sacha Baron Cohen), threatens to blackmail Todd, the demon barber executes him, and Mrs Lovett takes in the victim's youthful apprentice, Toby (Ed Sanders).

Gradually, Todd slides deep into moral dissolution, spraying his barbershop walls with the blood of innocent clients. Mrs Lovett bakes the remains of Todd's victims into succulent meat pies, her pie shop thriving thanks to the fulsome appetites of unsuspecting patrons. Her new protégé, Toby, begins to suspect Todd of gruesome misdeeds. Finally Todd sates his craving for Turpin's comeuppance, but there follows a tragic anagnorisis. Todd's wife has not met the fate claimed by Mrs Lovett – a revelation that emerges only when Todd spots Lucy among the slain bodies of his own victims. Anguished by Mrs Lovett's deception, Todd sends the devious landlady hurling into the bakehouse furnace. In a morbidly ironic final act, Toby – spurred to avenge Mrs Lovett's murder and to protect his own well-being – slashes Todd's neck with one of the barber's own razors.

As this synopsis indicates, Sweeney Todd generates a complex play with the spectator's allegiance. How does the film guide and constrain the spectator's sympathies? Here, as in any film, the viewer's evaluation of character is founded on the primary effect – the set of first impressions erected by the film, including the judgements formed about a character when she or he is first brought to our notice. These initial judgements tacitly guide our expectations about the character as the drama unfolds, and we constantly cross-reference durable first impressions against developing plot actions. Often the primary effect turns out to be a fairly reliable barometer of a character's attributes, while character change generally confirms our initial assumptions. About Judge Turpin we form broadly negative first impressions, and the narration simply 'deepens' our initial evaluation as the film progresses. The primary effect can prepare us for a more ambivalent engagement with characters too. The music-led scene introducing Mrs Lovett summons various devices to elicit our allegiance – Helena Bonham Carter's star persona cues us to expect an eccentric but basically attractive character; song lyrics nakedly solicit our sympathies ('pity a woman alone'); and the bouncy melodic line bathes the character in an affirmative, giddy atmosphere (Figure 8.2). No less crucial to our initial judgement of Mrs Lovett, however, is the scene's somewhat malevolent undertone. Unsettling elements pervade the jaunty action. Song

Figure 8.2 Sympathetic misfits: the eponymous barber (Johnny Depp) and Mrs Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter) in Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street.
Source: Courtesy British Film Institute. Dreamworks/Warner Bros.

lyrics repeatedly evoke imagery of dead animals. Skittering cockroaches get flattened by bakehouse utensils. The disquieting aspects to Mrs Lovett's character offset the narration's overt appeals to our sympathy with her. In such ways, the primary effect hints at the ambivalent allegiance that will characterize our engagement with Mrs Lovett across the film as a whole.

The primary effect, and the ongoing evaluation of character, are significantly shaped by the star system. Many films yoke the primary effect to the specific attributes embodied by the star player, creating swift and schematic character delineation – once first impressions have been set up, they are reinforced, dismantled, or subverted by the film in different ways. Our schemata for particular star personas help to orient us to Sweeney Todd's bizarre, antitheric protagonists. Both Helena Bonham Carter and Johnny Depp delivered sympathetic portraits of freaks and misfits in earlier films (indeed, this is Depp's stock-in-trade – think of his protagonists in Edward Scissorhands (1990), Ed Wood (1994), Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (2005), and the Pirates of the Caribbean series (2003, 2007)). Prior knowledge of the stars' personas not only prepares us for the idiosyncratic traits we discover in Todd and Mrs Lovett; it also discourages us
from regarding these traits as purposive deterrents from sympathetic engagement. Other knowledge frameworks elucidate the primacy effect too—for instance, generic schemata activate gothic or horror expectations (we may expect our protagonist to behave ominously); and familiarity with Tim Burton’s previous films like Beetlejuice (1988), Batman (1989), and Mars Attacks! (1996) cues us to anticipate a narrative populace illuminated by outlandish freaks and outsiders.

Once the viewer has been supplied initial story information, she continues to construct character by following narrational cues, such as the primacy effect, recognition, and the narration’s pattern of alignment and allegiance. Character development may serve to reinforce and ‘deepen’ our initial moral evaluation of a character—for instance, we evaluate Beadle negatively at the outset, and we are given no cause to revise our judgement as the plot progresses. (Indeed, our initial judgement gets forcefully reaffirmed by ensuing story action.) Alternatively, a film’s narration may press- gang us into reshuffling our allegiances quite radically. Most generally, films shape our judgements of characters in more or less drastic ways. Our allegiance with Todd and Mrs Lovett wavers throughout the film, while our antipathy toward Turpin and Beadle remains relatively constant.

We might assume that our allegiance is correlated to the changing traits of the character as she or he progresses through the narrative. For instance, our affirmative moral evaluation of Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) in On the Waterfront (1954) is homologous with the ex-boxer’s gradual embodiment of morally admirable values across the duration of the film. Often, however, what looks like character change is actually a flexing of the narration’s powers of communicativeness. Our moment-to-moment evaluation of Mrs Lovett depends not so much on the character’s changing moral traits as on the way the narration controls our knowledge of character information. Apparent shifts in Mrs Lovett’s moral valence suggest an arc of character change, traced across the whole film. Initially she embodies a host of affirmative traits, chiefly affection and compassion, e.g., her maternal stance toward Toby, her apparent sympathy for Todd’s withered wife (articulated in the song ‘Poor Thing’), and so forth. By the end of the film, personality traits of a far less desirable sort are brought to the fore.

Our moral evaluation of Mrs Lovett has changed, but crucially it has not changed in response to shifts in character psychology or morality. Rather, Mrs Lovett’s personality traits remain fundamentally consistent, while our moral evaluation of her is transmogrified by the revelation of information previously withheld from us by the narration—namely, the deception spun by Mrs Lovett around the ‘death’ of Todd’s displaced wife. Moreover, though our moral judgement has been transformed, our overall engagement with Mrs Lovett is apt to remain relatively unaffected. The revelation of her deception forcefully challenges our moral assumptions, but it is unlikely to short-circuit the fund of goodwill that we have generated toward the character throughout the foregoing action. (We don’t assume, for instance, that her affection for Todd was ever disingenuous.) Just as a certain equivocation defines our first impressions of Mrs Lovett, so does an ambivalent (or ‘partial’) allegiance characterize our engagement with her at the point of narrative closure.

For Smith, allegiance depends not only upon evaluating the characters in moral terms, but also upon hierarchizing these judgments and characters according to a system of preference. Allegiance, writes Smith, ‘rests upon an evaluation of the character as representing a desirable (or at least, preferable) set of traits, when compared with other characters within the fiction’ (1995: 62). Thus the protagonist of Fritz Lang’s M (1931) acts in violation of moral propriety, but comes to be regarded sympathetically relative to certain other agents in the text (e.g. the Lynch mob that persecutes him in the final reels). A film establishes an internal system of values whereby, Smith argues,

[our] real-world attitudes are organised by the ongoing placement of characters into positions of relative desirability. On the basis of this process, we form preferential and hierarchized sympathies and antipathies towards the various characters.

(1995: 194)

Morally straightforward films generate a Manichaean moral structure, which pits moral agents against immoral or amoral ones. Such Manichaean structures are mobilized in films like Star Wars (1977), Speed (1994) and Fargo (1996), in which the characters’ values are plainly delineated, and the viewer’s moral hierarchization of the agents occurs as relatively unqualified and automatic. Our emotional responses to such fictions and characters are likely to be comprised of ‘basic’ emotional states, such as fear, sadness, and joy. A major alternative to the Manichaean framework is the graduated moral structure, characterized by Smith as manifesting ‘a spectrum of moral gradations rather than a binary opposition of values’ (1995: 207). Smith posits films such as Otto Preminger’s Daisy Kenyon (1947) and Orson Welles’ The Magnificent Ambersons (1942) as exemplary cases. In the graduated structure, characters do not epitomize unalloyed moral values, but rather exhibit a finer-grained cluster of traits. The task of hierarchizing them according to a system of preference is thus more complex than in the Manichaean model, while the characters’ amalgam of diverse moral traits may arouse responses anchored in the ‘higher’ emotions (i.e. ambivalent, complex, or compound emotion states).
Sweeney Todd complicates the evaluation of character, but it nevertheless arrays its agents on a graduated hierarchy of moral values. Though his actions violate moral propriety, Todd manifests a relative desirability when compared with the still more degenerate Judge Turpin. Moreover, the film's initial flashback (depicting Todd's false arrest at the hands of the magistrate) sets up a moral opposition between Todd and Turpin which prevails in working memory even after Todd switches from victim to victimiser - thus the power of the primary effect. The flashback, and its precise placement near the beginning of the film, are integral to eliciting what Carl Plantinga calls 'spectator vengeance', an emotionally saturated desire to see come-uppance meted to an irredeemable wrongdoer (1999: 387). Guided by the primary effect and the narration's maintenance of character - e.g., its refusal to supply data that might ameliorate our judgement of Turpin - the viewer comes to see Todd's acts of vengeance not only as a justified trope, but as a desirable one as well.

Yet the viewer also recognizes that Todd's acts of violence far outstrip his desire for revenge. An internal moral structure posits Todd's violence toward Turpin as valid, but the film disturbs our approbation of Todd's activity when he sets about slaughtering innocents without justification. Evaluating these latter actions as morally unjust entails that the spectator activates real-world schemas for revenge and justice - these schemas, along with other cognitive predispositions (e.g., moral values) and the text's activation of horror schemata, shape our ability to discriminate morally perverse violence from 'desirable', justified retribution. Now the viewer anticipates a morally apt punishment to follow from Todd's unjust actions. To this extent, a film's system of value not only directs our sympathies and antipathies toward particular characters, but cues us to hypothesize upcoming story action as well. Moral structures trigger cognitive activity by pressing us to execute moral judgements, and by guiding our inclinations about how plot events should properly be resolved. In such ways, internal moral systems work to arouse and satisfy a desire for cognitive closure, the pursuit of which motivates the spectator's moment-to-moment engagement with the drama.

The climax of Sweeney Todd confirms the morally skewed nature of the diegetic milieu, but it supplies, in Noël Carroll's (1990) phrase, a 'morally correct outcome' insofar as the wrongdoers (including Todd and Mrs Lovett) are punished. (The exception is the virtuous and suffering Lucy, who is afforded no mercy by story events - her death serves principally to intensify the tragic flavour of the story.) Though we form a partial allegiance with Mrs Lovett, the landlady's death seems apposite in the context of the film's moral system. Moreover, the revelation of her betrayal at the climax is likely to deepen our sympathy with Todd, who is once again unjustly wronged.

The explicit (albeit theatrical) nature of Todd's bloodletting puts our allegiance with the protagonist under further strain. Torben Grodal notes that scenes of repellant violence are apt to elicit 'a kind of schizoid numbness, an emotional dislocation from the narrative experiences'. Spectators seek to temper dysphoric emotions by distancing 'themselves from a full empathic identification with even the most positive characters' (Grodal 1999: 143) - a more or less bottom-up reflex in which spectator perception and emotion are wedged apart. Identification with the fictive agent thus becomes 'purely perceptual' (Grodal 1997: 158), divorced from emotional involvement. If an affective distance is so accomplished, the spectator's negative evaluation of Todd may be registered less forcefully than if emotional engagement occurs as 'symbiotic' and unmediated. At any rate Todd's unjustified violence, for all its visceral arousal, is not adequate to foil the spectator's allegiance, though this allegiance is notably qualified by Todd's perverse acts.

If we are encouraged to sympathize with morally degenerate characters, isn't there a danger that the apparently innocuous activity of imagining will produce harmful, morally contaminating effects? Gregory Currie (1997: 162) cautions that beliefs and desires simulated by the spectator offline may inadvertently be brought online, due to a glitch in the viewer's 'inhibiting mechanism' - that is, the default brain activity that brackets off imaginative 'play' from normal activities and responses. Currie states:

By imagining ourselves in the situation of a character with destructive, immoral desires, and thereby coming to have, in imagination, the desires of the character... we may be in danger of really acquiring those desires through failure of the inhibitory mechanism.

(1997: 163)

Similarly, Stephen Prince (1998: 114) floats the prospect that justified violence in movies stirs up genuinely aggressive propensities within the spectator. Thus, in Sweeney Todd, our simulated 'trying on' of Todd's retaliatory cognitions may bleed into actual beliefs and desires, and potentially degrade our moral valence in the everyday world. If we do adopt Todd's immoral desires, and moreover if we remain sympathetically disposed to him, then our engagement in this instance may be characterized as perverse allegiance - Murray Smith's term for sympathetic responses to characters on the basis of their immoral traits and actions (Smith 1999b). For Currie, this kind of dubious engagement carries with it a risk of 'moral damage', since our simulation of immoral mental states may transmogrify the moral schemata we apply to real-world situations.
Smith (1999b) argues that perverse allegiance is in fact a strikingly rare species of spectator engagement. A genuinely perverse allegiance entails that spectators sympathize with morally undesirable traits and actions. But often what looks like perverse allegiance in popular cinema is only apparently so—sympathy for the character obtains in spite of the agent’s perversity, not because of it. Engaging with Sweeney Todd’s veneful desires amounts to an ‘imaginative slumming’ by the spectator: we simulate malignant desires (e.g., meting out revenge to Judge Turpin) while reassuring ourselves that the agent we ‘identify’ with is—at heart—morally worthy.

Moreover, moral degradation may be foreclosed by the mechanism of ‘schizoid numbness’. If Todd’s heinous acts prompt the viewer to disengage from empathetic identification with the protagonist (i.e., to effect schizoid numbness), then the spectator does not simulate Todd’s illicit desires—and since the spectator does not simulate immoral desires, there can be no danger that she acquires those desires through simulation. Schizoid numbness thus renders unlikely both moral damage by simulation, and allegiance of a genuinely perverse sort.

The viewer of Sweeney Todd also applies a schema for ‘justified revenge’ that helps her execute the appropriate moral judgments (a schema, moreover, that the film-makers trust will be activated). In concert with textual cues such as the primacy effect, this schema cues the spectator to regard Judge Turpin’s come-upance as a sanctionable, even desirable trope. Crucially, moreover, the schema calls attention to any actions that transgress the parameters of justified vengeance, such as Todd’s wanton slaughter of unfortunate clients. Once again, a genuinely perverse allegiance is discouraged. Todd’s moral perversity, exceeding the spectator’s schema for justified vengeance, does not draw our moral approbation, hence does not elicit our allegiance. Our disapprobation of Todd’s perversity, cued by schemata and the film’s moral structure, leads us to regard Todd’s grisly demise as the morally correct outcome—even though our overall engagement with the protagonist remains a sympathetic one. (The spectator’s schema for narrative closure—particularly prototypes of ‘poetic’ resolution and dramatic symmetry—is also likely a factor here.)

For all the suspicion of moral degradation, some cognitivists have stressed the positive moral development that empathetic identification may engender. Simulating the cognitive and emotion states of characters provides, they suggest, a form of ‘moral’ and ‘emotional learning’ (Gaut 1999: 213; Smith 1999b: 228; Nell 1996: 180), an expansion and ripening of the spectator’s moral schemata. As Noël Carroll proposes, narrative artworks exercise our pre-existing moral powers […] and thus the texts may become opportunities for enhancing our already existing moral understanding’ (Carroll 1996b: 237n4). In other words, the activity of character engagement may be endowed with educative value, sharpening and expanding the spectator’s moral and emotional repertoire, priming her for use of these capacities in real-world situations.

This is not to deny that debasement of moral values through empathetic engagement might occur. Nor is it to repudiate the notion of a genuinely perverse allegiance. (Smith argues that truly perverse allegiances do occur in film viewing, if infrequently.) It is only to suggest that, typically, spectators are guided—by a combination of strategic cues and activated schemata—toward morally sound identifications. Still, sympathetic reflexes may be triggered in unforeseen ways. Bordwell (2007) suggests that an unsympathetic character shown emoting—displaying, for instance, facial symptoms of sadness or fear—is apt to invoke emotional contagion in the spectator, an involuntary affective response whereby viewers ‘catch’ the emotion state etched on the character’s face. As a byproduct of legible, emotive facial expression, ‘a wisp of empathy’ may be felt for the unsympathetic agent, despite a more global condemnation of the figure. Such bottom-up responses of sympathy may be unanticipated and perhaps unsought by the film-maker, while the spectator’s brain continues to function in more or less autonomic or deliberative ways in response to stimuli. This interactivity between text and viewer—so central to the cognitive study of how films work upon us—gives ‘filmmakers enormous power, along with enormous responsibilities’ (Bordwell, 2007).

Glossary

**Bottom-up processing:** The term given to data-driven perception. Bottom-up processing occurs as a fast, mandatory response to stimuli. Such automatic processing, operating in tandem with **top-down processes**, is vulnerable to errors of perception, but possesses positive evolutionary value (e.g., an instantaneous appraisal of an unexpected noise or moving object can trigger motor responses that, in turn, rescue us from an oncoming threat).

**Primacy effect:** An aspect of narrative structure and comprehension pertaining to the forceful first impressions established by a film. The primacy effect is crucial in providing viewers with an initial orientation to the text, cuing expectations about upcoming action. Films exploit the primacy effect in various ways, undercutting, modifying, or extending the viewer’s initial cluster of assumptions. The concept occupies poetsicians and cognitivists in particular, since it guides and constrains the spectator’s activity and mobilizes basic cognitive procedures.
Schema; schemas/schemata (pl.): A knowledge cluster, comprising of a bounded set of beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and other a priori associations that the viewer brings to an artwork. Central to cognitivist accounts of spectator activity, a schema orients the viewer to the moment-by-moment unfolding of the film. Viewers make sense of a text by applying real-world schemas (knowledge sets pertaining to everyday experience) and intertextual schemas (knowledge of other artworks, including generic conventions, narrative topoi, stylistic norms, and so on).

Simulation: A term employed within cognitivism to describe the spectator’s capacity to imagine the experience of a fictional character. Cognitivists have employed the term in slightly different senses, but the broad assumption holds that spectators imagine, or simulate, the mental states of the narrative agent, nevertheless remaining cognizant of the fictional status of the film event. Set against the notion of psychoanalytic ‘identification’, simulation is conceived by cognitivists as a voluntary, active, and conscious activity that is, moreover, a basic part of our biological inheritance.

Top-down processing: The term given to cognitively mediated, deliberative responses. If bottom-up processing operates in quick, involuntary fashion, top-down processes are organized by the perceiver’s prior knowledge and schemas. Such higher-level cognitions include hypothesis-forming and inference-making, activating the expectations and memory functions of the perceiver.

9 Recent developments

Phenomenology, attractions and audiences

Despite reports of its death, film theory is alive and well today, even if it does not carry with it the bravado and solemnity of ‘Theory’ (with a capital ‘T’) that so energized the field during the 1970s and 1980s. Theories of film are flourishing and many new titles influenced by continental philosophy (for recent contributions see Beller 2006; Frampton 2006; Harbord 2007; McGowan 2007; Rodowick 2007; Stadler 2008), as well as cognitivism and analytic philosophy (for example, see Branigan 2006; Grodal 2009; Plantinga 2009), are continuing to appear. We cannot hope to chart each of these new contributions to the field here, but, alongside developments in cognitive theory and historical poetics, we do feel there are three theoretical areas of investigation that have flourished since the late 1980s. Each of these new areas of film theory has proven its longevity so that the future of these areas does not seem to us to be in doubt. The fields are phenomenology and film, the cinema of attractions, and audience research.

Phenomenology and film

(Vivian Sobchack, The Address of the Eye [Sobchack 1992].)

Two works appeared in the early 1990s which aimed to turn film theory back to the ‘things themselves’ in accordance with Edmund Husserl’s claim that phenomenology was a science which advocated a ‘return to things themselves’. The books were Vivian Sobchack’s The Address of the Eye (Sobchack 1992), which has had an enduring impact on film studies in the years following its publication, and Allan Casebier’s Phenomenology and Film (Casebier 1991), which sadly has had very little impact at all. Casebier’s book grounds its approach firmly in Husserlian phenomenology and supports a realist argument in which film has the capacity to show to us ‘things themselves’. The guiding trope of the book is that cinema has the ability to reveal the real world to us. One of Casebier’s closing claims is