

A Spinozan Analysis of Film Experience

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The thesis is submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements of the awards of
Doctor of Philosophy

By Oxford Brookes University

03/2016

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Thesis Abstract

The aim of this work is to analyse film experience within the perspective of embodied cognition, namely through the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. His work was based on a vision of existence as absolute immanence, on the refusal of all dualism, and established a perfect parallelism between sensation and reason. This account involves an ecological and experiential model of subjectivity that is continuously redefined by the relational systems in which it is involved and by the ability to take an active part in them. Furthermore, Spinoza defined the human mind as an integrated and multimodal process mostly grounded on the associations of body states with complex concepts. These notions are largely compatible with George Lakoff's semantic models, which focus on the experiential and embodied bases of cognition, and recent achievements within neurocognitive studies. With an innovative model that combines all these elements it is possible to accomplish a re-evaluation of Cognitive Film Theory (CFT) and to overcome different theoretical impasses in an innovative manner. In particular, Spinoza's philosophy provides the opportunity to address negation and sad passions without referring exclusively to traditional notions such as catharsis, sublimation or detachment, which are traditionally put forth in CFT. With this new account, it is possible to highlight and embody the descriptive power of negative perceptions of the world and to overcome them, thus generating a renewed, constructive point of view. This new analytical approach will be tested on four case studies, films that challenge the viewer's emotional engagement since they display situations of cosmic failure and depict controversial and damaged characters: *A Serious Man* (2009) by the Coen Brothers; *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars Von Trier; *The Act of Killing* (2012) by Joshua Oppenheimer; *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) by Jim Jarmusch. Spinoza's philosophy allows us to appreciate and master sad passions and, at the same time, to show the conceptual power of film experience.

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to prof. Warren Buckland for his precious guidance, for his kind support and for his invaluable suggestions and teachings.

I would like to thank my partner, Eleonora, for her affection and comprehension, and my parents, Nicola and Virginia, for their unconditional support and care.

I would like to thank Jill Organ for her gracious technical assistance.

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INTRODUCTION

Focus and significance

Watching films appears to be a direct experience. But, beyond this surface impression, a significant amount of non-conscious cognitive activity takes place: viewers act in a multifaceted way that involves emotion, reason, memory, and other factors. To produce a more detailed representation of film viewers' agency, many scholars – from Hugo Münsterberg (1916) onwards – have investigated the psychology of film. Today, Cognitive Film Theory is still addressing this issue, and has greatly improved upon previous research by drawing upon Cognitive Science, Philosophy, and Linguistics. With this work I aim to acknowledge the complex nature of film experience and to develop a descriptively adequate account of the film viewer's activity and agency within the perspective of Cognitive Film Theory. As I will point out in more detail below, the peculiarity of my research lies in the fact that I address the issue of film experience by combining Spinoza's philosophy with Cognitive Film Theory.

The expression 'film experience' always indicates a relation between the viewer and what takes place on the screen. A further element to clarify is the meaning of the term 'experience', which does not stand for the simple perception of something, but refers to a basic set of intellectual and physical constants shared by all viewers (embodied cognition), and to variations linked to individual specificity, such as culture or personal memory. In addition, film experience should not be interpreted as a passive experience, in which the viewer is bound to a pre-existent meaning and unable to participate creatively. On the contrary, film experience is an interactive phenomenon involving a mix of conscious and non-conscious operations. I will therefore often use the term 'interaction' to define this state of *in-betweenness*, what Gilles Deleuze calls 'becoming in the middle' (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 239), a contingency that involves the film and its viewer, which is unpredictable and is characterised by the complex combination of numerous perceptive and cognitive activities. From a Spinozan point of view, indeed, we exist in an ecological dimension and, consequently, we are always involved in a relational dynamic. The viewer thus appears more active and able to complicate the semantic outcomes of this connection.

Another hypothesis I wish to demonstrate is that the relation between a film and its viewer involves our conceptual and abstract thinking linked to our reasoning in pictures, which in turn is tied to our emotional involvement as well as empathic and simulative activities. By analysing these components of the viewer's potential activities we identify clear connections with the models of human mind and agency presented by George Lakoff (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1999), and other theorists. These scholars emphasise the experiential and relational aspects of subjectivity, which is a constructive and ecological process rather than a fixed and unchangeable category (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 288). These arguments will be discussed extensively below, and in order to indicate these theoretical correspondences it will be necessary to develop a prototypical model of the film viewer, in which all these aspects of cognition coexist.

To complete this model I will analyse four films that apparently test the possibilities of our involvement: *A Serious Man* (2009) by the Coen Brothers, *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars Von Trier, *The Act of Killing* (2012) by Joshua Oppenheimer (co-directed by Christine Cynn and an Anonymous author), and *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) by Jim Jarmusch. The peculiarity of these films is that they push the viewer to confront uncomfortable feelings and the controversial behaviour of their characters, which means that viewers are also affected by these extreme negative emotions (some of these films portray the end of the world, and dwell on the characters' emotional reaction to this cosmic event). An analytical tradition, which draws upon Aristotle and David Hume's philosophy, and which is nowadays represented by scholars like Carl Plantinga and Noël Carroll, maintains that in order to overcome destructive sensations we need to reach a final catharsis, or to assume a distant point of view (cf. Bartsch, 2010; Carroll, 2004, p. 179; Plantinga, 2009, pp. 176-177). These are psychological mechanisms through which we rationalise traumas and attribute significance to suffering and sad passions. At the same time, however, these reactions imply a detachment from the vision and a 'cold' participation in the experience, and therefore they lead to the definition of melancholic films as works related to irrational imaginary or to an under-developed level of thought.

In order to avoid falling into this reductive explanation, I will examine the film viewer's potential cognitive activities through Baruch Spinoza's model of the human mind, with the purpose of defining a new kind of agency, by referring in

particular to his *Imitations of the Affects* theory (Spinoza, 2002, p. 292-296). Spinoza posited a clear connection between emotion and reason, yet he did not conceive of human mental activity as a passive reproduction of physical experience. He thought that we use conceptual models, generated from our interaction with the world, to orient ourselves and organise perceptions. These cognitive schemas should not be interpreted as fixed categories but as dynamic structures. Because of our intersubjective condition, we find similarities in other humans and then we endeavour to understand their behaviour and their worldviews by imitating them (Spinoza, 1979, p. 104), but this interaction is not linear and can vary from negation to comprehension. Thus, we find also a new definition of empathy, which describes the condition of constant interaction and semantic negotiation between individuals.

Heidi Morrison Ravven argues that Spinoza's assumptions find a new interpretation in George Lakoff's linguistic theory and in his analysis of metaphor – which is not as much a figure of speech as a cognitive model through which physical (in this case audiovisual) experience can be associated to abstract thought (Ravven, 2003). Thanks to these cognitive conceptualisations we can organise the world and interact with our fellow humans, trying to understand their perceptions and values. Therefore, we can identify a new model of how the meaning-making process works within films, establishing a complex physical and semantic interaction between what happens on the screen and the viewer.

Methodology

My research involves a qualitative analysis of key texts in Philosophy, Linguistics, and Cognitive Film Theory for the purpose of presenting an innovative contribution to the analysis of film experience as complex embodied phenomenon, and to renew the examination of the role of sad passions within audiovisual media. This study follows the Arts and Humanities tradition of reading philosophical and theoretical texts closely in order to gain insight, knowledge, and understanding, but also to identify contradictions, fallacious reasoning, and hidden value judgements in order to outline a new paradigm, capable of correcting the flaws of current researches. With qualitative analysis, therefore, I mean the evaluation of the effectiveness of particular analytical theses in addressing specific issues in film studies. For this reason, the thesis has a double agenda: my first aim is to re-evaluate Cognitive Film Theory through Spinoza's philosophy and to present a model of embodied cognition inspired

by his thought. With this innovative account, it will be possible to overcome traditional models of cognition (Cartesian-rationalist and Empiricist), to propose an experiential constructive model that blends the affective and intellectual aspects of cognition, and to combine it with different philosophical interpretations of film theory.

My second aim is to address the issue of negative emotions in film experience with this innovative embodied approach. This methodological account brings together imagination and sensations, thus giving concrete value to conceptualisation, which in this case is presented in audiovisual terms. Thus, it is possible to conceive of perception and abstraction within an integrated process, where physical and imaginative aspects work in parallel and hold the same importance. Therefore, it will be possible to highlight the intellectual and conceptual nature of the filmic medium and to avoid a traditional interpretation of audiovisual experience as mere artefact, which can be managed through detachment and a 'cold reason' that recognises its discrepancies from the real world. This conclusion will make possible to address so-called negative passions in a new way, to reveal their problematic and conceptual qualities, and identify different methods to master them. By following this direction, I will be able to formulate new theories of viewer engagement with films infused with melancholia. Arguably, contemporary media production is largely characterised by works that effectively exploit sad passions and present controversial characters to side with. However, I have chosen these contemporary melancholic films because none of the four provides the viewer with emotional or intellectual consolations. Therefore, they are peculiar because they force the viewer to participate in the experience actively by understanding and using the problematic power of sad passions. Nonetheless, I do not maintain that films characterised by negative emotions are necessarily more sophisticated than productions that aim to produce a final rationalisation and to generate an affective-intellectual solution. The complexity and productivity of a film can only be evaluated, in my opinion, through the analysis of the experience itself, and by highlighting the potentialities it establishes for our interaction. Finally, I have chosen recent films because I aim to provide the reader with an analytical model able to address the peculiarities and the challenges of contemporary audiovisual culture.

Critical review of literature

Spinoza

In the first chapter of the thesis I will discuss in detail the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, by using Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of his concepts, and I will examine the theoretical elements necessary for my reasoning. Here, I will only mention three main aspects of Spinoza's work that decisively influence my analysis of film experience, and which can contribute to new developments in Film Theory: the parallelism between emotion and reason; the Imitation of Affects Theory; Spinoza's analysis of (negative and joyful) passions.

According to Spinoza, God, or the Substance, is the eternal immanent principle of Life. Thus, he defines Nature as The Plane of Immanence we live in. We, as finite parts of it, can conceive God adequately through the observation of its infinite properties (Attributes), which form determined beings (Modes). The attributes expressed in human nature are the body and mind, and we perceive the world through this essential set. These two modalities of our existence work as a whole, and so it is impossible to define which of them precedes or causes the other (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 259). Spinoza avoided the mind-body dualism and established a parallelism between the two and stated that what the mind thinks is exactly the body, and simultaneously the body is the physical expression of states of mind. These arguments imply a connection between abstraction and physical experience. Indeed, when we organise sensations, we process the idea of a particular condition of the body, and of its capacity to act in the world. These experiential imaginative models are our cognitive maps, the conceptual instruments we use to understand the world and define a set of possible actions to undertake. Because of the physical nature of abstract reasoning, on the basis of this philosophical approach we can understand film experience as the visualisation of body states, which are related to concepts with an agentive and sensorial output. Moreover, Spinoza's idea of God as absolute immanence, which rejects existential hierarchies and the notion of underdeveloped forms of thought, makes it possible to examine films in their concreteness as 'possibilities of the real', or rather as experiential situations with substantial affective and intellectual value.

The second point concerns Spinoza's ideas on empathy and the nature of human relations, theories that can be easily applied to film viewers' activity, since it

is based on imitation and simulation. Spinoza thought that our becoming in the world is continuously characterised and influenced by the presence of other physical beings, and we acknowledge that some of them are similar to us and share the same expressions of life. This interconnection determines the fact that we simulate and try to reproduce the others' way of thinking in order to increase our own agency. Nonetheless, this activity, the Imitation of the Affects, is manifold and does not only lead to understanding and comprehension, but also to hatred and conflict. Consequently, in Spinoza's view empathy lies in the ability to understand why people behave the way they do, in the sense that it is the endeavour to think and perceive the world in the same way others do. We understand that we need the other individuals to increase our power of living and to comprehend and explain all the social and physical phenomena surrounding us adequately. This new definition of empathy can be used to reinterpret the concept as it is currently used in film studies. Generally speaking, it is mainly assumed to be the aptitude that allows us to 'feel in' the characters' shoes, but from a Spinozan point of view it describes the state of continuous negotiation and the endless process that redefines our identities. For this reason, it can indicate different types of engagement, from negation to projection or allegiance, but it also makes it possible to share the emotional and intellectual state of the figures on the screen and then to compare and appreciate their descriptive power. Thus, empathy does not define a mere emotional involvement, but rather a constructive and creative interaction.

The third element that will have a strong effect in my discussion of melancholic films is Spinoza's description of the negative. The Dutch philosopher thought that no falsity and negation exist in reality and that everything should be evaluated in accordance with its expressive, connective and affirmative power. Therefore, even sad passions must be considered to be evil only to the extent that they decrease our power to act and condemn us to obsessions and inaction (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 369-370). Through Spinoza's philosophy the definition of trauma receives new significance, becoming similar to the concept of negation, a closure that reduces our interaction and impedes the transformation of what is anomalous into a new source of joy and power. For this reason it is impossible to fight these negative sensations through detachment; on the contrary, it is necessary to understand their problematic nature in order to contrast them by means of joyful affections, which are related to productive states of the embodied mind. By rejecting transcendental forms

of reasoning and by describing intellection as an embodied-constructive phenomenon, Spinoza gives us several theoretical instruments to address melancholic and traumatic films in a creative way, by mastering negative feelings and understanding their conceptual power. In particular, Spinoza highlighted the importance to evaluate things mainly for their connective or destructive power and, therefore, by using an experiential thought capable of detecting the intensities and creativity of phenomena. In light of these notions we should evaluate the systems of values expressed by filmic images by analysing the performative and experiential situations they define without resorting to consolations, so as to be able to evaluate their peculiar creative and destructive potential.

In this new perspective on the viewer's agency it becomes possible to question a traditional definition of pleasure, passions and activity in film experience, particularly in relation to Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic interpretation of visual pleasure. In her well-known essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), she maintains that the enjoyment of mainstream cinema is largely based on voyeuristic and fetishistic dynamics (Mulvey, 2009, p. 18). Through these mechanisms of identification the viewer builds a (male) gaze linked to an 'active and safe' erotic pleasure opposed to the passive state of the (female) characters on the screen. However, viewers' interaction is mostly determined by their visual positions and, consequently, the only way to contrast this process consists in breaking this gaze and in encouraging film practices that reveal or contrast this scopophilic eroticism. The first difference between this analysis and a Spinozan model resides in the definition of viewer subjectivity: while Mulvey, in accordance with psychoanalytical principles, emphasises the viewer's alienation linked to the process of identification (increased by the pleasure it entails), Spinoza's philosophy presents a multimodal, constructive model of subjectivity, constantly remodelled by the possibilities of our interaction. For this reason passivity and activity (and enjoyment) within film experience do not respond only to a strict definition of the gaze and of its rules. According to Spinoza, a passive state indicates the inability to participate productively in the relations we are involved in and, therefore, it is often accompanied by negative emotions, in contrast, activity, which is usually associated with pleasurable sensations, reflects an active interaction that is irreducible to a constant structure (Spinoza, 1979, p. 85). Therefore, viewers are not compelled to undertake a process of necessary submissive identification to enjoy films, but can

participate in multiple ways. Hence, my intention is not to reject this interpretation of visual pleasure altogether, but rather to highlight other possibilities of our involvement since, in my opinion, film experience does not stage a static positioning, but is a plastic and dynamic phenomenon of negotiation.

All these arguments demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of Spinoza's philosophy in describing human agency in relation with every kind of artistic experience, from literature to cinema. This is due to the fact that it establishes a set of common conditions of knowledge with indefinite and unpredictable results, involving emotion and reason, and emphasising the relational and ecological aspects of human nature.

George Lakoff, metaphor and Spinoza's anticipation of contemporary affective neuroscience

In the second chapter of the first part of this thesis I will discuss the other fundamental theoretical point of my research, that is, the possibility of connecting Spinoza's philosophy with George Lakoff's theory of embodied cognition. Lakoff, in collaboration with Mark Johnson, developed a new theory of language, establishing a theoretical paradigm called Experientialism. The most important aspect of this approach (or at least the most relevant to my discussion) is that it describes human language and semantic systems as embodied activities based on the conceptualisation of body states.

Starting from this assumption, Lakoff argues that the first important point to clarify is that we organise our knowledge by means of structures called idealised cognitive models (ICMs), which are conceptual paradigms we use to understand the role of things and their potentialities (Lakoff, 1987, p. 68). One of the most important of these conceptual instruments indicated by George Lakoff is the image-schema. This component of our imaginative thinking is based on visual-motor perceptions, and, thanks to this conceptual model, we generate most of our experiential categories, and establish a number of possible actions within particular situations and conditions of the body (Central European University, 2013). This operation is possible because the brain integrates perception via neuronal links and synapses, and generates ideas through concepts of our physical interaction. This evident link between visual perceptions and conceptualisation will be important in my research because it demonstrates how the viewer proceeds from a sensory

stimulus to a theoretical and abstract construction. According to Lakoff, the organisation of our actions into conceptual frameworks is fundamental to the elaboration of language and of different linguistic codes.

The fact that we are able to use these imaginative models and to associate ideas enables the generation of metaphorical structures, which allow us to transfer the meanings and concepts of terms from one semantic domain to another (Lakoff, 1987, p. 288). George Lakoff's new interpretation of metaphor is probably the most important element of his linguistic theory, because it becomes the leading instrument to understand how associative and imaginative thinking work. Metaphorical systems are based on conceptual blending, that is the action of connecting physical experience and everyday operations with abstract meanings, which are not directly linked with them. Therefore, this conceptual instrument is the best way to understand the embodiment of thoughts and abstract reasoning, a component of our intellect that we non-consciously use in thousands of different ways in order to describe and comprehend the world. The affective nature of conceptual systems and imaginative operations allows us to combine Spinoza's theory of human cognition with George Lakoff's work, and contemporary neuroscience in a broad sense. We will see that this perspective is largely useful for film analysis since it allows the examinations of perceptive and sensorial elements as cornerstones of our intellectual and abstract participation in audiovisual media.

Heidi Morrison Ravven, Professor of Religious Studies and expert on Spinozan philosophy, emphasises the pioneering qualities of his work and ethical premises. She suggests that Spinoza anticipated different theories confirmed by the studies of Antonio Damasio, George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, Vittorio Gallese (in particular by his 'Shared Manifold hypothesis') and Giacomo Rizzolatti. The first point she highlights is Spinoza's radical deconstruction and reconstruction of the traditional interpretation of ethics and morality (Ravven, 2003): these phenomena are generally assumed to derive from a transcendental kind of rationality, which is supposed to overcome the emotional and lower desires generated by our physical experience. Conversely, by confirming the unity between emotion and reason and the inseparability of Man from Nature, Spinoza stated the need to examine the natural causes of ethical behaviour and social organisation. Ravven specifies that, although Spinoza was a Monist (he maintained the substantial unity of existence around an ontological principle), he is not to be considered a reductionist, inasmuch

as he did not diminish the mind to the body or vice versa; mind and body express two different attributes of nature, which influence each other without any of them having a primary role.

Ravven lists twelve claims that effectively map out the commonalities between Spinoza and Lakoff. In summary, these are: the idea that thought is interested and affective because it is inseparable from the body; the pre-linguistic nature of cognition; the notion of human intersubjectivity as based on affective resonance, on imitative processes, and on a continuous semantic negotiation. What emerges from this analysis is that the conceptual models Spinoza defines as modes of thought, which lead us to the semantic elaboration of experience, carry out the same cognitive functions as metaphor and metonymy in Lakoff's linguistics. Hence, the two thinkers share a definition of language as an imaginative activity that uses cognitive mappings based on the body (Ravven, 2003). These idealised models are not mere mental images or abstract 'paintings' because they are not only visual, and through them we generate embodied agencies and practical explanations of reality. Therefore, Spinoza and Lakoff's linguistic theories are focused on those embodied conditions that allow the generation of signs, syntactic structures and representations.

Another fundamental point Ravven underlines is the importance of the Spinozan doctrine of the Imitation of the Affects. With this theory, which is discussed in the third book of the *Ethics*, Spinoza described how we start our social life by recognising other humans as being similar to ourselves: because of this acknowledgement, we share and reproduce basic affections in a sort of emotional contagion. The resonance of feelings and sensations leads us to imitate and mentally reproduce the behaviour of other individuals in order to understand their worldviews and the agencies linked to them (Ravven, 2003). It is a fact that to understand and comprehend something always involves the explanation of potential actions and possibilities of the body. This process is not a simple, necessarily constructive one, but defines a new model of subjectivity as multifaceted and relational, and the importance of empathy, which is the enabling condition of our emotional engagement and socialisation. These are the same concepts derived by the studies of Damasio and Gallese on the role of mirror neurons and on the properties of the embodied mind, and give us a clear idea of the possible and fruitful contamination between Spinoza's philosophy and Cognitive Sciences. All these notions will help us

examine film experience as an activity based on affective and conceptual operations and on the capacity to simulate, also on an abstract level, the actions on the screen.

Film Theory

My field of research falls within the domain of Cognitive Film Theory (CFT). The main reason I find this theoretical framework the most engaging and effective is that, as Peter Wuss explained, it constitutes the film theory's Trojan horse into the viewer's consciousness (2007, p. 222), in the sense that it makes it possible for us to examine the features of our perception and agency in film experience from a broad perspective.

The analytical instruments provided by CFT enable us to study films as conceptual systems, not because they represent abstract constructions and narrations, but for their physical and immanent nature, thus also highlighting the connection between perceptual and imaginative activities. These issues are just one aspect of the problematic questions Cognitive Film Theory is raising today, and the evidence of its stimulating role within Film Studies. Interestingly, most of the problems cognitivists are facing are similar to those posed by great filmmakers and intellectuals like Sergei Mikhailovic Eisenstein and Carl Theodor Dreyer. This statement is not unusual if we think that both of them studied and tested the synesthetic qualities of films in their works, which were always accompanied by accurate research into the possibilities of the medium (cf. Tybjerg, 2007, pp. 172-175).

A further strength of Cognitive Film Theory lies in its ability to reuse and be profitably influenced by the new achievements of Psychology and Cognitive Science in order to express more and more detailed theories of our interaction. Nonetheless, the fundamental relation between Cognitive Film Theory and modern neurocognitive theories does not imply the simple and consequential act of applying new scientific discoveries to Film Theory, but reveals new possibilities of research and adds more questions to face.

Therefore, film scholars working within this paradigm are also interested in Philosophy and other disciplines in order to recognise the systematic consequences of their analyses. Indeed, when we describe an ideal viewer, we define a model of his/her mind, of his/her agency and qualities, and consequently we establish a hypothesis that will directly or indirectly affect our understanding of human behaviour, from simple social life to more abstract political implications. This

additional puzzling element makes the study of films even more challenging because it shows how academic work is not self-referential but related to the definition and perception of general concerns. This is one of the reasons why research into the seventh art attracted, and is still intriguing intellectuals of all persuasions who felt the necessity to explore this powerful communications medium. Therefore, in my literary references about Film Theory I will not include the contributions of film scholars alone, but also the observations of philosophers and theorists outside the field of Cognitive Film Theory.

The second part of this thesis is dedicated to an extensive re-evaluation of different approaches to film analysis as seen through the works of Spinoza and Lakoff, and of the agentive model elaborated in the opening chapters. This theoretical report will include the discussion and comparison of the work of many cognitive theorists such as David Bordwell, who affirmed a top-down perspective, and Warren Buckland, who argues for a semantic and experiential method. I will demonstrate how, with a Spinozan account, it is possible to question a top-down approach, and to reconsider the role of imaginative processes in film experience. After, I will examine the ecological study of films proposed by Joseph D. Anderson and Torben Grodal and focus in greater depth on the investigation of character engagement through the works of Murray Smith, Greg M. Smith, Carl Plantinga, Ed Tan and other scholars. In this section, we will see that, through Spinoza, it is possible to go beyond a radical empiricist perspective on film experience and to present a new model for affective engagement and empathic involvement. In this part I will also discuss the experiential and conceptual aspects of films by drawing upon the texts of Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Anne Bartsch, and Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja, and I will notice how their work shares common stances with my Spinozan framework. Moreover, I will present the analytical notions elaborated by film scholars such as Michel Chion, Richard Rushton, Daniel Frampton, William Brown, Patricia Pisters, Robert Sinnerbrink, John Mullarkey, Pepita Hesselberth, and Gilles Deleuze. I will highlight how their conclusions are similar to those maintained by Spinoza, in particular for what concerns the embodiment of thought, and are compatible with some arguments of Cognitive Film Theory. I will then consider the new, compelling works on Trauma Theory, Melodrama and negative emotions of Thomas Elsaesser, Nadine Boljkovac, William Brown, Augustín Zarzosa, and Elena Del Río, and I will highlight how their approach to the analysis of sad passions

reaffirms many of Spinoza's psychological theses. By the end of this chapter, I will propose an innovative synthesis of these different positions and see which type of viewer's agency it reveals. In this last section I will tackle the issue of sad passions within the above-mentioned four films in the light of this new experiential model of film viewers. The purpose will be to demonstrate that even negative perceptions of the world have their descriptive and agentive effectiveness, and so they need to be addressed with accuracy and avoiding any simplistic and conciliatory answers, which risk removing all the constructive potential from these particular audiovisual experiences.

Limits of the analysis

Having outlined my critical review of literature, it is necessary to indicate the theoretical limits of my research and the issues I will not address. First of all, my research is focused on the semantic analysis of film experience. However, I will use semiotics and linguistics sparingly, since I will not refer to its syntactic and symbolic structure. With this choice I do not want to deny the importance and the effectiveness of this type of study, but simply refer to the mental and imaginative dimensions that prefigure the grammatical and syntactical organisation of film experience. Moreover, since George Lakoff and Baruch Spinoza are my fundamental references, I will also reject the traditional scientific and objectivist premise, which states that there is a logical order in the world of which it is possible to analyse its elementary components through clear representational structures. According to Spinoza and Lakoff, no objective perception of the world exists: we analyse existence by being part of it and, therefore, our scientific models, though elaborated and sophisticated, describe particular experiential situations and relational systems. Therefore, I will focus more on the importance of image schemas and metaphorical associations, which make us 'physically sense' ideas in film experience.

This theoretical position implies that I will not examine films as mere representational systems, because I am not focused on finding a clear correspondence between filmic signs and logical structures. On the contrary, in my research I will analyse the systems of meanings and the embodied frameworks that allow a particular communication and give significance to single signs. Additionally, I will use the Spinozan definitions of the non-conscious and irrational, terms that indicate what is out of control and constantly evolving; they also define the matter in which our conscience is immersed, thereby expressing a dynamic and multifaceted idea of subjectivity. I will not refer to psychoanalytical descriptions of mental phenomena, since I also adopt a cognitivist point of view on human brain activity, although I do not want to contest this framework or reject any possible contact point. My refusal of psychoanalytical models derives from the fact that they describe viewer's activity as something that requires his/her passive identification with the film and the characters on the screen. On the contrary, I aim to present a viewer that is able to interact creatively, through the conceptual blending of sensations and ideas, and through an open empathic involvement.

Chapter Outlines

The first Section of the thesis, divided into two chapters (1 and 2), will be dedicated to the philosophical and interpretative instruments through which I will examine film experience and particular case studies. In Chapter 1 I will present the main concepts of Baruch Spinoza's philosophy, while chapter 2 discusses the main theses of George Lakoff's linguistics. After outlining these ideas and their relevance, I will compare their theories and highlight similarities between their models of the human mind, also adding the interesting observations made by Heidi Morrison Ravven and other theorists. In the second Section of the thesis, divided into two chapters (3 and 4), the result of this comparison will be analysed with reference to different models of film spectatorship and viewers' engagement. Consequently, in chapter 3 I will present a Spinozan re-evaluation of Cognitive Film Theory and I will draw attention to the connections between the ideas of human agency previously presented and the models of viewer described by several film scholars. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to the discussion of other philosophical film theories and new studies on trauma and sad passions. Then, I will formulate a type of film analysis that summarises all the concepts presented. Subsequently, I will examine the characteristics and role of melancholy and negative feelings in relation to my interpretation of film experience. In the third and last section of the thesis, which consists of four chapters dedicated to each case study (5 to 8), I will highlight the effectiveness of this model for the analysis of the following films: *A Serious Man* (2009) by the Coen Brothers; *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars Von Trier; *The Act of Killing* (2012) by Joshua Oppenheimer (co-directed by Christine Cynn and an Anonymous author); and *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) by Jim Jarmusch. The peculiarity of all these films resides in pushing the viewer to face uncanny sensations without providing him/her with affective-intellectual responses to counter these sad passions.

PART 1

PHILOSOPHICAL MODELS AND INTERPRETATIVE INSTRUMENTS

*As lovers let us hope and fear alike:
of iron is he who loves what the other leaves.*

(Ovid, *Amores*, Book II, XIX, 4-5)

The philosophy of Baruch Spinoza has a complex and multifaceted nature, which makes it impossible to summarise his thought into fixed categories. Spinoza wrote about the nature of God (as the Substance), the primary role of reason to reconcile ourselves with the becoming of existence, and the importance in human life of a serene and gentle attitude. Nonetheless, one of the elements that surprisingly prevent us from interpreting his philosophy by following these simple coordinates is the continuous reference Spinoza makes to the concept of power in his texts. Spinoza never attributed to power the value of strength or dominance. He employed this expression to highlight the level and the gradient of life and explications expressed by a particular thought and act (Spinoza, 1979, p. 205). Power is an intensive property of things, and so it is not simply linked to the physical explanations and determinations of phenomena, but involves a constructive and problematic understanding of the potentialities of a being in the world. Thus, analysing the power of an existing object implies defining its agency, the set of actions and relations a body is able to form. For this reason Gilles Deleuze brilliantly summarised the tension within Spinoza's philosophy in the question: What can a body do? (cf. Deleuze, 2013, p. 81).

A similar attention to the experiential basis of thought and concepts and to the relational possibilities of a thinking object can be found in the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. The purpose of the first part of the thesis is to examine and compare the most relevant concepts from Spinoza's philosophy and Lakoff's linguistics in order to define an embodied model of human cognition and agency. Indeed, these two theorists share several ontological and epistemic assumptions about human nature and, in my opinion, address cognition while avoiding the limits of Objectivism and radical Empiricism, which they achieve by presenting a new model of rationality and understanding, one that is abductive, constructive (but not

transcendental), synthetic and multimodal. Truthfully, current research in cognitive sciences and in film studies does not completely fall within the two fixed dialectical categories listed before, but is far more nuanced and complex; nonetheless, a Spinozan-experiential account would be largely useful to overcome the theoretical impasses and the limits of contemporary analyses in these academic fields.

Furthermore, with their interpretation of human emotions it is also possible to go beyond the traditional positions and distinctions between sensations and cognition. In a Spinozan and experiential paradigm, these two components are not separated, but are integrated parts of a unitary process, thus implying a complete parallelism of abstractions and emotions, thoughts and actions. We will observe that an ontological system is always related to a consequent agency, which defines a mode of being in the world. Similar to other great thinkers of the past, Spinoza has been understood and explained in different ways – sometimes in antithetical manners. A number of scholars, for instance, maintain that he was an heir of the Platonic tradition; others believe that he was a pantheist and that his sensibility was really close to oriental and Buddhist thought. A more widespread view sees him as a champion of rationalism and scientific philosophy. Nonetheless, my description and use of Spinozan thought is largely filtered through the studies and commentaries of Deleuze, who was also an expert of his work and based his writings on an innovative look upon his philosophy. I chose this approach because Deleuze highlighted aspects of Spinoza's reflections that will be crucial to my analysis, such as the complete immanence of thought in reality, the absence of teleology and the concreteness and vividness of concepts. These ideas are central to affirm the connection between art forms and thought, and to describe film experience as knowledge obtained through audiovisual affections. Another idea that emerges from Spinoza's philosophy, and which is essential to comprehend the parallelism of mind and body is the complete reversal of the concept of abstraction and imagination; they must be seen as tangible elements of our cognitive and experiential life and not as secondary and meta-logical expressions of mental activity.

After describing the general conditions of understanding and acting that emerge from the comparison between Spinoza and Lakoff, I will employ the questions their work addresses in my analysis of Film Theory by trying to describe what a viewer can do when participating in film experience.

CHAPTER 1

THE PHILOSOPHY OF BARUCH SPINOZA

God, Substance, Plane of Immanence

The first concept of Spinozan philosophy that I will discuss is the starting point of his inquiry: the condition of existence upon which all life depends: God or the Substance (Spinoza, 1979, p. 227). This is the absolute principle of causation from which all the components of his thought follow and is, therefore, a necessary element to the understanding of Spinoza. In accordance with this definition, Spinoza's perspective on the world is radically immanent; an account that allows us to analyse every phenomenon for its creative power and for its capacity to generate connections among beings. The centrality of this notion in the analysis of film experience, therefore, resides in the quality the concept has in defining a completely new ontology that influences the comprehension of every aspect of human existence. Spinoza describes the Substance by analysing its Essence through a geometrical method. He maintained that in order to define the essence of the Substance we can follow the same logic we use to categorise triangles: by listing their properties instead of defining all the infinite numbers of existing triangles (Spinoza, 2002, p. 220). The first quality of an absolute being is that it must be conceived through itself alone, contrariwise it will imply that the power of the Substance is limited by something else necessary to its existence.

God is 'absolutely' infinite, or rather it is not simply undeterminable or uncountable, but nothing can be conceived outside of it, because there can be only one all-embracing being by definition (*causa Sui*), a quality that also implies its absolute freedom and limitlessness. According to Spinoza, freedom should be conceived with the absence of boundaries and as pure activity. Another fundamental property of the Substance is existence; it necessarily exists, because if it did not, this would imply that it is not absolute, but determined (Spinoza, 2002, p. 219). We understand how unlimited freedom and perfect necessity coincide, since the power of not being is not a faculty at all, but a negation. The latter is a limit, a trait of finite and determined beings and the characteristic of their imperfection. Spinoza

summarised this notion with the well-known phrase: *Omnis determinatio est negatio*¹ (All definitions are negations).

The Substance does not exist in a particular time; it cannot be conceived as something with a past and a future, because this would imply that it is imperfect and needs to modify itself in order to improve its condition. Spinoza here borrows the two definitions of the length of existence recognised by Stoic philosophy: *Αἰών* (Aion) and *Χρόνος* (Chronos), the former describing the absolute and everlasting endurance of Life and the latter explaining time in its particular and relational form (Spinoza, 2002, p. 217). From these initial statements we can understand that the Substance for Spinoza cannot be represented with anthropomorphic properties, and that it would be absurd to confer to God goals and objectives or previous stages to modify, for God is actual infinity. Spinoza denied the validity of all teleological speculations, but also some typical interpretations of the order of Nature. The Substance is not describable as a ‘thing’; it cannot be observed from the outside, for there is no isomorphism between a hypothetical mental structure and the world. We live in it and when we imagine and describe an organisation of Nature, we are expressing some particular relations of its internal elements. This is one of the first points of Spinozism that are antithetical to the foundations of Cartesianism: Descartes believed that the starting and evident point of any speculation resides in the minimum level of Logic and thought: *Cogito ergo sum* (cf. Spinoza, 1974, p. 53). Spinoza, on the contrary, affirms the necessary existence of a Plane of Immanence, which is automatically assumed within every expression of Life. In immanence every possible form of life is inextricably linked and simultaneous, as a body made of infinite folds. Therefore, the Plane of Immanence must be considered as the universal condition of existence that places every existing being and faculty on the same ontological level, thus rejecting the codification of superior states or of existential hierarchies. Indeed, we understand the concrete meaning of Spinoza’s famous phrase: *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature), which conveys that the Substance is Life itself (Spinoza, 2002, p. 321).

God is expressed through infinite modes and attributes. The latter are infinite properties of Nature; they all exist simultaneously and none of them is cause of the

¹ Spinoza used this expression in a famous letter to his friend Jarig Jelles (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 891-892).

other. We know the existence of two Attributes, *res cogitans* (thought, the mind) and *res extensa* (the body), and we cannot conceive of one of them as preceding the other. Therefore, they are determined just by the presence of God and work in parallel, since they all express the same thing through a peculiar quality. Life is thus expressed by thought and extension (and other infinite attributes) and since nothing can be conceived outside of it, the intellection of God is self-reflection in place (Spinoza, 1979, p. 25). Modes are, instead, finite beings and objects and, therefore, they are partial and determined expressions (or the affections) of the Substance. The more a mode is composed by Attributes and parts of reality, the more it has power and is capable of forming relations between beings. From this definition it is clear that there is no negativity or falsity in a mode, because it exists as effect of the Substance, and it cannot cause something against its Nature (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 235-236). The imperfection of a finite being depends essentially on its incompleteness,² and consists in the fact that it cannot be self-sufficient, but relies on something else, and so, with its expressions, it defines a limit, a boundary, a territory and a composition of beings. Therefore, we use modes to indicate individuals, the composition and assemblages these beings are able to form, and the relational systems in which they are involved: although a mode can be complex and composed of innumerable parts, its essence resides in its existential finitude. Moreover, according to Spinoza, there is no real and pure reality except for the complex of existence itself, and so every mode should be judged false just by evaluating its power of implications and explications (Deleuze, 1988, p. 68). This idea is comparable with the Nietzschean principle of the ‘power of the false’, which affirms the necessity to evaluate things for connections they create and the intensities they possess instead of judging them in accordance with a transcendental order (Deleuze, 2013, p. 169).

All these metaphysical arguments concerning the Nature of God appear to be detached from any ‘concrete’ and practical speculation, but they simply affirm some basic premises of understandings. From the notion of Substance Spinoza deduced his ideas on freedom and human activity, as well as the idea of immanence, in particular the presence of thought in the world expressed by particular connections of

² It would be interesting to confront the Spinozan idea of incompleteness and Plane of Immanence with Kurt Gödel’s logical thought, Niklas Luhmann’s sociological theory and Gregory Bateson ecological psychology (cf. also Brier, 2013).

individuals and beings. As we will see, Lakoff's speculations also address an innovative conception of Nature as a manifold and complex dimension and necessary assumption, so that we can observe that even modern cognitive theory is grounded on certain concepts of Life as whole. Spinoza is a 'realist', because he assumed that every form of thought automatically involves and admits existence, otherwise reflection is impossible, although we do not comprehend Life adequately (Spinoza, 1979, p. 243). According to Spinoza ideas, words, and signs are not simply subject to individual interpretations because they explain particular interactions in the world and should be judged for the amount and level of reality they involve. For these same motivations, concepts are not all equal, for they can be differentiated in reason of their connective power. There is no absolute disconnection between the way we conceive the status of the real and the role individuals play within it or vice versa, and therefore it is necessary or at least appropriate to state the theoretical premises from which the speculation begins. The constant interaction between the parts and the whole will be relevant in the description of film characters' emotional and conceptual systems and their relation with general atmospheres and moods that affect and distinguish a particular audiovisual world. Moreover, this peculiar dimension of immanence allows us to recognise a concrete epistemic and explicative value in artistic forms, which are not so much representations as living artefacts. In a Spinozan perspective, films should be understood as relational systems, which establish an agentic and ontological dimension expressed audiovisually.

Hence, for its effectiveness in listing the general dynamics and unity of Nature, concept generation and moral operations, Spinoza's philosophy can be considered a jump into the dark sea of immanence and a lesson in how to swim inside it (cf. Deleuze, 2013, p. 177).

Embodied Mind and Common Notions

Through the analysis of the parts-whole relation Spinoza examined and extrapolated the portrait of human agency and deduced the coordinates to express these potentialities. First of all, the same limits and rules applicable to a finite Mode also belong to human kind, whose specificity does not separate it from the Universal order where it is placed: 'The essence of man ... is a modification, a mode that expresses the nature of God in a certain determined manner' (Spinoza, 1979, p. 44).

As physical beings we experience the world through two attributes, extension and thought and, as it was explained before, these work in parallel and manifest the nature of things through a particular property. A concept of the mind is the abstract expression of a specific body and the conceptualisation of its states. Therefore, an idea should not be considered as a representation or a mental picture, but as a schema, a model of a particular disposition of the subject. Spinoza prefers to use the terms ‘concept’ or ‘idea’ to refer to the activity of the mind in order to distinguish it from perception, an expression that could manifest passivity (Spinoza, 1979, p. 37). The parallelism between the mind and the body indicates that they work simultaneously and must be conceived of as an indivisible set, within which none of them can generate the other. Consequently, the perceptions and the ideas of the mind are linked to the changes in the body states, which in turn depend on the affections received from other beings; and so everything that touches the body is necessarily expressed in the intellect. This is the Spinozan description of the embodied mind and of its basic characteristics, an analysis that derives from the close observation of human behaviour in the world (Spinoza, 1979, p. 47). Indeed, although Spinoza was not a typical empiricist, he gave great prominence to the experiential basis of knowledge and to the experimental and practical demonstration of theories. Spinoza criticised Francis Bacon’s determinism as uncertain, because the chain of events that causes phenomena is infinite and it is not possible to understand them since this would imply God’s intellect (Spinoza, 1979, p. 235).

All bodies exist because they are determined by something else and so their state depends on a relation. Spinoza thought that individuals are proportions and tensions between different parts of the extension, so he imagined the composition and interaction of things as something similar to Plate Tectonics, a constant process of erosion and rubbing between objects³ (Spinoza, 1974, pp. 74-76). This never-ending motion implies the absurdity of the concept of vacuum, which is paradoxical and against the idea of God, because it means absence of existence. We shall see that this anti-atomism is also reflected in his psychology and ethics, as Spinoza thought that when we describe phenomena as unreal, we express a negation and a limit of comprehension. Nonetheless, we start to consider bodies from the simplest, the

³ This analogy does not establish correspondence between Spinoza’s philosophy and modern Plate Tectonics, which was theorised in the 1970s, but I use it as a concrete example of Spinoza’s idea of the continuous physical encounter among beings.

minimum aggregation of substance that is relevant and significant. Since an individual is identified by a particular relation of its components, it can be considered as existing as long as it can preserve this composition (*gradus*), even though it is changed by the encounter of other beings.

The human body needs several other composite beings to persevere in its state, thus perceiving and acting in various modes and always in continuity with the world. Every encounter of our body is perceived by the mind and involves its abstract conceptualisation, which recalls the presence of an external object and a relation with it. This interaction identifies a state of the body that proceeds until something else does not add modifications to this composition or substitutes it (Spinoza, 2002, p. 256). A particular connection leaves a 'trace' (*vestigia*), an impression of its presence, which is automatically evoked every time the body is similarly disposed. The process through which our bodies are marked is continuous by definition because throughout the duration of our life we always encounter new individuals to interact with, and so we accompany the imagination of something with the other things it is related to. Therefore, the reverberation of a previous relation is not the memory of a singular object, but the generation of a chain of ideas through associative intellection. According to Spinoza, this is the basic functioning of memory: a constructive and generative path of relations between bodies and their ideas (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 257-258). This point reflects the connection Spinoza had with the philosophy of his century, which considered the act of remembering not as a mere reprocessing of information, but as the acquisition of new knowledge, a dynamic process of reconstruction of the past, confrontation with present states and their combination. The associative mechanism that defines our memories is not a neutral and disinterested course, but the semantic conceptualisation of experience, the definition of structures of meanings through which we organise and interpret new data and signs. The trace of a particular relation is a symbol, which does not mirror something, as Cartesian semiotics maintained, but stands for a state of the body, an arrangement of things in the world.

Spinoza affirmed that 'the human mind perceives no external body as actually existing save through ideas of modifications of its body' (Spinoza, 1979, p. 60). This is a problematic statement, because the fact that human understanding is based on the awareness of its states and relations in the world does not mean that it automatically produces adequate ideas about the self and the external objects. On the

contrary, this implies that our imagination of them is incomplete and confused, and leads to passive reactions. Inadequate ideas are limits and mutilations of the understanding (negations), impressions and ‘silent’ images, which are real, but do not express general properties. On the contrary, true and powerful knowledge starts with the definition of common notions, *notiones communes*, which express similarities and composition between bodies. The comprehension of things increases as our ability enhances to form and identify this correlation and we perceive other individuals as sharing analogous properties. Nonetheless, we should remember that, according to Spinoza, the most common notions are the least constructive, since they define properties shared by all beings, while the power of our intellection is evaluated by our capacity to generate new complex and multifaceted relations among individuals.

Spinoza’s semiotic approach can be considered a semantic one because he believed that signs and words cannot convey the interactive totality they refer to, but need a system of meanings to be understood and used; they are not, therefore, appropriate by themselves. If a symbol is the product of a relation, then every part of Nature is a source for representations and we can consider reality as a pan-semiotic expression. The set of signs a body carries composes its habit, a modifying and significant structure that is in turn affected and changed by new encounters. This concept can be compared with the anthropological notion of habitus: ‘systems of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures disposed to function as structuring structures’ (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 72). This is also the reason why Spinoza is compared to modern semioticians: because of his refusal of representationalism and of the importance he gave to the body in the generation of signs and symbols (Vinciguerra, 2012, pp. 136-137).

Impressions and words constitute the first type of knowledge, according to Spinozan theory, which reflects vague experiences, accidental sensations and the operations through which we attribute particular words to corresponding objects. The second kind of intellectual activity begins with the consideration of the causes and with the acknowledgement of common notions. From this state we begin to perceive reality in an effective and valid way, and we can establish compositions and correlate bodies out of contingency. This is the cognitive level of sciences, natural and human alike, through which reason actively constructs interpretations without being vulnerable to vicissitudes and perturbations. In addition to these, there is a third type

of knowledge, called intuitive science, which is the awareness of the essence of beings and the most adequate form of intellection (Spinoza, 1979, p. 68). Therefore, all methodological disciplines constitute knowledge of the second type. Although these methods are effective and do not need any other theoretical frame to justify them, they still do not form a complete consciousness of reality. Basically, all sciences search for regularities in the manifestation of phenomena, while intuition, as Spinoza intended it, is the comprehension of the essences, the intensive qualities, like the finitude in relation to the part (Spinoza, 1979, p. 72; Deleuze, 2013, p. 167). It is a common mistake to replace concepts of the second type with the essences, but when this happens we are usually confronted with a form of transcendence, an explication that implies limits. For example, formal logic is a really effective intellectual structure, but it does not summarise the entire complex of reality. By using knowledge of the second and third types we can avoid errors, comprehend and correct disagreements and explain how inadequate ideas arise, intuition serving as the creative instrument to criticise and assemble our notions creatively.

For these reasons, Spinoza rejected all philosophy that conceived of the will as a superior form of intellect, traditionally called voluntarism. If the will is nothing but the perception in the mind of particular volitions, then nothing differentiates the intellect from will but the fact that it is the same thing in relation to a specific disposition of the body (Spinoza, 1979, p. 75). For this reason, he also denied the sceptic suspension of judgement, which is not the act of a free and disinterested mind, but the result of uncertain ideas. What is unclear to the mind makes us passive and incapable, and identifies what is out of our control (non-conscious), hence reason is a process of self-awareness, creation and discovery. Spinoza's perspective on adequate knowledge and passivity will guide my film analyses for the purpose of showing how we can transform sad passions into a new form of awareness on the world. Indeed, thinking means considering concrete states of the body in the world and analysing how much reality they involve. These characteristics make Spinoza the 'practical' philosopher, because he conceived abstract ideas and forms of thought as definitions of agencies, powers to act, and considered the exercise of thought as the main route to happiness and ethical behaviour (Spinoza, 1979, p. 81).

Emotions and the Imitations of the Affects

Spinoza's philosophy is imbued with the strong desire to turn what we call the non-conscious into consciousness in order to increase our power to act, our ability to interact creatively, based on new dispositions of the body. This is essentially the attitude that I want to reflect in my analysis of films, namely the capacity to describe a way to transform non-conscious film experience into affirmative and conscious knowledge. However, because the conquest of the non-conscious calls for an enquiry into human affections and the process through which they are reflected in our mind, an important part of Spinoza's meditation is dedicated to the psychological analysis of human emotions.

According to Spinoza, there is nothing in the nature of emotions that justifies the typical idea of them as the underdeveloped form of the intellect. Denying this argument means to affirm that Nature makes mistakes or that it is imperfect, an absolute contradiction that reduces our ability to understand reality in all its manifestations. Emotions emerge as affections (*affectio*) and affects (*affectus*), the former standing for the modifications of the body and their perceptions, and the latter for their mental elaboration (Damasio, 2004, p. 86; Spinoza, 1979, p. 85). Furthermore, we experience two wide-ranging categories of affects: those linked to sadness and pain (*tristitia*), and those associated with pleasure and joy (*laetitia*). The first type of sensations indicates what hinders us and restricts our power, while the second category of affects reflects what is in accordance with our nature and enhances our state. From these statements we understand that through Love and Hatred we express a pleasure or a pain accompanied by the idea of an external cause (Spinoza, 1979, p. 95). Therefore, our knowledge depends on encounters with other bodies, which can improve or decrease our power to act. When we are not conscious of the affections that touch us, we react passively and, consequently, we generate inadequate ideas and explanations, because we do not understand the causes of phenomena. In this situation the emotions are called passions; otherwise they are defined as actions, feelings related to a sensation of activity and to a proper comprehension of what is located around us. Moreover, a state of activity is also connected to the ability to modify and affect other objects, becoming adequate causes of events and generating changes in the world. Although we have a limited and imperfect nature, we possess adequate ideas of existence, reality, and of our presence as subjects in continuous evolution and becoming. From this stage Spinoza

encourages the search for an increasingly more effective understanding of the relations we establish, in order to gain appropriate concepts and a corresponding power to act (Spinoza, 1979, p. 89). The close relation between affections and ideas leads to the integration of emotion and reason. The typical differentiation between them is impossible in Spinozan philosophy, since no pure intellection exists, and thinking is conceptualising what is expressed by another attribute or property of the Substance.

These arguments highlight the human interactive nature and the primary role of *conatus*, which describes our effort to maintain our state using other objects to increase our capacities. This endeavour is really similar to the concept of *homeostasis* as it is used in modern cognitive science, where it indicates an automatic mechanism that maintains well-being (Ravven, 2003; Damasio, 2004, p. 39). The cognitive scholar Giovanna Colombetti even interprets it as the grounding for all human affections and as the overall tension pervading Spinoza's psychology (Colombetti, 2013, p. 6). The importance of this dynamical and changing aspect of our behaviour also modifies the definition of will, appetite and desire (*cupiditas*). Will is the intellectual expression of volition of the body, of its relation with something, while an appetite describes this state considering its consequent physical response. Besides, desire is nothing but the awareness of our tension towards something (Spinoza, 1979, p. 92). The act of desiring is not simply the propensity towards an object: it entails the will to reach a particular state and the agency related to it, so that we do not try to get individual things, but a set of actions (Boutang, Parnet, 1996; Spinoza, 2002, p. 341-342). When we remember pleasant sensations, we recollect the other elements associated with them and we wish to reproduce those conditions as they were presented the first time. As we can see, external beings simultaneously constitute our limit and our source of power and, then, we associate to them an equivalent sensation and a corresponding mental state, which indicates the passage to a different degree of power and activity. In order to persist and extend our existence, we look for something that improves our state and we try to imagine what harmonizes with us. When the mind is concerned about the idea of something painful or contrasting, it endeavours to eliminate it by conceiving or remembering another image that excludes it. It is possible to observe that the same associative mechanism, which causes the generation of signs and images and allows us to construct a chain of ideas, works for our emotional development and constitutes its

affective parallel. Indeed, because we experience two or more bodies affecting us in a particular way and causing peculiar emotional responses, every time we encounter one of them again we will remember also the others and the sensations related to them. This happens mostly because we recognise similarities between objects, and in doing so we also link the emotional content of the idea we possessed. Therefore, every part of the extension can accidentally be the reason for a particular emotion inside of us, and only an appropriate comprehension of the event can replace the previous association of ideas. Conversely, the encounter with an object similar to another, which is a cause of pain, but associated with an opposed sensation, generates a *wavering of the mind*, a doubt (Spinoza, 1979, p. 97). The presence in the mind of ideas and their correlative sensations leads to an important concept of Spinozan speculation: the actuality of the mind. As long as an idea persists in our mind it is perceived as actual and present, and it describes a complete mental state, thus implying that we do not simply accumulate sensations and perceptions as singular data, but that we generate body mappings and concepts of the mind in a particular condition (Damasio, 2004, p. 112). This connection between sensation and conceptualisation reveals the synesthetic nature of mental activity so that we do not simply organise singular signals separated from each other, but we always perceive and understand them as a whole intellectual model.

When something changes our mental state, we respond with a connected and proportional emotion: sadness if the despised object is reinforced and joy if it is weakened or removed. The same happens for an idea causing joy that we try to affirm and strengthen as far as possible. Because of this mechanism we tend to love what gives pleasure to the things we are concerned about, because it increases their power and their presence (Spinoza, 1979, p. 100). The fact that we endeavour to defend the individuals and the ideas we approve of influences our judgement and often confuses and mutilates our intellect, because we tend to not take into account the real causes of phenomena and to evaluate things recklessly. Forming ideas about the other individuals that we perceive also allows us to recognise similarities between beings. In this intellectual process we see a connection with the production of common notions, the discovery and creation of regularities or recurrence between bodies and their composition. This reflection confirms the idea that common properties have no relation with *a priori* or inner structures, but they constitute a virtuality of the real, one of its possible systemic manifestations (Deleuze, 1988, p.

55). The generation of images and ideas of similar objects also involves the resonance of its affections in our embodied mind. If we think that someone shares some quality of his/her body with us we will imagine him/her to be impressed in the same way, and so we will start to imitate or simulate the results of his/her affects. This part of Spinozan psychology is discussed in the third book of *The Ethics* and is generally known as the theory of the Imitation of Affects (Spinoza, 1979, p. 102). This interactive operation of simulation is reinforced by the attachment and the accordance we perceive with another individual, but if we consider someone else as a source of hatred we will endeavour to deny their validity and reply to their affections with opposed emotions. This is what we can indicate as negation also in emotional terms; namely, the definition of a limit, of an unacceptable state, which necessarily reduces the power of our understanding.

The continuous emotional exchange in which humans are involved is what empathy consists of, according to Spinoza. It does not constitute a process of compassionate projection into the shoes of others or a simple reproduction of feelings; it describes a tension between the bodies and the simulation of acts and thoughts (Damasio, 2004, p. 115). Since emotions, actions and concepts work in parallel, imitating the body states of other persons means sharing systems of meaning, and involves an interaction on an abstract level. Therefore, every individual tries to affirm his/her own composition and the intellectual model related to it, and needs external subjects to improve his/her value and to affirm his/her existence.

Because our first aim is self-affirmation, when we must face an individual with a different semantic system we are involved in a negotiation of values with uncertain outcomes. This summarises the essence of empathy, an endless procedure of confrontation, opposition, agreement and generations of renewed explanations. It is important to specify that, despite the obvious risks that are linked to a competitive attitude, Spinoza never suggested humbleness and detachment as solutions for human conflicts. He thought that this kind of humility, though less dangerous than cruelty and arrogance, expresses a mortification that always leads to resentment and characterises the temperament of the most ambitious and miserable. Self-preservation is a primary characteristic of living beings, and renouncing it gives no form of power and cannot produce any benefits. Spinoza's ethical reflection has nothing to do with abnegation, guilt and sin; instead, it necessarily entails the search

for an eternal source of life and pleasure. On the contrary, an ethics based on self-hatred is despicable and constitutes an obstacle to a rational and complete understanding, the only faculty that can lead to responsible and conscious behaviour.

The more we acknowledge that another being shares similarities with us, the more our interaction will gain complexity and variations, which also clarifies why human interaction is assumed to be intended only for hatred and competition. Thus, Spinoza outlined the perfect parallelism between the mind and the body, the affections and the generation of intellectual models. Indeed, interacting in the world means at the same time producing signs and traces of the encounters and associating those elements to a particular state, which in turn expresses a semantic conceptualisation of what the body can do in particular conditions. Since we are becoming and transforming beings, 'desire' is the essential characteristic of our nature. We always strive for something and for a new condition, hence the homeostatic principle that regulates our well-being is a dynamic impulse, which adapts itself to new situations (Spinoza, 1979, p. 128). Therefore, Spinoza indicates two main virtues for an existing being: fortitude (*fortitudo*) and magnanimity (*generositas*). The first constitutes the affirmation of the self, the effort to maintain our presence (homeostasis); the second is the ability to harmonize our existence with that of the other beings (becoming). No living subject can rely only on his/her capacity to survive, on his/her direct utility and pleasure, because we are determined and finite beings and therefore we need other parts to continue our existence. Even the arrogant and the tyrant, who think that they have power just because of their inner qualities, need people to subjugate to affirm their alleged virtues, and so they actually are miserable and weak. Thus, magnanimity is the ability to understand the behaviour of others, how they act, in order to arrange ourselves effectively in relation to them and to find new sources for our life (Spinoza, 1979, p. 126). According to Spinoza, we are necessarily social animals because we are born as interactive beings, and therefore we cannot conceive the self as a disembodied property and an abstract construction. The self is a relational system in continuous evolution, which gains new information and definitions from the encounters it establishes in the world, arising as an extended and multidimensional phenomenon. The description of the affective composition of the body reveals that we do not control most of our activity and, as *waves driven about by contrary winds* (Spinoza, 1979, p. 127), we suffer the effects of external beings on us. Therefore, we are

mostly passive, victims of our affections, which we struggle to direct in a proper way, and we act driven by sad passions, emotions generated by the perception of our inadequacy (Spinoza, 1979, p. 141).

Sad and Joyful Passions; The role of Negative Emotions

We argued that the essence of passions resides in the inability to direct these sensations in a constructive direction. This passiveness necessarily implies a loss of power and consciousness, and consequently a difficulty in the definition and recognition of common notions. When we are directed by passions our interaction is limited, so we experience mortifications of the embodied mind and of its capacity to establish relations (Spinoza, 1979, p. 164). Nonetheless, the inadequacy of passions to comprehend the world properly is not the reason for their falseness and inexistence, just for their limits. Affects have their own reasons, they capture states of the body and concepts of the mind and the aim of an effective intellection is to understand how they develop and are formed. As we experience two main types of emotion, also passions can be distinguished in sorrow and joy. The first are generated by a state of powerlessness or decreasing power, while the others, although not consciously driven, register an enhancement and the affirmation of the self, which is by definition accompanied by pleasure. Since the perception of something that makes us suffer causes a feeling of sadness and pain, we endeavour to remove that state and are affected by hatred. The exclusion of the object to which we associate pain generates joy, but this positive feeling does not justify our destructive actions in full. Operating driven only by the need to eliminate what we perceive as contrary to us, mostly if it refers to other humans, always implies a loss of power, the incapacity to establish different relations. The reason why, according Spinoza, hatred is always a negative sensation is precisely because it prevents new activities and makes it impossible to renegotiate ourselves in order to improve the possibilities for our understanding. It is peculiar that Spinoza refuses hate not so much in accordance with some moral principle, but because it defines a removal of agency and of our ability to be affected, and thus also a reduction in our emotional and intellectual engagement.

The identification of a supposed *causa prima* for evil equally involves the generation of an order, of a structure of things, and the consequent establishment of an intellectual framework and of a hierarchy of values (Spinoza, 1979, p. 142).

Therefore, the production of systems of meanings is directly linked to our *conatus*, to our appetites and to the interactions we are necessarily involved in. This is the reason why Spinoza believed that men attribute goodness and wickedness in relation to what they desire or despise, and so the stages we typically define as ultimate goals are nothing but the satisfaction of particular desires and appetites. In the fourth part of the *Ethics* we find an interesting example of how conceptual models are formed by imagining the project of a house. We usually think that the house, its idea and design are the purposes of its construction; on the contrary, the entire process that leads to its realisation is nothing than another effect of a desire: the appetite for a comfortable and pleasurable state. Since we are unaware of the reasons behind our desires, we attribute universal and objective values to the things we approve of, and tend to judge everything that does not match with our expectations as a mistake or imperfection, ignoring that the absence of validity and virtue belongs to our intellect rather than to external objects. Morality is codified through the same associative process, it is generated through the elaboration of a conceptual model, of a framework of well-being, and sin and error exist in relation to what endangers or threatens the stability of this system. When we build a moral and intellectual model (and also ideological models) we try to defend it because we automatically assume that our welfare relies on its survival and affirmation, and so we negate and oppose any other idea that seems to reduce its validity (Spinoza, 1979, p. 143). The continuous and spontaneous defence of our modes of thought, though necessary and understandable, is in turn motivated by an inadequate idea, which overlooks the process through which we have produced our own morality. This lack of knowledge makes us passive agents of a code and unable to direct our agency in a powerful and productive way. Nonetheless, the suffering we face when we experience the limits of our understanding and opposed ideas can be a stimulus to reconsider our position, as well as an opportunity to broaden the complexity of our intellectual models and enlarge our territory. Indeed, no negation exists in Nature and a problematic and open understanding is the only instrument to oppose passions and produce joyful sensations.

Contrary to sorrowful emotions, these passions affirm our presence and the ideas related to it and so they increase our capacity to live and act, becoming the necessary stimulus to fortify ourselves. Joy is a passion in turn, and, although it is related to a concept of activity and enhancement of our state, it does not provide by

itself the complete awareness of the reasons of particular events. However, the power of positive feelings consists essentially in perceiving ourselves in accordance with the world, in finding new elements of agreement and in establishing fruitful relations with other bodies, discovering a productive tension with other beings. One of the purposes of Spinozan philosophy is to indicate how to direct this passion in a durable way and to avoid being victims of fate. For this reason the cognitive process that leads to an adequate intellection is based on the transformation of passions into actions, of automatic reaction into a participative and constructive agency (Spinoza, 1979, p. 158).

Every external object is by nature a possible source of power, and a useful instrument to preserve our existence; hence the effort to become an active agent inside the continuous flux of reality requires a proper knowledge of their structure and behaviour. This endeavour is accompanied by the capacity to generate and identify common notions between bodies, not in order to make a productive relation contingent, but to ensure its repeatability. Moreover, the adequacy of common notions is evaluable by analysing the constructive and destructive power they involve by creating or dissolving composition among beings (Deleuze, 1988, p. 50). Other humans are the external beings through which we can mostly increase our power because we recognise ourselves as similar or sharing a great number of properties and, therefore, we can form indefinite and powerful relations. A superior level of pleasure relies on the capacity to establish a correlation with other beings, to find power everywhere and to recognise it within each form of Life as well as inside the concepts they express, so that it is possible to develop a new agency. Because this tension for life is perpetual, like the duration of our *conatus*, we should try to look for an extensive and inclusive collective pleasure. If well-being is based on the exploitation and suffering of others, its existence is precarious and miserable (Spinoza, 1979, p. 165). Spinoza highlighted this difficulty of searching for a common and stable good, because it is necessarily based on the understanding of what we generally comprehend as traumatic, negating and limiting. Indeed, if we can harmonise ourselves with something or someone we perceive against us, and conceptualise the causes of its destructive manifestation, we are no more passively reacting against them, but are elaborating a new relational situation. Nonetheless, the process through which we transform negative passions into active joy requires the embodiment of their reasons, their full comprehension- an operation that has nothing

to do with an intellectual sublimation. As a matter of fact, the conceptual negotiation we participate in allows us to observe the inner explicative power and semantic composition of a negation, and we can turn it into new awareness and use it appropriately only through this emotional and conceptual (Spinoza, 1979, p. 182). Spinoza did not believe that we cannot do consciously what we usually make under the dominion of passions. On the contrary, consciousness gives us the possibility to redirect these actions, to use them in the most effective way and to not reduce their appearance to a casual and accidental phenomenon. This transformation entails the essence of freedom, which identifies a becoming active, conscious and joyful.

The path towards the conquest of activity and eternal pleasure, together with the process through which we form new concepts (thanks to the differential and destabilising essence of negation) also clarify the model of empathy deriving from Spinoza's philosophy. Empathy describes the exchange and transformation of semantic values, and its continuity is fundamentally due to the capacity to not impede the creative chain of meanings and emotions it produces. The definition of human interaction offers new elements to understand why Spinoza was considered immoral. Morality guarantees a behavioural code and its defence, but at the same time it describes a closure, an apparently self-sufficient system of meanings. The consciousness deriving from it can appear as complex, multifaceted, and characterised by sophisticated values, whereas it is mainly based on obedience and cannot provide us with complete explanations for human social interaction.

Therefore, a powerful and effective attitude derives from a different path to the one expressed by morality, and this is the reason behind the title of Spinoza's most important work: *The Ethics*, in opposition to morality, is based on the continuous discussion of the reasons that caused the existence of particular exigencies and behaviours; it involves a comparison and a confrontation between values. This process is also oriented to the discovery of the physical implications and aetiologies of systems of meaning, namely to reveal the relations and the operational contexts that allowed the generation of particular concepts and moralities. Thus, it is also possible to recognise the order of things moral orders entail, and to evaluate their explicative power and concrete effects; or rather the intensity of life they express (Deleuze, 2013, p. 81). This element contributes to put Spinoza in contact with Nietzsche, since both are commonly assumed to be the opponents of morality and the champions of ruthless and egotistic conduct. This interpretation is clearly

simplistic and misleading because the refusal of classical morality does not imply the approval of malevolence, but characterises the beginning of ethical speculation. Moreover, Spinoza's concept of the individual is always relational and ecological, and so it never reduces human behaviour to abstract and transcendental categories of judgement. On the contrary, Spinoza analyses it in its practical aspects, evaluating the creative potentialities emerging from every 'assemblage of bodies', or composition of beings. Consequently, we can observe that, according to Spinoza, ethics and well-being do not refer to good practices that are respectful of an *is-ought* (a duty) as according to the whole western philosophical tradition, from Socrates to Kant. Spinoza showed a path built around the concept of power, by means of which a positive attitude is evaluable by its condition of activity and potentiality.

Ethics and Adequate Knowledge (Concepts and Expressions against Representations)

The sad Jew, as Jorge Luis Borges called Spinoza, was a great scholar of the human passions, of the imperfection of our intellect, who analysed the strength of the illusions that dominate it. Nonetheless, we have seen that this observation of human narrowness was directed to the opposite goal: to explain the power typical of our condition and how we can become free and able to confront ourselves with reality actively.

In order to avoid negation, sadness and hatred Spinoza describes knowledge as the most powerful of affects, as the constructive and creative perception of the body. When we organise things we perceive according to the second and third types of intellection, we start to avoid passivity and we begin to conceptualise parts of the world by indicating relations between its components. Moreover, because we understand reality and individuals according to their essential properties, we also experience a stable pleasure accompanied by the capacity to act and establish new relations with bodies (Spinoza, 1979, p. 207). Thus, we understand that this process concerns not only the formulation of systemic explanations and scientific opinions, but also the ethical relation with our neighbours. Within this conceptual framework knowledge is equivalent to the power to participate in Life at a superior intensive *gradus* and to associate every new perception to the idea of God. To explain the world adequately does not mean to take on an external and final position with respect to reality, but implies a tension towards existence itself called *Amor Dei*

intellectualis: intellectual love of God (Spinoza, 1979, p. 218). The eternal propensity to life implicit in this embodied attitude is never-ending and does not foresee ultimate stages, but existence alone and the inclination to it. There is no superior level of intellection and thought consists in problematising and generating pieces of the world, and in considering the amount of life they can carry on. We express our potentialities within the immanent plane of life through which all existence unravels like colours and shades on a white board (Spinoza, 2002, p. 91). This singular philosophy of radical immanence finds an unexpected companion in Friedrich Nietzsche, who, after reading Spinoza, expressed enthusiasm in discovering an intellectual brother with a similar sensibility. It is actually possible to combine many Nietzschean arguments with Spinoza's philosophy. For instance, Nietzsche's notion of *Amor Fati* (Love of Fate), that he discussed in *Ecce Homo* (1888), is largely compatible with Spinoza's *Amor Dei* and maintains that it is not necessary to make happen what we desire, but to desire everything that happens (cf. Nietzsche, 2004, p. 39). Spinoza and Nietzsche share the idea of knowledge as an intensive creative force and the refusal of transcendental categories of judgement. Therefore, across the thesis I will often assemble Nietzschean concepts (like the notion of the power of the false, and his ideas on morality and traumas) with my 'Spinozan' analysis of film.

From these ideas we also gain a complete refusal of nihilism and another understanding of philosophical Relativism, which does not mean that everything is accidentally true, that opinions are subjective, and have no absolute value. Relativism means that every concept expresses a state of things, a perspective and real virtuality of existence, but can be evaluated in reason of its connective and explicative efficiency. The enhancement deriving from this direction of the mind can also be recognised within social life; it implies the equivalence between the second and third types of knowledge and the empathic and ethical inclination. The resonance and parallelism between all types of intellectual activity allow us to understand that what we experience in our everyday life with others is a continuous semantic exchange. We are involved in a complex interaction that requires the effort to read the minds of others, to simulate the meanings of their actions and to establish a framework to categorise and address their worldviews (cf. Spinoza, 1979, pp. 102-107). Of course, this tension towards others, oriented towards the construction of increasingly powerful relations among beings, requires an incredible intensity in our

participation, so that it does not necessarily foreshadow a linear course of improvement. Nonetheless, according to Spinoza, this path is the main road to beatitude, a state of power and activity based on fighting sad passions by means of contrary emotions. This ethical model implies that, like any other partial being, the self cannot be considered as being unitary and monolithic, but rather as a constructive and dynamic expression, a modifying structure (Deleuze, 2005, p. 90; p.199). It is for the same reason that the analysis of emotions within Spinozan philosophy does not describe the simple reproduction of stimuli and the identification of their causes. It involves cross-modal definitions, which integrate different cognitive and sensorial operations, since affects explicate ways of being and the agencies related to them.

From the discussion of the theoretical elements in *The Ethics* we have observed that every interaction and every relation we establish in the world carries its own conceptual expression, so that we can understand that thought is absolutely interested and that ideas cannot be separated from their ‘extensive’ implications and their emotional content. As Deleuze explained, the term ‘expression’ is also fundamental to comprehend another decisive and distinctive difference between Spinoza’s philosophy and the traditional rationalism attributed to Cartesian thought. Indeed, it is possible to state that the current of thought linked to Descartes is concerned with a representational and codifying issue: the attempt to establish a rigorous set of correspondences between an intellectual order and the structures of reality (Deleuze, 2005, p. 152). Therefore, rationalist philosophy seeks a complete mirroring of symbolic and cognitive schemas and the disposition and behaviour of objects in the world. This philosophical attitude entails several consequences: for example, it privileges structures of the mind, which make intellection and cognition possible, and reappraises the role of empirical investigation. This happens because it is impossible and improper to rely on the collection of external data without putting in a place a theoretical framework necessary to organise and understand them. Cartesianism maintains that differences between things can be made in numerical and quantitative terms, or by their symbolic clarity. In opposition to this argument, Spinoza was concerned with the origin and aetiology of signs and intellectual structures. As we have discussed, he solved this problem with his parallelism between the body and mind, according to which our relation with the world leaves traces and markings, which are the signs we will use to refer to determined codes and

intellectual models (Deleuze, 2005, p. 147). Since symbols and structures are the products of particular interactions, it is important to examine the components of such interactivity. This is the reason why Spinoza frequently used the term ‘expression’ in opposition to ‘representation’ to highlight the idea that explanations describe practical developments of the bodies and indicate relations between beings rather than fixed and crystallised images. Differences are rather qualitative than numerical, and can be expressed by referring to the essence of the objects, that is to say, to their relational life.

Essentially, the concrete dissimilarity between Spinozan and Cartesian semiotic theories lies in the fact that, according to Spinoza, the study of a particular symbolic system or language requires the comprehension of the conceptual model that generates it, but representations are real and effective in relation to a finite abstraction (Spinoza, 2002, p. 789). An interesting summary of Spinoza’s theory of conceptualisation can be found in one of his letters to Henry Oldenburg, where he explained his doubts towards several arguments of Cartesianism as well as Francis Bacon’s empiricist philosophy. In this writing he maintained that both philosophers forgot to analyse the first cause of events, and that Bacon did not produce a concrete model of the human mind in support of his thought. Descartes, on the contrary, needed to rely on the concept of free will to motivate the higher part of our intellect, which is able to direct our cognition. As we have seen, freedom is a problematic concept, which expresses the lack of boundaries around an object, and so it is not applicable to finite beings. According to Cartesianism, for example, when we categorise a colour, we use the inner structures of our brain to analyse and separate the fundamental elements of ‘whiteness’ so that we can use a clear and distinct representation of that relation. Spinoza replied that our intellect works in a different way: it is not our will, or the usage of superior parts of the mind that determines the generation of a particular colour concept. Will, as we have discussed, is nothing but the idea of a particular volition of the body, of its relation with something, and so the model we generate relies on the understanding of that specific relation. Completely overturning the argument, we can say that for Spinoza it is whiteness that expresses itself within us under particular conditions and not our will that directs us autonomously to that idea (Spinoza, 2002, p. 763). However, through that relation and the intellectual model it generates we obtain an imaginative instrument that we use to orient ourselves in the world and to compare our ideas with those of others,

recalling again the continuous semantic exchange that constitutes the very essence of our life. Therefore, Gilles Deleuze maintained that in Spinozan philosophy every concept possesses a metaphorical apparatus, not because of its rhetorical function, but in reference to the fact that it is involved in a complex system of reflection of physical conditions and intellectual expressions (Deleuze, 2005, p. 322). This happens also because every concept, except for God's intellect, is incomplete and needs to rely on something else. Finally, it is possible to add that if the Cartesian method is analytical and proceeds through deduction and induction, Spinozism is permeated by the necessity to always generate wider explanations of phenomena and their causes. For this reason this framework must be considered synthetic and constructive, because it takes into account the role of intellectual inference and abduction, useful instruments oriented towards obtaining conceptual unity (Deleuze, 2005, p. 157). Spinoza's philosophy is a singular type of materialism based on the perfect parallelism between body and mind, which in turn relies on the complete immanence of Life; at the same time it outlines a different form of rationalism that is pragmatic, experiential and verifiable for its effectiveness.

In this thesis, Spinoza's philosophy will not remain a mere abstract intellectual point of reference. Instead, it will work both as my main interpretative framework of viewers' activity, and as a powerful resource to address melancholic and negative sensations in the filmic experience. Its centrality is also due to the fact that most of Spinoza's arguments find new relevance and expression in different fields of study. Therefore, we will observe how these themes can contribute to a new definition of cognitive activities, emotional and intellectual alike, and specifically how they can affect our understanding of the film viewer's agency. In addition, I will highlight the common 'tensions' resonating in Spinoza's thought and in the work of many theorists with a different background, but whose theoretical assumptions are similar. The concepts these intellectuals share are the idea of the mind as embodied; a complete immanence of the human in nature and reality; the association among intellectual speculations and body states and, at the same time, a detachment from pure empiricism. It is essential that they all observe that the foundations of the cognitive processes, which influence language and abstractions, reside in perceptive and relational modalities, thus transforming the traditional assumptions according to which aesthetic phenomena need a secondary interpretation and do not express thought on their own. Now we will verify how these ideas, for instance, are

comparable to those of George Lakoff, one of the most recognised linguists of our time, and examine how this intellectual encounter can be transposed to film theory.

CHAPTER 2

THE EXPERIENTIALIST PARADIGM

George Lakoff: Presentation

To describe and formulate a theory of language is not a neutral operation; it implies the definition of a model of human mind and agency. For this reason, since their dissemination, Semiotics and Linguistics have never been limited to their own specialized readership. Indeed, a theory of symbolic and communicative activities reorients psychology and implicitly influences political and moral worldviews.

American linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by Empiricism. This current of thought was represented by famous scholars like the psychologist B. F. Skinner and the linguist Leonard Bloomfield, who were interested in the description of the external characteristics of communication, and argued against the possibility of referring to any type of inner categorisation and activity (Chomsky, 1966, p. 55). This approach requires focusing mainly on the stimulus-response mechanism that produces determined linguistic phenomena and does not acknowledge any particular autonomous faculty to the human mind, which stands as a *tabula rasa*. The ethical consequence of this definition of the brain and of our agency is that no freedom is conceivable and that well-being can be guaranteed just by looking for the right series of stimuli necessary to direct society in the proper way.

In reaction to this, Noam Chomsky interpreted language as a faculty based on inner *a priori* structures, and therefore dependent on transcendental and disembodied rules universally shared by human-kind (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 470). These characteristics of the mind allow us to generate an indefinite number of linguistic data, whose production cannot be referred exclusively to external inputs. The focus on the autonomous faculties of the human brain gives also the name to this particular orientation: Generative Grammar and, in the case of Chomsky, more precisely Generative Transformational Grammar. The difference resides essentially in the fact that Chomsky highlights our ability not only to generate structures of language, but also to transform them during the course of our lives. This revolutionary approach is generally considered the first cognitive turn in Linguistics, and also coincides with the first systematic attempt to describe human mental activity by means of

computational and mathematical models. This paradigm is also known as Objectivism because it is based on the study of those structures of the mind that mirror reality, and searches for the perfect correspondence between signs, their schemas and the relation of things in the world. Because of this assumption, objectivist theorists maintain that language relies on strict logical rules, which can be illustrated through algorithmic representations and can be reduced to simple meaningful particles linked to an objective categorisation of the world (Lakoff, 1987, pp. xii-xiii). We can see how this current is linked to Cartesian philosophy, to the idea of thought as pure and disinterested and to the demand for a crystallised and perfect series of correspondences between the syntactic organisation of our communication and the inner principles and rules of the world. This attitude does not take into account the experiential and empirical basis of research, which becomes vague and unreliable for any systematic description. Indeed, Chomsky divides linguistic phenomena into *competence* and *performance*; the first term indicates the inner faculties of the brain and the main object of his studies, while the latter refers to its external manifestations and applications, which can be multiple and subject to such variations that any coherent analysis is impossible.

The work of George Lakoff is placed in continuity with the generative and cognitive approach, but begins by raising some problematic issues at the foundation of this framework, such as the origin of the syntactic and disembodied structures of the brain, or how it is possible to separate the physical dimension from the intellectual one. On the basis of these interrogatives Lakoff reformulated all of the assumptions posed by Objectivism, not for the purpose of denying their validity or effectiveness, but to allow cognitive linguistics to address new themes, such as the embodied mind, and to refute strict computational models. This is what we will describe as the second cognitive revolution, characterised by a focus on the experiential bases of cognition and imaginative thought. The polemical, challenging positions assumed by Lakoff, who also authored a critical analysis of the major concepts of Western Thought, made him one of the most influential intellectuals of the last decades, whose texts stimulated studies and research in science, humanities and the arts. Lakoff uses his theory of the mind also to address social issues directly, and is a well-known analyst of the communication and semantic foundations of American politics. In my view, the most important aspect of Lakoff's work is that he presented a general theory for embodied cognition, thus establishing a completely

new analytical paradigm. Therefore, his work (in collaboration with Mark Johnson) does not simply represent a new reading of some cognitive activities, but, like Spinoza's philosophy, it constitutes the beginning of a new perspective on human cognition. Hence, we can extend the comparison among intellectual figures and assume that if Chomsky could be considered as a modern Descartes, Lakoff and his work would constitute a Spinozan reply to his system, and then highlight the similarities between some theoretical concepts of the two. Although a great number of affinities will be mentioned, I do not suggest a complete coincidence between Spinoza and Lakoff, the philosophical differences between whom are not secondary and will be discussed later. However, with this theoretical encounter we may go beyond the first-(transcendental) person perspective of cognitive linguistics studies and use a third-person position, as Warren Buckland defines it, which allows us to discuss also the relational and perceptive components of cognition (Buckland, 2000, p. 32). This theoretical transformation avoids the strict social determinism typical of cultural approaches since with this new interpretation it is possible to confront the social and natural models of human cognition and to demonstrate how these aspects affect each other. By transferring these views to film analysis we will be able to combine different methodological approaches and to reflect on their similarities.

The Semantic Turn in Cognitive Linguistics

It is possible to summarise the main arguments of the Objectivist models of understanding in the following propositions:

- Thought consists in the abstract and disembodied manipulation of symbols, which are internal representations of the external world;
- The mind is comparable to a machine that operates by algorithmic computation, and whose symbolic activity stands in correspondence with the order of nature (isomorphism);
- This faculty of the mind is independent from our physical characteristics, whose importance is incidental and limited to the description of our particular performances in life;
- Thought and language are atomistic, or rather they can be divided into simple significant particles that follow logical and mathematical rules.

Nonetheless, from the 1970s onwards the tendency to describe exclusively these features of our intellection was questioned by many scholars who were interested in discovering the intellectual process by which particular syntactic structures gain significance (Lakoff, 1987, p. 270). Indeed, the objectivist and Cartesian idea according to which we simply reproduce abstract signs mechanically and organise them into pure logical relations does not explain their effectiveness or the possibility to use them in ordinary life. Moreover, the value of Formal Logic does not imply its power to mirror reality, but highlights its capacity to connect elements and explain various phenomena. In order to use signs and structures properly we need them to rely on systems of meanings and references, which allow each particle to assume precise functions within particular linguistic conditions (Lakoff, 1987, p. 229). Therefore, Lakoff argues that the logical justification of Mathematics is not false, but it simply shows how algebraic and algorithmic representations capture a particular form of our reasoning, and demonstrates their effectiveness (Lakoff, 1987, p. 224).

Against the idea that concepts are pure abstractions dependent on syntax, Lakoff and his colleagues put forward a model according to which systems of meanings are generated through our interaction in the world. He calls his approach 'Experientialism' or 'Experiential Realism', illustrating how our linguistic activity entails forms of life, concrete relations of beings in the world. Our semantic models are the conceptualisation of specific conditions or states of the body in action, and express their intellectual reflection. Therefore, we understand that our linguistic activity is largely associative and based on the connection of physical encounters with their mental elaboration, and that we cannot separate the abstractions from their reference to concrete sensori-motor experiences since reason is embodied and not transcendental (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 22). The fact that our thought registers the states of our body in the world motivates the use of the term realism, which does not stand for objectivity or absolute truth, but for the idea that every concept can be referred to a particular type of interaction of existing entities in the world. This interpretation of the concept of 'real' and existence leads to a refusal of the absolute arbitrariness of signs and words, and to a reconsideration of postmodern and poststructuralist assumptions on the impossibility to formulate long-term theories. Even though we do not have objective methods to analyse the world or perfect instruments of verification, every model possesses its relative truth since it describes an arrangement of things in the world. Experientialism rejects the existence of an

external order in reality or the interpretation of reason as ‘God’s eye’ looking at the world from the outside: ‘We are not outside of reality. We are part of it, *in* it. What is needed is not an externalist perspective, but an internalist perspective [...] But that does not mean that knowledge is impossible. We can know reality on the basis of our being part of it’ (Lakoff, 1987, p. 261).

This position compels us to evaluate models and paradigms for their coherence, effectiveness and for the amount of reality they take into account. Furthermore, symbols and linguistic data, although they do not mirror reality and are inadequate to describe the world without a system of meanings, constitute the results of bodily encounters. They are traces and marks of our activity in the mind, therefore they all possess a real basis and a descriptive power to analyse. These ideas also suggest a different interpretation of Relativism and of the concept of cause.

Traditionally, every phenomenon has been thought to be produced by a series of events, and so we endeavour to build and imagine an explicative chain of causes that will describe this process effectively. Nonetheless, this intellectual procedure will be endless if we only rely on the definition of singular events in their succession, because we will always find smaller or new causes that will complicate our description, making our knowledge vague and unreliable. In order to understand and use a model of causation adequately we need a general illustration of how causes are related to a whole framework (Debs, 2010). This paradigm will constitute the system of reference that allows the comprehension of singular events and gives us the possibility to direct them from a certain source to a determined goal. Systemic causation should be conceived of as a condition of understanding, a conceptual model generated from experience, from which we start our intellectual activity, and reality is in itself the general and absolute prerequisite of any form of existence. It is interesting to notice how Lakoff (in collaboration with Mark Johnson) explains the importance of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, stating that the system of causations used by the famous German physicist is not a negation of Newtonian mechanics, but a description of Time curvatures and spatial relations using a different point of reference (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 229). In light of the fact that every concept is relative to the type of interaction it describes and to its participants, we also gain a new definition of time, which does not exist as an abstract mathematical measure. What we indicate with this expression is nothing but the registration of the length of the relations particular beings establish in the world and their conceptualisation. This

also motivates the coexistence of so many different concepts of time, which is verifiable by just analysing the language of an individual person in his/her ordinary life (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 138). This experiential notion of Time resembles the one discussed in the first chapter and leads to a similar distinction between contextual and experiential definitions of time (duration) and an idea of eternity that includes all of them.

Experientialism affirms the centrality of sensory stimuli and perception, but differs from classical Empiricism (more specifically Eliminativism) for many reasons. Eliminativism is a radical form of Empiricism based on the idea that cognitive phenomena should be studied only in strictly physical terms and that any reference to abstraction is inadequate because we do not possess evidences and cause-effect correlation to motivate this intellectual activity (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 110). First of all, while Lakoff highlights the importance of mental elaboration and imaginative activity, empiricist philosophy typically refuses to refer to any abstract operation and focuses only on the functioning of things in the external world. Consequently, it mainly relies on biological and neurological explanations and on the idea that an effective chain of causes can describe the reasons of phenomena. Lakoff himself affirms the importance of technologies like neuroimaging and fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) in expressing our neuronal behaviour, but advises to not consider them as complete descriptions, because they just constitute representations of a far more complex and everlasting process (Central European University, 2013). The experiential approach, therefore, denies that in our intellectual operations, linguistic and conceptual in a broad sense, we simply and mechanically respond to sensory stimulation or to changes in ecological factors. It is, of course, the interaction with other beings that determines transformations in our embodied mind, but this point does not eliminate creative intellectual activity (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 112). In substance, the two paradigms differ in that Experientialism considers human cognitive activity as an indivisible set of perception and imagination, which are the two aspects of the same process, and interprets the physical world as a source for verification and discovery. On the contrary, Empiricism rejects the ‘abstract’ sphere, which is seen as a plane made of pure assumptions, which can all be equally true without any possibility to test their validity and the concrete causes of their existence (Chemero, 2009, pp. 14-15).

The main role of the body and of all its components in the study of our imaginative faculties led the second generation of cognitive scientists to focus on two parts of our nature that previous studies had omitted altogether: emotions and the non-conscious. Indeed, analysing the physical world implies necessarily to come to terms with the nature of our reactions and with their reflections in our minds, a perspective that highlights the importance of sensations for our intellection. Because our thought is characterised by the affections of our body, the typical distinction between emotion and reason has no theoretical basis because we cannot think of our mind as something composed by ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ parts, but as a complex integrated system continuously modified by the encounters with other beings (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 13). Lakoff and Johnson’s work connects with Spinoza’s insight that the affective nature of reason implies that thought is passionately involved in the world, and that without the emotional content of an idea related to a particular object or physical state no reflection would be possible, and we would be unable to make any kind of decision.

The association of feelings and concepts highlights the importance of emotional learning, that is to say the fact that no adequate comprehension happens without an appropriate emotional involvement and participation. Therefore, even the apparently ‘coldest’ and most detached concept is related to a certain mix of sensations and to the expression of a particular agency. For this reason Lakoff affirms that Mathematics and Formal Logic have meanings, or rather they do not report objective, neutral and external descriptions of things, but derive from the same associative thinking we use to generate other intellectual frameworks (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 443). Ideas are related to modes of being, they reflect particular operations and express agencies and forms of power to live and act. The affirmation of self and of its capacities, which is implicitly involved in the discovery of new agencies and thoughts, must not be interpreted as the will to dominate and control others. It constitutes the main purpose of the homeostatic principle discussed above, which is the mechanism through which we use other beings and parts of the world effectively. The basic function of sensations is so to help us to orient ourselves in the world and to persevere in a state of well-being, which is in turn the main source for the construction of morality and ethics (Damasio, 2004, p. 84; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 291). Because emotions are related to complex body states, they do not simply express singular reactions, but multimodal conditions characterised by

different affects, even contrary to each other. A sensation of pleasure related to the perception of our power can be accompanied by the uncomfortable idea to lose this state and to the necessity to defend it in some way. We receive multifaceted and even opposite emotional feedbacks, which always work together, thus demonstrating that we cannot discuss feelings in strict stimulus-response terms (Debs, 2010).

The fact that our relational nature is continuously determined by encounters with other beings and by the conceptual associations we generate from these connections implies that our mental activity resembles a cascade of neural bindings, of imaginative associations we can hardly manage and direct. This mechanism, which stands also at the foundation of memory, exemplifies the fact that we are not aware of most of our mental activity. Actually, according to recent studies, 98% of our intellectual activity is non-conscious (Central European University, 2013), but the use of this term has no negative or moral connotation, it is not necessarily linked to traumatic experience or to emotional removal, it simply defines what goes beyond our control. This is exactly the domain of Lakoff's studies on mind and language; he interprets the non-conscious as the main source of our knowledge and explicative power, and so its conquest constitutes the constant discovery (and we can say also generation) of new possibilities and agencies (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 14). The studies on the embodied mind are mainly characterised by the necessity to transform non-conscious activity into consciousness and by the desire to discover the reasons and the meanings of words and symbols by linking them to their physical and interactive origin. This type of research has the purpose of strengthening our associative thinking by complicating it and unveiling its multifaceted nature, to understand its functioning and the path to direct it effectively, thus actively participating in our mental life.

We can indicate our imaginative capacities with the term commonalities: the general properties of our embodied minds, whose knowledge involves the comprehension of our physical composition and of the neural processes that lead to abstraction and imagination (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 4). Before moving to the next section we can summarise the experientialist paradigm in these statements: thought is completely embodied and consists in the conceptualisation of physical experience; for this reason it must be considered imaginative, not automatic and indirect, because it is based on the use of idealised cognitive models (ICMs) such as *prototypes, frames, categories, image schemas, metonymies* and *metaphors*, which

do not mirror the order of reality and cannot be considered representations. More specifically, they indicate types of relations we engage in the world, thus symbols and linguistic outputs are the traces and marks deriving from these operations; human intellect is ecological, it cannot be reduced to simple parts and its activity goes beyond the mechanical manipulation of abstract symbols; therefore, the comprehension of the mind passes through the discovery of the interactive possibilities of the body in the world (Lakoff, 1987, p. xv; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 77). Lakoff suggests considering the common properties of human nature as the potentialities of the embodied mind to act at both physical and intellectual level. ICMs are conceptual instruments grounded in experience and influence most of our intellectual processes (Lakoff, 1987, p. 267). In the following pages we will discuss Lakoff's interpretation of these semantic tools and demonstrate how their generation and behaviour, as for the Spinozan common notions, capture particular agencies and relations between beings.

Thought is Interested: Categories, Prototypes, Colour Concepts, Frames and Image Schema

Western thought has traditionally considered categories as the abstract and neutral definition of common characteristics between the members of a particular group and stated the independence of these properties from experience. Cognitive Semantics has strongly challenged this assumption and one of the most important contributions in this sense can be found in the studies of Eleanor Rosch. In her essay *Natural Categories* (1973), she rejected the idea that categories and prototypes are objective representations and started to make experimental analysis on human imaginative activity, demonstrating that categorisation does not resemble at all a process of simple mirroring (Lakoff, 1987, p. 40; Rosch, 1973, p. 329). Categories, which are concepts concerning particular objects, are the results of inference made about them and registered through our neural mapping, characterised by the non-conscious activity of billions of cells connected through synapses. The latter allow communication between different parts of the brain and make it possible to associate sensory stimuli to more complex ideas. Therefore, inference and neural categorisation strictly depend on the condition in which we experience the object and how our bodies 'shape' that specific relation (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 19). Rosch found that we have different levels of categorisation; the first we develop is

basic, and recognises general characteristics as the operations peculiar to a class of beings, their shapes up to more sophisticated definitions (such as the common knowledge and evaluation of a particular object within society), which make it possible to compare the same members of a category. Consequently, another important discovery made by Rosch is that the prototypes we generate from this activity are largely asymmetrical and constituted by different degrees of centrality (Lakoff, 1987, p. 41; Rosch, 1973, p. 330; 346). This means that we establish a specific idea of an item as a cognitive reference point, and then we use it in our communicative interaction, and continuously confront it with the categories of other individuals. We also modify our concept through different experiences of the same being or by noticing different types of that object, even though it is difficult to transform a model that was constant for most of our life. One of the most effective examples of how our categorisation works can be found in the analysis of colour concepts. Experiments demonstrated that they do not exist outside in the world, neither do they represent logical properties of the mind, because this would imply that colours are monolithically defined with minimum degrees of variations. On the contrary, our categorisation of colours is based on several physical components like light conditions, wavelengths of electromagnetic radiations, colour cones and neural processing (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 24). As for the Spinozan definition, it is not our independent thought that defines the category, but it is a series of physical phenomena expressed in our embodied mind that generates that specific type of model. A prototype of colour is not an objective instrument and does not work as a full description of what, for example, red is, but as a wide range of possibilities in which red can be used. The relation of these ideas with real conditions of the body implies also the fact that they are not fully arbitrary, but vivid abstractions that can be compared and used in everyday life. Moreover, we can see how our intellectual activity is anything but 'pure': it is always filtered and virtual, because it is related to something else, such as our perceptive conditions and the conceptual schematizations we have formed in our life.

The concreteness of thought and the experiential nature of ICMs become evident by analysing another fundamental cognitive model: the *frame*, which was first used by Charles Fillmore in the 1970s to indicate the semantic paradigm for words, symbols and sentences (Lakoff, 1987, p. 68). In his famous essay, *Frame Semantics* (1982), Fillmore affirmed that frame is formed through the embodiment of

a specific agency like eating at a restaurant, an operation that we non-consciously register together with all the types of activities and sentences related to it. It is in this way that we use words like waiter, menu, maître, which, uttered in the restaurant context, have a certain function and effectiveness (Fillmore, 1982, p. 119; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 117). Substantially, this cognitive instrument provides an overall conceptual structure defining semantic relationships among all its members and allows the usage of all the possible expressions and actions operable in that specific situation. The presence of a conceptual paradigm is also necessary for the generation of complex reflections within the same framework and, consequently, for the development of metalinguistic reasoning, which can be accompanied by comparisons between the whole structures of different semantic systems. In this sense ‘breaking’ a frame means contradicting a semantic coherence, like using war language in everyday life, which can generate irony and also productive associations. The aetiology of the frame demonstrates the essential continuity existing amid meanings and actions, since concepts are always ‘spatialised’ and require to be linked to physical experience. Indeed, a number of our ideas arise from our capacity to move in a particular space, and to form schemas of these motor operations.

This idealised cognitive model is commonly known as the image schema, which is exactly the act of perceiving regions, boundaries, paths, objects and their relations within a specific area (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 508). The purpose of this activity is to provide a general description of the possible agencies in particular spaces, in order to use these schemas to orient ourselves in similar conditions and to transfer the general sense of these operations from one conceptual domain to another. This additional component of our imaginative thinking is based on visual-motor perceptions and it is possible because of the connection between different parts of the brain through neuronal links and synapses, which literally transform what is seen into concepts of the body (Central European University, 2013). This neuronal activity is fulfilled also by people who are blind from birth, therefore it depends on the conceptualisation of integrated physical states and not on specific sensorial stimulations. The most used and analysed forms of this body-based concept are the container schema and the source-path-goal model. The first is based on the perception of things as whole systems, which have an interior reality distinguished from the external world and are characterised by other smaller parts. These sets of beings work as a topological boundary, in whose perspective their components and

outer entities operate and move (Lakoff, 1987, p. 271). We normally adopt container schema models in thousands of everyday life activities, such as drinking water from a bottle (indicated by words like into, inside, out, and outside). Actually, these are cross-modal instruments since we can make use of spatial expressions in reference to art and philosophy, and we apply the logic of motion also in mathematic propositions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 32; Lakoff, 1987, p. 355). The source-path-goal schema, instead, traces the trajectory an individual must follow to reach a state seen as the ultimate goal, and is often announced by words like ‘toward’, ‘away’, ‘along’, and ‘through’. With the elaboration of a model related to a particular agency and motion we trace the ontological definition of a *scenario*, a structure of events and relations characterised by a precise logic, which works as a whole for its components and internal agents (Lakoff, 1987, p. 286). Therefore, by recognising a situation prototype we also recall a set of possible actions applicable to that specific condition, which we try to apply in the most effective way. As for any other cognitive operation, this conceptual model is not monolithic, and can present different variations (obstacles, non-linear movement, repetitions and so on), and it is exemplary of how imaginative activity relies on bodily projections in a way that denies the typical dichotomy between perception and conception (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 37). All these ICMs (prototypes, frames, categories, image schemas) are not isolated faculties operating on their own; on the contrary, most of our activity is characterised by the simultaneous presence of these conceptual instruments, thus presenting itself as complex and multimodal. Because of their capacity to connect physical states and kinaesthetic situations, ICMs constitute a cornerstone of my embodied approach and will be largely employed in my film analyses. Furthermore, the associative nature of these mechanisms and their capacity to blend together different sensations and concepts lead us to the discussion of the most relevant theoretical innovation made by Lakoff: the redefinition of the role of metonymy and his revolutionary interpretation of metaphor as a major conceptual instrument.

Metonymical and Metaphorical Blending

Linguists have generally interpreted figures of speech as secondary functions of language, unnecessary to unveil the inner rules of semiosis. This refusal is related to the connection these expressions have with poetry and other contextual phenomena,

whose study is considered irrelevant for the purpose of making inferences about the nature of our communication because of their irregular nature that excludes any systemic definition (Lakoff, 1987, p. 341). Lakoff questioned this paradigm by affirming that when we start to reflect on how the mind operates within linguistic processes, we go beyond the simple semiotic enquiry, and begin to analyse words and expressions in terms of concepts and intellectual models, addressing the foundations of all our cognitive activity (Lakoff, 1987, p. 110). The use of metonymical sentences, for example, is not just the effective ability to use an individual object or its characteristics to indicate the entire group it belongs to. It indicates the possibility to understand a whole conceptual system, a category, by referring to one of its members or to submodels that stand for the entire structure (Lakoff, 1987, p. 79; p. 104).

A famous example used by Lakoff to show the effectiveness of metonymical blending and generalisation is: 'The White House is not saying anything', which clearly means that the USA government has not expressed yet an opinion about some issue. Here it is possible to observe how the name of a building stands for an entire political organisation, because of the conceptual connection between the institutions and the physical places where they reside (Lakoff, 1987, p. 77). We operate this type of conceptual association in a wide variety of forms defining social stereotypes, reference points and idealised examples. The prototypes generated through metonymical blending do not express fixed and central categories; on the contrary, since these models arise from the interaction of our embodied mind and are renewed by new encounters, they are characterised by variations, non-central members and radial categories. The latter are members who are not directly linked to the main level of a category and involve the existence of other prototypes generated around it (Lakoff, 1987, p. 153). The lack of an ultimate level of categorisation implies the constitutive incompleteness of our models and the fact that we continuously confront the members of a single category and negotiate their meaning by communicating and acting in the world. The strong part-whole relation deriving from the analysis of metonymy is additional evidence of how even higher and elaborated ideas depend on body states and perceptions and, conversely, of how concepts are concrete and influence our physical life.

This interpretation of metonymic models is in total opposition with the objectivist idea according to which categories and concepts must mirror nature and

clearly represent objects. ICMs express a state of the things in the world and recall relations of beings; therefore, they are not like ‘silent paintings’ and ‘fixed images’ (to use Spinoza’s critique of pure symbolic activity), but affectively based models; their purpose resides in connecting the abstract content of our experience and in allowing us to make inferences and to build our knowledge of reality (Lakoff, 1987, p. 204; p. 299). The associative and constructive power of our intellect is the central component of metaphorical blending. Far from any literary function, metaphor is the key cognitive faculty to understand how we link together ideas that we believe to be detached from each other, and how sensations and affects are turned into abstractions. The function of this intellectual model is precisely the act of transferring meanings and concepts from one conceptual domain to another allowing the use of expressions, words and sentences deriving from different fields of our experience (Lakoff, 1987, p. 288). A metaphor is therefore always composed of a source and a target domain, a conceptual path that describes the trajectory of our associations and its relationship with our embodied knowledge. Most of the thousands of associative ideas we possess and use are formed in our childhood and are deeply present in our non-conscious cognition, thus implying that we continuously employ them unaware of their origin. One of the simplest types of blending we form in the first years of our life is describing the emotional capacity of a person by linking it to warmth or coldness. This kind of association is usually related to the act of recognising the presence and care of parental figures based on the body heat. The affections of our body are thus turned into abstractions that define a condition of the body and of its power to act. Thus, we obtain vivid conceptualisations of emotions, like the comparison of anger to a container full of boiling fluid, due to the fact that this feeling is commonly accompanied by a rise in blood pressure (Lakoff, 1987, p. 383). With this ordinary metaphorical blending we are already mixing together perceptions linked to heat, spatial dispositions with kinaesthetic image schemas and the definition of an agency related to a peculiar state of the mind. From this type of association it is possible to comprehend how we generate complex and indirect conceptualisations like the connection between time and money we typically use in capitalist societies or the definition of someone’s moral and emotional predicament with reference to the disposition of his/her body (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003, p. 9; p. 18).

It is also possible to understand that there are different levels of conceptualisations and we can define the most elaborate as *supermetaphors*, or rather metaphors related to a multiplicity of neural events and mnemonic associations (bigideasfest, 2013). Therefore, a complex metaphor does not simply consist in associating words and concepts, but it captures an entire condition of the embodied mind, a particular ontology that works as the filter for our reasoning by providing a scenario, a scale of values and a set of sensations related to it (Lakoff, 1987, p. 406). Since it is the basic semantic process through which we give sense, order and meaning to things so that we can interact with them, metaphorical activity lies at the foundations of cognition and allows the generation of particular codes. Grammars, specific types of language and behaviours depend on these conceptual systems, without which they could not be used and understood properly. Because our models are interested categorisations of experience, they are incomplete and polysemic, even though their structure may appear unitary and self-coherent. The case of the word *over*, analysed by Lakoff, is exemplificative of this multiplicity since it covers nearly one hundred kinds of different metaphorical uses based on as many different experiential conditions, revealing the incredible cascade of possible activities related to single signs (Lakoff, 1987, p. 418). Moreover, cognitive models need to refer to something else to prove their own validity, though their internal rules are concrete and effective (Lakoff, 1987, pp. 356-358). The ultimate reference points are reality, existence and the presence of our embodied mind, which form the indubitable conditions for cognition. The essential nature of these associations does not imply that all our thought is metaphorical; we generate concepts also starting from simple perceptions, but without this cognitive activity most of our abstractions could not be accomplished. Moreover, the universality of metaphors and of the ICMs does not mean that all mankind produces the same kinds of concepts: the common elements are the mechanisms and intellectual processes, not their results, which can be uncountable, and the ability to communicate, though not in a pure, clear and disinterested way. Analysing cognition, according to Lakoff, consists in comprehending how different conceptual systems are formed in order to become an active participant in our intellectual activity; this account, then, recognises the discovery and examination of body rationality like a creative enterprise (Lakoff, 1987, pp. 334-337). The experientialist model of the embodied mind makes us

understand that we exist as communicative beings, as systems of relations, immersed in a universe of informational structures.

Concepts, Agency, Values and Empathy

The impact ICMs have on our life necessarily affects our thinking in such a deep way that it is reflected in morality, philosophy, science, art and all of our intellectual life. Indeed, it determines the generation of ontology through the body, of entire worldviews whose effects are concrete operations and agency we can fulfil in the world. Concepts are nothing but physical relations and the ideas of these encounters, but this does not imply that all thoughts are ordinary and simple. On the contrary, it means that disciplines considered abstract, useless and elitist matter have a concrete importance since they capture potentialities of our reasoning (Lakoff, 1987, p. 157). Even though rules and laws have meanings, they do not represent objective descriptions of rights and duties; by codifying a specific definition of society and its components, they describe a paradigm within which certain activities are considered respectful to a standard and others deviated from it. Given that there is no form of pure and transcendental methodology, the typical distinction between human and natural sciences simply indicates different methods, because they are all formed through a similar process, but they are distinguished by specific relational and perceptual characteristics. Intellectual views are based on the development of our embodied mind, of its categorisation of experience, and shape our behaviour, our judgement and an interrelated agency.

Similarly, a philosophical system expresses a state of the body, defines a way of living and the possibility to interact with other beings in a particular modality by giving specific meanings to those interactions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 542). This implies that to philosophise is to make concepts about pieces of the world, to problematise a certain amount of reality and evaluate how much power and life is involved in it. This acknowledgement persuaded George Lakoff and Mark Johnson to investigate the embodied origin of currents of Western Thought, in order to bring out the concreteness of metaphysical statements, to show how they influence our existence and reveal their creative and synthetic nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 136). Conceiving ideas as active entities constitutes a further stimulus to understanding that we are connected to the physical world, thus considering

ourselves as interactive beings, who are always identified in systemic relations with others.

Our ecological nature leads to a different definition of the self since subjectivity can no longer be interpreted as a monolithic structure. According to Lakoff, there is no inner 'homunculus' to refer to, and the definitions of ourselves we generate are constructive models in continuous renewal (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 243). Therefore, we can substitute the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* with an experiential becoming of subjectivity.

The most common descriptions of the self are associated to image schemas and containers through which we indicate a state of the subject as reference point while shifts away from that condition express variations and modifications. These basic neural bindings already demonstrate how the self is a problematic and dynamic structure since it is possible to conceive and compare different states of the subjectivity in a single moment (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 280). Similarly to any other metaphorical activity, the associations we generate can be simple and intended only for the purpose of orientation, or they can be abstract and connected to the discussion of complex ideas. The ability to extend the self and to redefine it in accordance with our interactions is the basic mechanism through which we have access to social life. When we encounter someone else and start to interact with them, we are also sharing the conceptual models of the actions they are performing, and we try to mentally imitate them and their meanings. The models of our identities are thus always complicated by the presence of other beings we have to deal with both physically and intellectually.

In addition to this new interpretation of the self and of empathic emotions, recent discoveries about mirror neurons, which led to the appearance of the so-called third cognitive revolution (based on the union between neurosciences and cognitive theory), have increased the interest in the ecological aspects of the mind. These cells, discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his research team in 1995, enable the simulation of other humans' activities, which directly 'resonate' in our mind, becoming one of the fundamental bases of our social and cultural development. Indeed, we non-consciously imitate the movements of others and categorise these actions, thus creating a conceptualisation for these experiential situations, to which it is possible to associate a symbolic and linguistic structure (Debs, 2010). Therefore, simulative and imitative activities are the fundamental operations that allow

language acquisition and the elaboration of complex concepts related to interaction and social life. Furthermore, the activity of mirror neurons goes beyond the mere imitation of other individuals since it enacts imaginative processes within different types of operations, and allows the embodiment of affective-conceptual perceptions. For this reason, the activity of mirror neurons is crucial also to understand how film experience works, by enabling film viewers to imitate the actions on the screen and to understand the abstract content related to them. From these achievements in research we also gain a new definition of empathy, which is generally interpreted as the automatic reproduction of the emotional states of others, or is connected to a peculiar emotional sensitivity.

Although there is an automatic form of empathy, caused by the reflection of perceptions in our intellect, this imitative operation is essentially a semantic negotiation (not an act of reproduction), and consists in the attempt to ‘read the mind’ of an external being by associating the meanings of its behaviour to our theory of mind, our cognitive model for social situations (bigideasfest, 2013; Levin, Hymel, Baker, 2013, p. 244). Empathy conveys the immanent relational condition we live in and it is an activity that we do not perform only in social life, but in every aspect of our interaction (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 566). Even the act of reading is based on this simulative and empathic activity, thanks to which we begin to speculate about the sense of what we perceive and to conciliate our models to the new ones encountered. Nonetheless, negotiating is never a linear process, it is characterised by misunderstandings, caesuras between the parts, negations and communicative difficulties, which makes it impossible to predict the outcome of a particular interaction (Lakoff, 1987, p. 332). On the other hand, assuming the position of the other or being active and conscious in a particular relation (such as an artistic relation) involves sharing an entire condition of the embodied mind and so it means acquiring different values and general semantic definitions, reflected in a renewed capacity to act. However, empathic engagement has nothing to do with projection and alienation, which can be considered fixations of the subject within particular dispositions, and can be associated with passivity; it simply expresses and strengthens the conception of the mind and the self as multifaceted and interactive. According to Lakoff, the capacity to embody the reasons of others, to reconsider our territory and the limits of our intellection stands at the foundations of a responsible life whose purpose is to be conscious of our nature and able to express it in its best

form (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, pp. 333-334). In conclusion, my aim is to reflect this relational and interactive model of human activity in the discussion of film theory and in the analysis of case studies. To this purpose I would combine modern achievements in the field of embodied cognition (and concerning the activity of mirror neurons) with a Spinozist perspective, which highlights the affective-conceptual nature of human cognition.

The Similarities Between Spinoza and Lakoff

The separate discussion of the main concepts of Spinoza's philosophy and George Lakoff's linguistic theory allows us to observe and compare the commonalities between the intellectual universes of these two theorists. Nevertheless, we must not elude an evaluation of the differences that characterise them and, therefore, we should not consider the views of the two as entirely overlapping. First of all, unavoidable historical and contextual conditions are articulated in the work of these two theorists, which obviously distance their positions, and maybe also the purposes of their research. Apart from the peculiarities linked to the social and cultural background, Lakoff's interest is mainly scientific, in the sense that his production is the expression of a particular methodology within the framework of cognitive studies. Spinoza's philosophy, on the contrary, moves outside the coordinates of a specific paradigm, and his appreciation of methodological sciences is one of the consequences of his reflection (whose aim is to find a source of eternal pleasure and beatitude), not the opposite.

As for the common stances shared by the two theorists, we may borrow the list of twelve claims made by Heidi Morrison Ravven (Ravven, 2003, pp. 259-260), which actually provides a complete psychological model of the human embodied mind deriving from the connection of Spinozism and Lakoff's embodied cognition:

- Thought is interested and affective, because it is inseparable from the body;
- It conceptualises body states and mappings, which are characterised by sensations and emotions;
- Affections register the encounters we make in the world as they reflect the body's furthering or diminishing (pleasure or pain) by these encounters;

- Representations recall an interactive and experiential situation and the associative activities related to that specific experience;
- Conscious thought arises from self-reflection, since it is based on relational systems rather than inner abstract operations;
- Our cognitive processes are largely non-conscious and, therefore, the non-conscious is the source for the discovery of the possibilities of the self in its environment;
- Bodily/affective imitation and contagion is a primitive form of sociality, and the self is not atomic. Therefore, Spinoza's theory of the Imitation of Affects is largely compatible with the modern theories of empathy and mirror neurons' activity;
- Morality and values are generated through homeostatic models of well-being;
- Ethics is not dependent on transcendental systems of judgement, but on the continuous evaluation of connective and destructive power of things;
- Language is imaginative and based on the use of ICMs;
- The mind is an integrated process with no higher or lower parts;
- There are universal affections (*conatus*, the desire to live and increase our power to act) and secondary emotions linked to the specificity of our condition.

This list of claims effectively summarises the ecological and relational dimension we live in, implying that to discover our subjectivities is to understand how they behave with the other beings and objects that surround them. The self, then, is extended because it generates affective models of the things it interacts with (mostly if they share similar characteristics) and from this state it starts a semantic and complex negotiation. The empathic mechanism begins with the imitation of the body states of other individuals (Spinoza, 1979, p. 102; Damasio, 2004, p. 86; p. 115), and is linked to the understanding of an agency, the definition of a set of actions a body is able to perform. Thus, we connect concrete operations to their abstract conceptualisation, defining entire ways of living. Therefore, Ethics relies on the ability to incorporate the theory of the mind of other humans in our definition of

the self, in the ability to expand the landscapes and territories of our bodies, in order to improve our consciousness and our capacity to act (Ravven, 2003). Finally, while the differences in semantic views and the related agencies are linked to specific conditions (cultural, historical, environmental), the general structure of our embodied mind is common, and constitutes the foundation of our possibility to reason and operate at any level. The purpose of my research is to reveal how the film viewer's agency is placed within the embodied cognition model and to use these findings to reflect upon four films that challenge the common idea of emotional engagement.

In addition, this comparison between Spinoza and Lakoff outlines a singular psychological model that is recognisable, as an interpretative instrument, in every kind of human operation. For instance, a number of linguists, such as Zoltán Kövecses, connect studies on metaphor (and ICMs) to art and films, thus removing the typical distance and mistrust between humanities and sciences (Kövecses, 2010, pp. 63-64). The intersubjective predicament described by this cognitive model also recalls many aspects of Vittorio Gallese's 'Shared Manifold Hypothesis' (Ravven, 2003): according to this theory, our cognition cannot be described in terms of functional symbols and of the rules that organise them, but it is based on a mutual enactment within bodies, whose encounters enable the formation of codes, languages and specific communicative situations. This is the reason why Gallese considers agency as a key concept to understand intersubjectivity; this term can summarise the constant emotional and intellectual endeavour we must perform in our 'ecological life', based on the empathic process through which we establish meaningful connections between ourselves and others (Gallese, 2001; Ravven, 2003).

Spinozan psychology can be considered antithetical to the positions of Psychoanalysis, which reconstructs the entirety of the subject and believes that when we experience the self as fragmentary we are facing a traumatic state. As a consequence of this, to build a stable definition of our identity we need clear mental representations of things and of their role in our mind. According to Psychoanalysis the non-conscious manifests itself as the counterpart to rationality and the place where uncomfortable knowledge is bounded. These are a few essential elements of the 'Freudian-Cartesian Theatre', a vision of the mind as something partly detached from its functioning in the world and compelled to represent an eternal and unchangeable logic (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 393; Deleuze, Guattari, 1990, p. 298). On the other hand, within the universe of Spinoza and Lakoff, the non-

conscious is the place where all the possibilities of our embodied mind take shape; it is the factory and the productive centre of our physical and intellectual life.

However, the psychoanalytic model of subjectivity must not be considered false and ineffective; rather, it stands on static determinations, which in Spinozan terms are negations. For Spinoza, instead, the limits we perceive (internal and external) are the stimuli we should look for to improve our own definition and our power. Indeed, passions, emotions and the affections we experience with other objects and beings are the sources of knowledge and can be transformed into a new consciousness of the reality we are involved in, thus making subjectivity a constructive process we can direct in the most productive way. Therefore, every form of life has its own reasons and expresses a power to live and, in order to act effectively in relation to it, we should understand it, incorporate its semantic framework and the activity it implicitly carries out with us. However, this does not imply an ascetic refusal of conflict, which must be acknowledged and can even play a creative role. With this conception of the human mind, the generation of knowledge becomes a synthetic, cross-modal and abductive process, where every hypothesis and intellectual system should be judged only by its explicative power and not in reference to a fixed order of nature.

In response to this psychological model it is possible to mention the objections raised by Lawrence Shapiro and outlined in his text *Embodied Cognition* (2011), where he defends the standard objectivist model of cognitive sciences against what he perceives as the naïf approach towards studies on the embodied mind. He asserts that Lakoff's and other scholars' work does not deny the validity of computational and algorithmic models, with problem-solving functions, and that these different hypotheses rely on vague assumptions with no concrete scientific basis, in the sense of mathematic representations (Shapiro, 2011, p. 2). For the purpose of categorisation, Shapiro divides the current trends of the second and third generations of cognitive studies into three streams: the conceptualisation hypothesis, the replacement or ecological model and the constitution paradigm. The first coincides with the study carried out by Eleanor Rosch and other scientists on the generation of ICMs. The second is linked to the description of the self as environmental and relational, and uses neurological descriptions. The third trend is the most philosophical one, and perceives the mind as extended and interested in discovering to what extent other parts of the world take part in our cognitive processes (Shapiro, 2011, pp. 4-5). Shapiro maintains that all three approaches share

the same flaw in rejecting computational models and need symbolic representations to be expressed and verified.

Nonetheless, I do not think that the purpose of the psychological prototype described is to deny the effectiveness of the objectivist paradigm. We have already observed that formal logic and computation are not false; on the contrary, they describe a powerful state of the embodied mind and of its agency, of its capacity to perceive the world regularly. Indeed, one of the aims of the experiential approach is to analyse the relations from which an intellectual paradigm is generated and the connections it is able to form. In addition, with this philosophical attitude it is also possible to highlight how particular codes and symbolic systems are produced from our interaction in reality, since languages need a semantic framework to refer to, which is the result of our conceptualisation of experience. On the other hand, scholars like Anthony Chemero, in *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science* (2009), raise a different critique against the experiential approach. Chemero's theoretical account is an extreme form of empiricism that denies the existence of any reliable data different from the functions of our body in the world. According to Chemero all conceptualisation is nothing but the result of external stimuli and changes in the environment, and no intellectual activity is conceivable. Chemero describes the evolution of the studies on cognition as a path divided by two main theories of the mind, empirical and representational, with some points of agreement (Chemero, 2009, p. 30). His model for cognitive sciences shares the positions of Eliminativism, as it strongly refuses any type of computational and representational activity, even the imaginative and conceptual operations identified by embodied cognition. Chemero maintains that it is not necessary to rely on 'mental gymnastics' to explain our intellection, and draws inspiration from James Gibson's ecological psychology. According to Chemero, Gibson's work is the most valid example to follow for future developments in cognitive studies (Chemero, 2009, p. 106). Perception, therefore, is direct and universal; consequently, the differences in our experiences must be motivated through the analysis of environmental factors and physical conditions. In *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (1979), Gibson explains that colours do not need any categorisation in order to be understood, but are the mere product of our perceptive states in relation to particular environmental circumstances (Chemero, 2009, p. 108).

Nonetheless, as Lakoff pointed out, Gibson worked on perception, not on cognition, and his studies describe the physical mechanisms at the basis of sensory stimulation, while they do not provide for models to understand how semantic definitions are formed and communicated, or the reasons for cultural differences (Lakoff, 1987, p. 216). Chemero and Gibson's belonging to this 'radical' ecological paradigm attribute to experience an objective and monolithic value and believe in mechanistic descriptions of phenomena. In opposition to this and by outlining a Spinozan prototype of the human mind, we have observed that no neutral causation exists, because we always need a system of reference to comprehend and categorise events. Moreover, an experiential approach always takes into account the role and nature of physical states, which are considered unavoidable and implicit; at the same time, it affirms that they have no primary role with respect to the intellectual plane, because the mind and the body express two attributes of the same thing and work in perfect parallelism. Finally, no experience exists as pure fact; phenomena have meanings for us, they do not manifest themselves as casual atomic events, and we conceptualise and try to organise them in order to orient ourselves in the world.

Conclusions: The Effects of this Psychological Model on Film Theory

After this long discussion, we can summarise the results of the theoretical assemblage between Spinoza's philosophy and some stances of embodied cognition, and observe their implications for the description of a prototypical, but not idealised, viewer in relation to film experience. First of all, the viewer should be understood as a relational category, meaning that when we are discussing a perceptual situation we are already involving an interaction between different agents and objects of attention, therefore no transcendental viewer is conceivable, although we imagine him/her as detached and pure. Watching films is a physical and imaginative activity, which starts from audiovisual perception and is influenced by other conditions of the body (position, distance and other contextual and interactive factors). At the same time, as a consequence of Spinoza's and Lakoff's reflections, what we see on the screen (or any other visual medium) is constantly intellectually conceptualised by the viewer, thus becoming an expression of reality and a complete form of thought under particular relational conditions. Nonetheless, our imaginative activity is just partly directed by ourselves and involves several non-conscious operations, which coincide with the generation of conceptual models of experience.

When we perceive actions, movements or simple ‘landscapes’ on the screen we simultaneously generate models of those visual expressions (image schemas, categories, metaphors, and so on) and associate them to our memory, previous knowledge, and current state of the embodied mind. Since this operation involves our body and is interested, it is always characterised by an affective outcome, an emotional response that does not reflect simple, individual feelings, but indicates physical states in relation to something else. Therefore, when we consider emotions at the movies, we are not simply talking about reactions to sensory stimuli; we are defining the particular agency a viewer is operating in respect to the objects and characters on the screen, a specific positioning of his/her embodied mind. Every component of film experience is affective and conceptual, and contributes to the construction of the ontological and semantic frame the viewer interacts with. For this reason, in the film analyses I will use a semantic approach that highlights the perceptual-abstract aspects of the experience and the general coordinates of viewers’ interaction instead of discussing the case studies in terms of syntactic rules or as specific linguistic structures. Viewers’ activity relies on the pre-linguistic level of cognition, therefore, I am not considering films as representational instruments composed by atomic symbolic particles. Instead, I am analysing films as embodied conceptual expressions with which we interact in a creative way.

Specific filmic languages and styles (such as Classical Hollywood Cinema) express, instead, the codification of a peculiar type of visual experience characterised by similar interactive and intellectual properties. This leads us to think that maybe the question we should pose ourselves when we watch a film is not: ‘What does this mean or symbolise?’ but rather: ‘What is this film asking me to do or what can I do in relation to it?’ As a consequence of our intersubjective nature and of the fact that we tend to imitate and make abstractions about the things we perceive, through this interaction we are forced to engage the affective-conceptual world of the film and of its characters, which we recognise as similar or sharing common properties. Therefore, we make inferences about the sense of a particular experience and attribute intentions, goals, desires, emotions and values to fictional figures in a process that resembles the endeavour to ‘read the mind’ of the film and of its characters. We have already observed that these empathic and simulative operations start as a form of emotional contagion or resonance of sudden emotions (Tan, 2013, p. 343). It is from this state that we begin to interact with the film, trying to

understand the worldviews it implies, the semantic and ethical frames expressed by the individuals on the screen, to which we respond with a related agency. Needless to say, this negotiation of meanings and moralities has no linear outputs, and may differ according to the subject considered in modes that can vary from a complete projection of the self towards the characters, to a total negation and refusal of the events on the screen. What we can consider to be common (notions, properties) are the compositions of our embodied minds in relation to film experience, characterised by the non-conscious mechanisms according to which we transform visual experience into vivid concepts of the mind, living forms of intellection we interact with.

The comprehension of a film, therefore, passes through our capacity to be active within this particular experience, to become aware of the actions we are performing and to be able to incorporate the semantic world of the work of art, thus enlarging our territory and broadening our mental and physical universe. Again, within artistic phenomena knowledge is linked to the concept of power because it involves the best expressions of our empathic characteristics, yet not in the sense of being comprehensive and merciful. Becoming conscious viewers means to be participants and actors of our own passions within film experience, able to produce meanings and express all our potentialities with an indefinite (and joyful) tension towards life that manifests itself through the screen and the mind.

PART 2

COGNITIVE FILM THEORY AND PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO FILM ANALYSIS

Evaluations, in essence, are [...] ways of being,
modes of existence of those who judge and evaluate.

(Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 1)

For many years, Spinoza made a living by working as a lens grinder and was able to find in this activity inspiration for further research about optics. When he wrote about visual phenomena, for example, in letter 40 to Jarig Jelles (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 864-866), he did not describe perception as the mere accumulation of sensory data, for he maintained that the collection of singular stimuli does not explain by itself the complex nature of visualisation. In order to organise and comprehend these inputs we need them to rely on a system of reference, built on the indefinite plane (Substance) we live in, and which takes on specific characteristics according to the physical conditions of our body (cf. Spinoza, 2002, pp. 865-866). Thus, perception (not only visual) is always recognised as a synesthetic and synthetic process, in which different kinds of stimuli are condensed and comprehended as a whole.

In regard to Art, Spinoza did not explicitly treat the argument in any of his texts, but we know that he was a worshipper of painting and theatre, since he also acted for a while in his youth and loved Terence's plays. Moreover, he thought that the interest in any discipline that can cause pleasure and knowledge must be supported and considered as an instrument to increase our power to live (Spinoza, 2002, p. 345). Although we do not have any other particular information about Spinoza's opinion on Aesthetic or Poetics, his theory of knowledge and the mind suggests to us the implications of his positions and how they influence the interpretation of artistic manifestations. First of all, since thought is interested and relational, Spinoza denies the existence of a superior form of reasoning and states that scientific and methodological thinking should be considered the most effective only to the extent to which it helps us organise phenomena and perceptions (Spinoza, 1979, p. 231). Therefore, art does not constitute an undeveloped form of thought or an incomplete expression of understanding; every aesthetic production reveals the

power of the intellect under particular conditions of the body and registers a type of interaction it is possible to establish with the work of art. The relational system the viewer (the art receiver in general) generates with the object defines also the agency peculiar to this operation and how the perceiver's subjectivity is defined.

Nonetheless, the psychological specificity and the emotional complex of the participant are also determined by numerous other phenomena related to his/her individual situation, like personal memory or cultural formation, and cannot be completely summarised by the definition of the general structures of a particular operation. Therefore, we can state that according to Spinoza, recalling McLuhan's well-known expression, *the medium is the message* (McLuhan, 1994, p. 9, emphasis added), in the sense that what counts is the relation and what we can do within it (again the famous question: 'what can a body do?').

This concept should not lead us to the idea that the physical singularities of an art form also constitute its limits; on the contrary, we are encouraged to affirm that every perceptive system must be considered as a type of intellection, but needs to be analysed starting from the understanding of how bodies relate within that particular practice. Hence, film experience can be considered a non-'contemplative' interactive system with an implicit emotional and conceptual content that starts from audiovisual perception, an expression of thought that falls within the system of Spinozan embodied philosophy discussed above.

In the first part of this thesis, I have outlined the philosophical framework on which my understanding of film experience relies and I have tried to highlight a prototype of the human (and viewer's) agency deriving from it. Now I will compare this model and the themes related to it with the analyses proposed within the paradigm of Cognitive Film Theory (CFT), by stressing those arguments that validate the proposed hypothesis. In addition to this, I will also contrast these statements with the explanations that deny or oppose them, such as the description of film viewers' agency in strict behavioural terms. In opposition to this I will also critically examine another cognitive analytical model for film analysis, which is essentially based on the idea that film-comprehension happens as a top-down process. These explanations both belong to the cognitive field, and others, while appearing to be antithetical and producing opposite descriptions, all derive from the necessity to analyse films as communicative phenomena and to demonstrate the possibility of their understanding by posing a defined taxonomy and a set of general

assumptions and regularities. As Christian Metz summarised in one of his most famous statements: '*The fact that must be understood is that films are understood*' (Metz, 1974, p. 145; italics in the original), or rather that beyond any *a priori* justification or motivation for film experience, this phenomenon exists as a media event. This unavoidable element motivates the ceaseless search for always more adequate descriptive paradigms and the continuous debate among the different currents of film studies.

Traditionally, these differences are based on the dialectical and antithetical opposition between logical-analytic approaches and the European semiological tradition of film studies (Buckland, 2000, pp. 2-3). It is interesting to notice that the two schools criticise each other of being 'reductionist'. Cognitive theorists ascribe to their supposed opponents, in addition to the classical lack of empirical evidence, the incapacity to direct the analysis beyond a socio-historical determinism or, in the case psychoanalytic approaches, the excessive reliance on Freudian and Lacanian models of the mind (cf. Bordwell, 2010). I argue that the accusation of determinism in general is misleading since, in Spinozan terms, every theoretical point of view implies the choice of a principle of causation and establishes a certain type of determinism. On the other side, Cognitive Film Theory is accused of simply applying new discoveries in the scientific field to other subjects of study without the adequate support of a critical point of view so that it easily falls into so-called scientism (Nannicelli and Taberham, 2014, pp. 10-11). Of course, the real horizon of media theory is far less Manichean than it was described here and this picture does not adequately consider the innumerable shades existing within each theoretical framework. Moreover, if we look closely to the recent publications in the field we can notice that this atavistic difference becomes more and more vague and indefinite since the analyses are mostly based on multidisciplinary approaches. A further element that increasingly overcomes this opposition and encourages a new common ground between film scholars is the recent tendency to highlight the link between film and philosophy. We have seen that it is possible to define films as thought under particular perceptive modalities because, through the philosophy of Spinoza, we have established a parallelism between concepts and body states. Moreover, this connection allows us to observe and examine together the embodied and cognitive characteristics of viewers' agency and their relation to contextual and social meanings. No cultural phenomenon exists as a simple abstract concept, but it always

involves and describes a particular expression of human agency and is linked to the possibility of our bodies to act. At the same time, we cannot consider the natural definitions of our behaviour as something detached from the world and as a form of self-contained knowledge, but as meaningful descriptions that are always in interaction with other contextual conditions besides the notion of scientific objectivity.

One of the innovations that I would like to introduce in film theory is the consideration of cinema as cognitive instrument rather than as an accessory and illusory aspect of human expression. For all these reasons I argue that a Spinozan point of view, put in relation to modern theories of the mind as it was previously done, can serve as a new ontology, an effective new philosophical perspective from which all speculations can find origin and significance. With his notion of Substance as indefinite Plane of Immanence, Spinoza affirmed the perfect parallelism between nature and culture, physical descriptions and semantic analyses. After all, if ideas are related to our interaction in the world, they gain significance because they express the conceptualisation of a practical disposition of our bodies.

Consequently, concepts and intellectual models are living and dynamic beings in relation to other contextual rules, historical and cultural, which in turn affect our body and influence our way to conceive and use it. It is possible, therefore, to analyse the physical reality of cultural descriptions and the social and intellectual implications of cognitive approaches in order to increase the analytic opportunities for film scholars. Knowledge, as we have observed, resides exactly in our capacity to be active and constructive in this everlasting process and to reveal what happens to us at a non-conscious level (it is the most powerful of the affects). This philosophical perspective on film theory attributes a leading value to an abductive and constructive type of reasoning, and identifies audiovisual works as conceptual instruments characterised by a multimodal, synesthetic and synthetic nature. Nonetheless, this notion does not deny the validity of linguistic or syntactical studies on films, but expresses the aim to focus on the pre-linguistic level of communication and highlights the necessity for representational structures to rely on a semantic system, which they codify and regulate.

Finally, I argue that a Spinozan re-evaluation of CFT will also serve to highlight the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the various interpretations of film experience, which, otherwise, would remain implicit and concealed, thus

preventing us from a self-critical understanding of the subjects in question (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 552). Noam Chomsky, for instance, clearly stated that, at the beginning of his career, his linguistic work and response to Behaviourism was based on a Cartesian theory of mind and on the work of the seventeenth century Port-Royal grammarians (Chomsky, 1966, pp. 52-53). In the same way, if we become critically aware of the epistemological grounding of our analytical perspectives, we will be able to compare our paradigms with other intellectual models, thus creating new possibilities for our research. Having clarified these points, we can now move on to the main topic of this whole section, whose purpose is to put all these speculations out of the realm of pure abstractions and to prove their practical validity.

CHAPTER 3

A SPINOZAN RE-EVALUATION OF COGNITIVE FILM THEORY

Film Comprehension as a Top-Down Process

The first scholar and model I will discuss and re-evaluate in accordance with a Spinozan perspective on film experience, is probably one of the most influential of the last decades and constitutes the major reply to film theories based on Structuralism, Marxism and Psychoanalysis. David Bordwell is well-known for his harsh critique of the cultural and continental approach and for the formulation of a new theoretical paradigm for film studies based on the application of the rules of analytic philosophy (Bordwell, 1996, pp. 3-36; Carroll, 1996, pp. 37-68). He has also elaborated a psychologically functionalist account of formal conventions to capture the regularities of film experience and to examine the generation of the narrative process (Bordwell, 2010). My analysis and critique of his work aims to challenge his analysis of narration, which, in my opinion, relies on a traditional rationalist perspective, whereas, in his recent publications, Bordwell seems to be more interested in the affective aspects of film experience (cf. Bordwell, 2010; Bordwell, 2013 pp. 49-50).

In order to define this new cognitive account of narration, Bordwell reinterpreted the work of Russian Formalists and used the notions of *sjuzet* (plot) and *fabula* (story) to describe the necessary conceptual activity the viewer must perform to understand the story of a film. The first term indicates the way a story is told, its style in the arrangement and organisation of the events, while the second one refers to raw narrative material without any reference to expressive strategies. According to Bordwell: 'The *sjuzet* is a system because it arranges components- the story events and state of affairs- according to specific principles' (Bordwell, 1985, p. 50). From these assumptions we can understand that Bordwell's theory directly evokes the viewer's perceptual and intellectual agency, which is interpreted as an active component of film experience. One of the most important elements emerging from his analysis is the reaction against the passivity of the spectator typical of certain analyses belonging to the *Grand Theory* of the 1960s and 1970s.

The scholars influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis tended to see the viewer bound to the realm of fetishism and illusion, victim to the ideological strategies of

dominance and destined to an ineffective and imaginary fragmentation of self and subjectivity through the mechanism of identification and symbolic activity (Bordwell, 2013, p. 43). Against this idea, Bordwell opposes a constructivist model of the viewer able to make inferences and frame hypotheses about narration through which he/she can understand and participate in the events on screen. The mere succession of images, indeed, does not provide by itself all the information necessary to comprehend a film adequately, so it is mandatory to suppose a conceptual production, an 'internal speech', without which no cognition is possible (Bordwell, 1985, p. 17). From this point of view, Bordwell re-uses the Chomskyan objection to strict behavioural scientific descriptions and then starts to list a series of operations a prototypical viewer should perform for the purpose of film intellection (cf. Bordwell, 2013, p. 47). However, this *competence* should not be evaluated as an idealised model but as the definition of some generally shared properties.

An important clarification to make is that, although Bordwell focuses on the inner competences of the viewer and describes a transcendental subject as a reference point for his model, his theory (and no one else's in the framework of CFT) cannot be considered computational in the common sense of the word (Nannicelli and Taberham, 2014, p. 5). Bordwell does not use algorithmic descriptions, neither does he deny the importance of perception and sensory experience to the purpose of the meaning-making process of the film. On the contrary, he gives relevance to the analysis of the historical and economic context that favoured the appearance of a particular narrative and production style. His constructivist account is based on the idea that film experience is a dynamic psychological process constituted by a set of perceptual activities and by the features of our physical experience accompanied by previous knowledge and intellectual activity. In addition to these components, the material of the film, with its own narrative structure, encourages the story-constructing operations in the viewer (Bordwell, 1985, p. 33). Bordwell's interest is mainly directed to the top-down processes of this list, and maintains that every film is characterised by cues, patterns and gaps the viewer can utilise or is stimulated to conceptually compensate for. Therefore, the main difference between Bordwell's theory and my Spinozan point of view is that the former puts aside the emotional and physical components of film experience altogether and, consequently, also its semantic aspects, which, for me, are central to the purpose of filmic comprehension. Although this model is really

effective in describing how the film viewer imaginatively generates narrative structures, Bordwell does not take into account the experiential and conceptual frames on which they are based, thus assuming an internalist or, we could say, a Cartesian perspective.

Bordwell describes the viewer as an autonomous agent, whose activity is basically characterised by the ability to give a logical order of causation to the particular elements of a narrative film. Another important feature of our participation is the ability to generate a chronological causality and to connect this chain of events to a unitary and coherent structure that makes us perceive a film as logically concluded and sufficient. A specific characteristic of art and auteur films is, according to Bordwell, the intention to strongly violate this narrative reliability or to push the viewers to confront with filmic expressions that explicitly avoid time-space continuity (Bordwell, 1985, p. 159).

These elements show that Bordwell's interest is mainly directed to narrative cinema and the cognitive basis of storytelling. Consequently, the conceptual and semantic interaction that some film-makers and theorists like Sergei Eisenstein evoked in the viewer constitutes an exception from the norm, which is otherwise oriented to different communicative strategies. The focus on the conceptual aspects of film experience, generated through the embodiment of relations on the screen, is, instead, one of the main elements of my theoretical perspective. The top-down processes Bordwell describes are based on the production and utilisation of determined schemas, which we can indicate as 'syntactical', in the sense that they are useful to the purpose of defining an order of communication rather than to a semantic elaboration of the film. For this reason, what we call classical cinema or Hollywood cinema is nothing but the codification of an effective diegetic strategy that is implicitly related to some inner qualities of the viewer. Examples of these schemas are the establishing shot at the beginning of a film or of new sequences for the purpose of indicating a new situation or the shot-reverse shot patterns to express a dialogical exchange or one of points of view between characters (Bordwell, 1985, p. 110).

The transcendental model described by Bordwell leads him to the conclusion that no definition of narrator is necessary since the viewer automatically produces it in his/her inner activity. Furthermore, Bordwell affirms that the similitude between film and language advocated by Metz and the scholars linked to Structuralism must

be rejected. Nonetheless, Metz argued that he never theorised cinema as a linguistic object, but as a system of signification to be analysed with the instruments of semiology (Buckland, forthcoming). We could say that the difference between the two theorists is mostly based on misunderstandings (Buckland, 2000, p. 4). Metz and Bordwell even have some elements in common, since they both examine film experience as an interaction based on syntactical structures, which we understand because of our intellectual competences.

Renewing Spinoza's objections to Descartes, we could say that Bordwell's paradigm of the disembodied viewer does not demonstrate from which type of interaction a viewer's logical qualities come or the reason why diegesis should be considered as the primary function of film and audiovisual media (cf. Spinoza, 1979, pp. 200-202). What we usually define as narration, which is also a wide and polyvalent category, is not a neutral and objective operation, but is semantically motivated and based on the application of logic-sequential reasoning, as Bordwell himself affirms, and so it is not the only conceptual structure on which film communication relies. Paraphrasing a concept expressed by Eisenstein: a straight line is not the only possible result of the encounter between two cells; they can collide, contrast and annihilate each other or synthesise and generate new entities (Eisenstein, 1998, pp. 87-88); a metaphor that clearly summarises the indefinite conceptual possibilities of audiovisual media.

The Cognitive Semiotics and Semantic of Film

We have seen that Bordwell's model clearly rejects the comparison between film and language even from a semantic point of view, but this position is not universally shared within the framework of Cognitive Film Theory. Scholars like Warren Buckland are working in the direction of establishing a common ground of analysis among different schools of film theory and looking for the possibility of combining the rules and models of Semiotics with cognitive analyses as it is actually happening in other fields of study. In the forward-looking text *The Cognitive Semiotics of Film* (2000) Buckland maintains that the diffidence between cultural and natural studies of language is misplaced since both paradigms often use and share similar concepts and views (Buckland, 2000, p. x). He also explains that the schema-based theory put forward by Bordwell is motivated by the refusal of the implicit behaviourism of linguistic and cultural approaches. Nonetheless, as we have observed before, this

disembodied perspective risks leaving the viewer with too much autonomy in constructing filmic meaning, and rejects the experiential aspects of viewers' agency. The main consequence of this theoretical positioning is that it generates a totally subjectivist approach, narcissistically built around a self-reflexive image of the viewer's ego without any need to demonstrate the basis of this activity or its connection with the physical factors that determine it.

Buckland defines this conception as the first-person perspective of the philosophy of the subject and proposes to reproduce, within the cognitive studies of film, the same theoretical changes and improvements produced in the linguistic field by turning the perspective from the first to the third person. This first stage of cognitive media studies can be compared, up to a certain point, to a Cartesian and objectivist interpretative model. What he suggests, then, is to focus on the semantic basis of conceptualisation by following the studies of Lakoff and Johnson since their generative paradigm demonstrates the correlation between images, mental schemas and body states. As we discussed in the previous part of the thesis, by using the achievements and the explanations of experientialism we can show that the foundation of our cognitive activity resides in the capacity to associate physical interactions with intellectual models so that we can give a practical value to concepts, which are not pure abstractions. The space schemas gain meanings directly from the body's sensory-motor capacities and are, therefore, connected to the semantic evaluation of kinaesthetic images. Moreover, since these models are applied to different aspects of our everyday life, they are also used to orient ourselves within film experience and to organise and elaborate visual perceptions (Buckland, 2000, p. 42). These conclusions are in line with the Spinozan model of the embodied film viewer discussed above, and we may consider Buckland's work as a helpful connection among many theoretical elements that I am trying to combine, since he establishes a common ground between imaginative and experiential (physical) activities in cinema.

The model of cognition based on interactions and relations avoids different types of theoretical impasse: the arbitrariness of filmic expression, the attitude to explain the activity of the viewer without any reference to its physical and interactive dimension or, on the contrary, its behavioural and deterministic description. The experiential and semantic approach stands in the middle between these opposites, and synthesises and overcomes all of them because it does not deny the importance

of intellectual and abstract activities that are the constitutive elements of cognitive processes. Therefore, film comprehension is not directly linked to the mechanical reproduction of external stimuli, it needs to be filtered by a mind, which in this case is embodied and works in a kind of parallelism. At the same time, by linking concepts to a physical reality, which can be expressed, compared and conceptualised even though this operation does not take place in clear and fixed forms, we are able to avoid the problem of an absolute relativism of the image that can be interpreted in infinite ways without a reference point.

Buckland affirms that the viewer's conceptual activity consists in the use of the metonymical and metaphorical models we have presented, but mostly refers to those cognitive instruments related to space conceptualisation and to the abstract organisation of sensory-motor activity. Indeed, the primary operations suggested by Buckland coincide with the elaboration and utilisation, within the filmic relation between the screen and the viewer, of container and image schemas, source-path-goal models and the definition of part-whole relations (Buckland, 2000, pp. 43-44). Through the use of these cognitive models, all based on the conceptualisation of body positioning, the viewer is able to project his/her material condition on the screen and to associate this physical situation to more abstract ideas that in turn affect and influence him/her, thus generating the continuous exchange on which film experience is based. The viewer conceptualises him/herself as a container in relation to a whole schema, which in this case is expressed by the screen and filmic narration, and then can establish the semantic ontology that regulates it and is characterised by specific sources, paths and goals. All these elements are meant to help the viewer in the elaboration of a coherent structure such as to allow a harmonious comprehension of the film. This impression of coherence, as Buckland defines it, implies that the metaphorical projection we use within film experience is not fixed and linear, but characterised by variations from a central category and by the possible generation of different levels of communication, sub-metaphors and semantic duplicities (Buckland, 2000, p. 49). The idea whereby frames clearly correspond to particular perceptive situations in everyday life is incomplete and misleading since they always need to be related to the entire structure of the film and the sequence. For this reason, subjective shots do not simply reproduce the character's point of view, for example, but are employed to increase some aspects of viewers' positioning (focus, attention, control of the diegetic elements, emotional involvement).

With this theoretical account, Buckland has analysed several film-makers, focusing particularly on Hollywood contemporary cinema by stressing the ambiguity of the image and the ontological incompleteness that arises from them as their main semantic peculiarity. These films provide complex narrative structures that contradict classical representative strategies by destabilizing mnemonic coherence and continuity, describing unreliable behaviours of the characters and often posing the existence of different levels of reality (Buckland, 2014, p. 5). These epistemological problems, therefore, highlight the semantic multiplicity of filmic expression and the cognitive dissonance we experience with the perception of the limits of a particular *scenario* or cognitive frame. Film-makers like David Lynch, on the contrary, exploit the ontological pluralism of cinema up to the point of demonstrating, like in *Inland Empire* (2006), that even irreconcilable concepts of self and reality involve each other within an inextricable chain of reflections. In this film we experience different versions of the same main character, Nikki Grace / Susan Blue (Laura Dern), whose subjectivity is fragmented and continuously modified by the context where she is placed, thus violating any conceptual unity and coherence. Similarly, the structure of the events is presented as an inextricable concatenation of narrative Chinese boxes, which all have their own different diegetic world, but are united by a bewildering and disturbing series of cross-references (Buckland, 2013, p. 247). The viewer can participate in this malleable mult diegetic world by transgressing the orthodox and traditional rules of narration accordingly and breaking a semantic frame with a metaleptic operation, which allows him/her to jump from one communicative level to another (Buckland, 2013, p. 242). All these arguments in Buckland's analysis are key to the definition of the complex dynamics of film experience. My attempt is to combine these experiential theses with other concepts linked to the emotional and empathic aspects of the viewer's participation thanks to Spinoza's philosophy, which, with its radical immanence, describes the coexistence of all the features of cognition.

The Ecological Psychology of Film

Recent discoveries in cognitive sciences and the renewed interest in the physical factors and causes of intellection have affected the analysis of film as well, pushing film scholars to focus on different models, which are increasingly embodied and environmentally explained, and less and less linked to ‘pure cognition’ and idealised descriptions (G. M. Smith, 2003, p. 6). This radical change has also increased the number of studies that utilise new types of scientific instruments such as fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and other processes of neuroimaging. This turn is further motivated by the spread of neuroscience and by the revolutionary effects of the discovery of mirror neurons’ activity and their importance in the evolution of human language and behaviour. These innovations encourage scholars to concentrate on the experiential factors of film vision and to rely on an empiricist philosophical model, thus providing the opportunity to inventively investigate the complex of our emotional participation as viewers. Emotions, in all their infinite variations and complexity, are directly evoked as consequences of our physical interaction and, consequently, they are a necessary part of our cognitive process. Therefore, the traditional distinction between rationality and sensitivity is replaced by the idea that our cognition is characterised by integrated processes, as indicated by Spinoza’s parallelism. The variety and number of sensory aspects involved in film experience are two of the reasons for the abundance of this kind of studies, which all differ because of the specificity of their case studies.

Scholars like Kaitlin L. Brunick and James E. Cutting are concerned with the connection between colour perception and tones and the generation of a related emotional mood that affects the viewer and influences his/her participation even from an intellectual point of view. They demonstrated that the saturation of particular tonalities is oriented to the production of corresponding reactions such as in the case of animated movies, where the attention is generally increased by the use of reds or bright colours while softer levels of luminance produce a more relaxed interaction (Brunick, Cutting, 2014, p. 132). Another important component is characterised by the visual pace of the film, which is expressed by editing choices, by the average shot duration and, naturally, by the activity suggested by camera movements. These features of film experience were all considered low-level elements, but with a series of experiments on viewer’s reception we can observe how they critically determine an overall effect of the film (Brunick, Cutting, DeLong,

2013, p. 134). We will see, for example, how slow-motion images are closely connected with the communication of depressive states in films like *Melancholia* (Von Trier, 2011), since they express, by decelerating motion, the absence of meaning in action, a complex concept that can be elaborated in different ways. Following this type of study, Tim J. Smith has verified Eisenstein's hypothesis on film as a conceptual and emotional instrument with his analysis of the famous *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). The Russian film-maker intended this work as one of the most important experiments on human perception and on the possibility to direct viewers' attention and eye movements by stressing the cross-modal components of films (Smith, 2014, p. 91). In the very well-known sequence 'The Battle on Ice', Eisenstein linked up the soundtrack composed by Prokofiev and its musical tone to the visual tension of every frame and photographic element in order to predict and, therefore, strongly influence viewers' response. Although Eisenstein's experiment shows some fallacies (cf. Smith, 2014, pp. 97-98), he demonstrated that film components work in a kind of synchronicity and produce a synesthetic effect. We perceive them as whole systems that are not equal to the sum of their parts, but express an integrated (but not unitary) perceptive state, thus we can say that films are physically experienced concepts.

As we have observed, the proliferation of these studies is related to the renewal of an ecological approach to cognition that has widely influenced different fields, from psychology to cultural studies. In this regard, it is important to mention the contribution of film scholars like Joseph D. Anderson, whose theoretical effort is based on the complete application of J.J. Gibson's ecological psychology to CFT. Through the utilisation of Gibson's empiricist model, it is possible to clearly describe a series of physical causes that lead from perception to cognition without the need to rely on abstract and inner cognitive activities. It is also noticeable that Anderson wants to produce in film studies the same radical theoretical changes that Anthony Chemero considers necessary for cognitive sciences in a broad sense. What he maintains is that film experience must be observed from a naturalistic point of view, because there is nothing illusory in its components and we perceive the world of cinema directly without any other instrument than our body and its sensory capacities. For this reason he criticises the excess of cultural and intellectual explanations for film comprehension and denounces the minimal attention traditionally given to its biological aspects. His approach can be considered a radical

functionalist account since he refuses to locate the seat of cognition in the brain and transfers it to the body and the environment where we act in general (Anderson, 2013, p. 81). Our attention must be focused only on the responses the viewer produces in respect of particular stimuli and we must not rely on other explanations except for the functions of specific elements in reality, which in turn are reproduced within film experience. Therefore, it is also important to relate the notions of evolutionary psychological theory and Darwinism to film analysis in order to understand how we developed some perceptual capacities and for which adaptive purposes. Thus, the clear connection between determined aesthetic mechanisms and their necessity does not need any intellectual theorisation, but the discovery of its use in reality in a broad sense. With this framework we also affirm that film experience expresses body states through audiovisual perception, and that the changes in our reactions must be referred to modifications in environmental factors.

Another consequence of this approach is that the expressive and aesthetic modalities we use to define film genre or art and *auteur* films are nothing but the codification of certain habits (*habitus*), particular behavioural modalities developed through iteration and repetition. The continuous reproduction of specific actions gives us the possibility to recognise a particular filmic situation and ‘frame’ it in order to respond to it accordingly using the behavioural competences developed through adaptive processes. According to Anderson, art and cultural aspects of cinema are the standardisation of a practice that is conventionalised and socially evaluated as relevant for the artistic world and for the existing common model of knowledge. In addition to this, Anderson highlights the capacities to enter into a diegetic and narrative world or to ‘play’ with its internal rules, abilities that we develop because of the framing of a specific activity. Every film, then, possesses an internal coherent logic as if it constitutes a linguistic game with which we learn to interact through a repeated experience (Anderson, 2013, pp. 87-88). Moreover, the ability to play allows us to not substitute the world of fiction and cinema with reality altogether, and so to not interpret it as a true dimension, but as a virtuality of the real.

Several elements of Anderson’s theory are essential to understand how we shift from a disembodied model of the mind to an embodied and ecological understanding of it, and they are incredibly effective in rejecting every explanation that is not proved by repeated empirical evidences. Even though I share some of these positions and, above all, the idea that our agency must be evaluated in respect

of the relations it is able to form and generate with the environment, we have observed that a Spinozan concept of rationality and human activity is not reducible to a radical empiricist account for several reasons. Firstly, we have seen that the idea according to which phenomena are simply describable through a chain of physical causes is incomplete since, in order to understand them we need a system of causation, a conceptual reference that allows us to give meaning and purpose to those specific events. Therefore, describing film experience simply as an adaptive and evolutionary process cuts off every imaginative activity and relegates intellectual and cultural aspects of art, even the capacity to aesthetically appreciate something, to secondary thoughts and meta-reflection, with no concrete intellectual substance. Thus, the analysis of film as communicative phenomenon becomes almost irrelevant and we can even admit the risk of scientific reductionism. Furthermore, as we have observed in discussing Spinoza's philosophy and Lakoff's linguistics, perceptions are not concepts by themselves; in order to consider something relevant and significant we need a cognitive activity, the capacity to semantically elaborate sensory stimuli (Spinoza, 1979, p. 37).

Without these assumptions, we should imagine that we simply respond to external inputs and that all our intellection is nothing but a social convention without any real importance. On the contrary, it is cognition that gives us the possibility to interact meaningfully in the world, to generate and use schemas and models for our operations in order to orient ourselves, since it establishes the difference between passivity and activity. Likewise, film experience should not be interpreted as a strictly natural phenomenon without implications; it is related to the concepts and the values we possess, and describes thoughts and reflections, thus it is not only associated to direct transformations in the environment and in our perceptive conditions. When we refer to body states we are not merely talking about simple responses or physical expressions without a semantic value, as they define agencies, the capacity to act and to form relations with other beings. For the same reasons we must consider every form of film and audiovisual media as concrete, because it is related to this embodied dimension, and reject the idea that the cultural reflections on art are mainly based on insubstantial intellectual speculations. There is also another consequence of the harsh application of Anderson's conclusions: that is, we must admit that the most relevant forms of artistic expression are those that would reproduce reality and natural perception in the most effective way (cf. Anderson,

2013, p. 84). These types of productions would be the most accessible since they would not need any cultural preparation and sophistication and could achieve the aim of a universally shared and understood communication. Of course, the consequence of this attitude is a complete devaluation of any form of expression that seems detached from an immediate reproduction of the 'real'. Anderson's methodology implicitly affirms uncritical notions of Nature and perception, which are impossible in Spinozan terms, since there is no disinterested look upon the world; furthermore, I argue, it is also based on the misleading conception according to which conceptual models, philosophical explanations and art forms belong to the abstract realm and do not establish any concrete connection with our ordinary life.

An Evolutionary Approach to Film Theory

The search for the universal components of film experience has encouraged the study of the evolutionary path that allowed the formation of our consciousness, and has inspired the investigation into the physical and biological reason for cultural variations and common aspects among different populations of the world. This biological approach, which is usually referred to by the term bio-culturalism, frequently relies on studies concerning our neural activity and its connection with the cognition and intellectual elaboration of data. One of the leading scholars in this field is Torben Grodal, who has published several works and essays on this topic, stressing the importance of the behaviour that the human species, unlike other mammals, has developed since the Pleistocene (50,000-100,000 years ago), which has also determined our cultural distinctiveness (Grodal, 2009, p. 6). Thanks to these universal characteristics that evolutionary processes have selected and favoured, we were able to form different types of societies (agricultural and sedentary), to use complex written and spoken languages and use tools for a variety of purposes, among which painting and sculpture also emerged.

This stage of our evolution, which is recognised as the hunter-gatherer society, shaped our structure and still influences our behaviour in a way that is reflected in film and in genre preference and prevalence. What Grodal argues is that we should not consider the human mind as a blank slate because, in accordance with an embodied model, we refuse to admit the existence of innate components of cognition. He affirms that the common characteristics we need to refer to are neuro-physiological and not disembodied and, therefore, they do not need deductive

reasoning to be demonstrated, but can rely on evidence and experimental proofs. These concepts are not in contrast with the idea of common notions present in Spinozan philosophy that I want to highlight in film viewing because they point to the physical and intellectual capacities of human beings to form relations and notions of these interactions. According to Grodal, with this type of reasoning it is also possible to avoid the problems posed by the Grand Theory and the traditional approaches to cultural studies, mostly those currents that analyse cinema and other art forms as structured languages. Indeed, I agree with the theorist that linguistic approaches to film analysis lead to an excess of relativism that can reduce films to the expression of cultural differences and deemphasise the importance of those cognitive and agentive instruments that are universally shared and allow trans-cultural communication (Grodal, 2009, p. 11).

On the contrary, through the observation of specific films we identify constant themes and recurrent dynamics that prove the centrality of universal biological components. For example, Grodal mentions the success and widespread popularity of adventure films since the early age of cinema, or the characteristics of animated movies for children, which present some common types of narration, prototypical diegetic paths and encourage similar emotional engagement, thus stimulating related agencies and reactions in the viewer. Recurrent themes in animated movies are parental loss and separation from safety and domestic love together with the idea of growth and ending of childhood. These ideas and the basic emotional mechanisms they involve are shared by films that are very heterogeneous from other points of view, such as *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001) and *The Lion King* (Allers, Minkoff, 1994) (Grodal, 2009, p. 27). These two movies seem totally different because they reflect two distant cultures and their rich symbolism. Moreover, while the first one is an art film in which we recognise a certain aesthetic sophistication that is addressed not only to young audiences (there is not a clear distinction between Good and Evil), the second one is specially made for children, and stresses all the conventions of classical cinema to raise the attention of the viewers by using strong emotional tones and indicating clear moral stances. Nonetheless, both films are based on the affective elements listed above and express the children's need for exploration, play and discovery through which they can achieve maturity and independence. We also notice a common romantic, sentimental path that moves from the attachment to parental figures, a biological constant, to the

necessary separation from them and then, the creation of new bonds between persons, usually love relationships that pave the way to adulthood.

These emotional links are essential for survival since the early stages of human and mammals' evolution because they allow mutual support and, therefore, cooperative strategies to overcome difficulties and dangers. The evolutionary argument is that these operations and the creation of these boundaries are still accomplished into different coordinates and parameters, or that when we discuss childhood issues and growth problems we are referring to these processes under different cultural and environmental circumstances. The emotional reflection of these activities in film experience is expressed by traumatic feelings of loss and anguish (Grodal, 2009, p. 30; 126). Similarly, a common biological ground is also identifiable for epic and fantasy sagas like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, which enhance our desire to be recognised as a group with similar characteristics in opposition to a common enemy that we identify as corrupt or distant from an ideal of moral purity. With the definition of this prototypical filmic situation he also stresses the importance of Lakoff and Johnson's experiential work on cognition, even though he is not interested in the semantic and conceptual consequences of their ideas of schemas and intellectual models. He maintains that we can define particular recurrent themes in cinema as archetypal, but not in an entirely Jungian sense, because these universal narrations constitute a shared legacy of our evolutionary process and, therefore, they reflect an embodied agency and a structured and behavioural system.

Another important aspect of Grodal's theory is the demonstration of the connection of this embodiment with a particular neural activity, a process called *PECMA flow* (perception, emotion, cognition and motor action). This model describes an integrated system of data acquisition and elaboration of responses that links together muscular and motor visual stimulation with the emotional response and the activation of the associative areas of the brain that allow the categorisation of particular body states (Grodal, 2009, pp. 146-147). This cognitive flow must not be interpreted as a simple bottom-up process, since it is not averse to conceptualisation and describes a unitary cognitive architecture without any privileged position of the body in relation to the mind or vice versa. The idea of a flow of consciousness, which integrates perception and cognition, is largely compatible with a Spinozan model of the viewer since it emphasises the synesthetic and synthetic operations we

perform to access and interact with a filmic world. Indeed, imaginative thought and abstractions are used to recognise the specific physical situations and standardised expressive systems we have codified through repeated interactions. Consequently, the operations performed in particular film experiences define related agencies, which constitute the essence of different film genres and communicative typologies. Our ability to play or act in different ways, depending on the situation the movie we are watching provides, is strongly reflected in comic language. This artistic code is based on the reversal of (social and perceptual) conventions and takes place because of the need to make some (political and cultural) conditions more acceptable or to react against them and, then, it is characterised by a deep cultural value and variance (Grodal, 2014, pp. 191-192). In addition to the faculty to play, which Anderson also highlights, we also simulate the characters' emotional state through a resonance of feelings: the activity of our mirror neurons that allows viewers to imitate facial expression and mentally reproduce their behaviour (Grodal, 2009, p. 183). Through this empathic process, we can share in the characters' point of view and use models of the self in comparison with someone else, a cognitive faculty indicated also by Lakoff as our ability to conceptualise subjectivity in order to orient ourselves in the world. The result of the interaction between the viewers and the characters can vary from sympathy and support to negation and opposition, and is based on narrative strategies of attachment and on the correspondences among the values of the two parts. Grodal, therefore, maintains that film experience is basically codified around these strategies reflected in narrative and classic cinema. In contrast, art and auteur films are based on abstractions and 'disembodied' reflections because they encourage, by expanding space-time relations, subjective associations with personal memory and the feeling of contrasting and distanced sensations. This kind of film often lacks characters with clear, recognisable behaviour, an element that facilitates secondary thought against empathic involvement. For instance, Grodal examines several of Wim Wenders's films and highlights the fact they are based on unclear visual metaphors and spatial mappings that stimulate free associations and abstractions (Grodal, 2009, pp. 209-210).

Although Grodal's model is insightful and encompasses several aspects of film experience effectively, I believe it is reductionist to some extent because of the need to explain every process through the evolutionary development of cognitive faculties, a perspective that rejects any other operation that is not directly linked to

adaptive reasons. On the contrary, from a Spinozan point of view, which stresses the importance of imaginative and creative activities, Grodal's model is ineffective in analysing more complex features of our semantic interaction. The embodied operations Grodal highlights work perfectly within the so-called narrative cinema by indicating some basic and common mechanisms that we can ascertain among cultures. Nonetheless, these considerations do not offer a full explanation for the analysis of other intellectual activities that are summarised under the broad definition of 'subjective associations' without specifying what type of function and importance they have for cognition. Grodal defines imaginative reasoning as 'disembodied', as if it was detached from any real function in the world, while what I am trying to argue is that every film expresses a way of being (becoming) in the world, a set of concepts and values to which an agency is connected. Therefore, in my opinion film experience cannot be reduced to strict adaptive functions, for it also consists of complex embodied processes of meaning construction within which evolutionary aspects of intellection take place. In a Spinozan perspective, every expression refers to a power to live and act, but this does not mean that everything resembles the ancient struggle for survival. On the contrary, what we call adaptive intelligence changes continuously and reflects problematic concepts. Likewise, I believe, the primordial societies we imagine as pure and direct, like the hunter-gatherer groups mentioned by Grodal, expressed a highly developed conceptual complexity, which cannot be reduced to a naïve authenticity.

Engaging Film Characters

Having examined some aspects and models of the embodied cognitive theory of film, I will now discuss what is perhaps the central issue that Cognitive Film Theory is facing today and some of the arguments maintained by scholars who are studying and addressing it: the affective features of viewers' engagement. Indeed, as it was explained before, the centrality of emotions in cognitive processes is the unavoidable theoretical starting point for an ecological approach to the mind, and the investigation of the viewer's emotional involvement is a direct consequence of this inquiry. Revealing the nature of emotions within film experiences and the methods through which we can interact with diegetic figures gives us not only the opportunity to unveil most of the unknown activity involved in this operation, but also the possibility as viewers to direct it in the most effective way and to use films as

cognitive instruments. This is also the main purpose of a Spinozan perspective on film studies: to become aware of the operations we perform (what can a body do?) so that we can understand the reasons of our reactions and use this knowledge in a creative way. Although many scholars are interested in addressing the issue of filmic affections and affects, and have analysed it in depth, the theme is more problematic than it may appear and new questions are emerging in correspondence with recent discoveries in the scientific field. The analysis of these topics also poses different philosophical problems because, by describing the ability to empathise with someone or to simulate his/her behaviour, we necessarily call into question the nature of ethical and moral conduct, since we establish a similarity between the way in which we use our social faculties in everyday life and in watching films. Some scholars stress the differences between real and artificial engagement to avoid problems of sadomasochism or voyeurism in the viewer, while others establish a substantial coincidence observing just those interactive aspects that distinguish everyday operations from our agency as viewers.

Murray Smith discusses this issue in *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (1995), where he criticises the psychoanalytic notion of identification and maintains that our participation with the characters in film experience is a more complex affective process. The Grand Theory model has always described this interaction as a fragmentation of the viewer's subjectivity functional to an immersion in a symbolic and ideological system. This idea has the effect of bringing down every constituent of our agency to this realm of illusion and moral projection, denying the cognitive and agentive potential existing in audiovisual art. Smith asserts that, in order to admit the possibility of film experience, we must accept a set of mental and physical activities that allow us to fulfil this operation. To this purpose, he indicates a list of features that should be interpreted as general assumptions: the existence of a discrete human body, of a perceptual activity in which self-awareness is included, emotional and intentional states, the capacity of self-reflection, the possibility to understand language and the persistence of traits and attributes (M. Smith, 1995, p. 21). This notion of self is not only useful to define the prototypical qualities a potential viewer possesses, but also the conceptual model we generate concerning fictional characters, attributing to them a monadic schema, which is usually characterised by an internal coherence and by the recognition of specific semantic values. Thus, the comprehension of characters is

a process by which we perceive a person as a whole system of meaning and related actions. This cognitive instrument is referred to by the expression *person schema* and viewers utilise it in order to interact with the characters, to predict their actions, to understand their behaviour and to empathise with the choices they make. Starting from these general assumptions it is possible to admit all cultural variances and the obvious importance they have in influencing our participation with particular dramatic figures. Furthermore, Smith affirms that this cognitive process is dynamic and in constant evolution and transformation; some directors challenge the possibilities of our interaction by consciously violating the person schema in order to manifest how its internal coherence is only apparent and less rigid than we assume (M. Smith, 1995, p. 31).

In addition to this, he is also interested in the embodied aspects of emotional engagement and affirms that our empathic qualities are essential to produce and infer a semantic comprehension of the figures on the screen. By imitating facial expressions and mentally simulating the actions they perform, we are also able to understand the meaning of their actions and the intentions implied. Thus, viewers can assume their positions by the kinaesthetic and motor mimicry, which is in turn tied to an intellectual imitation of the body states portrayed on the screen (M. Smith, 1995, pp. 98-99). This is a further element that links together sensorial stimulation, affective resonance and embodiment with reflection and the semantic comprehension of film, thus defining our participation as the elaboration of expressive states more than a linguistic interpretation of static codes. These notions are largely compatible with my Spinozan perspective, and particularly with the idea of viewers' subjectivity as a constructive process determined by a constant conceptual negotiation, an operation accomplished through the generation of embodied cognitive models. Smith believes that films work on the pre-linguistic level of cognition, and considers frames and camera movements as agentic elements of communication rather than fixed representations. For this reason he maintains that subjective shots should not be considered as the expression of characters' points of view or an instrument to be projected completely into their worldviews; on the contrary, they must be evaluated in a wider expressive context since they mainly enhance particular perceptual conditions (M. Smith, 1995, p. 84). François Truffaut even affirmed that point of view shots work in the opposite direction because we mostly empathise with a characters' state of mind when he/she looks into the camera, as we can perceive

his/her facial expressions in the most effective way (M. Smith, 1995, p. 158). Moreover, many films, such as Dario Argento's *Profondo Rosso* (1975) are based on the systematic violation of the truth of personal perspectives, but perhaps the best example of a complex subjective situation is to be found in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991).

In one of the last sequences of the film Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) has discovered the hideout and real identity of the terrible serial killer 'Buffalo Bill' alias Jame Gumb (Ted Levine) and must face a final confrontation with him in the basement of his house in the dark. The scene is narrated through the murderer's eyes; he is wearing night-vision goggles, and observes the main character desperately trying to orient herself in the environment. Exactly in the moment we, the viewers, think that she will be defeated, Clarice reacts and shoots in the direction of the camera, killing the villain and directly hitting the viewer's gaze. Traditionally, we would have labelled this communicative condition as a sadistic-voyeuristic positioning for the viewer, who identifies with the killer, though Clarice inverts the status and demolishes this gaze. This interpretation is reductive and does not take into account all the conceptual dimensions of the film, in which the main character is continuously subjected to the male gaze in different ways (physical oppositions, irony, mistrust in her capabilities), thus evoking in the viewer the feeling of domination she suffers. The final sequence, then, works as a radical conceptual association between femininity, weakness and passivity, and stages the complete overturning of it. Therefore, we may say that our interaction works in an opposite way, because the film suggests a complex engagement with Clarice's predicament more than an identification with the assassin's point of view. Of course, the result of this engagement also relies on the specificity of the viewer and of the performance, but these communicative dynamics all exist as part of the meaning-making processes the film can trigger in the viewer.

All these notions about viewers' activity point to an imaginative model of the viewer, in which the physical and affective components of watching films do not deny the centrality of cognition and rationalisation; on the contrary, they constitute an essential part of this process and are essential to fulfil mind-reading operations. It is for this reason that we can apply imaginative instruments and cognitive models of experientialism to film characters in order to understand and interact with them, so that we can recognise a fictional figure and then start a process of *alignment* with

his/her condition and moral values. Smith distinguishes alignment from *allegiance*, which indicates the communicative strategies of a film that lead to a full moral justification and support for any controversial actions of the characters (M. Smith, 1995, p. 188). In addition to this, we can make use of other kinds of conceptual alignment with the diegetic figures - more oriented to collective categories (e.g., class, ethnic groups, gender), and associate them with general concepts, such as a certain idea of history and progress (cf. M. Smith, 1995, p. 133). We can assume these emotional positions mostly through the intrinsic communicative characteristics of the film and the semantic and ideal structure according to which the objects and acting figures are arranged in space and relate to each other. Therefore, Smith suggests that in the case where we are pushed to confront with damaged or controversial characters the entire structure of the film tends to justify this particular moral condition, thus making it possible for us to understand their reasons and even ally with them (perverse allegiance), even though they express and share values different from ours (M. Smith, 1999, p. 221; M. Smith, 1995, p. 189). In addition to this, we gain an idea of subjectivity that is multimodal and mobile (Smith defines it as anti-egoistic) because it is based on the modifications and on the interactions we operate in the world (M. Smith, 1995, p. 235). Actually, there is no direct negative implication in the fact that we can project ourselves into other beings and modify our models since these operations do not necessarily imply alienation and passivity. On the contrary, as we have already pointed out through Spinoza's philosophy, by knowing these processes we become more conscious of our capacities and we can direct them in the most effective way. Therefore, Smith reveals how film experience is an integrated process of sensations and concepts through specific perceptual conditions, an opinion that I wish to highlight in this work by stressing how this connection affects more complicated forms of reasoning too.

There are a series of studies on character engagement and emotional involvement that address, for example, the difficulties of involvement with evil or controversial characters like in the case of *American History X* (Kaye, 1999). In this film the main character, Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton), is a Nazi skinhead who was sentenced to three years in prison for double murder and who has organised a group of racist activists to fight immigration in his neighbourhood. The central part of the film is dedicated to the narration of his past before the crime and the imprisonment through the eyes of his younger brother, and describes his conquest of

followers and the first ‘achievements’ of his political activity. This series of flashback sequences is described with an epic black and white photography and an elegant style that emphasises Derek’s physical qualities and the validity of his political point of view. For instance, this narrative section is characterised by a major use of slow motion editing, details (particularly of Derek’s body) and close-ups - all aesthetic elements that stress the emotional participation of the viewers and glamorise the character’s ideas and lifestyle. The paradox of the film is, according to Christopher Grau, that there are no equivalent and effective semantic counterparts to this position in the narration, but rather the presence of two African-American characters who stand for the stereotype of the Good Samaritan. The final ethical conclusions are also expressions of liberal, common sense beliefs against racism and intolerance (Grau, 2010, p. 53). Even though the film ends with a kind of reconciliation and an overcoming of Nazi rhetoric, we are somehow led to admit that Derek’s opinions are the most effective and that their opponents are just hypocrites who are afraid of violating political correctness. This acknowledgement leads us to ask ourselves how it is possible for us to side with such a despicable person and how reductive explanations to justify this allegiance could be avoided. Margrethe Bruun Vaage, for example, maintains that we are ‘blinded by familiarity’, since the affective attachment we have generated for characters, and narratives that justify immoral behaviours, allow us to participate and partially approve actions that we would usually label as dangerous and perverse (Vaage, 2014, p. 280).

I believe that the problem with this film in particular is that it works perfectly in showing how Derek perceives the world, but does not succeed in providing a more complex perspective and point of view on the events. This happens because the film makes use of a simplistic framing to address these political and ethical issues, and offers the viewers the possibility to counter Derek’s opinions just by evoking a consolatory moral reaction. Hence, the trouble does not reside in the expression of a ‘negative’ point of view or of controversial themes, but in our capacity to confront them, in the specificity of the viewer, and in the possibilities we have in the interaction. Indeed, if the purpose of a cinematic work is to overcome a destructive position, its effectiveness resides in the instruments and suggestions the film provides to counteract it. Thus, even a problematic and perturbing element can be useful to gain a greater awareness about particular issues. Nevertheless, it is important to reflect on the internal strength and value of specific ideas, as well as on

the system of values and judgments implied in them in order to reveal whether and how they can be considered destructive. We have seen that, from a Spinozan point of view, this affective (and intellectual) engagement in our everyday life resembles a continuous semantic negotiation, which, if directed in the most effective way, leads us beyond negations and semantic failures. One of the aims of this research is precisely to analyse filmic participation from this perspective. However, this involvement is not a linear and harmonic exchange, like an ideal democratic confrontation: it envisages conflict, harsh contrast, paradoxes and the ability to reconsider our theories and positions in unexpected ways, thus displaying different levels of empathic attachment, which can vary from a basic alignment to negation or allegiance.

Scenarios, Moods and the Imaginative Dynamics of Involvement

While Smith describes the modalities that allow viewers to align with fiction figures even when they are characterised by negative feelings, other scholars such as Carl Plantinga and Noël Carroll (Carroll, 2004, p. 179) argue that we are able to interact with these characters and to empathise and even support immoral behaviours because of the artificial nature of the medium, which makes us not perceive their real implications. This different current of cognitive film studies appeals to a philosophical and aesthetic tradition that goes from Aristotle to David Hume and develops this model by connecting it with evidence from scientific studies on behaviour and neural activity. In accordance with these general assumptions, Carl Plantinga's research constitutes a fundamental contribution to the study of emotions and affections within film experience and in establishing the connection between feelings and thoughts. Indeed, Plantinga investigates the emotional aspect of cognition in a broad sense, encompassing concepts like scenarios, the emotional mood of films and the possibility of engaging with characters while trying to establish a unitary affective and perceptual model that links together all these aspects. He argues that in the analysis of film experience it is impossible to establish a traditional analogy with literature and a metaphorical association between the viewer and the cool and distanced reader since audiovisual perception derives its communicative effectiveness and strength from the capacity to intensely arouse feelings and sensations in the participants. As Oliver Sacks highlighted, films are more similar to the entire stream of consciousness and, therefore, it is not helpful to

rely on models that cut off sensory experience and relegate intellectual activities into the realm of abstraction and symbolic interpretation (Plantinga, 2009, p. 2; 48). From these ideas it also emerges a kind of *trait d'union* among different philosophical traditions often interpreted as completely opposed by linking together Bergson's idea of the mind as a cascade and the experiential and functionalist approach to cognition of William James (cf. Plantinga, 2009, pp. 48-49).

According to Plantinga's theory, which he defines as cognitive-perceptual, the viewer is incited to generate his/her own semantic response and interpretation from a set of affections and emotional coordinates the film provides. This process, which the viewer accomplishes non-consciously for most of its aspects, begins from sensory impressions and sensations, which we can broadly refer to by the term affections, and ends with the formulation of feelings and emotional states. The result of this activity is, then, accompanied by reflections and higher associations that shape our interpretation and intellectual interaction. Hence, we are allowed to formulate models and cognitive instruments to the purpose of comprehension and organisation of data. Plantinga's concept of emotions, indeed, is quite close to those expressed in the Spinozan model of cognition, since he does not interpret them as simple reactions but as entire bodily and conceptual states related to ways of being in the world. He defines them as concern-based construals, which means that emotions are the reflection of encounters with other beings in the world, from which we obtain an intentional propensity and interest (Plantinga, 2009, p. 56). Like Spinoza, Plantinga affirms that this cognitive operation does not necessarily need to be performed on a conscious level, thus stressing the importance of non-conscious activity on rationalisation, and is identifiable with the term *conation*. This term clearly evokes Spinoza's *conatus* we discussed above, and indicates a general automatic attitude of interest in the external objects that touch and determine us. Thus, we can say that we have emotions and, therefore, thought because we are concerned by some external individual and, again, we cannot rely on something like disinterested reasoning.

The affective power of film, to paraphrase the title of one of Plantinga's latest essays, also consists in determining some general communicative strategies that ontologically and semantically define the type of communication we are involved in. This is the case of film *scenarios* (an expression borrowed from Ronald De Sousa's emotional and cognitive theory), which are models of film characterised by a series

of emotions (global, local, fictional and so on) with different value and purpose (Plantinga, 2013, p. 96). Some of these feelings are meta-cognitive, in a multiple sense, because they constitute reflections on particular emotional states (like feelings on a previous sensation). They can also indicate a complex set of affections and affects oriented to a specific task, like the search for the killer or monster in horror films that mixes together anxiety, anger, excitement and preoccupation. Other sensations, instead, may have the function to increase sympathy for the main figures or simply respond to direct stimuli. In general this intricate and, at the same time, visceral and sensual nature of the medium generates in the viewer the sense of reality that is necessary to actively participate in film experience, which is not caused by the suspension of disbelief as psychoanalytic theory affirmed (Plantinga, 2013, pp. 98-99). Plantinga maintains that when we lose this sense of internal coherence and perceive film events as not plausible, it is because we are weakly involved in this particular performance and then we lose interest; consequently, we must not consider viewers as victims of the cinematographic illusion, but as partially conscious agents. These characteristics of the scenario entail the generation of filmic modes, which can be compared to the concept of film-genre, and through their conceptualisation we are able to interact or play, that is to perform peculiar activities, since a specific narrative style is associated to an interconnected agency. Thus, we can understand how it is possible to participate in adventure films and enjoy the misfortunes and negative experiences the fiction figures must face, without making the ironic and pleasurable tone of the movie fade away.

On the other hand, it is also easy to perceive the implicit seriousness of events implied in dramas and thrillers (Plantinga, 2009, p. 82; 2013, p. 106). Moreover, we are more reconciled with the vision when we perceive that the narration is oriented to the solution of all the problems presented - a process we may call *closure* as it provides a kind of semantic practicability. This set of cognitive modulations also allows the automatic recognition of narrative paradigms without an excessive meta-reflection on the part of the viewer. This happens because films have a synesthetic and unitary effect that makes us perceive them as a whole based on manifold and multisensory aspects. The multimodal nature of the medium is implicitly evoked also in the concept of emotional mood, which stands for a global tone of the communication or atmosphere produced in the viewer as an *overall affective charge* (Plantinga, 2014, p. 145). Like scenarios, moods indicate an

ontological state rather than a simple emotional reaction to a particular relation; this feature of cinematic expression mainly provides the general modality and affective filter according to which other specific sensations are perceived and organised. It is for this reason that it must be distinguished from the previous cognitive model, since it is, instead, destined to the regulation of another agentive aspect of viewer interaction. Moods affect and influence the way we relate to the other features of cognition; they determine the way we recall memories, what type of sensations, feelings and thoughts we tend to associate to this general emotional structure. For this reason they are synthetic but not necessarily perceived as unitary and completely coherent (Plantinga, 2014, pp. 148-149). We could even say that moods have a metaphysical value because they express an overall way of being in the world and, therefore, they also generate a prospective condition characterised by precise moral and ethical implications from which the viewer establishes his/her own participation. The concept of mood has been extensively examined also by Greg M. Smith who, by drawing upon Brentano's psychological theories, considers it as a prototypical set of intentionally-based affections. Smith states that mood generates emotional expectancies in the viewer, thus enabling him/her to evaluate a specific film in a mood-congruent fashion (G. M. Smith, 2003, p. 38). Therefore, these conceptual models play a pervasive role in film experience because they orient viewers' emotional and intellectual participation, and help us in perceiving a specific cinematic reality as an audiovisually assembled existential dimension. As we can see, the deductions of Plantinga and Smith are really helpful in demonstrating the affective and conceptual nature of our participation and, consequently, I will largely employ the imaginative instruments discussed here in my film analyses.

Through the expression of the tone implicit in a worldview, moods also direct the way we are able to perceive specific events and, therefore, their role is fundamental for the judgment of actions and character behaviour. Films like *Blood Diamond* (Zwick, 2007), according to Plantinga, deal with war, violence and social injustice, which are portrayed as dramatic elements and concrete contextual issues, stressing all the communicative operations and strategies that help us to generate a sympathetic concern with the principal characters (Plantinga, 2014, p. 150). In his analysis, Plantinga argues that this mood is elicited by the combination of anxiety produced by fast cutting rate and chaotic camera movements in addition to loud sound effects of gun-fire and, on the other hand, with the use of close ups of the

crying victims and the main figures to increase compassion, sadness and terror. We can consider these communicative choices conventional because they orient the strongest engagement towards the protagonists, who are a father and his son involved in a warm and close relationship. Their bond is, then, received with a strong sense of moral positivity, which is increased by their suffering and struggle to survive the barbarity afflicting their country (Sierra Leone).

Plantinga maintains that a controversial ethical issue is posed, instead, by *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971) in which Alex, the main character, and his fellows, the droogs, commit every kind of crime and brutal act in a pure spirit of happiness and enjoyment. In the first sequences of this well-known and problematic work, we are involved in a singular mood construction because we are exhorted to empathise with these characters through a series of aesthetic modalities that make us perceive violence in a 'relaxed' and enjoyable way. Plantinga affirms that Kubrick's attempt was to make us see the world as Alex and his friends do and, therefore, we are stimulated to interact with these actions with an empathic attitude. This effect is reached, for example, through the ironic use of soundtrack with Rossini's majestic *The Thieving Magpie*, which is commonly disconnected from a context of violence. In addition to this, the fight and rape scenes are depicted with a kind of choreographic elegance that causes a general sense of positive and even comic flow of actions without any real immoral or destructive effects (Plantinga, 2014, p. 152). According to Plantinga, we can watch these sequences without being upset only through the use of a distanced, cool and intellectual point of view, which is necessary to understand the film without falling into sadistic activity.

For this reason Plantinga does not justify the director's choice, since it has an immoral and dangerous consequence and treats sexual violence with cheerful connotations. He explains that it is typical of Kubrick's works to discuss controversial philosophical issues (in this case natural violence and social violence) and to apply a ruthless and cerebral look onto things - a perspective that requires a developed capacity on the part of the viewer to not be seriously affected by the narration. In the case of unethical and immoral behaviour or of the expression of extremely negative moods, we need to distance ourselves from the film and to use an intellectual and reflective approach in order to enjoy the vision. Otherwise, Plantinga affirms that we would passively accept these behaviours and implicitly justify them. In my opinion, the part of the film where the viewer can 'enjoy' the droogs' violence

ends with the assault on the couple living in the country. At the beginning of this sequence the comic mood is delayed by the famous *singin' in the rain* performance but, when the couple is brutalised, there is an exchange of glances between the two victims, portrayed through a shot-reverse-shot succession (close ups), which changes the perceptive modalities of the scene. From that moment, I believe, the viewer has access to a different perspective on that violence, which clearly modifies the general tone of the experience. With this example it is already possible to demonstrate how traumatic film experiences need an analytical approach capable of recognising their complexity and potentiality. Furthermore, we will observe that Plantinga's interpretation of sad and disturbing sensations in films can be reductive and we will use Spinoza's philosophy to oppose this perspective with a paradigm that allows us to tackle these passions in an innovative manner.

In his analysis of negative emotions, Plantinga makes use of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which invokes a cathartic process in the viewer to reach a final rationalisation and reconciliation necessary to 'heal' the spirit from the evil expressed by the tragedies (Aristotle, 1902, p. 45). The Greek philosopher was, indeed, one of the first to state the importance of emotions for comprehension since they are the result of a modality of thinking and, therefore, it was necessary for him to evaluate which affections and sensations facilitated the generation of an effective reasoning (Plantinga, 2014, p. 153). Moreover, Aristotle stressed the centrality of imitative and simulative processes in the viewers to receive tragedy as an artistic phenomenon and the consequent need to write plays that have the character of plausibility and rationality. The ultimate purpose of a work of art is to provide a unitary explanation that can overcome the implicit madness of human behaviour evoked in mythological tales like the story of Jason's wife Medea, a witch who represents a pre-civilised world and kills her children in a crazy impulse of jealousy. A play, in Aristotelian terms, must be devised as a coherent source-path-goal schema and requires a logical resolution that is, therefore, necessary to make the viewers feel pity and compassion for controversial figures and to warn them about the risks and dangers in losing the capacity to rationalise. For this reason empathy, sympathetic emotions and even fear and suffering serve to overcome negativity and to connect an effective reasoning to moral and socially constructive conduct. It is also interesting to notice how from Aristotelian aesthetic thought emerges the importance of expressions against representations, the idea of play as imitation of entire ways of

living (Aristotle, 1902, pp. 23-25). It is easy to observe that Plantinga develops these arguments, and it is also possible to notice on which philosophical foundations he establishes his interpretation of viewers' involvement with fictional figures.

Furthermore, as we have discussed before, film experience is a synesthetic imaginative phenomenon and, consequently, simulating and reproducing characters' emotions means understanding the significance of the actions implicit in their conduct, which must be considered entire modes of existence. Therefore, viewers should be seen as active seekers of meaning and not as passive perceivers because they automatically strive to understand the actions expressed on the screen (Plantinga, 2009, p. 148). Character engagement is, according to Plantinga, a trajectory of mental activities in relation to film figures that can vary from indifference to sympathy and involves cognitive assessment and complex emotional responses in accordance with our desires and other subjective facets. He agrees that this interaction is possible because of our capacity to imitate facial mimicry and body states and to simulate the intrinsic meaning of these states.

Murray Smith's and Carl Plantinga's considerations on character engagement are compatible with Spinoza's theory of *imitation of the affects* since they affirm that our involvement is not grounded on the simple simulation of feelings, but entails a conceptual effort, which allows us to comprehend and interact with complex relational systems. Our conceptual activity is, therefore, extended from the general comprehension of the film to the generation of characters' schemas and models through which we can understand or infer their goals and the reasons for their actions. Of course, as we have already seen, the problem emerges in the case of negative emotions and damaged characters, in relation to which Plantinga suggests a solution that combines the Aristotelian catharsis and David Hume's notions of power of artefact emotions, with his opinions on the poetic value of negativity (Plantinga, 2009, pp. 176-177). Plantinga states that the first concept must be related to the necessity to elaborate a clarification, rather than a religious or spiritual purgation, whose purpose is to connect suffering to a final explanation that justifies and motivates it by contextualizing pain in a higher moral order. This operation of rationalisation, which helps us to accept the existence and necessity of suffering, is in turn tied with the intrinsic sensual power of dramatic and tragic passions. Negative affects have a strong expressive and communicative validity since they are characterised by a sublime and overwhelming sense of abundance and excess.

Anne Bartsch has also mentioned the importance of meta-emotions to manage sad passions; these mixed sets of feelings are exemplary of the fact that sensations can never be expressed as a singular reaction to a particular stimulus, but as a result of an integrated multiple appraisal (Bartsch, 2007, p. 131). In the case of horror-related films, for example, fear and terror are justified by the pleasure to be shocked and control or surmount these difficulties. Another important contribution in the analysis of meta-emotions comes from the film scholar Rikke Schubart. Indeed, in her essay on positive emotions in horror TV series, she affirmed that we must avoid simplistic and dualistic analysis of emotions because they always reflect complex agentic systems developed through social interaction (Schubart, 2013). For this reason, feelings do not arise only as direct and automatic responses: they appear as a combination of sensations, which in turn are associated with ideas and values. Similarly, Plantinga maintains that our participation in film experience is manifold and that this multiplicity helps the viewer to monitor sad passions, but affirms the necessity to adopt distanced approaches. A negative sensation is also caused by the violation of viewers' moral schemas which, following Lakoff's concepts about the genealogy of morality, is accompanied by physical disgust and the feeling of withdrawal from an idea of purity. Consequently, the models of morality generated through our experience in the world also have a social and historical value and aetiology that must be evaluated carefully, as emotions of guilt, shame and embarrassment are linked to cultural prohibitions. He mentions and examines several ways in which viewers can interact with these sensations and respond with positive and gratifying emotions. Ironic participation is, for example, effective in using these affections to criticise moral conventions and cultural standards; on the contrary, disgust can be functional to elicit a defensive response that retroactively works to preserve a structured ethical model possessed by the viewer (Plantinga, 2009, p. 219). Of course, the trajectories of our responses also depend on the specific communicative strategies of the film we are taking into account. However, if we analysed the issue of negative sensation through the perspective of Spinoza's philosophy on passions, both these attitudes would appear to be intrinsically conciliatory because they indicate the possibility of avoiding confrontation with the 'logic' of wicked behaviours. Thus, we would automatically consider these practices as immoral and impure without taking into account the causes of their existence, the explicative power they may possess and, therefore, we

would become unable to tackle these sad passions to eventually transform them into a new active consciousness (Spinoza, 1979, p. 182).

Plantinga addresses the majority of the problems raised by the analysis of emotional engagement, but remains in some way conservative about the discussion-disturbing sensations and negative filmic expressions. Therefore, my objection to Plantinga's claims is that he indicates certain ways to manage sad passions, which are useful for the viewer to 'defend' his/her own positions and internal coherence but does not describe how they can be turned into new knowledge and cognitive power, thus reducing their intellectual role and relevance. Moreover, by considering detachment and intellectual distance as ways to master sad passions, he implies that the viewer can estrange him/herself from the film, whereas in Spinozan terms it is possible to refer to this operation as a negation. We can oppose this Aristotelian tradition, which invokes catharsis and intellectual estrangement, with the Nietzschean 'Yes' to tragic events and suffering. This is the endeavour to not simplify negative phenomena as irrational, and the effort to understand them by recognising the world they describe and even the uncomfortable desires they establish (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 146). This concept, which recalls Spinoza's notion of intensities, encourages us to evaluate things by recognising their connective and destructive potentialities, thus rejecting transcendental systems of judgment (Deleuze, 2013, p. 169). Nonetheless, this endeavour does not imply an unproblematic justification of evil and an act of sublimation; on the contrary, it makes it possible for us to elaborate more complex and sophisticated models to understand sad passions and, therefore, to become active and resist the idea that they just manifest human brutalities and madness. With the power of an extended and abductive intellection we can recognise and contrast them adequately, without easy conciliations or by having recourse to a cold, distanced reason.

Resonance, Mirror Neurons and Mind Reading

The importance of neural activity as the main instrument to establish simulative operations suggests a thorough comparison between the way we perform empathic responses in common life and the way we do it within film experience. For this

reason Gallese⁴ highlights these similarities assuming that the central feature of our interaction, on which the entire concept of imitation is based, is the Mind Reading process, which allows us to elaborate ideas about the behaviours of others and to infer their meaning (Gallese, Guerra, 2012). This activity is also reinforced by an idea of subjectivity that is experiential, multimodal and constantly redefined by the imitations and the encounter with other individuals (Shared Manifold Hypothesis). Gallese maintains that most of our cognitive faculties develop through the process of mutual enactment between individuals and thanks to the embodiment of the others' actions and of their related meanings (Gallese, 2001). The film scholar Ed Tan initially analysed this process within film experience via the problematic concept of empathy. The widespread definition of empathy recalls the capacity to spontaneously reproduce the emotions of other people or to 'feel into' someone else in a way that allows one to completely project into the mind of other individuals and, consequently, of an artefact. It is interesting to observe how the majority of empathic processes are communicated through the metaphors that describe the 'self as a container'. Empathy, which is also indicated by the German expression *Einfühlen*, is seen also as the ability to reach a total identification with another subject. This definition may be misleading because it describes a loss of the self (or a superimposition of a subject onto another one) in favour of direct access to the other, and avoids the analysis of the complex underlying process (Tan, 2013, p. 338). According to Tan, empathy must be examined as the condition that makes the interaction between two parts possible, allowing us to understand the meaning of others' actions and to respond with a related emotion. It is for this reason that Tan rejects the idea of a complete isomorphism between the outputs generated by the viewer and the affects expressed by the characters of fiction. He also focuses on the structures of this interaction and affirms that there is an automatic, direct form of empathy that functions as a kind of 'emotional contagion' and is generally defined as resonance because it is based on the diffusion of feelings.

This concept is quite similar to the notion of Imitation of the Affects we discussed in the previous chapter regarding Spinoza's model of human interaction. It

⁴ Gallese advocates a new approach to human and cognitive science that could finally link together the two fields of study and points out the necessity for scholars and researchers to understand and acquire the languages of different disciplines so that it is possible for them to mutually use the analyses and start a productive exchange. He also affirms that aesthetic experiences are multimodal and should be considered synesthetic (Gallese, 2014).

indicates a process according to which, when we recognise someone as similar, or as sharing some common feature with us, we tend to imitate his/her state (Ravven, 2003; Spinoza, 2002, p. 292; Tan, 2013, p. 349). Resonance, as basic imitative activity, is mostly directed to the simulation of those reactions and emotional states we generally assume to be automatic like joy, surprise, sudden fear and terror. From this state Tan assumes that we start the process of mind reading: a complex semantic interaction oriented to the purpose of understanding the behaviour of the characters on the screen and to investigate their internal meanings and concepts. It is also necessary to point out that most of this process happens at a non-conscious level since it links together a complex set of affections and responses that are not completely under our control. The indirect form of empathy we are discussing implies a more complex interaction that can be defined as imaginative and involves social inference, reasoning and more abstract reflection. Moreover, this process of semantic comprehension lies also in the possibility to simulate the theory of mind (TOM) of other people. What we usually indicate with this expression is the cognitive model that an individual generates concerning his/her own abilities and behaviour in the world, and also involves the capacity to recognise that other subjects possess these conceptual instruments (Baker, Hymel, Levin, 2013, p. 246). Therefore, by simulating the other's theory of mind we formulate and generate models about how individuals behave and the general values implied in these operations. The comparison between our model of the self and the subjectivity expressed by fictional figures is further evidence of the manifold, interactive aspects of the human mind, and reveals the continuous negotiation of meanings we are pushed to fulfil (Tan, 2013, p. 357). The simulation of others' intellectual/physical states is directed towards understanding not only the goals and intentions of others' actions, but also the complex moral systems behind them that give significance to specific social performances.

For these reasons the result of this operation can vary from allegiance to negation, in case we reject altogether what is portrayed on the screen such as a conduct that violates every moral and ethical norm we possess. Tan further reflects on the fact that, since our empathic participation is always accompanied by emotional responses, the complete comprehension of others' behaviour produces gratification and pleasure in film viewing and perhaps constitutes one of the main reasons why we enjoy cinematic experiences. The seventh art (and audiovisual

media in general) elicits our inquisitive faculties and stimulates our interest in discovering how ‘our fellows see the world’ (Tan, 2013, p. 362) - a desire oriented towards increasing our capacity to understand reality and enlarging our agency within it. Therefore, the act of mind reading in cinema clearly evokes the idea that we must consider films as systems of thought and perception since they express relations between bodies and concrete ways of living in the environment. For this reason, Tan’s interest is also focused on the study of how different types of film communication function, what kind of thought they express and, therefore, which interaction they recall in the viewer. Tan argues that films establish different forms of engagement that can be more sympathetic or detached, and links these operations to the idea of action readiness – the state that prompts behavioural responses, thoughts and attention (Tan, 2014, p. 107). These differences are evident when we discuss and compare film genres and observe how the emotional involvement varies, for example, in relation to classical dramas or naturalistic documentaries. Tan affirms that when we are watching typical narrative films our affective participation is oriented towards finding sympathetic links with the characters and towards the comprehension of and desire for specific narrative conclusions that may satisfy our expectations.

Docu-films (mostly scientific and didactic productions) often require and provoke a more detached approach because they are based on an engagement that is not generally directed to simple story solutions. These films tend to communicate a general sense of things accompanied by a calm, relaxed mood, which encourages reflection and abstraction. Through this analysis Tan denies the idea whereby a filmic genre can be described as lacking in emotional participation altogether, highlighting, instead, how even scientific documentaries recall an affective reaction (Tan, 2014, p. 119). Therefore, the affective power of a movie must be evaluated in relation to the specific dynamics it creates and in the agency it invokes and may generate. Of course, I do not wish to assume that anyone can easily enjoy art and auteur films: I want simply to point out that the difficulty of perceiving these works as emotionally effective lies in the habit of considering as engaging and satisfying only a particular type of interaction. It is an opinion that automatically leads us to consider ‘more sophisticated productions’ as purely abstract and addressing educated and trained viewers only, without taking into account the communicative power specific to a particular film. Conversely, if we understand film experience through

Spinoza's philosophy, and particularly through his idea of knowledge as 'the most powerful of the affects', we can reveal the conceptual qualities of every interaction, and imagine ways to employ it creatively beyond the boundaries of habits and intellectual models.

The examination of emotional engagement in film experience has also led to hypothesise whether it is possible to formulate the existence of a global affect structure (GLAS), that is to say a general theory of a unitary principle regulating our participation in film viewing (Plantinga, Tan, 2007). The search for these rules is the main argument of a challenging exchange between Ed Tan and Carl Plantinga. The discussion involves themes like desire, which is the central affective component according to Psychoanalytic film theory, attention, boredom and the ability to focus on the events on the screen. Plantinga affirms that desire, as it was described by Grand Theory, does not provide for a complete explanation of emotional phenomena different from the reproduction of childhood fantasies in cinema. It is clear that through this process we cannot explain why we feel pity and compassion, for instance, towards the character of Selma in *Dancer in the Dark* (Von Trier, 2000), a figure we hope will survive and escape a certain execution. Tan continues the discussion explaining his theory of interest as chief emotion elicited by film or as the mechanism that drives and directs our attention (Plantinga, Tan, 2007). It is because of this attachment that we enjoy watching films and continue the vision; thus, Tan identifies interest as the backbone of the affect structure and as the condition to produce emotional responses. The theoretical difficulty lies in considering interest an emotion, because we usually separate this concept from the realm of affective reactions. Nonetheless, Tan affirms that interest should be evaluated as a general affective regulator because it makes relational operations possible although the processes of attention rising in film experience are different from those in everyday life. Plantinga, on the contrary, believes that defining interest as an emotion raises several problems because interest is vague and undefined, and gathers a wide range of sensations without a specific unitary characteristic and origin. He rejects the idea of an overarching principle for affective involvement, and prefers to interpret it as the intentional orchestration of multiple affects; at the same time, he advocates for a cognitive approach to film theory that does not appear fragmented or focused on excessively specific aspects of cognition. Tan replies that interest describes the urge to explore objects in face of a novel stimulus or situation and the tendency towards

other beings necessary to perform activities and focus attention on particular phenomena (Plantinga, Tan, 2007). This definition is also motivated by the fact that if boredom dominates the viewer, he/she has an actual difficulty in managing the information received from the film. Tan and Plantinga's discussion ends with an incomplete synthesis since many arguments remain unresolved, such as how specific emotional responses arise. Tan's theory does not describe how we shift from paying attention to something or someone to jealousy or to other complex feelings and meta-emotional states.

However, I argue that the concept of interest illustrated by Ed Tan can be integrated with the use of the Spinozan notion of *conatus*, not as precise emotional mechanism but as the main regulatory principle of our existence as relational beings. Spinoza thought that we live in a continuous tension with other individuals and, therefore, we are automatically interested in other forms of life to increase our power to exist and express our potentialities. Moreover, the concept of *conatus* also provides a description of the process that leads from basic interests in and concerns for others to more complicated responses and mixed feelings. We have seen that every encounter we make indicates a change in body states and is also accompanied by sensations of pleasure or sadness that describe the enhancement or the weakening of our condition and capacity to act. From these simple mechanisms Spinoza derives all his psychology without denying the importance of particular affects, but explaining how even complex feelings and meta-emotions reflect this continuous search for more power to live and act that captures the essence of life itself. For this reason self-knowledge and reflection are the discoveries of the relations our embodied mind is able to operate, the generation of new potentialities to express and living worlds to experience. A Spinozan model of human embodied cognition stresses the idea of a film viewer who can increase his/her ability to understand and use film by discovering the nature of his/her affections and the constitution of particular perceptive processes. Thus, the transformation of the non-conscious internal dynamics of our involvement into awareness gives the viewer the possibility to direct these data in a productive way and to utilise a work of art as a cognitive instrument to interpret reality. Another result of the combination of Murray Smith's, Carl Plantinga's and Ed Tan's notions of engagement with Spinoza's theory of simulation will be a new definition of empathy. From this perspective, empathy is not defined as a simple affective response, but as the continuous negotiation that

redefines our identities as intersubjective agents, in accordance with ‘The Shared Manifold Hypothesis’. This is a process of mutual enactment and simulation between bodies through which we embody the others’ actions, associate a complex meaning to them and attempt a process of ‘mind-reading’, thus responding to relational situations with a complex and creative interaction (cf., Gallese, 2001; Ravven, 2003). This enlarged notion of empathy can indicate different types of engagement, from negation to allegiance, but also makes it possible to experience the emotional and intellectual state of the figures on the screen and, therefore, to contrast or appreciate their descriptive power.

Emotions and Cognitive Models: An Experiential Perspective on Film Analysis

Throughout the discussion of emotional engagement we have observed how sensory aspects are essential to influence and determine the generation of cognitive models and concepts in a way that completely denies the traditional distinction between intellectual participation and affective experience. Moreover, we have also seen how, in order to interact with a character emotionally, it is necessary to generate a *person schema*, a mental image for fiction figures that allows viewers to support or oppose a certain character and to understand the meaning of his/her actions. It is for this reason that, in spite of remarkable theoretical differences, all the scholars mentioned agree on the idea that sympathetic emotions are linked to deeper forms of social-moral reflections; they also agree on the fact that our interaction is based on a capacity to semantically negotiate our ethical and moral model with those expressed and maintained by the film and its internal agents (Bartsch, 2010). This interconnection between imaginative thought and physical experience confirms the validity of the experiential and embodied model of film experience, thus making it possible to understand the cognitive process underneath the comprehension of audiovisual communication. At the same time, this type of analysis suggests that the production of semantic models goes beyond the dynamics of character comprehension and emphasises the fact that conceptualisation works in relation to all the elements expressed by the film, which must be conceived as a whole (but not unitary). This aspect constitutes further evidence of the aesthetic value of thought, or rather of the parallelism and interdependence existing between body and mind, a connection that is not the description of a simple correspondence, but of a more

sophisticated communicative level. What audiovisual perception offers to the viewer is, indeed, the reflection of entire ontologies into ‘practical’ forms of living.

Film scholars like Anne Bartsch systematically combine conceptualisation and aesthetic perception through the use of Lakoff and Johnson’s ICMs within film experience. Since metaphors and metonymies are not simply figures of speech but have an experiential and perceptive foundation, it is easy to observe how these models work within audiovisual cognition. These conceptual paradigms do not perform a direct symbolic function, but are primarily intended to describe particular relations between the objects and the characters on the screen (Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2014). It is possible to observe how the iteration of these interactions and modes of thoughts enables the codification of a specific form of filmic language and communication and, therefore, the analysis of conceptualisation requires focusing on the connection between bodily positioning and higher mental expressions. According to Bartsch, for example, this bond appears through the disposition of perceptual and psychological modalities, which define a consequent agency. From a basic level of sensations and communicative strategies indicated by the film we can associate an undefined number of semantic elaborations and complex interpretations, which are somehow united by the set of affections the artistic experience provides. Because our reflective and intellectual activity is not exquisitely abstract, it is also accompanied by emotions and levels of gratification, which Bartsch differentiates between hedonic and eudaimonic (Bartsch, 2010). Bartsch borrows this separation from Aristotle’s ethical theory and indicates the distinction between a simple and unproblematic enjoyment (the traditional idea of art as *divertissement*) and a sophisticated appreciation, which is connected to an idea of self-development and morality. She develops this notion to affirm that every form of appreciation and enjoyment refers to a concept of well-being because it is oriented to the satisfaction of definite needs and to the expression of potentialities of the embodied mind. Therefore, she also rejects the categorical distinction between elitist and popular art (Bartsch, 2016, p. 204). However, since film experience is characterised by sets of affections, she denies that we have simply to investigate reactions and emotional responses and suggests examining the paradigm scenarios a film establishes and combines, or rather the complex of feelings it generates and stimulates to use.

Dramas, for example are not just meant to elicit sadness, negative sensations or compassion, but they blend these feelings together with other emotions, which

provide a specific motivation to suffering and pain or emphasise the positive role of self-sacrifice as in the case of *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997). As we can see, these scenarios implicitly evoke a deeper social and moral function because of the type of heroic behaviour and conduct they positively affirm and because of the values intrinsically expressed within them. Without these characteristics, the enjoyment of dramas, horror movies and other genres built on negative sensations would be more problematic because of the absence of clear moral and affective coordinates that allow emotional and intellectual conciliation. Bartsch maintains that the possibility to connect fiction figures' actions, emotions and the general mood of a film to social moral reflection is also based on the capability of cinema to combine first- and third-person perspectives, a mixture that always makes it possible to observe the environmental consequences of decisions and operations (Bartsch, 2010). Since films also express ethical and conceptual models, we can talk about their ideological consequences or analyse the set of ideas they implicitly convey, not as superimposed strategies of cultural dominion, as a classical school of critique affirmed, but as the definition of coordinates for actions and roles of the subjects. In addition to this, the metaphorical potential of films arises in the possibility to construct cognitive mappings or visual paradigms for particular scenes or in the capacity to define perceptual expectations, which can be violated to create a sense of shock, surprise and disorientation (Bartsch, 2010). Bartsch analyses the emblematic case of *The Birds* (Hitchcock, 1963) as a film that leads the affective logic of dramas to extreme consequences. She observes that the threatening flock of birds that torments Bodega Bay can be explained as a metaphorical visualisation of fear, turmoil and anxiety that surrounds the film and exasperates the characters' feelings. This main metaphorical image does not imply that only one correct interpretation of the film exists; on the contrary, it establishes the possibility of generating different semantic conceptualisations starting from the main dynamics of fear and tension. We have seen that the state of turmoil and anxiety is typical of the genre since it also helps to make particular moral values emerge in combination with the centrality of positive figures. In the case of Hitchcock's masterpiece, the film establishes a general sense of uncertainty because the birds attacking the city are not moved by any particular action expressed by the characters. At the same time, I believe that this perennial state of instability reveals also the incompleteness of film image and of thought in general, and denies the idea that audiovisual perception is distanced and disinterested

since it always evokes a concrete reaction in the viewer, which can be shocking and destabilises his/her comfortable position. This is a mechanism and a psychological dynamic that Hitchcock constantly researched and communicated in his works. The unconventional situation described by the film provokes the idea of a complete alienation between human kind and nature, which is effectively visualised through the final sequence of the car escaping from the city conquered by the flock of birds (Bartsch, 2010). Furthermore, this experiential dimension of anguish and ambiguity urges the viewer to look for explanations and rationalisations, thus encouraging the production of personal inferences and complex interpretations of the film.

All these notions help us to understand how we can consider film experience as ‘thought provoking’ and how we can distinguish enjoyment from appreciation: a participation more related to imaginative reasoning and generative of complex emotional responses (Bartsch, Oliver, 2011). The idea that we participate through meta-emotional processes is not simply related to the construction of moral models, as we have already discussed, but refers also to the fact that affective states are manifold and multidirectional. Thus, so-called negative emotions like fear, sadness and anger can be rewarding experiences because of the desire to overcome them or the loss of hope and abandonment they cause (Bartsch, Mangold, Viehoff, Vorderer, 2008). At the same time joyful passions can be unwelcome since, if they are not directed in a constructive way, they force us to defend a pleasurable state and induce us to fear everything that could damage and threaten its existence. Meta-emotional processes are also linked to the conscious and non-conscious generation of feelings about personal states, reactions that can be of shame, reflection, defence (or rejection), doubt and so on. The comprehension of these processes gives us the potential to direct our responses in a productive way and to be positively surprised by unexpected sensations and thoughts, though they appear uncanny or perturbing. As indicated by Spinoza in his psychological inquiry on human affections and affects, the positivity and joyfulness of emotions, which are also a cause of real and effective knowledge, lie in the affirmative capacity to control and generate pleasure through the encounter of something else or to manifest an expressive power. We may say that Bartsch suggests a constructive and affirmative psychological self-reflection that leads the subject to become an active creator and participant in his/her own sensations, as the Spinozan model of a free and strong man does (cf. Bartsch, 2016, p. 208; Spinoza, 1979, p. 222).

Our emotional involvement, therefore, not only constitutes a reaction to particular stimuli, but is also expressed in more sophisticated and constructed states tied to modes of intellectual conceptualisation and imagination. These participative processes must be extended to the empathic and affective reactions we produce when engaging with fiction characters. Like any element of film experience, through the actions they perform the protagonists of diegetic events push us to a continuous confrontation with the meaning of their behaviour, whose comprehension and sharing are part of the complex gratification we seek as viewers (Bartsch, 2016, p. 206).

Following the same type of analyses, Kathrin Fahlenbrach argues that movies should be conceived as perceptions filled with metaphors and cognitive models since they always express a synesthetic potential. A famous conceptualisation of fear is verifiable in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) where the constant idea of danger and threat is visualised by the perfect combination of the fin emerging from the water and the soundtrack's persistent and disturbing rhythm. Another type of effective visual conceptualisation or vivid abstraction, as Anne Bartsch calls them, is the light sabre in the *Star Wars* series, which combines a bright blade with a metallic electric noise that recalls a concept of sharpness and effectiveness in cutting (Fahlenbrach, 2005). This association is possible because cinematic perception happens at a cross-modal multisensory level influencing cognition from the non-conscious plane to the higher form of rationalisation. This link between different sensations and abstraction is identified by the term *synchresis* used by the scholar Michel Chion to indicate the multi-affective conjunction of acoustic experiences, general feelings and states of the body, a construction that recalls the metaphorical generation of conceptual associations described by Lakoff. For this reason we must consider that every aspect of the moving image and of its structure possesses a conceptual power and needs to be considered as a vehicle for intellection. Hence, Fahlenbrach identifies metaphorical associations in architecture, scenography and other features of film expression that we usually tend to conceive as secondary or decorative. Spaces and architectures, for instance, play a central role in orienting and defining the semantic ontology of a particular film since they provide general structures of comprehension and agency for the viewers and the characters. For this reason it is possible to identify different types of audiovisual metaphors, which can be structural, ontological, *orientational* and image schematic (Fahlenbrach, 2007, p. 107). The first

kind defines the common associative logic that regulates conceptualisation; the second indicates the categories and the overall status that influences the emotional mood; the last two are mental schemata that organise spatial experiences. According to Fahlenbrach, the network structure of audiovisual metaphors highly recalls the reality of our perception since it cannot be reduced to simple atomistic and isolated stimuli, but is based on multidimensional and multisensory integrated processes. That is why she affirms that cinematic expressions are maybe the most qualified to demonstrate the experiential and associative reality of our reasoning and thinking, because they make the experiential and interactive nature of thought graspable (Fahlenbrach, 2016, p. 5).

Filmic metaphors for spatial systems make it possible to transform topographical structures and relations (centre-periphery or container schemas) into topological models and, consequently, to generate complex conceptual interpretations for sequences and particular aesthetical situations. Codruta-Elena Morari reports an emblematic case in which she discusses how film forms mirror feelings and thoughts. She mentions and analyses Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). In this film there is a total opposition between the internal and the external locations (Morari, 2007, pp. 94-95): the former are excessive, baroque, labyrinthine spaces that evoke the cascade of our mnemonic and non-conscious activities and affections, while the latter consist of well-organised and comforting gardens that can be associated to a model of Cartesian rational and reflexive life. Furthermore, Fahlenbrach recognises all these metaphorical typologies in some music videos, where she notices the presence of conceptual expressions such as fear as a fluid container or hidden force (Fahlenbrach, 2005). The schemata we generate through film experience can be connected, according to Fahlenbrach, to the Aristotelian idea of *aisthesis*, which identifies the origin of rationalisation and cognition within affective-sensory stimuli and emotions-related reflections (Fahlenbrach, 2005). For these reasons Fahlenbrach reuses McLuhan's concept of *the medium is the message*, since she highlights the centrality of perceptual modalities instead of the primary role traditionally given to signs and symbols. The 'meaning' of a particular audiovisual experience, then, should not be recognised in its alleged abstract content, but in the perceptive modalities it stages, as well as in the relational potentialities it offers to its viewer (Fahlenbrach, 2005). I have already associated this famous statement to Spinoza's ideas on visualisation and on art as

interactive thought. Indeed, the experiential notions discussed by Fahlenbrach and Bartsch add to the complexity of an embodied cognitive model for the film viewer by stressing the importance of every aesthetic element on the screen for the purpose of conceptualisation. This centrality is not to be interpreted as the lessening of artistic forms to a simple set of affects and sensations automatically reproduced by the viewer, which would mean to reduce their intellectual power, but as the recognition of the perceptual bases from which abstract and intellectual reasoning starts and develops.

In addition to the work of Anne Bartsch and Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja analyse how subjectivity is metaphorically expressed within film experience. In particular, they focus on the relations fiction characters establish with the objects on the screen, and highlight the interactions they are, consequently, able to perform. The description of these perceptual modalities is not expressed through symbolic representations, but is linked to the definition and regulation of the encounters our bodies experience in the world. For this reason, again, the idea of the subjective point of view does not need to be rendered through an exact reproduction of personal perspective, but is expressed through a metonymical and metaphorical conceptualisation of perception as physical contact between perceiver and perceived (Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2014). The typical association between the act of seeing and the idea of a perceptive state or of understanding is a demonstration of this conceptual blending, which is commonly used in audiovisual media. By means of these associations it is possible to identify how an individual is positioned within the filmic space and how he/she relates with other objects and beings. Therefore, we can recognise character behaviour as the expression of ways of living and, more generally, the complex ideas that evoke an entire system of values (Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2014). According to Coëgnarts and Kravanja, thanks to the cinematic analysis of conceptual models it is also possible to reveal a particular, new definition of the subject, which is not determined as something pure and *a priori*, but reaches its own explanation through its experiential properties. Furthermore, this concept brings to mind Spinoza's experiential notion of subjectivity, which defines individuals by the relations they are able to generate in the world. Because these models are linked to sensory-motor experiences, they are mostly formed from container, source-path-goal and image schemas; these are all idealised models that indicate modes of motion of a subject in space. It is particularly

easy to recognise source-path-goal and image schemas, since they reflect the bodily experience of action-fulfilment (Lakoff, 1987, p. 275). The breakdown of source-path-goal schemas will be one of the essential aspects of my analysis of *Melancholia*. For this reason, character actions often visualise this cognitive association between kinaesthetic conditions and the accomplishment of a result, or of complex conceptual aims, since these metaphorical structures generate the imaginative spatialisation of mental states. At the same time, viewers embody and interact with these *vivid concepts* through empathic and simulative operations. All these arguments unravel the experiential nature of audiovisual communication and the integrated cognitive process that connects emotions and sensations to higher cognition. As we have seen, this interrelation underlines the phenomenological unity of thought and perceptive experience, and the fact that *art is reasoning under sensuous modalities*, to use a Hegelian claim (Plantinga, 2014, p. 144). This argument allows us to define filmic concepts and imaginative models as *percepts* (an expression borrowed from Deleuzian thought that will be discussed later) or systems of thinking under the form of audiovisual images.

Conclusions

Thus far, we have outlined, and reinterpreted through Spinoza's philosophy, some of the recurrent positions and statements of Cognitive Film Theory and the most important recent research in the field in relation to the semantic analysis of cinematic communication. We have also highlighted the influence that embodied models of the mind and the effects that neurocognitive studies have had on this analytical paradigm. The purpose of this extensive survey was to critically examine the most important positions within this paradigm and to identify which of them is compatible with the experiential-Spinozan model I plan to use in my film analyses and, together, to discuss my objections to the opinions that contradict my hypothesis. Spinoza's philosophy and Lakoff's semantics, then, are used here as a general epistemological backbone to support my re-evaluation of CFT, and description of film experience in general. This choice is motivated by the potentiality of these theoretical instruments in producing an innovative reading of film theory, which enables the combination of different analytical frameworks, traditionally seen as antithetical, via the experiential account of film experience.

In summary, we have observed that Buckland's semantic approach allows a combination of sensorial and highly conceptual factors, and we have stressed the importance of low-level affections. Subsequently, we have discussed and combined Smith's structures of engagement (person schema, alignment, allegiance), Plantinga's and Greg Smith's conceptual models (mood, scenario), and Tan's theory of empathy and resonance. With these theoretical assumptions, we have examined the usefulness of Fahlenbrach's, Bartsch's, Coëgnarts and Kravanja's studies on filmic metaphors and associations in developing an experiential model of audiovisual communication. From this discussion we have extracted an interpretation of the filmic image as a synthetic and synesthetic expression, or rather as a form of thought under particular perceptual modalities. This interactive and agentive understanding of film experience is also linked to the comprehension of how we emotionally engage with the whole substrate of the film, including the characters, by taking into account their conduct and generating models of the figures that we must confront with. Therefore, we can affirm that the general characteristic of film experience is to think in cinematic terms and, because of these new elements, it is possible to establish a concrete connection between film and philosophy. This comparison arises not only in terms of intellectual abstractions, of meta-reflections or secondary interpretations, but as the capacity to perceive ideas and concepts in the world as ways of living and as spatial organisations of bodies.

CHAPTER 4

A SPINOZAN PHILOSOPHY OF FILM EXPERIENCE

The Relation between Philosophy and Cinema

The philosophical interest in cinema coincides with the widespread popularity and diffusion of the seventh art and, since the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous intellectuals have dealt with the nature of the medium and with its capacity to modify and interrelate with human perception (Carroll, 2008, pp. 1-2). The great influence of this mass-medium raised the question of an enormous anthropological shift that affected every aspect of modern life, from individual and personal speculation to the social and collective perception of the world. Needless to say, this change also stressed the political implications of the seventh art and the need to elaborate analyses and examinations of its effects on public life. Walter Benjamin, for example, faced this issue in his influential essay on mass communication called 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (1936). Here, he discussed the importance of using this medium effectively in order to direct its communicative power towards revolutionary and political intents and to avoid the risk of fascism. A tyrannical rhetoric, in his opinion, resides in the unproblematic aesthetical description of modern life and in the naive enthusiasm for technological developments (Benjamin, 2008, p. 41). The fact that film experience affects our ability to perceive the world and even generates new realities and worlds implies that cinema is not merely a language or representational mode, but an instrument of thinking and conceptual expression. For this reason thinkers belonging to very heterogeneous currents of thought have described ways in which the seventh art expresses a mode of thinking or an instrument to perceive the becoming of the world. This is also the central argument of André Bazin's reflection on the role of the medium and on its capacity to manifest how the events in the world take shape through the use of long shots, deep focus and long takes in opposition to a cinema made of fast cutting rate and close ups (Bazin, 2005, pp. 35-36). According to Bazin these aesthetic choices allow viewers to perceive individuals in their relational capacities, and in their compositional nature, and reflect their continuous

becoming through temporal continuity, thus showing the entire reality of the concept of 'being in the world'.

In his book *The Reality of Film* (2011) Richard Rushton offers an interesting summary and expresses personal evaluations of the philosophical theories of filmic reality. Rushton maintains that film describes worldviews and semantic systems, therefore there is no need to find other disciplines to justify its existence. Since there is nothing beyond the nature of film experience in its potentialities, the aim is to analyse its intrinsic characteristics and to avoid the simple idea that cinema is just an inertial product of the cultural industry, the offshoot of a dominating ideological *apparatus* (Rushton, 2011, p. 9). For this reason he also rejects the typical distinction between reality and illusion in cinema, since he does not agree with the 'modernist' claim according to which the seventh art is an abstraction detached from the flesh of the world. Thus, Rushton reiterates a Deleuzian claim, highlighting the possibility for film images to express their own reality and significance beyond the function of representing an *a priori* world (Rushton, 2011, p. 196). Therefore, we should not look beyond the realm of artistic fabrications and symbolic representations of films in order to find its basic truth and its concrete connection to the nature of things. On the contrary, film experience shapes what we call reality, generating possibilities, situations and events that become part of our lives (Rushton, 2011, p. 4). In his discussion of Slavoj Žižek's work on cinema, Rushton argues that we cannot reach the Real directly and, consequently, we cannot simply fulfil desires and needs within film experiences. What is required in order to act within audiovisual interaction is a filter for our reasoning, a cognitive schema, which may also be ideological. Consequently, moral mechanisms lose their secondary and meta-reflective value but affect our understanding as a conceptual model that gives us the coordinates and the direction for our activity (Rushton, 2011, p. 149). Therefore, we participate in film experience because we perceive an organisation of the objects of fiction that directs our desires and expresses an ontological worldview; consequently, the analysis of the medium coincides with the discovery of these conceptual structures. Ideology, then, does not indicate false consciousness, the existence of dominant values that we non-consciously reproduce; instead it expresses a modality in which reality is shaped and concepts such as justice/injustice, inclusion/exclusion are formed.

In his discussion, Rushton implicitly uses the Nietzschean (and intrinsically Spinozan) concept of the power of the false. We have observed that according to this

idea no definitive reality exists, but every form of expression moulds a partial and incomplete ontology, whose essence must be evaluated by its affirmative power and by its capacity to form relations and compositions among beings (cf. Rushton, 2011, p. 166; 193). Therefore, we recognise a concept or any form of life and expression as false or inadequate to the extent that it manifests weakness, which is directly linked to the necessity it expresses to deny other things in order to survive. The discussion of Rushton's work is helpful to identify similarities between 'naturalistic' and philosophical approaches to film. Indeed, the idea that cinema makes us interact with entire modes of existence starting from a perceptual and affective dimension is really compatible with some interpretations coming from cognitive film theory. Moods, Scenarios, Person Schemas and Audiovisual Metaphors are the cognitive and experiential models through which we embody the reality of film, we participate in it and interact with its ontological dimension. Thanks to this common tension, which indicates films as systems of thought, it is possible to compare and combine different theoretical models, thus focusing on the interactive situation and on the type of 'reality' a particular audiovisual work displays. The conceptual texture and concreteness of audiovisual experience are also the central elements of John Mullarkey's book, *Refractions of Reality* (2009), where he affirms that cinema can think in its own affective way. Mullarkey even maintains that film experience provides the most radical form of thought since it does not communicate through a specialist language (as philosophy does), but expresses 'possible realities' refracted on the screen (Mullarkey, 2009, p. 212). Thus, films establish concrete and powerful relational systems by constantly involving the viewer affectively and conceptually, and by generating new realities to interact with. For this reason, Robert Sinnerbrink thinks of film-philosophy as a new discipline, and demands a different analytical approach that avoids excessively abstract symbolic interpretations and combines aesthetic receptivity to film with philosophically informed reflections (Sinnerbrink, 2011, p. 3).

In line with these conclusions, the film scholar Pepita Hesselberth develops an interesting philosophical study on the interactive power of cinema, through a reinterpretation of *deixis* and *enunciation* linked to the idea of spectatorship as embodied and affective. Although semiotic studies on film tended to interpret these dynamics as abstract and imaginative, in his famous essay *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) Roland Barthes already advocated for an affective, interactive notion of

aesthetic experience. In this essay, Barthes maintained that the *writerly* pleasure of artistic texts requires a less linguistic, more pragmatic approach. This method focuses on the embodiment of artistic concepts and makes it possible to observe the work of art as a passionate and sensual becoming that the viewer/reader experiences, and which must be evaluated in its active and creative aspects (Barthes, 1975, p. 33). The concentration on the body and the senses allows a new understanding of communicative categories because it goes beyond their typical linguistic and semiotic interpretation opening the analytical field to perceptual engagement and the orientational mechanisms implied in aesthetic interaction. Hesselberth indicates film vision as a complex system that involves a dynamic coexistence and covariance between the audience and the screens (in all their forms) and, in addition to this, she borrows the term *chronotopes* from the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (Hesselberth, 2014, p. 9). Via this key concept Hesselberth highlights the ‘intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships in artistic expression’ and specifically the capacity of cinema to thicken particular times and durations by establishing interactive modalities that in turn generate a consequent idea of the self and of its agency. Therefore, every filmic situation creates a bond as well as the definition of cognitive reference points which allow us viewers to actively participate in the vision and to reformulate our subjective position in accordance with it (Hesselberth, 2014, p. 36). Through this activity called ‘punctuation’ we orientate in the experience by using three main reference points: our perspective and position, the rhythm of the film, and the negotiation between viewers’ state and the conceptualisation of time established by the film. The experiential situation emerging from this encounter is never fixed, but dynamic, thus making us experience cinematic events as concrete and vivid ontological dimensions.

Hesselberth also examines the cognitive and perceptual effects of the ‘handheld aesthetic’ and the problems this aesthetic modality raises in terms of audience interaction. She maintains that the characteristics of these films (handheld camera, fast movements and extremely subjective points of view) generate what Giuliana Bruno defines as a disorienting space-affect linked to a traumatic performative dimension and a continuous state of emergency (Bruno, 2002, p. 271; Hesselberth, 2014, p. 54). Hesselberth argues that this type of film describes a particular cinematic interaction that, alongside the notion of authenticity or of genuine perception, expresses a singular somatic experience. This aesthetic situation

does not discourage thought because of its peculiarities; instead, it provokes reasoning in terms of particular visual perception. These affective features convey the sustained sensation of a body, of its agency and intellectual qualities and, more in detail, the negative feeling of having difficulties in establishing a reference point within a state of ceaseless ambiguity and confusion. This interaction forces viewers to renegotiate our sense of self and, by thickening an unconventional temporal logic, it offers the possibility to engage in a perceptive state that we do not usually have (Hesselberth, 2014, p. 127). For this reason Hesselberth believes that cinema has the power to make us modify and challenge our ideas as individuals and subjects; she takes inspiration from those scholars and philosophers who have conceived consciousness as a continuous constructive and immanent process against a dualist notion of the self (Gilles Deleuze, Vivian Sobchack, Giuliana Bruno, Laura Marks, and others). Therefore, she imagines the viewer as a flexible subject whose faculties are completely embodied and, therefore, is immersed in constant change and affective stimulation that also appears traumatic and exhausting.

Furthermore, the idea of an intensified ‘self’ establishes for us not only the capacity to experience new types of temporal-spatial relationships or to empathise with different subjectivities; it also opens up the possibility of embodying new agencies in order to expand our capacity to act in relation to the surrounding context. We can observe that many of Hesselberth’s notions can be combined with a Spinozan model of the viewer. Hesselberth shares the idea that film experience is an interactive phenomenon involving cognitive and sensorial activities, which makes it possible to participate in a particular experiential situation through the embodiment of ontological dimensions based on perceptive and affective states. Like Spinoza, Hesselberth describes an agential concept of time and rejects a transcendental idea of the self, which, on the contrary, is always involved in its ecological and performative aspects.

The idea of film experience as a creative conceptual endeavour is the central argument of Daniel Frampton’s *Filmosophy* (2006), which develops an innovative and productive notion of film-philosophy by stating that every film expresses an organic dimension, which requires a psychology of ‘expanded’ states of mind to be analysed (Frampton, 2006, p. 24). Audiovisual experience frames the action in a whole network of relations and makes the viewer perceive what is in the film in accordance with the type of thought produced by the film itself. Thus, like

Hesselberth, Frampton imagines the filmgoer as a dynamic agent, a body-subject, who produces meaning through the embodiment of the affective and material elements of film (Frampton, 2006, p. 46). To justify and demonstrate the connection between film and philosophy Frampton reuses Lakoff and Johnson's notions of metaphors and ICMs, which highlight the parallelism between thought and perception and enable the analysis of film images as interactive visual concepts. For this reason, thinking at the cinema is a productive construction, an affective experience of ideas that mingles every perceptive component with an imaginative, abstract model.

The synesthetic and multisensory nature of film experience, related to an embodied model of viewer, is also the central characteristic of Michel Chion's work on cinema. Although his main interest is the examination of film as sonorous art, he does not refer to this aspect as a separate or privileged characteristic of the medium, but as an essential component functional to the purpose of generating a coherent and unitary perception. He believes that even in the silent cinema age, films have never been soundless expressions: their nature automatically evokes the presence of an acoustic trace and the necessity for the image to communicate through music, speech and noises. We do not experience sound as an atomic, compact signal; on the contrary, we make sense of filmic images by assembling sound with the order of the composition and the states of the bodies within the filmic world. For this reason Chion even affirms that the soundtrack does not exist since its significance emerges in relation to the other features of a particular image and, consequently, as a product of a whole filmic concept (Chion, 1999, p. 14). The inseparable connection between images and sounds in cinema is highlighted, for example, by the tendency in silent movies to show the actors moving their lips although there was no sound in relation to that activity. Chion prefers to talk about a 'deaf' cinema instead of a silent one because he affirms that the acoustic expression is implicitly involved in the cinematographic form and is always conceptually explicated somehow, a mechanism that explains the disappointment many viewers felt when they heard the real voice of various movie stars (Chion, 1999, p. 20). This conclusion entails two further reflections: the first one is that film perception functions as a synesthetic experience because it is defined by the condensation of different sensory states into a whole system of ideas. Chion talks about *synchresis* as the power of the medium to synthesise and associate together different sensations, thus forming a specific

concept and affecting the generation of a filmic scenario. Several great directors, such as Jacques Tati or Max Ophüls, tested this conceptual association by avoiding the clear correspondence between sound, speech and objects and privileging the perception of spoken words as bustle, communicating a strong feeling of bewilderment and inadequacy in the possibilities of orientation in the world (Chion, 1999, p. 99).

This consideration leads us to the second, more problematic aspect of Chion's analysis, i.e. the problem of giving a body to the voice, a necessity we try to fulfil because of our need to control and rationalise. It is through the localisation of a sound and of its source that we can find a meaning and a general explanation for it; in addition, we can also easily understand how this cognitive process influences our capacity to orient ourselves in reality and in film experience. The absence of a reference point makes us perceive that voice or sound everywhere, as something that affects the entire status of reality we are involved in (Chion, 1999, p. 39). This mechanism is referred to by the term *acousma*, a technique that characterises the entire history of cinema, which is full of effective voices without bodies, and is emblematic of masterpieces like *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (Lang, 1933). Lang's film is entirely based on the problem of searching for the body of a criminal threat, of this non-identifiable evil, whose encompassing power is closely connected to our impossibility to localise it. The acousmatic voice is associated with the voice of God and, consequently, is characterised by an absolute capacity to affect reality and perceive it. It conceptualises our ontological incompleteness and it is for this reason that the voice-over often plays the role of omniscient narrator and, on the other hand, the discovery of its source and physical reality reshapes this status altogether, bringing it back to a human and mundane dimension (Chion, 1999, p. 45). Therefore, we understand the centrality that sound has in making us visualise a certain concept, since it is intensely related to the other perceptual aspects of the film, generating an imaginative unity. This constitutes an additional element in support of the thesis outlined here, which affirms the unavoidable integration between aesthetic affections, abstraction and imagination - a relation which is also supported by the work of scholars like Kathrin Fahlenbrach who already link cognitive studies to these philosophical analyses (cf. Fahlenbrach, 2005).

Films are Percepts

Deleuze's work is a constant reference point in my research. The importance of his thought is due to the fact that his philosophical path was largely based on a revolutionary interpretation of Spinoza. From Spinoza he developed his concept of immanence and his complete refusal of a philosophy that leads to transcendence and mortification. Deleuze's contribution is central also because he was one of the first thinkers who investigated the connection between films, thought and philosophy deeply and systematically. Indeed, Deleuze maintained that the analogy between cinema and language is inadequate since the seventh art functions on the pre-linguistic level of cognition and expresses thought and concepts through audiovisual perception (Deleuze, 2008, p. 251). For this reason he discussed film directors and audiovisual artists as if they were theoreticians or philosophers, as their works do not need any secondary interpretation or methodological disclosure, but make us perceive concepts and ideas relying on a sensory structure rather than a representational capacity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 193). He considered artistic expressions as blocks of sensations and, at the same time, he believed that concepts cut out and create ways and modes of existence in reality, in the plane of immanence where every form of life and thought coexists. The plane of immanence, like the Spinozan idea of Substance and the experientialist vision of Reality, must be considered as a condition, a pre-philosophical and pre-scientific assumption that makes it possible for individuals to think and create (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 41). Deleuze argues that because every human expression happens on this common ground and refers to intensive qualities, then there is no real and a priori difference between art, science and philosophy, and their specificity must be researched in the way they relate to this plane. Philosophy creates concepts; it begins with the desire to problematise aspects of reality and causes the generation of ideas, of whole systems of meaning, which are 'signed' in the sense that are specific to an 'author' who captured them in the becoming of the world as Plato did with the *Idea* or Descartes with his *cogito*. Science (every type of methodological science) is not directly opposed to philosophy; on the contrary, it can communicate and share ideas and systems, but its specificity relies on the fact that it looks for regularities among phenomena, like the second kind of knowledge in Spinoza's philosophy and, therefore, the concepts it produces possess different properties. Since the products of scientific discourses are functional to support a certain analytic paradigm and respect

its premises, like the role played by laws in relation to a normative system, they are called *functives* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 125). Nevertheless, their origin is similar since even scientific concepts reflect modes of reality and body assemblages in the world, and, as Lakoff and Johnson indicate, can express an authentic creative power.

Following this description, Deleuze states that art generates percepts; it expresses thought under specific perceptual and physical modalities, with a set of affections (Bogue, 2009, p. 368). Hence, in opposition to the majority of thinkers and film scholars, Deleuze argues that there is no need for other disciplines and techniques to explain the validity of cinematic communication, which generates concepts by itself. In view of this autonomy, which makes cinema an intellectual instrument, its products can be compared with those deriving from other disciplines and sciences. That is why he believes that there is a privileged relationship between film and philosophy and consequently, he addresses fictional characters for literature and cinema as living beings, even thinkers. According to his interpretation, they identify *conceptual personae*, models of individual, an idea comparable to Murray Smith's concept of person schema: an idealised cognitive model with which we can interact and semantically negotiate values and worldviews.

Deleuze claims that when we encounter another being in artistic experiences, we begin to enter into its territory, the set of relations it is able to set up in the world. When we start this interaction we are involved in a new becoming so that we start transforming our subjectivity into relation to the individual we are facing. This negotiation can take on indefinite forms and is not linear. Indeed, we know from the previous discussion of Spinoza's ethical theory that the nature of our capacity to interact within artistic experiences, as in life in general, depends on the ability to transform every new challenge and encounter into a source of power, and in avoiding closures and negations. These two negative phenomena are clear consequences of an exceedingly narcissistic subjectivity, unable to comprehend and respond to new events actively. An individual who behaves accordingly, therefore, needs to negate the others and their visions in order to keep on living, and reacts with passivity and mortification to the loss of his/her existential space (*detritorialisation*). In addition to these notions, the complex of Deleuze's work on cinema provides a compelling justification and explanation of how films are forms of thought and reflection, ways to experience reality into various forms or even to come to terms with the becoming

of reality itself (Deleuze, 2008, pp. 26-27). In Deleuze's opinion, the semiologists who analysed the moving image as language failed because they did not ask what the linguistic characteristics of cinema are, but tried to reduce cinema to the functions of a defined language, thus putting aside its internal specificity as thought in forms of percepts. What the seventh art does is relate to the open whole of the real, creating expressions and definitions of this multifaceted plane through blocks of space-time, sensory-motor conditions. Classical cinema dealt with this dimension by compressing the continuous flux of events into an understandable and conventional idea of time and objects relation. This does not imply that mainstream cinema should be necessarily underestimated; on the contrary, we can evaluate the type of thought it expresses by recognising its aesthetic properties and communicative qualities. Deleuze grounds his analysis on some principles of Peircean semiotics, like the triadic classification of the image with the concepts of firstness (presence and possibility), secondness (relation and combination) and thirdness (the dependence of this relation to a whole). Deleuze argues that Peirce's work is more suitable to address cinema since it avoids representationalism and Structuralism. Deleuze also finds Peirce's idea of unlimited semiosis challenging and useful, as it describes the world as a pansemiotic dimension, where the process of sign production and interpretation is eternal (Deleuze, 2008, p. 29).

The second inspiration for his research resides in Henri Bergson's notions of time, movement and memory. He believes that time in cinema is not experienced as a transcendental category, but it is consequent and parallel to the systems of relations the bodies compose in the world, and their capacity to act in the space (Deleuze, 2008, p. 182). We can say that every film arranges a temporal modality, a way it is perceived and organised. At the same time, there is a unitary and immanent definition of it, where every possible contingent manifestation of temporality is expressed. For this reason, he defines the status of cinema in classical forms with the expression *movement-image*, since it privileges causal and consequential relation among bodies like those we can observe in procedures like shot-reverse-shot or eyeline match editing. At the same time, memory does not consist in the classification of singular data; it resembles a cascade of events and every mnemonic process generates a mode, a complex conceptualisation of past happenings in relations to our present states. Therefore, we may state that classical cinema shapes our mind as viewers in a way that makes us perceive the world according to a

specific kind of rationality, which becomes a *cliché* in its repetitive and non-creative manifestations. Nonetheless, this apparently self-referential system is contradicted and pushed to its own limits by film-makers like Orson Welles, whom Deleuze described as a baroque and Nietzschean artist. Welles enlarges perspective and depth of focus in a way that even contradicts the centrality and clarity typical of traditional filmic forms (Deleuze, 2008, p. 105). This break into communication demonstrates how the cinematic image is multiple and manifold, an aspect which Italian Neorealism revealed effectively. This cinematographic movement was not unitary, and produced a varied aesthetic but, nonetheless, by using long shots, long takes and particular attention to the living spaces of modern life (cities after WWII, factories, desolate countryside), it started to visualise the sense of becoming of things, a non-linear concept of time. This new kind of cinematic expression is defined as the *time-image* and is peculiar to films like *Umberto D.* (De Sica, 1952), where we experience a pure optical situation in the famous sequence of the young servant performing several everyday duties and discovering her maternity (Deleuze, 2008, p. 2).

This enlargement of the perspective and complication of the relational systems does not produce a regression into subjective association in the viewer, as Grodal affirmed. Deleuze maintains that this openness is one of the characteristics that make it possible for a film to connect more aspects and possibilities of the real, to affirm more life and to make the subject experience a becoming-multiple (Deleuze, 2008, p. 137). In a Spinozan system of evaluation, art like any other phenomenon is not evaluable according to fixed paradigms of justice or goodness, but only to the extent that it has a connective power and a transformative capacity. The 'last' stage of the time-image is the *crystal-image* that endeavours to condense all the expressive possibilities into one communicative dimension as we can see, for example, in Tarkovsky and Resnais' works. Their films are based on the manifestation of several and coexistent (Deleuze would say compossible) levels of the self and senses of reality, and completely reject a linear and consequential composition, thus enabling the viewer to reuse the visual material in an affective and intellectual process of discovery and creation.

It is implicit in Deleuzian analysis that films and artists shape the mind of the viewer and modify his/her perception; Deleuze even maintains that film experience affects our neural cortex establishing a connection between feeling and thinking, sensation and conceptualisation (Deleuze, 2008, p. 153). He believes that cinema

makes the absolute and dynamic monism of Nature explicit and, because of its internal components, it calls for an emotional intelligence, a non-transcendental reasoning. In addition to this, Deleuze reflects on the fact that the filmic expressions are metaphorical or metonymical not in a linguistic way, but as concepts that can be compared and associated:

Jakobson noted that cinema is typically metonymic...it does not have metaphor's specific power of giving a subject the verb of the action of another subject...but this restriction is only partially true...it is false if we take the cinematographic image for what it is; movement-image which, as well as dividing movement by connecting it to the objects which it is established (metonymy which separates images), can dissolve movement by connecting it with the whole that it expresses (metaphor which connects images). (Deleuze, 2008, p. 155)

The departure from classical semiological positions and the analogy he stressed between cinema and cognitive processes (Deleuze goes as far as speaking of neural and biological structures) suggests a common ground between his work on cinema and some of the thesis of CFT. In opposition to this, some theorists find that the philosopher's hypotheses are vague and not linkable to methodological speculations (cf. Nannicelli and Taberham, 2014, p. 10). Nonetheless, Patricia Pisters is one of the film scholars⁵ who mostly stress these theoretical possibilities comparing the latest discoveries in neuroscience with the idea of the extended self and the interactive viewer emerging from Deleuze's discussion. She argues that Deleuzian thought combined with the knowledge offered by cognitive studies makes it possible to understand how new technologies and digital cinema work. The concept of reality and the topicality of the virtual or the vision of cinema as a flux of consciousness are, for instance, common elements to these two theories, like the idea that cinema allows the viewer to experience new possibilities of the real and to embody them (Pisters, 2012, p. 30). In order to identify this interconnection, Pisters elaborates the concepts of *neuro-image*, a filmic image that expresses all the characteristics listed

⁵ I argue that also the work of Giuliana Bruno goes in this direction because of her interest in *haptic*, in the interactive aspects of artistic experiences or in the role of the *surface* as main ground for conceptual participation, but I will not discuss these points here (cf. Bruno, 2014, p. 14).

by Gilles Deleuze and that, at the same time, can be compared to notions like Gallese's Shared Manifold Hypothesis. The fact that observing someone performing a particular action and doing it in the first person stimulates the same part of the brain suggests that the mind is ecological and multidimensional, and film experience makes it possible to compare and simulate other ways of being. This concept, as we have seen, is central also in Deleuze's discourse because of his ideas on negotiations and encounters in art (Pisters, 2012, pp. 117-118).

In addition to Pisters' work, William Brown has elaborated an interesting theoretical 'assemblage' for the purpose of analysing the potentialities of digital cinema (see *Supercinema*, 2013). Brown found a common denominator among Deleuze's philosophy, neurosciences, quantum physics (Riemannian Geometry and Einstein's Relativity), Cognitive Film Theory and speculations on embodied cognition (George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, F. J. Varela and others). According to Brown, these scholars share an immanent perspective and a consequent refusal of Cartesian dualism, of the existence of transcendental structures in reality, of anthropocentric and crystallised definitions of space (Brown, 2013, p. 52). One of the central arguments of his analysis is that we exist as relational beings, that it is not possible to define individuals in strict and fixed terms since to observe life in general means to perceive interactive systems. This is the aspect in which the power of cinema resides, namely to make us experience spatial-temporal relations and different types of 'enworldment' through audiovisual perception.

Following the example of Spinoza, Brown's intention is not to identify and describe the true and pure form of cinema, but to study what the seventh art can do (what can a body do?). Film experience should not simply narrate, describe characters' psychology, show the linear development of a plot or define any violations and discordances from this paradigm, but it should express new possibilities of the real (Brown, 2013, p. 87). Brown also uses a Spinozan definition of 'realism', which evaluates all the audiovisual elements in relation to the effectiveness (or scale of realism, photorealism) they manifest within a particular context. In the same way, we cannot consider space (the site of projections and the one presented on the screens) as something fixed and codified; indeed, viewers (and living beings) are always involved in a becoming something else since Reality itself is the chaotic amalgam of all possible events, and our body states register these passages, the encounters that our embodied minds experience in the world. Brown

maintains that contemporary cinema has the capacity to reveal this continuum, overcoming the geometric categories described by traditional physics and mechanics (based on the definition of fixed points) and inaugurating a ‘democratisation’ of the spaces where every possible universe is involved and entangled (Brown, 2013, p. 112). This does not mean that the Cartesian universe does not exist anymore or has no epistemological value: it simply identifies a specific conceptualisation of the space-time, not its constant organisational structure. This possibility of the medium also implies, therefore, the ability to construct different temporalisations of the space and timelines that are generated in relation to the logic of interactions among the objects portrayed. Therefore, Brown recovers the distinction between Chronos and Aeon (*Aion*) we discussed with Spinoza, and affirms that in digital cinema we have the possibility to experience this continuum and the coexistence of multiple universes which can be re-experienced and re-determined thanks to the power of retroactive causality of memory. Brown, by drawing upon Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphor and intellectual models, argues that we conceptualise relational systems non-consciously, which we use as organisational instruments and that we perform the same imaginative (and physical) procedure in relation with films.

Furthermore, the fact that we are involved in an interaction of whose aspects we are mostly unaware does not mean that we are passive viewers. By examining the conclusions of the theorists of embodied cognition we can observe that we become active when we bring the non-conscious to consciousness, when we are aware of the changes in our body states and of the new possibilities of the real involved in these transformations (Brown, 2013, pp. 145-146). Thus, we are able to generate new models, new understandings of the world and, therefore, to increase our capacity to act inside it. We do not become conscious or mindful of a film but ‘with a film’, namely in relation with something else and not in a contemplative and static position. Nonetheless, this creative, constructive power is not an easy and ultimate conquest, it requires a Love for Life, a continuous affirmative tension with the world that also implies a non-conciliatory and endless confrontation with all the assumptions we have about reality. This last concept, which is similar to Spinoza’s *Amor Dei Intellectualis* and in line with Brown’s observations, demonstrates the possibility of combining philosophical approaches with film experience (as an embodied phenomenon) and an experiential cognitive account. Brown offers us the

possibility to engage Deleuze's work on cinema with a new perspective, avoiding an over-simplification of several aspects of his philosophy.

Because of his rejection of psychoanalysis and linguistic structuralism, Deleuze is generally perceived as a champion of entirely hedonistic and rebellious behaviours as well as of an anti-subjectivist and anti-methodological thought. His philosophy, and in particular the concepts discussed in the famous *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), written in collaboration with Félix Guattari, is considered a kind of absolute relativism and praise of irrationality, eulogy of madness and schizophrenia as emancipatory states. I believe that Deleuze shares in some way the same destiny of the philosophers he studied and loved the most, because his supporters and detractors have usually misunderstood his opinions or have interpreted them without taking into account the whole body of his research. Indeed, in the last pages of the above-mentioned book, the two theorists invite the reader to not take their celebration of desire and constructive schizophrenia as a simple and enthusiastic approval of immorality or as the foundation of a new *man par excellence* - a concept that they mostly opposed (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, pp. 379-382). On the contrary, as Michel Foucault noted in his introduction to the famous text, the two writers call for a true ethics based on a careful meditation upon the destructive and affirmative power expressed by things and beings and on the refusal of any resentment and negation - the sources of fascism.

Sad feelings, lack of knowledge and passivity always produce a sense of guilt and resentment or narcissistic consolation - attitudes that lead to tyranny and misanthropy since they are based on a decrease of our power to act and think. Moreover, the concept of relativism within Deleuze's speculation has nothing to do with an extreme subjectivism, which he defined as a mortification of thought. He conceived relative and partial verities through the concept of perspective and perspectivism, which does not point to the relativity of truth, but the truth of the relative. This refers to the fact that every thought, theory and expression captures certain parts of reality and indicates forces and intensities, modes of perceiving and experiencing (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 130). For the same reason, not all perspectives and forms of life are equal, but can be evaluated based on the strength of the connecting and affirmative power they possess. As we can see, Deleuzian concepts of desire, territory and de-territorialisation, multiplicity and incompleteness must be conceived in relation to the philosophies he studied and appreciated. All

these clarifications are necessary not only to avoid a simplistic interpretation of Deleuze, and to highlight the aspects of his work that are relevant for my analysis, but also to indicate in which way they will be used in the discussion of the case studies. These specifications are also useful to stress the similarities and the common arguments Deleuze shares with other theorists discussed in philosophy, cognitive science and film theory so far.

Spinoza's philosophy enables us to highlight the commonalities among all the theories presented because of the importance he attaches to the physical reality of concepts and to our existence as ethical and ecological beings, rather than simple reproducers of external stimuli. Intellectual modes linked to sensations, as well as the central role of an affirmative and connective attitude to affirm life and power with a view to avoiding negation and mortification are concepts relevant in Deleuze's work as well, and emerge as a consequence of the many cognitive studies discussed. Through the connection of these elements we can also avoid the theoretical *cul de sac* posed by Plantinga and others on the way in which we manage negative sensations. By comparing these reflections, it is possible to formulate a general affective model for the viewer based on the idea of *conatus*, on a viewer who lives in 'tension' with the screen in search for an expressive capacity and new agencies. Furthermore, the idea that films are percepts, i.e. concepts generated as blocks of sensations, is not only referable to a Spinozan mode, but also to the ICMs used by several film scholars like Buckland, Bartsch and Fahlenbrach, who discuss semantic models related to experiential aspects of cognition. The same idea that fiction figures are *conceptual personae* with which we engage a semantic negotiation, a *becoming in the middle*, to use a Deleuzian expression, is in some way shared by most of the theorists discussed here. I find that there is a common sensibility among Spinoza, Lakoff, Deleuze and many cognitive film theorists. It is the vision of non-conscious components of cognition as source of our power to act and think, and the wish to transform this dimension into a new awareness in order to become active and constructive participants in our experiences. The aim of this research is precisely to emphasise how films express ontologies, entire worldviews and moral systems, and therefore, to reveal their internal effectiveness (and incompleteness) and to hypothesise the best way to interact with them.

The Issue of Trauma and Sad Passions in Film Experience

The discussion of negative sensations, of their importance and reasons is not only a feature of cognitive studies, but also one of the main focuses of classical continental theories on cinema. In recent times, theorists like Thomas Elsaesser tackled traumas, neurotic and fetishistic components of film experience with a more philosophical approach linking them together with some elements of the psychoanalytic tradition without reaching the same conclusions, but rather affirming solutions that are comparable to those discussed so far. One of the elements that differentiate Elsaesser's work from psychoanalytical film theory is that he does not consider these negative psychological effects as irrational, illusory or as the mechanisms necessary to watch films. He refers to them by the Freudian term *parapraxis*, which stands for the incapacity to act, as semantic closure of our understanding (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 14). In his opinion, these phenomena have their own reasons and, therefore, they must be understood and observed carefully. The real emotional and intellectual challenge for film-makers and for the viewers is to recover these negative sensations by comprehending their internal motivations and descriptive capacities, so that they may be turned into a new, deeper source of knowledge. Elsaesser mainly reflects on the nature of sad passions and traumatised memories in German media culture since 1945. According to him, the terrifying nature of the Holocaust and of the Nazi regime produced the incapacity to discuss the past in order to overcome its threats and repetition. The desire to fully represent history generates its own limits and failures as it is wonderfully expressed in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). One of the most famous sequences of the film shows several shots of the disastrous effects of nuclear bombing on the city and on its population. The voice-overs of the two main characters argue about the ability and the effort to understand the concrete nature of that tragedy just by watching these moving images. The sequence thus reveals the impossibility to explain these horrors drawing upon a disinterested and 'higher' moral order and the inadequacy of representations to carry out this traumatic dimension completely and clearly (Elsaesser, 2014, pp. 11-12).

These kinds of approaches to trauma and ethical failures prevent viewers from developing a clear awareness of the events and compel us into the psychological trap of an insufficient sense of guilt and of the victims/prosecutors dialectic (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 21). In the way media generally address these tragedies, they appear as excesses, as deviations from the normality of the life of our

governments and as the logical consequence of entrusting political power into the hands of crazy dictators. All these arguments are, obviously, relevant and effective, but do not raise the real question about the evil of which humans are capable in the name of a supposed idea of justice. On the contrary, what remains difficult to analyse and accept is the fact that these tragic events constitute the extreme consequence of our liberal democratic societies and of their logic of inclusion/exclusion. It is through this social mechanism that we can identify an alien body or subject as the cause of our problems or as the negation of our values. For these reasons, Elsaesser affirms that the Holocaust is the evil Enlightenment legacy and that Germans did not reach a complete understanding of what WWII and all its consequent horrors are. They only have to feel guilty and ashamed of these past mistakes that constitute their bad conscience (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 27). An imprecise sense of guilt for previous errors can only lead us to a morality of (infinite) debt and resentment, since it does not express our becoming conscious and ethical individuals; on the contrary, it just shows our acceptance of a modality to easily master trauma and failures (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 264). The only way to overcome these limits is to embrace these failures, to understand their reasons and to abandon the conciliatory desire to catalogue these phenomena according to a transcendental morality.

Elsaesser affirms that directors and intellectuals like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Harun Farocki and Alexander Kluge already showed how to overcome this impasse by refusing the traditional system of judgment. They embrace paradoxes and the multiplicity of the real as a source of emancipatory expression, also looking for a renewal of the capacity to act and understand the world. An example of this attitude can be found in the way they relate to time and the past, avoiding the notion of historicism, linearity and the search for a precise chain of causes and clear explanations (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 193). They change the perspective by displaying the logic of retroactive causality, 'where the effect (present state of affairs) imagines and generates from within itself the causes to which it owes its existence' (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 194).

Fassbinder, for example, forces us to actively participate in this process by destroying the linearity of history and accepting its problematic variety. Hence, we can consider time as a plane where all events happen simultaneously and where we must construct the most connective, affirmative and effective series of events in order to take part in history. Through this operation, we can also break the frames

and loops of our ideological and intellectual models, and then establish new possibilities by embracing, embodying and reabsorbing the reasons for traumas and the agency and descriptive power they possess. Therefore, it is possible to avoid narcissism, fetishistic closures and the death drives that they generate. Moreover, Elsaesser affirms that traumatic forgetting and memory lapses, as other forms of parapraxis, are not the opposite of remembering, but the very and most adequate way to face the past (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 321). Admitting the failure and the incompleteness of a mode of our understanding in order to build a new knowledge that even recovers its reasons, is a concept close to the Spinozan idea of false knowledge and of the importance it has in our intellectual life. It is interesting to note the common definition of trauma they share, considering it a result of a limited semantic system and as an expression of negation and passivity. Elsaesser's analysis is central to understanding how to conceive negative sensations and to manage them considering the amount of life and the perspectives they carry out.

All these observations also imply that it is not necessary to avoid or explain sadness and melancholy as irrational reactions, but to regard them as motivated forms of reasoning. Nadine Boljkovac, for instance, combines Deleuze's concept of art as resistance, as productive force to counter death drives and mortifications, with the analysis of traumatic film experiences, and affirms the need to tackle sad passions effectively (Boljkovac, 2013, p. 12). By resisting negative forces and using trauma as an opportunity to produce 'difference' and discover new potentialities, we become active and creative agents, and generate lines of flight to escape a destructive becoming. In particular, Boljkovac highlights the affirmative capacity of traumatic film experiences that deal with unresolved cultural and personal memories: by avoiding a traditional rationalisation of the past, these films make us experience Time as a plane for invention and production of meaning. The possibility to use negative sensations as affirmative ethical forces is the main point of Brown's essay on violence in extreme cinema (2013). In this paper he argues that if an audiovisual experience presents cruelty with a radical and disturbing aesthetic through an absence of cuts, with long shots and extended duration, it gives the viewer the opportunity for a profound ethical reflection. Indeed, when there are no comforting sensations or external justifications we recognise the 'monster within us', or reflect on the fact that evil is part of humanity and needs to be addressed with a

disenchanted and problematic thought, which is capable of reflecting on our capacity to justify violence in our everyday life (Brown, 2013).

Augustín Zarzosa is another scholar who works on revaluating melodramas and tragic films, demonstrating the significant role of suffering in our comprehension. Zarzosa draws inspiration from Peter Brooks' definition of melodrama as a mode of conception and expression, as a semantic force (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 3). Zarzosa challenges the assumption that this fictional modality is nothing but a scenario that visualises the disappearance of a moral order, of its functions and structures, thus provoking suffering and pathetic participation in the viewer - a conciliatory experience. On the contrary, he highlights the potentiality of melodrama and considers it as an *apparatus* whose aim is to understand and redistribute suffering within a community and a social whole. In opposition to a traditional view, Zarzosa affirms that it is suffering that shapes our moral order and values, and therefore melancholic film experiences become a powerful instrument to understand how social rules and behaviours are generated and justified. In Lakoff and Spinoza we have seen that morality is affectively based, it reflects an agency and model of well-being and, therefore, does not derive from a transcendental order or as manifestation of 'higher' values. Thus, to evaluate the adequacy and productivity of a moral code we need to address the relational system that generated and motivated it. To accomplish a description of how these emotional and expressive mechanisms function, Zarzosa takes into account Gilles Deleuze's work and borrows the Spinozist definition of mode as expression of life, way of living characterised by sensorial perceptions, by the ideas of these affections and by a particular agency. A mode, in the Spinozan interpretation of the concept, is an assemblage, a composition among bodies and a relational system that produces particular affections and a meaning parallel and related to them. Zarzosa notes that melodrama indicates modalities according to which bodies and objects relate to each other producing passions and emotions linked to suffering (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 14). The melodramatic mode stresses the procedures through which these interactions gain meaning and historicity, because they must be interpreted as operations that have significance in relation to a whole system they belong to, and consequently, they have strong social, ethical and political implications.

These concepts allow Zarzosa to highlight the reality of melodrama as a modality of experience and thought based on the transformation of sad passions into

a form of knowledge. Thus, 'audiovisual' sad passions become instruments to investigate suffering, to find new forms of activity for the viewer and to address effectively crucial themes of contemporary debate such as moral confusion, anxiety and the dissolution of hierarchical systems. Another innovative element of Zarzosa's analysis is that a suffering subject should not be considered as an unproblematic passive reproducer of stimuli, but rather as an agent of meaningful dispositions of the body in space and detainer of specific behavioural strategies. The connection between body states, semantic ontologies and definitions of pain and suffering through the evaluation of objects can be observed in films like *The Piano* (Campion, 1993), where the characters' behaviours reveal the fixation and the narcissistic closure of a system of judgment (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 77). Narcissism prevents individuals from discovering new potentialities and addressing events adequately because it reflects the absolute dependence of a subject on a particular conceptual and affective system to give significance and meaning to the world. Zarzosa observes that the real limits and fallacies of these attitudes rely on the incapacity to overcome suffering and death drives; therefore, they necessarily lead to self-destruction and mortification, an autoimmune process according to which the subject works against him/herself as if he/she was protecting his/her state (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 55). This psychological and semantic mechanism resembles a cognitive closure, which appears indispensable to defend ourselves from the senselessness of horrors, a condition we try to counter by finding a logic for catastrophes. Therefore, with these fetishistic fixations we try to find a general sense we can use as a shield against the dark semantic vacuum produced by tragedies, even though in this way we do not generate new understandings. On the contrary, by obsessively searching for conciliatory answers, we fall into a self-destructive process that dignifies and elevates suffering.

Because of their glorifying power, melodramatic procedures participate in the generation and definition of the parameters of exclusion-inclusion functional to a defence of social stability. This logic also involves the need to define typologies of the human, the non-human and the post-human in order to orient and comprehend these mechanisms of regulation and categorisation that unveil an excess of 'human definitions', or rather the possibility to always renew the concepts on which these normative practices rely. Zarzosa reflects on the differences between melodrama and tragedy listed by Hegel and Nietzsche, and affirms that they essentially rely on the

absence of a sacred, heroic dimension within modern dramas, a level towards which they tend but always fail to reach (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 146). Nonetheless, this failure is not necessarily a negative outcome, because it could imply a more powerful capacity to understand secular culture and to construct new values through the experience of negative emotions. Melodrama and art forms based on sorrowful sensations give us the possibility to raise the Nietzschean challenge, which consists in transforming these passions into a new form of power. The deficiency of a transcendental moral order that frees us from pain forces us to understand and embody the internal reasons of evil and catastrophes in order to increase our power to understand the world and to act within it. The film scholar Elena Del Río shares a similar perspective when she urges us to reject resentment and easy moral conciliations, and suggests using the distressing power of extreme cinema to invent new life (Del Río, 2016, pp. 28-29). By assembling the work of Nietzsche, Spinoza and Deleuze on affects and morality, Del Río highlights the capacity films have to stage new possibilities of the real and, at the same time, to change our perception of the world with an unconventional and creative becoming. With a performance of ethical negativity, indeed, the viewers can criticise and problematise a whole understanding of reality and generate new concepts, revealing the fallacies, power relations, and the 'acceptable' violence implied in our moral and social systems. The affective and conceptual power of cinema, then, resides also in this great challenge, which consists in pushing the viewer to question him/herself and his/her role in Life.

The concern of all these scholars for a new analysis of dramas, trauma and destructive experiences in cinema which does without the traditional explanations linked to catharsis, irrationality and detachment, is comparable with the suppositions made so far. The most important observation they point out is that even these melancholic modes of expression have a semantic system, an explicative power and a related agency, with which we confront and engage a negotiation, the results of which are unpredictable. It is possible, therefore, to connect the assumptions made on the nature of film and its viewer, on his/her common notions based on the capacities of the embodied mind, to these hypotheses about the way we manage and address sad passions, and then to observe how we can transform a disturbing experience into a source of knowledge. It is a method that is not only abstract and intellectual, but also cognitive, practical and experiential, and captures the very nature of self-comprehension within the environment, as it was maintained and

proposed by Spinoza, who identified in this ethical attitude the means for the realisation and expression of human potentialities.

Summary and Conclusions: The Experiential Viewer and His/Her Possibilities

Before moving on to the discussion and analysis of the four melancholic films chosen, it is necessary to go over the main points of the second part of the thesis in order to list and clarify the characteristics of the film audience resulting from the enquiry proposed. One of the conclusions reached is the possibility to avoid the distinction between cultural and natural or scientific studies, and to establish a dialogue between them about common themes and similar conceptions of viewers' nature and agency. We have described films as blended blocks of sensations, expressions of spatial relations that synaesthetically convey systems of concepts and meanings. Several neurocognitive and philosophical studies on film demonstrate that we interact with films through the embodiment of these ideas, an operation that is possible thanks to our capacity to connect visual perception with idealised cognitive models (ICMs). Consequently, a viewers' intellection is mostly associative and based on the parallelism between bodies, perceptive states and conceptualisation - a connection that influences also his/her power to act. These aspects of film experience are always combined with our empathic involvement, which occurs through the simulation and categorisation of the characters' actions and the body states accompanied by an affective negotiation of values and ideas. The embodiment of the perspectives of other individuals is not a simple projection into someone else, it is an intense state of intercorporeality and of mutual enactment between bodies. Therefore, experiencing the world of films means being involved in a semantic interaction with the virtual reality we see and its internal actors, trying to read the mind of the characters and the ontological dimension that the artistic expression conveys. Our capacity to act as viewers increases as we avoid collapsing our understanding into negation by escaping or rejecting what we see; otherwise, we limit our interactive qualities and react passively, unaware of the reasons that made us respond in a particular way.

The proposal outlined here is, then, to become a creative perceiver of a work of art through the active transformation of negative sensations into new knowledge. This is not the act of a transcendental superego, but the expression of a great

emotional intelligence, deeply involved in the world and in its (magmatic) disordered dimension. For this purpose, we have observed the centrality of metaphors and cognitive schemas (person schema, scenario, mood, kinaesthetic images) to motivate our semantic interaction, since they generate our capacity to associate perceptive and physical states with intellectual modalities. Furthermore, these common notions are accompanied by complex affective and meta-emotional reactions linked with empathic activities (Shared Manifold Hypothesis). In this sense, we have observed how Spinoza's Imitations of Affects Theory shares similar stances with modern neurocognitive studies, and contributes to a radically innovative analysis of sad passions and conflicts in film experience. Therefore, we can notice that when we perceive the limit of a conceptual model we can react with disapproval because it expresses a negation of our presence and of our power. On the contrary, the attitude to overcome our boundaries, to be able to redefine and recompose ourselves within film experience gives us also the power to perceive the intensity and reality of every encounter we make, even though this does not imply acceptance or the refusal of conflict, which can have a positive and affirmative value. The re-evaluation and assemblage of philosophical and cognitive studies on cinema is possible thanks to the radical immanent perspective of Spinoza's thought, which analyses human activities as relational and performative phenomena, and is able to reveal their affirmative and destructive power. The result of this theoretical enquiry is that the encouragement and exercise of our simulative and empathic qualities, together with the practice of synthetic and abductive thought, allows us to enhance our comprehension and overcome melancholia and negative sensations.

In this part of the thesis I have demonstrated how, through a Spinozan-experiential analysis of film experience, it is possible to overcome some of the theoretical impasses of current film studies. I have highlighted how a radically empirical approach and a top-down perspective can be reframed by an experiential paradigm that combines the affective and intellectual elements of cognition. I have also proposed a new reading of empathy and emotional engagement, one that innovates the study of sad passions in audiovisual media. I have demonstrated the capacity of film to communicate complex concepts through conceptual associations, kinaesthetic images, and performative situations, and, therefore, the possibility to understand cinema as philosophical medium that operates through blocks of sensations. In conclusion, with this Spinozan-experiential perspective it is possible to

describe film experience as a problematic event, which asks for a creative participation and allows us to violate the limits of our understanding.

PART 3 CASE STUDIES:

FOUR MELANCHOLIC FILMS

I see it more as a film on a state of mind or a mental condition than a disaster film.

(Lars Von Trier on *Melancholia*, interviewed by Mark Kermode)

The difference between men is in their principle of association. Some men classify objects by colour and size and other accidents of appearance; others by intrinsic likeness, or by the relation of cause and effect. The progress of the intellect is to the clearer vision of causes, which neglects surface differences. To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine. For the eye is fastened on the life, and slights the circumstance. Every chemical substance, every plant, every animal in its growth, teaches the unity of cause, the variety of appearance.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essay I*)

The theoretical survey in the two previous parts of this thesis finds its necessary outcome in the discussion and analysis of four contemporary melancholic films: *A Serious Man* (2009) by the Coen Brothers; *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars Von Trier; *The Act of Killing* (2012) by Joshua Oppenheimer (co-directed by Christine Cynn and an Anonymous author), and *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) by Jim Jarmusch. Although these works are different from one another – we may state that they express four different cinematographic genres – they share a common emotional and semantic ground: a negative dimension, a complex of destructive sensations that are not included in a wider conceptual system that rationalises and motivates them. The essence of these films, indeed, is that they express an almost coherent system of ‘catastrophic’ reasoning and that they do not rely on the intervention of a *wise* voice that confines controversial arguments to the sphere of the irrational or reduces the relevance of their functions and cognitive mechanisms by means of conciliatory answers and explanations. For these reasons the viewer is forced to deal with their intrinsic power, to participate in this uncanny dimension through a process of semantic negotiation with indefinite results. The purpose of the analysis is, therefore,

to demonstrate how viewers can face these artistic forms possibly without falling back on conventional responses and, on the contrary, to recognise the internal conceptual strength of these films. Hence, it is possible to generate a new understanding that includes these motivations and transforms them into new knowledge, a creative thought that is not based on the 'absence', on the simple negation of something else, but on the affirmation of new principles, new categories and forms of life. We will demonstrate that this possibility to become something else, to experience and create new thoughts is in turn based on our simulative faculties and on the conceptual effort to read the mind of the film and of its characters. For these reasons, I am placing these films within the all-encompassing ideas of Spinoza's philosophy, which has wide applicability and gains a double validity in this context: it is the analytic paradigm with which we analyse these particular cases, but, at the same time, it provides us with emotional and conceptual instruments to address these films *a posteriori*, to interact with them in a productive way.

CHAPTER 5

A Contemporary Job: *A Serious Man*

The fifteenth Coen Brothers' movie, *A Serious Man*, is set in Minnesota around 1967 and deals with the incredible, endless series of misfortunes suffered by Larry Gopnick (Michael Stuhlbarg), a morally correct and respectable physics professor, observant of the Jewish religious tradition, and harassed by his neighbours. Some reviewers have observed that the movie presented a funny and satirical portrait of the Jewish community, since the main character appears as a contemporary Job mistreated and misunderstood by his own social group, which comes out as grotesque, selfish and unable to empathise with his suffering (cf. Orr, 2009; Sandhu, 2009; Stevens, 2009; Taylor, 2009). This opinion is also motivated by the presence of an ironic announcement after the credits, which informs that no Jews were harmed during the filmmaking. In this analysis I will show that the film does not manifest a critique of an ethnic group, of its morality or of its religion. I will instead focus on how it communicates different concepts related to the human existential predicament, particularly the idea of uncertainty, the absence of higher rational perspectives and of a greater meaning of life, through the visual situations it describes. At the same time, I will demonstrate how these dynamics are reflected, perceived and experienced by the main character, how he relates to them in accordance with his personal values, conceptual models and experiential context. As a consequence of this, we will have a practical example of the fact that we understand and interact with these ideas thanks to the features of our empathic involvement, which give us the possibility to access the emotional world of the characters and of the film in a productive and problematic way. Paraphrasing Deleuze, the film makes us encounter a world of uncertainty and problematic indeterminacy, and shows how 'a serious man' can fit into it. The evaluation of these conceptual elements will arise with the examination of particular key sequences that condense specific ideas and manifest central experiential modalities that are also stimuli for problematic philosophical questions.

We are introduced to this overall existential dimension by a superimposed aphorism appearing immediately after the titles: 'Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you', a quote from Rashi, a medieval French Rabbi and well-known

scholar of the Talmud. The admonishment is very simple in its literal interpretation, which is the suggestion to acknowledge the mystery of Life without asking hard and terrifying questions about the meaning of existence and the reasons for what happens to us. This opening quotation already outlines the semantic frame we have discussed above and the conceptual and emotional tension that pervades the whole film, namely the absence of a deeper meaning and project, even of a rational structure in Nature. This set of sensations is always accompanied by the unavoidable need and desire to find an explanation for the negative circumstances to which no clear answer is given to the characters and the viewer. The theme of uncertainty and of the absence of a higher perspective to understand life is illustrated in the opening sequence, which describes a short Yiddish tale that also introduces viewers to the universe of Jewish tradition. In a Polish *shtetl* (a small town with a majority Jewish populations) in the early 20th century, Velvel (Allen Lewis Rickman) comes back home at night. He enters his house and starts telling his wife Dora (Yelena Shmulenson) what happened to him during the day. The overall atmosphere of the sequence is relaxed and even comic; the tone changes completely when Velvel says that an old man, Traitle Groshkover (Fyvush Finkel), helped him to move his cart. The woman states that Velvel has met a *dybbuk* (an evil spirit according to Jewish mythology), since she knew Traitle Groshkover was dead.

After this exchange we hear knocking on the house door; the camera pans from left to right and shows the door in medium shot and, then, cuts to a reverse shot of the couple, terrified. Then, we see Velvel opening the door and Groshkover being introduced by a long close-up. Indeed, his appearance in the dark and his look validate Dora's fears and the viewers participate in these mixed and confused sensations. This happens because the sequence is characterised by chiaroscuro lighting that increases the overall mood of mystery, which is accompanied by the placid, melancholic and slow rhythm of the soundtrack by Carter Burwell. The theme (mainly for piano and strings), which will be repeated several times during the film with little variations, the non-saturated colour tones (the cinematography is by Roger Deakins, a regular collaborator of the Coen Brothers), and the slow cutting rate, all contribute to the communication of a sense of dejection and passivity. These perceptive elements generate a sense of vagueness and uncertainty, which the viewer embodies, thus also sharing the point of view of Velvel, who, being the main character of this opening tale, is bewildered by conflicting sensations. Groshkover

begins to talk, enters and behaves politely, but the couple receive him in an uncomfortable way since the woman is firmly convinced of his supernatural nature, while the husband oscillates between being kind to the guest and accepting his wife's version of events. The three discuss the real condition of the amused visitor, who defends his human nature while Dora provides evidence of her opinions. The grotesque, surreal dialogue is suddenly interrupted when the woman stabs Groshkover in the chest. At first, he is surprised and laughs in an uncanny way (thus remarking the idea that he is a ghost); then he asks Velvel, who has defined himself as a 'rational man', whose opinion is correct, and who, between Groshkover and Dora, is the possessed individual, and finally leaves the house. The viewer shares Velvel's perceptual position when observing the scene, puzzled and lacking some of the elements needed to evaluate the situation clearly (we do not know whether the man is dead or not). In addition to this, all the affective and perceptual elements of the sequence enhance the feeling of incapacity to orient oneself effectively, associated with sadness and resignation, which together are connected with non-excitement and inactive states of the body. Furthermore, the two interpretations of the events presented by the characters in the sequence are both valid, and no certain or higher affirmation of them is possible.

The lack of a narrative resolution and the set of negative sensations produced by the perceptual and semantic elements of the scene leave the viewer in a passive state of confusion and unbalanced cognition, which is associated with the inability to comprehend things and the following difficulty to act, as Spinoza defined it (Spinoza, 2002, p. 288). If we reflect on the experiential dimension expressed by these first images using Spinozan thought, we will notice the absence of a wider, more effective perspective on the events that could give us the possibility to rationalise and organise them precisely. There is no master shot and the camera follows the actions from the inside or by reproducing, in particular, Velvel's perspective on these circumstances. As Frampton explained, films are organic thinking worlds and present thinking characters through their conceptual filters (Frampton, 2006, p. 38). Therefore, viewers are able to associate and combine actively the ontological sense of vagueness communicated by the sequence (and by the film in general) with the characters' actions, to simulate their state and interact with the meaning of their behaviour in a specific visual context. This situation of uncertainty, mixed and confused feelings and existential passivity, then, generates an

overall interactive, affective structure that functions as the mood or ontological atmosphere of the film, and establishes the basic cognitive and emotional mechanism on which this particular experience is based (cf. Plantinga, 2014, p. 148).

Furthermore, these cognitive schemata do not only affect the background and the context, but are reinforced by our empathic involvement with Larry since, in the course of the film, he will undergo similar situations. At the same time, the insurgence of these negative sensations enables a meta-emotional response and a desire to find a rationalisation and an explanation for the events, as well as an attempt to reduce the effect of these negative emotions on us and on the fictional figures (Bartsch, Mangold, Viehoff, Vorderer, 2008). The perceptual situation indicated by these first moments stages the absurdity of the human predicament, the impossibility to describe events according to a higher logic or to recognise a transcendental rationality at the basis of human behaviour. These are key *leitmotifs* in the films of the Coen Brothers, in which villains especially are depicted as grotesque, ridiculous and petty figures who express the banality of evil, its miserable senselessness. The incapacity to act properly is also translated in a general sense of anxiety and vacuum with eventual comic effects. These themes are effectively summarised in one of the most famous sequences of *Fargo* (1996), where one of the villains, Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) tries to find a briefcase full of money hidden in a wide snowfield and, suddenly, he starts looking at the environment around him and feels disoriented by an infinite white landscape. An image schema that is easy to associate with a feeling of bewilderment because of the difficulty in orientation, and a reflection on the senselessness of actions that is generated with the visual metaphor of someone searching an object in an empty place without a clear purpose and direction.

In the same way, *A Serious Man* makes it impossible for the viewer to refer to the traditional categories of Good and Evil or to profound explanations about the necessity of tragedies in life and history. The result of this absence also defines the difficulty for the characters to evaluate their actions properly, since they mostly behave without any idea of the consequences of their actions, unaware of the causes that made them choose one particular path instead of another, a factor that confers a surreal note to their manners. Even those who try hard to find an internal logic within nature are overwhelmed by its chaotic and alienating essence. The connection between inadequate knowledge and passive reactions is another essential component

of the film that we identify in several situations and that influences our interaction with it.

The theme of uncertainty and its reflection in everyday life is reiterated in a later sequence, when the protagonist explains Schrödinger's paradox⁶ to his confused and tired class. Larry quickly writes on the blackboard a series of algebraic formulas that describe the famous ideal situation of a cat put inside a box that is at the same time dead and alive since there is no possibility to externally determine which option is true or not. The topic of the explanation clearly recalls the initial experiential situation and the incapacity to understand phenomena from a transcendental point of view. With a slow tilt the camera shows Larry bending on his knees, moving and speaking in opposition to his students (revealed in reverse shot), who attend the class silently and statically, placed in an elevated position. The opposition between these two image schemas - of motionlessness and restlessness - has an ironic effect and suggests the class's lack of interest in the subject of the lesson. Moreover, the sequence produces an experiential metaphor that we could summarise with the expression: 'action is pointless', since these moments visualise Larry's difficulty in communicating (his actions do not produce reactions) and his submissive and calm disposition. This incapacity to act affectively is also reinforced and reproduced in his relation with one of his students, Clive (David Kang), a Korean with a thick, comic accent, who has failed a test because he did not know it required mathematical preparation, and wants to sit it again. As they are in disagreement, their conversation is problematic because of the difficulty in understanding each other; following this, the teacher finds an envelope with money inside, which is likely to be an attempt to bribe him.

Thus, we have a visual conceptualisation of two experiential dimensions and kinaesthetic images: a relational difficulty in linguistic understanding, and the image schema of discomfort in movements that is linked to the incapacity to realise the expected results. These are two cognitive mappings and semantic frames that will accompany the viewer all along the experience. These conceptual structures function equally in presenting Larry's figure and in introducing the viewer to his world and person schema, to use Murray Smith's expression, which is characterised by a constant fear and frustration concerning future events. As we have seen, it is possible

⁶ The reference to Quantum Physics theories that express the uncertainty and relativity of knowledge is also present in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001) and *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013).

to generate these ideas and side with Larry through motor mimicry and the imitation of his body states (M. Smith, 1995, pp. 99). In addition to this, another element manifests how the conceptual and emotional world of the character works. When he rejects Clive's request, Larry affirms that the story of the 'dead cat' (which he does not understand either) is just an illustrative fable, but the reality of physics is described through numeric formulas. The reliance and trust that the professor places in this abstract and logical structure reflects his uncritical acceptance of established rules and knowledge. We can infer that Larry does not show a critical and autonomous agency, since he relies on these rules and assumptions passively. Because of these aspects, he embodies what Spinoza defines as the 'morality of the sense of guilt', the idea to perform some actions not out of a personal elaboration but, in accordance with the wish to be accepted and acknowledged within a conceptual moral order (cf. Spinoza, 2002, p. 428). For these reasons Larry simply follows the rules and demands to be rewarded or accepted in relation to them. His passive approach to culture is an explanation for the fact that he does not understand the meaning of physics theories; Larry reports them passively, without recognising the experiential context and world these concepts describe (the uncertainty of knowledge and its relativity, the absence of a God's eye view on existence). Ironically, we may say that his idea of mathematics and algebraic formulae is in complete opposition to a cognitive semantic point of view. Indeed, through Lakoff and Johnson's studies, we have discussed the experiential basis of abstract theories, and how even the most complex system reflects a concrete relational and agentive condition (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 443). Larry, on the contrary, experiences these theories as objective structures and clear mechanisms. This communicative inefficiency makes him an *inactive* agent of signs and codes, and is reiterated in later confrontations with Clive as well as in other dialogues. In another moment, Larry is trying to make a student admit a bribe attempt, but paradoxically the young man reacts accusing the professor of defamation and adding that their communicative difficulties depend on *surmises*, on linguistic misunderstandings.

Afterwards, we see Clive's father (Steve Park) talking to Larry to find a compromise that may save his son. He starts by stating that all the problems are due to a 'culture clash', but in substance he threatens to sue him if he does not make his son pass since he still has the money, which is evidence of corruption and sufficient ground for a lawsuit. Larry cannot understand how a simple situation has become

completely unclear and is invited to ‘accept the mystery’, to not look for deeper answers, which is a repetition of the theme presented in the opening scene. Therefore, we perceive a reiteration and reinforcement of the conceptual situations experienced before that increases the feeling of uncertainty and inability to respond adequately. The comic and, at the same time, disturbing effect of these three dialogues is also based on the concept of misunderstandings and on the ambiguity of language, which does not provide by itself the adequate instruments for mutual comprehension. This dimension is increased by Clive and his father’s hilarious quietness and apparent harmlessness, which is not expected from people who are intimidating one another, and reproduces Spinoza’s distinction of expressions from representations, that is the misplaced trust in signs to correspond to reality (Spinoza, 2002, p. 257). As for the mathematical descriptions, signs, codes and syntactic structures do not mirror the world and do not possess a perfect and uniform representational power, but need to be evaluated in relation to their experiential context. In *The Ethics*, Spinoza uses a famous example to explain the production of signs, memory, conceptual models and their link to pragmatic situations. It describes the different chains of ideas produced by a soldier and a peasant in recognising the footsteps of a horse in the sand. The former, after inferring the nature of these traces, will shift from the idea of the animal to that of horsemen, and then he will start to think about war, because of his experiential background and habits; conversely, but according to the same cognitive process, the latter will associate those signs to the image of a plough and of a field (Spinoza, 2002, p. 258). The relation of models to experience is also the reason for the varieties of opinions and misunderstandings, because most humans tend to attribute an absolute power to their ideas and to think of the signs and images they use as objective and pure (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 266-267). Spinoza apparently did not consider representations as reliable instruments of proper intellection, since they are marks, traces that hide a complex relation of the body in the world. They stand for different relational systems that give them significance, and the difficulty in recognising the same communicative model is precisely one of the reasons for Larry’s suffering and for the failure of his expectations. Larry’s attempt to interpret reality according to a clear logic order is also contrasted with the work of his brother, Arthur (Richard Kind), who is trying to draw a mathematical probability map of the universe called *Mentaculus*, a study characterised by chaotic shapes and multifaceted structures. These images unsettle their viewer-reader

because of the feelings of complete disorientation they convey. It is possible to associate these figures to the idea of a manifold and labyrinthine world where no main path is discernible.

We also engage with Larry's frustrations and difficulties by observing his home life. He lives in a middle class district, which we identify by the small bungalows with lawns, private parking spaces, and gardens. The aesthetic characteristics of the location as well as the simple, regular shapes, the absence of dark or hidden sites describe a topographical mapping that can be associated with the idea of a comfortable, peaceful life. This happens because these cognitive visual mappings do not stage difficulty in orientation and irregular image schemas, thus conveying the conciliating sensations of control and predictability (cf. Fahlenbrach, 2007, pp. 113-114). The set recalls the American dream of a quiet and happy life, but all these elements are in opposition with the behaviour of the inhabitants, who do not talk to each other and appear to be detached and alien to the place. We also notice an opposition between external and internal spaces, since in the first location everything happens in an unchanging, unnatural routine, while private lives, specifically Larry's, are characterised by seamless catastrophes. One scene, which portrays the protagonist on his coming home at night, clearly manifests this condition and the passivity deriving from it. We experience the whole action through a fixed medium shot and, when we see Larry opening the door, all the family members quickly address him to complain about something and go away, while he hardly has the opportunity to reply or even understand what is going on. This way we embody a sense of blockage and constriction in his family life, a difficulty in motion that is often associated to a lack of freedom (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 304). Image-schematic metaphors are fundamental in describing the moral condition of an individual through the association of a spatial arrangement to its conceptual and abstract content (Lakoff, 1987, p. 291; 319). For this reason, freedom is often associated to the absence of boundaries, and activity and power to a higher positioning in the space of the action.

A change in perspective, which confirms the state of domination and passivity experienced by Larry, occurs when he gets on the roof of his house to fix the aerial, a situation that establishes a different image schema that is characterised by openness and, the absence of direct limitations and external influences. Indeed, these different physical conditions are usually connected to the capacity to act and

convey a sense of independence and control. Therefore, we perceive him as being relaxed for a while, not scared by the things that surround him since he looks at them from a safe top-down perspective. Interestingly, the film poster portrays Larry in this position of apparent safety and confidence, feelings and sensations that will be continuously overturned. In these moments the character is even allowed to experience a voyeuristic state (depicted with a slow tracking shot) of the attractive Mrs. Samsky (Amy Landecker), who lies naked, sunbathing in a small (square) closed garden that is only accessible to Larry's sight, an experiential personal 'container' for his desires that is not threatened by external elements. Hence, the higher position is also connected with a sense of potential and opportunity. Nonetheless, this moment of decompression, of reduction of anxiety, is interrupted by a sense of dizziness caused by the sunlight. The conceptual oppositions between internal/external spaces and low/high ground are associated with the opposition between enclosed/non-enclosed settings, yielding 'internal-low-enclosed' on the one side, and 'external-high-non-enclosed' on the other. These are key experiential coordinates that the film visualises; they convey Larry's conflict and allow the viewer to embody the same tension through the imitation of sensory-motor states, in order to align with his 'inner' world and to experience his emotional states, fears and desires. As Coëgnarts and Kravanja have pointed out, kinaesthetic images and spatial definitions are the essential metaphorical associations for the definition of characters' subjectivity in film (Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2015, p. 222). However, this dualistic opposition is not the only cognitive schema the viewer can generate to align with Larry, but it visualises the frustration of the character and his passive existential condition effectively.

The hostility he receives from his neighbours is evident in the relation with Mr. Brandt (Peter Breitmayer), who deliberately breaks into his property by mowing the lawn, and visibly despises the Jewish professor. This semantic dimension of abuse against him is reinforced by other elements of this character: he dresses and acts in a soldierly way, he hunts with his son and is associated with Nazi aesthetic and anti-Semitic prejudices. Another strange and ironic aspect of the dialogue between Larry and Clive's father is that Mr. Brandt intervenes to help the professor since, we could say, an Asian intrusion seemed less tolerable than a Jewish, a behaviour that can be associated to the fact that the film is set during the Vietnam War years. Furthermore, by talking to his wife Judith (Sari Lennick), Larry finds out

that she wants a ritual divorce (*gett*) in order to be remarried in faith with Sy Ableman (Fred Melamed), a common friend. Their dialogue is emblematic of the protagonist's passivity since they communicate on completely different semantic levels. We see that Larry is totally caught out while Judith is upset and perceives his upheaval as a sign of his lack of honesty and emotional immaturity. At the same time, he receives every new piece of information as a shock and does not know how to react properly. This state of complete submissiveness in relation to new events and to other individuals, and his inability to communicate effectively are perfectly expressed in the next dialogue with Sy. Sy behaves like an old friend, apparently kind and sympathetic, but, at the same time, he demands from Larry humiliating and unfair procedures to speed up his separation from Judith. The kinaesthetic situations visualised during their encounters convey a grotesque irony. In their first meeting, for example, Sy wants to talk to Larry alone in order to build a relation of complicity, and offers him a good bottle of wine. At the same time, he invades the room and the space, and slowly pushes the protagonist onto the furniture; therefore, we obtain a visual and semantic opposition between the two characters (their dialogue is portrayed through a typical shot-reverse-shot composition). Larry is completely trapped and with no space left to move, while Sy is absolutely comfortable and exacerbates the interlocutor's condition by hugging him and, consequently increasing his passive and submissive position with close physical contact. The opposition between the two figures is also enhanced by Sy's explanation according to which all the things that are happening to them are tokens that demonstrate that their future will be perfect and happy, whilst, from the previous dialogue with Judith, we learn that Larry has experienced these changes as traumatic events. This relational situation is repeated in an even tougher manner when they meet in a restaurant to decide the living arrangements and other practical matters following the divorce. Sy hugs Larry again and always searches for an upsetting physical contact with him; moreover, he wants Larry to leave his house and move to a motel to let him and Judith enjoy their new relationship. The protagonist's rational objection is that the new couple should move out and not him, but, as a consequence of his incapacity to convey his needs, it is received as an insult and as a sign of meanness and, therefore, it is rejected altogether.

Larry's dissatisfaction and failed expectations are also reflected in his fantasies, which the viewer experiences through three imaginary situations. The first

one describes Larry in a large class full of students while explaining Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, according to which we cannot really and definitely affirm what is happening since the viewer influences the observation and, therefore, no transcendental logic and description is possible. We have observed that this concept works as the general experiential context of the entire film and here it is associated with an enormous blackboard full of chaotic formulae and mathematical descriptions, which recalls Arthur's *Mentaculus*. After the lesson, the students go out and just one man remains seated in the highest part of the classroom; this is Sy, who asks Larry if all the complex and elaborate theories he has been describing have any connection with the real world or any relevance to his personal life. With a very self-confident pose Sy affirms that he knows what is going on in this world, while Larry is a victim of events. Mathematics is the art of the possible⁷, he continues, and the logic he is entrusting is just a clever speculation. Larry, then, tries to defend himself, but unexpectedly Sy grabs him, bangs his head on the blackboard repeatedly and insults him, until he awakens from the nightmare in shock. This sequence reiterates the metaphorical and conceptual dimension we have discussed so far. Larry is portrayed in a condition of complete passivity (top-down perspective), in a relational situation of judgment and examination that leaves him without escape since when he speaks to justify his actions he is also physically hurt. The dialogue also replicates the emotional opposition between him and Sy: the more Larry is cornered, the more the opponent is confident and able to act.

The second dream visualises the negation of his erotic fantasies. Larry imagines having sex with Mrs. Samsky, with whom he has awkwardly tried to flirt in real life. Nonetheless, Sy materialises again and orders the closing of a coffin upon him, and consequently two wooden beams are placed on his head as the closure of his dream and of any sexual aspiration. Because of the fact that in his dreams Sy prevents Larry from affirming himself and his desires, we experience him as the embodiment of all the humiliations and frustrations he must endure.

The last dream sequence is, therefore, the vision of an escape. He imagines taking his brother to the Canadian border in order to save him from legal prosecution (he is charged with sodomy and gambling), gives him money to start his new life and hugs him. The two are finally relaxed and happy, Arthur takes a small boat and

⁷ Actually, according to Otto Von Bismarck, 'Politics is the art of the possible' and, indeed, during the scene Larry reflects on this sentence and tries to remember what it was referred to.

crosses the lake, apologizes for his behaviour and says goodbye to Larry, and the general atmosphere of the sequence is serene. Even the music, for the first time, has a less melancholic tone than in other parts of the film, thus accompanying the change in the emotional atmosphere conveyed by the characters' bodily and facial expressions, particularly in Larry, who appears calm and reconciled at last. Nonetheless, a sudden shock overturns the situation: Arthur is shot by Mr. Brandt and his son. They are armed and dressed for hunting. The man advises the boy of the presence of another 'Jew', and then shoots Larry, who wakes up screaming. The peculiarity of this sequence resides in the fact that, although it maintains an aesthetic continuity with the rest of the film by using fixed medium shots, similar types of lighting and cinematography, and a slow cutting rate, it appears different in the general mood. We have observed that the film is framed in an overall feeling of uncertainty and existential vagueness, while here the behaviour of the characters, the changes in the soundtrack and other visual elements suggest a more relaxed and optimistic emotional situation. In addition to the scene on the roof of Larry's house, this sequence visualises another non-enclosed space, which does not configure difficulties in motion. Larry has been mostly presented and conceptualised through opposite visual image schemas, which convey his passivity by describing situations of closure and oppression. Again, we have an example of how body states visualise moral conditions. As we have discussed above, we embody these states by simulating them and providing them with a semantic value that we use to interact and negotiate (Gallese, Guerra, 2012; Tan, 2013, p. 349). In addition, because of these different bodily conditions, which leave them able to act and express themselves, Larry and Arthur feel comfortable and communicate empathically. These different aesthetic elements and the new cognitive situation they configure basically convey Larry's desire to escape an intolerable situation of oppression or to break a deadlock. This further aspiration or illusion is destroyed by the presence of his anti-Semitic neighbour, who kills him and his brother, thus visualising, on the contrary, the impossibility to change his predicament. By connecting all these experiential situations and the practical difficulties Larry faces (in addition to those listed above there is also the possibility of losing his tenure), the viewer engages with a series of negative emotions and aligns with a character who is repeatedly humiliated and let down in all his expectations.

The effect of these sad passions on the viewer is increased by the fact that Larry has no concrete empathic relationships with other subjects (with the minor exception of the divorce lawyer played by Adam Arkin), a component reinforced by his communicative inability, which isolates him emotionally. All these elements facilitate our alignment with the character and increase our desire for a resolution and for a positive turn in the course of events. Additionally, Larry says to a friend that ‘everything he thought one way turns out to be another’ or that ‘he feels like the carpet has been yanked out from under him’, expressions that indicate the failure of his moral assumptions and of the results that should derive from their application. We have seen that morality is experientially based (Lakoff, 2002, p. 43; Ravven, 2003; Spinoza, 2002, p. 239), it manifests itself in relational systems, and it is possible to embody and negotiate these values through affective imitation and semantic interaction. By empathising with this character, then, we can generate his person schema and recognise how he attributes values to things and events (M. Smith, 1995, p. 98). The involvement with Larry, therefore, implies a cognitive and affective negotiation with the model of a person who largely respects and follows a behavioural code and accepts a predetermined, superior order of things, to which he associates ideas of rationality and logic. For these reasons we see that the assumptions on which the protagonist establishes his life and actions are continuously challenged, and in relation to this we expect, as a meta-emotional response, a rebalancing of the moral order, a return to normality or a reaction, which may reshape the situation and its inner sense.

The attempt and wish to rationalise this suffering and to redistribute it into a conceptual whole leads Larry to visit three rabbis (as Job was visited by three theologians) to discuss the reasons for the catastrophes that affect him. He wants to draw upon the millenary, wise tradition of Jewish knowledge and moral study, to which he is obedient, and therefore tries to visit rabbi Nachtner (George Wyner), one of the most important religious authorities of his community. Nonetheless, his first encounter is with young Rabbi Scott (Simon Helberg), who invites him to look at what is happening to him from another perspective that can make all these terrible things more acceptable than they appear. Their conversation takes place in the theologian’s office and is described through a sequence of shot-reverse shots, but the real semantic opposition between the two characters is revealed by their body states and their actions. While Larry is seated, remaining almost stationary, hardly

speaking and showing an evident melancholy and uneasiness, the rabbi speaks fast, moves frantically and manifests an unmotivated enthusiasm, which widens the gap between them. The physical opposition between the two men expresses a relational lack of communication, placing the characters on completely different experiential levels with a consequent comic incapacity to understand each other. Because of this physical and conceptual distance between them, there is no empathy and comprehension, and Larry acknowledges the rabbi's suggestions as a kind of minimal rationalisation or a common sense that is unsatisfying and inadequate for his needs and questions. Rabbi Scott presents a weak, clumsy attempt to be sympathetic and comforting, but actually he avoids the issue raised by Larry, thus producing an even greater sense of alienation and anxiety. Therefore, what was meant to be a first attempt at rationalisation and emotional conciliation for the viewer (and the character) turns out to be the opposite, thus reiterating experiential failures and enhancing the melancholic states indicated above.

Before the dialogue with the second rabbi, another strange circumstance occurs in Larry's life that completely disrupts the order of the events: he and Sy have a car accident at the same time, but Sy dies and Larry, who is also going through financial difficulties, must pay for the funeral. This new dramatic change increases the character's uncertainty and his desire to understand if the things that are happening to him are signs of a superior will and a message to be interpreted. Rabbi Nachtner, therefore, seems the perfect spiritual mentor to give Larry the explanations he is looking for. He is calm, acts and speaks quietly and has a serene expression that is easily associable to great wisdom and years of experience. He tells Larry the story of another member of the community, Lee Sussmann (Michael Tezla), a dentist who was tormented by the same terrible sensations that are afflicting the professor. During a routine medical examination of one of his patients, the doctor noticed some strange signs engraved on his teeth. By examining these symbols more accurately, he discovered that they were Hebrew letters that could be translated as a request for help, and that, according to the Kabbalistic numerological system, they represented a telephone number. This discovery deeply worried him, so that he looked for Nachtner's advice as well, who simply suggested that helping people does not hurt and that we do not know the real meaning of these signs. Therefore, for a while Lee continued to search for new letters and then stopped and returned to his previous life. This story with no real conclusion does not provide any helpful explanations or

indications about God's will, and does not meet Larry's expectations. Consequently, he keeps asking the rabbi for more details about the story, complaining about its absolute futility and about the fact that God makes us feel questions that he does not answer. Nachtner responds that *Hashem* has no obligations to humankind and that duty runs in the opposite direction. Nachtner continues by affirming that Larry must consider the questions that are bothering him as a toothache and that soon they will go away.

Nachtner's advice links up with the opening quotation, and the overall cognitive effect of the story is one of emotional delusion based on the fact that it presents a problem without offering a solution to it or any possible explicative instrument. The sad feelings with which we interact are also produced by the analogical structure Sussmann's story shares with Larry's personal vicissitudes, such as the succession of events without explanations and the need to motivate them, a desire that remains unsatisfied like the questions it carries with it. Furthermore, similarly to the previous dialogue, this one is also built on opposite emotional reactions and behaviours; the rabbi is always calm and confident in his answers, while Larry is visibly disappointed and even offended by this useless wisdom, which would describe his troubles as frivolous issues. The emotional effect on the character is one of repeated frustration, which enhances his state of passivity and incapacity to act, which the viewer can share. Again, we see the conceptual invitation to accept the mystery of Life, to receive it with simplicity looking for nothing more: it is a moral advice that cannot satisfy the desires of a 'serious man', who has always followed ethical and rational rules and imagines to be rewarded or, at least, not to be trapped in a situation without escape. It is for this reason that Larry wants to meet Marshak (Alan Mandell), the eldest and wisest rabbi, who is able to convey the obscure meaning of Jewish doctrine and has stopped doing pastoral services, and who spends most of his time alone studying and reflecting. Nonetheless, Larry is rejected, so he cannot satisfy this demand for rational consolations and explanations. As a consequence of these three unsuccessful encounters, the film makes us interact with an additional negative sensation based on the impossibility to configure Larry's misfortunes within a conceptual whole. As we have seen, this emotional reconciliation is typical of the engagement with dramatic fictions, which, through the depiction of sacrifice and extreme acts, enables the reestablishment of moral and ethical coordinates (cf. Bartsch, 2010; Zarzosa, 2013, p. 17). However, in the case of

A Serious Man, the continuous failures Larry experiences and the absence of similar visual mechanisms prevent the elaboration of a cathartic resolution.

This mix of uncertainty, frustration, inadequacy in action and rationalisation, reaches its maximum emotional and negative tension with the sequence of Danny's bar mitzvah, which is expected to be a moment of joy, relief and acceptance, even though there are no good premises for these desires to be realised. This sequence coincides also with Larry's state of extreme anguish. Before the ceremony, which consists in the boy reading and declaiming verses from the *Torah*, he smoked marijuana and is visibly under its influence. His perception is completely altered, this distorted state of the body being expressed by the use of Dutch angles, non-linear camera movements, by the fact that he is the only subject in focus and by the opaque sound. Coëgnarts and Kravanja have pointed out how characters' subjectivity in film is expressed through the relation of the perceiver with the environment (Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2014). In this case, Danny's subjective point of view is produced through the use of these particular kinaesthetic images conveying the idea that his senses are generally muffled and distorted - a condition that makes it impossible to act properly or to control motion, thus communicating discomfort and disorientation. This semantic dimension is also increased by Danny's visible panic and by the disturbing and confused perception he has of old priests praying in Hebrew. Against all odds, his lecture is perfect and linear and the satisfactory effect of his performance reconciles Larry and his wife, thus solving at once the marital and financial problems of the protagonist. After the ceremony Danny goes to visit rabbi Marshak, who congratulates the new members of the community. His study is full of objects that belong to different disciplines. There are religious representations (e.g. a reproduction of Caravaggio's *Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1603), biological and astronomic models, and numerous ancient books: all elements that give the sensation of a baroque excess of knowledge. In addition to these symbols, the scene is depicted with a slow tracking shot that describes the idea of entering a mysterious place. The boy takes a seat and listens to the wise man's words, which are the first lines of Jefferson Airplane's song *Somebody to Love* (a recurring motif during the film), then Marshak gives him back his Walkman and money, which were confiscated from Danny at the beginning, and amicably admonishes him to be a good boy. Therefore, we have the description of a bizarre connection between an incredible accumulation of wisdom and a minimum ethical element: 'find somebody to love when things are

going completely wrong'. This line and the musical theme will be repeated many times, and probably provide a positive emotional reference point by stressing the need to open ourselves up at times of great need. This concept can be easily associated with the film diegesis and interpreted as a reaction to the melancholic mood of the experience, even though, I reckon, it does not stage a concrete answer to the sad passions we face. At the same time, the unexpected outcome of Danny's ceremony reiterates and exasperates, though in a positive way, the constant motif of the unpredictability of life that governs our participation in the film.

The emotional reconciliation we experience in these sequences also influences Larry's professional life, since he obtains tenure, but at the end of the film the predicament of the characters changes one more time. We have a circular return to the initial situation, with Danny at the Hebrew school and via cross-editing Larry in his office. The professor checks his mail, decides to accept Clive's money envelope and changes his mark, but he is surprisingly called by Dr. Shapiro (Raye Birk), who urges the professor to go to his office to discuss the results of x-ray exams, probably because they show the presence of cancer or of another serious disease. At the same time, a tornado is approaching Danny's school, and he and his friends are forced to go outside in search for shelter. While the students are waiting for the teacher to open a door, Danny calls Fagle (a schoolmate played by Jon Kaminski Jr., who persecutes Danny during the film) to give him his twenty dollars (a fact that influenced Danny's behaviour throughout the narration), but the other boy does not pay attention to this since the terrible storm is near and no escape route is available. An American flag is strongly shaken by the wind and the last frame of the film is an image of the tornado coming, with Danny back to camera and Jefferson Airplane's song playing in the background, followed by the film credits. The film ends with a general capsizing and a total negative, destructive solution that is associated with the natural catastrophe represented by the tornado that does not spare even social and moral beliefs (as the shaken banner manifests). This negative conclusion does not provide the viewer with any positive emotions to contrast it, perhaps, with the only exception of the recurring Jefferson Airplane's song. Thus, no consolation is possible or is directly provided during the experience, even though we have seen that the film is also characterised by a comic register. On the contrary, in my opinion these feelings enhance the overall negative mood of the film since they are largely connected to Larry's misfortunes and to a general grotesque and surreal

tone of the experience. Indeed, these ironic sensations do not provide an emotional escape for the viewer, but stress particular negative elements, such as Larry's existential passivity and the idea of a general hostility of the world surrounding him. It is even possible to imagine the final destruction as expression of God's justice since it comes after Larry's moral failure, but this explanation removes the fact that a destructive force is affecting Earth indistinctly, making exigencies and desires, like Danny's preoccupation for the twenty dollars, futile. The semantic and experiential situations this film-experience sets generates an overall feeling of uncertainty, of an inability to act, of persecution and at the same time of complete desolation, which is also confirmed by the ending with no hope.

The melancholic dimension of the film is generated not only through image schematic models that reflect Larry's difficulties. We have seen that every aesthetic component contributes to the generation of this emotional mood of anguish and resignation. The empathic process towards the character and the involvement in the film events are, consequently, the cause of negative sensations that are not countered by other elements in the experience. We also remark the lack of elements that may help intellectual detachment and affective sublimation. This configures for us a drama without resolution, a declaration of the failure of Larry's moral and behavioural system within a cosmic sense of decay. Another conceptual domain that the film visualises is a predicament of determination. Humans are not the masters of their fate and of events; they are victims of fortune, of external forces and their successes mostly depend on things that they cannot control, as exemplified by Danny's bar mitzvah. Moreover, no higher justice is possible since Larry's demands for proper reward or for an explanation are not satisfied. Viewers also receive a general affective concept of delusion that is connected with the pettiness and grotesque nature of ordinary people and their illusions. Different emotional and semantic ways to manage this cosmic situation of failure are possible and offered to the viewers: one is resignation, the acceptance of the mystery of Life proposed at the beginning, which is also embodied by the first two rabbis. This configures a kind of common sense wisdom that is based on the negation of knowledge and of the need for general truths, a route to passive conduct whose only power is to prepare the self for negative and incomprehensible events. It is exactly one of the possible manifestations of Melancholy, as Spinoza discussed it, based on the inversion of hope, a mortification of the self in relation to the fear of the future (Spinoza, 2002,

pp. 345-346). The second one, expressed by Larry is, on the contrary, based on blame and resentment against fate. The delusion of his expectations pushes him on a search for rationalisation and, at the same time, provides Larry with the 'opportunity' to blame destiny and God for his misfortunes, also motivating his endless effort to decipher divine signs and will. By observing him and by empathising with his decisions we see that his type of resentment, motivated by concrete suffering and despair, still prevents him from being active, from really questioning his values, his behaviour, and the ethical assumptions on which he has founded his life. Moral or ethical behaviour, in its creative and affirmative sense and not as a simple repetition of conventions, constitutes a reward in itself since it is based on the active disposition of the human mind and body to respond to every encounter in the most constructive way (Spinoza, 2002, p. 355; Deleuze, 2005, p. 252). Spinoza explains that expecting to be awarded (or punished) for our actions has nothing to do with the realisation or discovery of our capacities, but reveals a passive reliance on a shared order of knowledge, on common sense. Larry follows this destructive tension, always expressing the desire to be reconciled with the general system of meanings he trusts and that has helped him to organise his life. Larry enacts a double game of hope and fear towards the events of life, which prevents him from becoming an active participant in existence. When things go a bit better, he does not deal with the same issues and problems, thus revealing the instability of human emotions and intellect, which are strongly influenced by adversities and fears. Not incidentally, Spinoza indicated hope and fear as the main causes of false beliefs and superstition, since they offer an inadequate knowledge of the world and induce humans to look for easy solutions and consolations (Spinoza, 2002, p. 388). The problem of these sad passions is that, as in Larry's case, they make us reject any individual questioning and, therefore, they also prevent us from discovering new existential potentialities.

According to Spinoza's psychological descriptions, we observe that ascetic acceptance and resentment have their own power in explaining and describing events. At the same time, Spinoza helps us demonstrate that these intellectual and affective models both base their stability on a great mortification and refusal of Life. The acceptance of mystery results in the incapacity to find powerful, effective modes to experience life; conversely, Larry's moral beliefs are despicable only to the extent they make him unable to address the events as ethical problems rather than referred

to an unquestionable scale of values. This behaviour is also repeated in his inactive or unquestioning attitude towards signs, words (the use of the term *Hashem*, 'The Word', to indicate God is significant in this sense), and gestures, which he never questions or addresses with a productive tension, but just receives, is subject to and passively responds to. This emotional dimension is also the source for his sense of guilt, which works both as persecution and consolation. By interacting with these concepts, the film stages the general sensation that we are overwhelmed by the external world, that catastrophes happen without a superior motivation and that no positive end for our existence is established. For this reason it pushes us to come to terms with serious ethical issues related to our incapacity to find definite truths in life and to our difficult search for a constructive and connective existence. In this sense, the final repetition of Jefferson Airplane can be interpreted as the sole positive element, capable of providing the viewer with a minimal cathartic reconciliation.

In conclusion, we have discussed how the film makes us align with Larry and embody a negative metaphysical dimension, hence, we have the opportunity to experience a pessimistic vision of the world as a motivated 'visual ontology' with concrete and reasonable foundations. This melancholic thinking that offers no consolation challenges us to affectively and conceptually 'explore a new territory', to look for new answers that can address the issues posed by the film adequately. This agential complexity is also due to the fact that our emotional and intellectual reactions are multifaceted and creative, and can mix contrasting feelings and sensations (Bartsch, 2010). The viewer's possible reactions to *A Serious Man* are unpredictable and, as we have seen, can vary from negation to an intellectual and ironic sublimation or to partial engagement. However, these options all avoid the confrontation with the pivotal conceptual problems that the relational aesthetic dimension of the film generates. On the other hand, the embodied model of the viewer that we have outlined shows the capacity for an active participation in the experience. By comprehending these sad passions, the viewer is capable of transforming them into creative and affirmative knowledge accompanied by active emotions in order to not be victims of the events like the modern Job epitomised by Larry.

CHAPTER 6

The World Shatters: *Melancholia*

Lars Von Trier's work is characterised by films that investigate fiction and narrative conventions like *Dogville* (2003) and *The Boss of It All* (2006). This happens through the deconstruction of different aesthetic elements (scenic design, cinematography, sound effects), which generate a destabilising, problematic experience for the viewer (cf. Vinterberg, Von Trier, 1995). In the case of *The Five Obstructions* (2003), the entire film constitutes a confrontation between conflicting ideas of cinema as artistic medium. Von Trier's films are also well-known for describing damaged and controversial figures, who are unable to participate in social life. This is accompanied by unusual and adverse developments of narration or by ambiguous endings, such as the ending of *Breaking the Waves* (1996), which combines lust and holiness in a bizarre, disturbing way. The world of Von Trier's films is also characterised by a general sense of discomfort and decay, visual elements that are particularly evident in his last three works, commonly known as the trilogy of depression, constituted by *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* and *Nymphomaniac* (2013). These three films all have negative endings, reject emotional conciliation, and present controversial characters. Furthermore, these fictional figures are not associated with conciliatory and moral points of view, which are useful to reach a rational catharsis, neither do they provide cognitive stimuli to facilitate empathic involvement (Bartsch, 2010).

Melancholia (2011), in particular, is entirely based on the conceptual association of personal depression with cosmic and ontological failure. Since the beginning of the film, the viewer is forced to accept this dimension, which is powerfully communicated through several conceptual images, vivid abstractions that criticise the positivist and illusory trust in human possibilities to control and comprehend life rationally. We will see that this general feeling of the experience is mostly conveyed through the breakdown of the source-path-goal schema, which produces a sense of desperation because it communicates the impossibility of accomplishing the expected results of reaching one's goal, or of fulfilling desires. As we highlighted in discussing Lakoff and the experiential aspects of cinema, these

metaphorical associations enable the spatialisation and visualisation of mental and moral states (cf. Lakoff, 1987, p. 277).

Nonetheless, I will show that although the viewer is not provided with consolations and emotional gratifications, appreciation is still possible thanks to the multifaceted nature of affective responses (cf. Bartsch, Oliver, 2011). In addition to this, we can generate resourceful insights through a creative interaction with the main character, Justine (Kirsten Dunst), grounded on the simulation of her body states. If we apply Spinoza's notion of the Imitation of Affects and connect it to our capacity to align and empathise with fictional figures, we will notice that by simulating characters' physical conditions and actions, we also assign meaning to those states, thus starting a process of mind reading (M. Smith, 1995, p. 21; Spinoza, 2002, p. 292; Tan, 2013, p. 349). Therefore, we motivate these operations and generate conceptual models for fictional figures that we use as orientative cognitive instruments. Indeed, Von Trier has claimed that the film is constructed on the idea that a person affected by depression reacts more positively and constructively than 'average people' to moments of great stress and troubles (Carlsen, 2011). The emotional engagement with the film is also enabled by the contrast between the two main characters who express different views of the world and their ability to act in it. Therefore, this type of experience puts the viewer in front of what we have defined as the 'reason' for the negative or, the tension to understand which type of world and agency melancholic perceptive states describe. Following the example of Spinoza's thought, we can also realise that when we explain the behaviour of people by just attributing madness or foolishness to them, we are exclusively naming our ignorance of the causes that made others act the way they do, and passively reacting to the challenges and turmoil they display (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 321-322).

The viewer is primed into the film's atmosphere through an intense prologue, consisting of a succession of *tableaux vivants* accompanied by the soundtrack of Wagner's *Prelude* from *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-1859). This sequence has the function of introducing us to the tragic, romantic world of the film, establishing some basic concepts and visual situations that will be reiterated during the narration. The first image is a close-up of Justine. Her face and skin have a pale complexion, her hair is dry and she is evidently dejected while in the background we see birds falling down, as in an apocalyptic imaginary. Therefore, from the very first moments there is an association of foreground and surrounding environment, staging

individual suffering within a general atmosphere of collapse, a conceptual blending that urges us to verify a connection of emotional and inner states with whole perceptive modalities. We have already discussed how it is from the semantic interaction with these aesthetic components that we ‘access’ the inner world of the characters and the conceptual domains of the film. The second tableau is an extremely long shot of two characters moving in a big garden, possibly Justine and her nephew, with a meridian in the foreground. In addition to the great distance, which by itself makes it difficult to perceive motion, the action is described by an accentuated slow-motion (which characterises the entire prologue) that enhances our inability to trace a direction or a purpose to their movements. Thus, the viewer is also solicited by the feeling of a lack of precise aims in action and, therefore, to the negation of progress and linearity of time, which the cutting rate delays at incredible levels. These metaphorical associations are reiterated in a following shot, which describes Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), Justine’s sister and the other main character (in addition to the prologue, the film is divided in two chapters that are indicated with the names of the two sisters). She is trying to escape and save her son Leo (Cameron Spurr) from the incumbent catastrophe that is going to destroy Earth: the collision with the planet Melancholia. She looks desperate while holding the boy in her arms, running across a golf course, where we see a flag with the number nineteen, which stands for impossibility since in golf there are only eighteen holes. Claire sinks into the ground as if it were quicksand, thus metaphorically expressing the incapacity to react to an unavoidable tragic end. As we have highlighted in the discussion of *A Serious Man*, also in this case we can observe the use of image schemas that conceptualise the idea of difficulty in motion that is at the same time associated with a general semantic domain of breakdown and hopelessness. This happens because, by simulating and embodying these actions, we interact with the abstract and moral content connected to them (cf. Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2015, p. 277). In particular, the impossibility to fulfil actions or to organise motion determines the failure of the source-path-goal schema and consequently conveys to the viewers the idea of a negative performative situation associated with sad passions and with an affective-intellectual failure.

Furthermore, scholars like Sheena Rogers have examined the role of slow motion in emphasizing particular sensations and the meanings they are associated with. For example, in the case of this opening sequence, the idea that a terrible,

inevitable event is about to happen is markedly increased by the breakdown of actions, which highlights the inability to change a situation and to affect reality (Rogers, 2013, p. 151). The complete decline of life is also expressed by the shattering of the famous painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Hunters in the Snow* (1565), thus communicating that even art is mortal. In addition to this effect, the image is also a quotation from Andrei Tarkovsky's masterpiece *Solaris* (1972), in which the painting has a strong emotional value expressing the presence of a creative, empathic power in humans. If we compare the two films, we see that Von Trier's act works as a negation of Tarkovsky's intentions, since he denies art's capacity to survive and represent an eternal value. These reflections can be associated with a non-standard interaction, which is conscious of the numerous references to poetry, paintings and literature present in the film that all evoke an anti-rational and negative thought. For example, the title of the film recalls Albrecht Dürer's engraving called *Melencolia I* (1514); Justine's name refers to the negative and grotesque world of the novels of the Marquis De Sade. In addition to these, several Pre-Raphaelites paintings are quoted directly (by showing in the film their reproductions) or through the settlement of similar aesthetic situations. Nonetheless, I do not think it is necessary to know all the cultural references of the film to interact effectively as viewer, since the image of a painting burning effectively conveys the idea of futility, or at least of the mortality of art. Therefore, although this latter image can be considered a 'meta-linguistic' and symbolic component, it actually gives the viewer the opportunity to engage this film experience on a complex level with a reflection on the status of the Arts and of their potentialities.

This aesthetic situation configures the mood and semantic domain of the film, which is immersed in an ontological sense of negation, and works as the whole container or the emotional plane where all the characters as individual parts rely. Moods, as we have discussed, pervade perception and consequently frame and influence our experience by inserting sensations and ideas in a complex affective-intellectual ontological dimension (G. M. Smith, 2003, p. 38; Plantinga, 2014, p. 145). In addition to these images there are other moments that reflect Justine's state of mind, her despair and incapacity to adapt to an ordinary lifestyle. These concepts are expressed by the following frame, where we see her in a wedding dress walking with large roots and woollen threads all around her body, which prevent a normal motion or floating, and driven by a stream while she clutches a bouquet (an image

that recalls John Everett Millais' painting, *Ophelia*, 1852). Of course, these visual metaphors recall a strong association between the lack of freedom and a predicament of external determination, which is in turn connected with the idea of marriage and other social conventions. In contrast with this idea, in the prologue we see other images of her enjoying the end of the world, observing with wonder the strange phenomena that accompany these cataclysms and living a kind of peaceful abandonment. A visualisation of this emotional attitude is conveyed, for instance, by the woman standing at the centre of the shot, arms open and eyes closed. The observation and simulation of her body state offers the viewer an unusual connection to a world falling to pieces and a kind of ascetic acceptance of the event manifested by her open and relaxed position, as if she were welcoming the event without resistance and opposition. At the end of the prologue the viewer witnesses the collision with planet Melancholia and the extinction of life on Earth. Hence, we know right from the beginning that the film is going to end in a negative way, that no hope for survival is possible and the ending of the film is already set, a very unconventional idea that overturns the classical filmic mechanisms of suspense and creation of interest in the viewer (Plantinga, 2013, p. 107). Nonetheless, we know that film experience is not a neutral phenomenon and that from the knowledge of some emotional elements and other visual components viewers are able to comprehend and generate the *scenario* of the film. It is in this way that, according to Plantinga, we recognise film genres and, consequently try to interact in a concordant way evaluating the seriousness of the events in the fiction (Plantinga, 2013, p. 103). Therefore, cognitive assumptions about the experience do not prevent the enjoyment and surprise themselves. On the contrary, they define the conceptual starting point from which we establish the interaction with the work of art. In an interview regarding the film, Lars Von Trier himself affirmed that when we watch James Bond movies we already know from the start that the hero will prevail and survive, but the excitement for the events on the screen is possible anyway (Thorsen, 2011). Aaron Smuts defined this phenomenon 'the paradox of suspense'. This cognitive mechanism allows the enjoyment of film experience even when we know the end, since we experience the events from the perspective of the characters within the fiction (Smuts, 2009). In line with this notion we can say that the prologue has the cognitive function of establishing determined conceptual and emotional coordinates around which all the events will take place and gain significance. At the same time,

it gives the viewer the first opportunity to encounter and align with the inner world of the characters, in particular with Justine, and to reflect upon her reactions and body states in relation to this particular context.

The first part of the film, which is dedicated to Justine's wedding ceremony, shows us how her character relates to the world and how her subjectivity responds and adapts to external contexts, human relations and social conventions, thus offering us the possibility of accessing her inner dimension and her semantic interpretation of reality. One of the major aesthetic components of the film is the use of handheld camerawork (operated here by Manuel Alberto Claro, and typical of many Von Trier's film) to communicate disorienting space-affect and in embodying trauma as negative performative (Hesselberth, 2014, p. 54), in order to participate in Justine's perceptive state, in which uneasy sensations are predominant. Though most of the film is shot using this technique, we will see that the moments that convey Justine's disturbing sensations are also accompanied by unsteady, unbalanced shots. This narrative section (like the rest of the film) takes place in her sister's manor house, a location that, as with any other component of the experience, has its own aesthetic and evocative power. The set is a luxurious mansion, a 19th century castle with elegant wooden furniture and a terrace on an enormous and manicured garden with a golf course. This topographical mapping recalls a romantic imaginary because it stages a poetic and 'contemplative' relation of man with Nature, also establishing an isolation of the characters from the social and historical context (cf. Fahlenbrach, 2007, p. 109; Morari, 2007, pp. 93-94). Not incidentally, many reviewers noticed some resemblance between *Melancholia* and *Last Year at Marienbad*, because of the similar settings and because of the effectiveness of architecture and landscape in resonating the characters' emotions and sensations (cf. Sandhu, 2011; Scott, 2011). The long sequence (which recalls another production, *Dogma 95: Festen*, 1995, by Thomas Vinterberg) begins with the married couple (Justine's husband, Michael, is played by Alexander Skarsgård) who are trying to reach the castle in a limousine. Justine and Michael are presented as a typical couple in love, but have difficulty in crossing a narrow road in the long car. This first fragment of the sequence lasts about three minutes; it is mostly shot with a handheld camera, and oscillates between a comic effect, because of the hilarious incapacity of the car to overcome this obstacle, and the portrayal of an upsetting situation due to the repeated failure in the completion of actions. These feelings of discomfort are enhanced by the scene's

length and by the camerawork, which, through the use of Dutch angles and oblique shots to describe the actions of the characters, enhances this sense of uneasiness. In the end, the couple decides to reach the castle on foot and arrive late in the evening at their own banquet. Thus, we have another breakdown of the source-path-goal schema and a kinaesthetic image linked to an inability to move that, as we have seen several times, is associated with metaphors of the incapacity to act and a consequent negation of normal expectations. In relation to her husband's attempt to move the car, Justine even says: 'Well, I can see it, it's not looking good', a further cognitive hint to the future failure of her marriage. Therefore, the first experiential description from which we access this love relationship is based on ambiguous feelings and confusing sensations, which already prepare us for its negative result.

We experience the wedding feast as a total, continuous frustration of what we usually imagine to obtain through marriage, namely the realisation of love and empathic feelings, a failure that, as we shall see, is also intended to express the impenetrability of human emotions. This emotional collapse starts when some of the guests give their speeches. The first one is Jack (Stellan Skarsgård), Justine's employer, who announces her promotion to art director (she works in the advertising industry), but takes advantage of the situation to cynically ask her to prepare the tagline for a new product. Then, her parents, Dexter (John Hurt) and Gaby (Charlotte Rampling) take the floor. The two, who have been long divorced, use the occasion to berate each other and to list the disadvantages of marriage and love relationships. Although he is attached to his daughters, Dexter behaves as an old libertine, unreliable and unable to understand the seriousness of the context he is in: he spends all the time courting two young women and making upsetting jokes. On the other side, Gaby denies the importance of love and, celebrations, and denounces the hypocrisy of conventions she totally refuses. Because of their embarrassing and inappropriate conduct, both parents are presented as petty figures, egocentric and unable to empathise with Justine. From her facial expression, we can infer that their actions have caused a major change in her emotional state and attitude: she feels uncomfortable and spends most of the time away from the banquet; she even takes a long bath while her husband and the other guests are waiting for her to cut the wedding cake. Justine's behaviour causes Claire's agitation and the disapproval of her brother in law, John (Kiefer Sutherland), who complains about the costs of the

ceremony he has had to bear and about her actions, which he interprets as disrespectful.

Justine starts to show early signs of depression particularly through a continuous lack of enthusiasm. She describes her state by saying that she feels 'unable to move properly' and reacts disapprovingly when people invite her to be happy. All these elements help us formulate the idea or the model of a person who perceives herself as powerless and incapable of appreciating an event that other people commonly assume to be festive and joyful. On the contrary, she experiences it as a tremendous constriction and a cause of nerve-racking emotions. Moreover, during one of these moments Justine tells Claire a dream she had that recalls the image of her walking surrounded by roots and threads that we witnessed in the prologue, which reinforces this concept and the metaphorical association between sensations of uneasiness and the incapacity to act. Through all these elements, then, the viewer experiences the cognitive reiteration and consolidation of the failures presented before and the reinforcement of negative expectations for the development of events.

Although Justine tries to re-establish emotional contact with Michael, who in turn endeavours to be understanding and sympathetic, their communication becomes ineffective as a consequence of this emotional and semantic change. In one of their conversations, for example, the man gives Justine a photograph of a beautiful apple field he has bought, in order to donate her a wonderful image she can use to overcome moments of sadness and weakness. The woman seems moved by the sweet act, but when she leaves the room she forgets the photo on the sofa, a gesture that Michael notices and that enhances her new feelings and the definition of a new state. All these actions manifest Justine's failure to act properly in relation to the context surrounding her and, at the same time, they redefine her agential and behavioural system, which is now oriented to the demolition of the elements in opposition to her feelings.

Another moment clearly communicates this change in her perceptive state, which is now leading towards negative expectations, towards the feeling that everything will turn bad and, therefore, towards the mistrust of what we commonly assume to be positive human characteristics. She is alone in a studio full of painting reproductions from art books; the images mostly belong to Geometrical Abstractionism and Suprematism, forms of abstract art based on the use of geometric

forms within conceptual compositions, which, therefore, can be associated with a rational order and with a positivist worldview (many of them are Kazimir Malevich's works). Bothered by these images she angrily replaces them with paintings that evoke an opposite and romantic imaginary constituted by dark and saturated colours, violent and gloomy sensations. We see Millais' *Ophelia* and *The Woodman's Daughter* (1851), Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* (1609-1610), the already mentioned *The Hunters in the Snow* and other famous paintings. In these moments the handheld aesthetic is also enhanced not only to follow Justine's actions, but also in a way that reproduces her hesitation and conflict among conflicting emotions, giving us the image schematic idea of the impossibility of equilibrium and appeasement. As we outlined above, every visual interactive element can be used for the purpose of defining a character's subjectivity, and the possibility to combine these elements as cognitive stimuli to empathise with Justine must not be considered a 'higher' intellectual activity. The Spinozan comprehension of film experience is useful to reveal how even these simple gestures of Justine replacing the paintings convey sophisticated and concrete meanings, or at least establish an interactive dimension for the viewer, who is able to generate complex interpretations of them. We can associate this violent refusal of a positivist imaginary with her subsequent attempt to react against the behavioural boundaries established by the context, with the aim of reshaping the condition of passivity she is going through.

Hence, by aligning with this character and trying to comprehend her point of view, we experience her confusion and her wavering among conflicting emotions: duty, anxiety, distrust and, at the same time, need for love and comprehension. Justine's conflict is expressed, for instance, by the fact that, simultaneously, she repeats her desire to marry, while affirming her fear and despair. Therefore, the viewer perceives that her behaviour is not monolithic and uniform, but shows contrasting aspirations. Indeed, we also see Justine trying to overcome emotional difficulties by talking with her parents, but Dexter ignores her or does not properly take into account her demands, while Gaby mercilessly advises her to escape from that situation demonstrating a similar form of incomprehension. This distance and difficulty in mutual understanding is effectively expressed by a conversation between Justine and her mother. Here we see the main character's failure to find emotional support due to Gaby's ineptitude to realise the depressive state she is going through. The mother shows a monolithic, self-referential attitude, and

expresses a cruel and pitiless judgment by inviting Justine to stop dreaming and affirming that she does not belong to that place and conventions. The separation between Justine and Gaby is conveyed through the fact that the two women do not look into each other's eyes, a condition that visualises the absence of physical contact and emotional exchange, and reinforces the sensation of isolation Justine suffers. One of the modalities in which subjectivity is visually defined is through the metonymic association between eyes and body (Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2015, p. 223), revealing, like in this case, the impossibility of direct affective contact. Another image schema, which is present in a later sequence, reinforces the idea of Justine's discomfort in human relations. At a certain point of the ceremony, the brides and groom and the guests are invited to go outside in the garden to admire the sky lanterns flying. They are all enjoying this magic moment accompanied by Wagner's music, while Justine (in foreground) sees her mother far away, standing alone in a higher position and staring at her. This perceptive situation is based on physical distance, on a fixed eye contact, and on a subordinate position in relation to Gaby, thus establishing a condition that is easily associable to control, oppression and impossibility to react (cf. Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2014). As a consequence of the emotional abyss that we perceive as separating her from Gaby and the other people, Justine closes her eyes and looks at the stars imagining faraway constellations (where the planet Melancholia might be) to which the woman feels more connected than to any other space. This new state assumed by the character involves a new cognitive situation and a different approach towards other individuals based on the definition of new relational categories.

As we engage these passages as crucial points for her transformation, we shall see that from this moment onwards Justine decides to break with what her life was supposed to be. If we imagined her behaviour to be dominated by contrasting emotions, now we can assume that her person schema is characterised by a strong incapacity to trust the future and to have a positive and constructive attitude. These sensations are translated into a series of destructive actions that progressively spoil her love relationship and career, which, on the surface, appeared promising and safe. She refuses to make love with Michael, but at the same time has sex with Tim (Brady Corbet), Jack's assistant, on the golf course. This sex scene is a long take depicted through a long shot with low-key lighting on the figures and an almost total absence of sound. By making us unclearly perceive the act from a distance, these

elements can be associated with lack of intensity, with coldness, and with a negative moral judgment (Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2015, p. 230), which is reinforced by the observation of something lacking emotional participation and meant to obtain a baleful purpose. Moreover, Justine does not oppose any resistance to the fact that her husband leaves her, going away from the castle during the wedding night. On the contrary, she affirms that ‘nothing else was expected from her’. In the same way, she gives up her job by revealing to Jack what she thinks of him and of his miserable greed for power, thus causing her immediate dismissal. Although she shows some regrets and confesses to Claire that she tried to not destroy her marriage, we can see that Justine’s controversial choices are intended to undermine the social and emotional connections she perceives as boundaries, as communicated by several images and reiterated in her behaviour.

We have observed that the film makes us confront an ontological sense of decay and destruction, so that the entire atmosphere is characterised by sad passions and by the related idea that the worst possibilities will realise. This cognitive frame generates the sensation that human actions and decisions are futile. According to Spinoza, this affective-intellectual state of despair derives from the acknowledgement of human inadequacy in addressing life, and recognises the fallacies and limits of our understanding (Spinoza, 2002, p. 313). This general mood is strengthened through the use of intense shades of colours, long takes and accentuated acting. This happens particularly in those scenes that polarise pathos and passions, until the production of magic and mystic sensations emphasised by Wagner’s music, as in the beginning or during the sky lanterns scene. This sense of emotional excess recalls and produces in the viewer the idea of the sublime that we discussed in the previous part of the thesis, a set of strong emotions that accompany tragic artistic forms (Plantinga, 2009, p. 175). In addition to these aesthetic components, the viewer is forced to engage a character whose actions turn out to be controversial, contradictory and destructive. Nonetheless, if we try to read Justine’s mind by interpreting and conceptualising the ways in which she relates with the world and other individuals, we can empathise with her and embody her emotional world. The lack of perspective she expresses and the following sense of falsity and constriction she perceives in human relationships push her to not accept any more moral obligations, even though this choice causes her suffering. This way Justine avoids the sense of confusion and emotional wavering we saw unsettling her during

the first part of the film. Therefore, though damaging and negative, this change affirms an expressive power, reflected in a depressive state of abandonment, similar to that perceived in the prologue, which frees her from painful human relations. We can state that the tragic mood of the film morally justifies or helps our alignment with Justine's actions, as Murray Smith observed in the analysis of dramatic figures (cf. M. Smith, 1995, p. 235). At the same time, the woman embodies a complex emotional and conceptual worldview to which we can attribute a concrete intellectual potentiality that we can engage in multiple ways.

At the beginning of the second part of the film we see Justine showing the physical connotations we usually attribute to depression. She is unable to move (she hardly opens her eyes) and to take care of herself, her skin and her hair are dry as in the opening image and she has difficulty even in performing simple actions and decisions like getting inside a taxi or having a bath. Justine only wants to sleep and rest and finds everything to be dangerous or disturbing. This complete reversal in perception is effectively shown in two moments: the first one depicts the woman trying to wash herself with her sister's help, and we also see her resisting this attempt and refusing contact with water. Moreover, the discomfort the character feels is communicated through a particular use of the handheld camera, which follows her actions and closely captures her physical details, and by the length of the action, which lasts one minute and twenty-two seconds. Again, this aesthetic choice reinforces negative emotions by making us participate in Justine's perceptive state and in her discomfort. Thus, the viewer is forced to engage the passive condition of the character, her inactivity being also motivated by the sensation that every external object is harmful and dangerous.

The second scene that depicts this sense of precariousness describes the woman and her sister's family eating together. Claire has prepared Justine's favourite dish, but when she starts eating she spits it out and cries because to her 'it tastes like ashes'. Justine's depressive state is accompanied by the use of low-key lighting, grey tones, which are present more extensively in this part of the film, and by the enhancement of diegetic sounds and noises that, as a *synchretic* whole, can be associated to a disturbing feeling of confusion, and to a general dejection due to the senselessness of existence (cf. Brunick, Cutting, DeLong, 2013, p. 144; Chion, 1994, p. 64). As a meta-emotional response to these stimuli, then, we can conceptualise Justine's behaviour as a way to adapt to this completely gloomy world surrounding

her, which does not offer positive or encouraging stimulations, thus making it possible to perceive the reason for her suffering, which is expanded to an ontological level. As Augustín Zarzosa affirmed in his discussion of melodrama, melancholic film experiences are instruments to render suffering visible, to investigate its aetiology, and to question ourselves about the problematic content they express (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 52).

In the second part of the film we become aware of the arrival of the blue planet Melancholia, and we engage these events more within Claire's emotional perspective. She fears for her own life and her beloved one's, since she has read on the internet that some scientists believe it will hit the Earth. John, who is an amateur astronomer, reproaches her for her concerns and invites Claire to trust Science, since authoritative experts have already affirmed that the planet is not going to clash with ours. This character incorporates all the qualities of a rational 'enlightened' man; he studies science, follows moral and common sense rules, and has a positive and practical attitude towards events and life. Because of the model of reasonability he approves and manifests through his actions, he rejects excessive emotional manifestations and blames Justine's behaviour, which he finds absurd and immature. In addition to this, he is not scared by the astronomic event that is going to happen since he trusts in analytical consensus and enjoys it as a marvel, playing with his son and taking photographs.

The approaching of the alien planet is also accompanied by the succession of unusual natural phenomena, such as restless horses and other animals, changes in electromagnetic stability and summer snow. One of these is constituted by the repeated refusal of Justine's horse, Abraham, to cross a bridge, a physical situation that evokes impossibility, a failure, which is in turn associated to unavoidable cosmic collapse and the fact that Nature already perceives its end. This scene reiterates the initial source-path-goal breakdown and reinforces the semantic frame of the film that, as we have seen, is generally oriented to absolute negativity. Moreover, by clearly enclosing motion, this kinaesthetic situation suggests to the viewer a strong sense of containment, which evokes absence of freedom and the definition of an inescapable order of things (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, pp. 303-304). Because of her emotional state, Justine is not scared by the vision of Melancholia. On the contrary, when Claire stops Leo from showing to his aunt what he discovered about the planet on the web, the woman replies that she is stupid if she

thinks those events could scare her in some way. Their different reactions to the possibility of an imminent catastrophe manifest the opposed set of sensations affecting them. What the older sister assumes as the total negation of life and of her desires, Justine serenely accepts.

This opposition is effectively synthesised in a sequence set during one of the nights before the arrival of Melancholia. Claire is awakened by the neighing of horses and cannot go back to sleep because she is distressed by the forthcoming event, and after a while sees Justine walking in the garden. She decides to follow her and finds the woman lying naked on the river bank admiring the fascinating light of the incoming blue planet, an act that upsets Claire, who has opposite feelings and is not able to calm down. This moment, which also reiterates the idea that Justine has a strong connection with Melancholia, is visualised through the same aesthetic modalities that characterised the other intense and ‘magic’ scenes of the film: powerful colours, fixed shots and long takes in opposition to the anxiety and suffering conveyed through the use of handheld camera, of fast movements and cutting rate. These different attitudes are reiterated in other moments such as the next morning, in which we see again Claire in a state of anxiety, while Justine calmly enjoys her breakfast (she has regained her appetite) and John and Leo make observations with a telescope (Leo has even invented a rudimentary tool to observe the planet’s distance). As a good mother, Claire is frightened by the idea of her son’s death, and fears catastrophic consequences although John continuously reassures her and promises that no negative episode will occur; nonetheless, she buys a lethal mix of medicines that she intends to use for her and her family in the case Melancholia comes fatally close to earth, a gesture that disappoints John. Von Trier declared that the purpose of this character was to express the point of view of an ordinary person in relation to catastrophe, the reactions of ‘someone who has something to lose’ (moondarksound, 2011).

Later on, there is an interesting and emblematic conversation between the two sisters. Claire is looking for Justine to wash her, and finds the woman in the studio, quiet and calm. Surprisingly, Justine had a bath by herself and is very serene. The two women start talking about the coming event and Claire confesses her fears, which are not quelled by John’s reassurances. In response, Justine dramatically affirms that ‘Life on Earth is evil’, and maintains that they do not need to grieve for its disappearance since we are alone in the universe and nobody will miss us.

Obviously, Claire tries to counter this tragic and definitive sentence by asserting that John studies these phenomena and his opinion is more reliable. In addition, she expresses her worries for Leo's survival, but Justine replies that she knows things, that she is sure the worst possible scenario will take place (as she was unexplainably sure of the number of beans at the lottery during the wedding party) and so the end of human existence is inevitable. In this dialogue we experience all the intellectual and emotional differences between the two sisters, by comparing their person schemas, i.e.: the conceptual models they express. In Claire, we identify a common behaviour based on her attachment to family and on an understandable fear of death associated with shared moral and positive values. A further factor that may make it easier to empathise with her character is that she shows comprehension for Justine despite her destructive and negative attitude, and she always tries to comfort her. As a consequence of her dispositions and feelings we understand that Claire cannot easily accept the idea that life is futile and going to end since all these concepts are a negation of what she defends and lives for.

On the other hand, we can observe that Justine, paradoxically, has finally reached an inner reconciliation. Now that she is sure of the imminent catastrophe, she has no more worries and, consequently, we see her modifying the state of abandonment made of physical and moral mortification in which she was persisting. We have seen Justine embodying the idea that everything was going to vanish and her behaviour emerging as a consequence of this approach to existence. The semantic model and world she expresses is based on the contradiction of what we normally consider to be the positive values of progress and the improvement of our capacities. Hence, the confirmation that the feelings she had were true gives her relief and the capacity to participate in this situation actively. For this reason, she affirms that she knows things without studying, because she is aware of this cosmic negative dimension and this consciousness makes her able to use all the expressive power she possesses under these circumstances, to use a Spinozan formula. Even her aspect has changed and manifests a recovered and renewed strength of her body. Thus, we have a conceptualisation of depression not as illness, as a form of irrationality or, at least, as a deviation from normality; on the contrary, depression here is a form of thought and action with a descriptive and cognitive power, which must be evaluated in accordance with its strength and capacity to combine elements (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 55).

These elements link with Spinoza's philosophy, particularly with his approach to negative and destructive desires. For Spinoza, in Nature negation is impossible, and the traumatic experience of a limit is the perception of a semantic closure, of the incapacity to extend comprehension. Therefore, we understand that, in the universe of Spinozan philosophy, madness coincides with obsession and fetishism, with a narcissistic fixation of our subjectivity, which we are unable to reformulate (Spinoza, 1979, p. 184). Consequently, Spinoza maintained that the essence of an 'insane' behaviour has nothing to do with desires considered by themselves, because they all express and affirm potentialities of Life, and humans must be conceived as 'desiring machines', or organisms generating appetites and discovering new tensions (Deleuze and Guattari, 1990, p. 283). Negative ways of living, on the contrary, are those that negate life in order to survive, which mortify existential potentialities to maintain and increase their power. Spinozan notions of desires and his method to evaluate the 'intensities' (the connective or destructive power) of things imply that we never desire individual objects, but complex states to which an agency and a potentiality is linked or attributed. All these analytical elements help us to recognise the complexity of the character and to observe that the viewer is pushed to cope with the real problematic elements that Justine poses; therefore, we interact with her paradoxical and controversial emotional states in a way that does not envisage any easy reconciliations and resolutions.

A further moment is emblematic of how we can perceive and interrelate with these contrasting conceptual worlds and experience the affective dissonance that separates the characters. The night after the confrontation between the two sisters, the planet passes by, generating a sublime natural spectacle, which all the family observes from the castle's terrace (this scene is depicted through the use of a medium shot with slight camera movements). John enjoys it as a scientist, also because he is convinced of its harmlessness or non-fatality, while Justine, comforted by the idea of the end of suffering, welcomes it. Claire is frightened and protects her son but, after using Leo's inventions to observe the movements of Melancholia, she calms down since she finds out that the planet is moving away. Claire's relief is only transitory, and she blames her sister saying that 'it is easy to always imagine the worst things possible', a reflection that highlights to us her consideration of Justine.

Indeed, the morning after, they all discover that Melancholia is irreversibly coming back and we acknowledge the different reactions of the characters. John

commits suicide since he cannot bear the tragic reality that entails the fallacy of his assumptions and the failure of rationality as he intended it; indeed, his emotional breakdown is so strong that he is even unable to spend his last moments with his family. Claire takes her son and tries to escape, but this decision turns out to be futile since the car by which they are trying to escape stops at the same bridge Abraham did not want to cross, reinforcing the sense of spatial enclosure already discussed. This sequence follows the identical visual logic we have observed above for the moments of stress, by following the actions with a handheld camera, with the use of zoom to capture details, the absence of soundtrack and the enhancement of diegetic sounds, highlighting sensations of confusion and disorientation. There is also an image that effectively condenses the idea that Claire's attempt to run away is futile: it is an extreme long shot showing the car moving across the golf course covered by fog and rain. The incapacity to clearly see the vehicle, which moves within a big and opaque space without a clear destination or direction, defines for the viewer a perceptive state lacking precise reference points that can be associated with the concept of an absence of escape and opportunity. Claire's desperation is also conveyed through the image of her holding Leo and walking slowly under an oppressive hail storm, caused by the traumatic changes in the Earth's atmosphere. The physical state described here constitutes an expressive instrument to communicate the ineluctability of what is going to happen since we see an external agent preventing her motion and dominating her condition from above, similarly to the flock of birds dominating Bodega Bay in Hitchcock's *The Birds* (cf. Bartsch, 2010). Thus, we have a repetition of the sense of containment conveyed by the impossibility of crossing the bridge, a sense of absolute determination and, at the same time, a definitive breakdown of the source-path-goal schema based on the incapacity to perform any action.

Claire's reactions to the dramatic situation are reinforced by the repetition of the visual themes of the prologue, which are put into opposition with Justine's responses. For instance, when she arrives back at the castle, we recognise a great divergence between their body states, since Justine is sitting on the terrace, calm and relaxed (even in a meditative position we may say), while Claire breathlessly trudges towards her. However, the final confrontation of the two sisters takes their differences to the extreme, thus giving us another possibility to experience and interact with conflicting semantic systems. Claire confesses her difficulties and

imagines spending the remaining moments together with her and Leo on the terrace drinking wine and listening to music. This plan is strongly and mercilessly destroyed by Justine, who emphasises its vacuity and uselessness, to which Claire replies that her intentions were just to make this difficult moment nice or ‘enjoyable’, a statement that she rejects altogether since it represents another way to avoid the truth. We can notice that the older sister’s project is rich in semantic and moral values because it signifies the ultimate celebration of human capacities and an extreme tribute to life, which she would use as a reconciliatory moment. Justine ironically suggests that also by using Beethoven’s ninth symphony as a soundtrack, which is often associated with the exaltation and glorification of Enlightened Reason (see *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* by Sophie Fiennes, 2012). The tremendous negation of these values that Justine communicates exasperates the sense of despair that afflicts Claire, who answers: ‘Sometimes I hate you so much’ as she also did at the end of the wedding party.

In the following and last sequences the viewer experiences a complete emotional reversal in Justine. She shows empathy and comprehension, reassures Leo about the approaching of Melancholia and invites him to build a ‘magic cave’, where they can be safe. During the preparation of the wooden refuge there is also an interesting detail of the ground beneath them, where we see worms and insects moving chaotically, an image that overturns the idea of Nature as a comfortable and ordered place. In the final sequence of the film, we see Justine kindly accompanying Claire into the refuge while Leo takes his place, and they all hold their hands trying to comfort each other. The recurring Wagner prelude is once again used as a soundtrack, whilst the handheld camera closely follows their facial expressions and physical reactions. Finally, the last image of the film is a long shot that describes the three characters in the middle of the scene while the Earth is hit and completely destroyed by Melancholia, followed by a black screen and the end credits. The viewer completes the vision by acknowledging that the drastic and negative expectations of the prologue are respected in full. In addition to these sad passions, we are also confronted with the problematic fact that Justine, whom we have experienced as a damaged character, has an ethical, constructive conduct towards the others, a critical element that increases the possibilities of our semantic interaction with the film.

Lars Von Trier's film does not provide the viewer with any consolatory answer or response to counter a general destructive meaning and feeling of decay. It makes us face a cosmic and unavoidable collapse and the idea that everything has not an eternal and indisputable validity, thus establishing what Zarzosa indicates as a melodramatic situation without a superior whole order that gives meaning to suffering (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 145). This is the tragic concept at the basis of the film's mood that accompanies the viewer throughout the experience.

It is interesting to analyse the type of reflections we can produce thanks to the contrast between the situation of anxiety and those of sublime and tragic emotions that the film stages. These two different relational and cognitive situations are described by means of opposing aesthetic choices, as we have witnessed. The first are based on an exasperation of the condition of anxiety, confusion, incapacity to obtain good results from actions, and on the sense that there is no end to the continuous struggle and tension of life, as the long wedding ceremony testifies. It is for this reason that Justine systematically compromises her life to avoid this tremendous dimension of difficulty and anguish against which depression and abandonment are a reaction.

On the contrary, the moments of total despair or of apocalyptic revelations are described with different aesthetic tones (steadier shots, images of wider spaces, different lighting) emphasised by the recurring *Prelude to Tristan und Isolde*. The fact that the pathos and the affective participation is increased produces a sense of total emotional overwhelming that is typical of tragic expressions and communications, which, as we have seen, are in turn connected with the idea of the sublime, of an uncontrollable excess of passions. We see that in these moments the characters' agency is transformed altogether, and Justine reveals herself to be the most able person to confront these terrible sensations. We can attribute this change to her capacity to recognise the tragic aspects of the human condition, and to her ability to sense reality as a disordered and 'magmatic' dimension out of rational control. Indeed, by visualising the continuous fallacy of the source-path-goal schema, the film as a whole and Justine's character establish a negation of a positivistic view of the world, of hope elevated to maximum levels, or as blind trust in reason and technique to face life. For this reason the viewer can assume that Justine's actions also set up the conditions for ethical and connective behaviour. The fact that she does not believe in necessary progress gives her the power to ask herself what is

possible or necessary to do to face a particular situation of despair. It is only by rejecting some of the assumptions that regulate our common sense like teleology, linearity of time or any form of anthropocentrism, that we can establish the space for new modalities of coexistence and comprehension.

It is for this reason that she is able to build the ‘magic cave’, which defines a primordial cooperative and empathic relational system with which all the characters can face the fatal end together and support each other. Obviously, this awareness is accompanied by suffering because it implies the deconstruction of a moral model of human behaviour and of its relative strength and opportunities: Claire is not able to accept the terrible event directly, since she partially embodies those values that have failed. Therefore, we can observe that *Melancholia*, as a whole experiential dimension, makes us confront with the reasons of the negative and examine which power of explanations damaged and melancholic worldviews express. Arguably, there is also a liberating emotional effect in the film. For instance, Elena Del Río stresses the effectiveness of Justine’s behaviour in deconstructing capitalist utilitarian morality and the myth of progress, thus liberating life from mere economic and instrumental evaluations (Del Río, 2016, p. 208). According to Del Río, the extinction of life portrayed in the film has an affirmative and ethical power because it expresses human ability to live intensely by abandoning all the illusions that we normally use to console ourselves and to not participate actively in existence (Del Río, 2016, p. 214). *Melancholia* frees the interaction from the classical and conventional reshaping of the moral order we typically experience in disaster films, and fulfils the expectation of showing the end of human life, a conclusion that is mostly avoided in cinema. This, I argue, is the reason why Slavoj Žižek talks about an ‘optimism of *Melancholia*’, because of its unconventional characteristics that are inevitably thought to be provoking and problematic for the viewer (cf. Big Think, 2012). This is the essence of the challenge that the film urges the viewer to take on, forcing him/her to share the territory of an unconventional person within the general idea of the futility of life, and embodying this emotional and signifying world without a catharsis or the new configuration of a superior order.

This element connects this specific film experience with the Spinozan refusal of transcendental moral orders and of existential hierarchies. The mad and the wise man share the identical natural right to exist, and both express a form of life and a descriptive power, which we can confront, but the real and practical problem resides

in understanding the constructive and destructive intensity that they possess, what relations they are able to form or not (Deleuze, 2013, p. 89). It is on this level that we can evaluate the superiority of rationality and find a way to emotionally and conceptually overcome the total negation and destruction the film carries on. Justine's real weakness lies in her inability to express her ethical power in normal conditions, though only within the framework of the end of the world, which works as a consolation and as a liberation from the expectations she is not able to satisfy in normal life. Thus, her strength derives from a sad passion based on the mortification of life and, because of these components, her position can be considered destructive and responsible for a reduction of the capacity to act (Spinoza, 2002, p. 345). Spinoza's philosophy is here useful in revealing the continuous wavering of sensations our intellection is driven by, and the need for great fortitude and emotional creativity in order to address them adequately. Indeed, we can infer that Justine's limit is constituted by a narcissistic closure, by a fixation of her subjectivity on negative expectations, which prevents her from reconsidering herself in relation with different experiential conditions. For this reason a fetishistic and narcissistic closure is self-destructive, since it generates those behaviours we follow blindly, and which necessarily lead us to ruin and decay. It is only because we are not conscious of the limits of our understanding, and unable to elaborate them in a productive way, that, in order to satisfy particular desires, we act against our instinct to survive and extend life as if we were increasing our state. However, the sad passions we experience can be overcome by a new, more complex understanding, which is able to recognise and use the concepts that depressive states define. In this case, for instance, we can say that melancholy is the most precious thing Justine possesses and her only source of activity. Consequently, Justine reacts with abandonment and passiveness to normal life, but when she does no longer need this protective state to face reality, she recovers her capacities and expresses also a productive attitude, as we have explained.

To use a Deleuzian expression, Von Trier 'gives us a body' (cf. Deleuze, 2008, p. 182) and stages an interactive system that makes it possible to perceive the fallacy of a certain way to interpret rationality, its limits and its implicit falsity. It shatters conventions about progress and the linearity of time, leaving us in a problematic landscape of desolation and mystery (even of anguish). But because of this critical and stimulating openness, by embracing these concepts the film offers

the possibility to address serious ethical issues. This interaction requires a transformative and experimental understanding that is always able to explore and question its foundations and to draw opportunities and stimuli from negations and apparently irreconcilable differences. Indeed, it is only when we accept the idea that our world can fall apart physically and conceptually that we start acting and imagining how to construct a new one.

CHAPTER 7

Mastering Genocide: *The Act of Killing*

The third film I am going to discuss has been considered one of the revelations of recent years. Renowned directors such as Werner Herzog and Errol Morris welcomed it as a great innovation because of its stylistic choices and peculiarities (Vice, 2013). It is a documentary by Joshua Oppenheimer (co-directed by Christine Cynn and an Anonymous author) called *The Act of Killing* (or *Jagal*),⁸ which revealed to the general public the genocide that took place in Indonesia around 1965-1966, which is ignored by most of the rest of the world, and still very difficult to be discussed publicly. During this period, the right-wing general Haji Mohammad Suharto, under the pretext of preventing a Communist coup d'état, overthrew the government, took power and ordered the massacre of political dissenters and copious Chinese minorities with the approval and support of the US government. The coup d'état operated by Suharto was motivated by the fear of The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which was the third biggest communist party of the world at that time and a powerful political organisation. The number of victims is estimated to be between 1 and 1,5 million, and this carnage also involved terrible acts of torture and brutality. In order to reach a fast and effective outcome Suharto asked for the help of paramilitary groups and gangsters, who also worked in the black market of cinema tickets, adducing that communists would have banned Hollywood films from Indonesian movie theatres. American films were the source of their profits and models for their personal imaginary, as we shall see. In addition to this, one of the most incredible and terrifying elements of this documentary is that it is the story of a genocide that has not been healed by any historical renewal, social reconciliation or by moral and ethical reparation for the victims' families. No international court has discussed this crime or called for legal action against the persecutors, who, on the contrary, still rule, retain a primary economic and political role in the Indonesian society and are acclaimed as heroes, also because of the fear they instil in the population (Boone, 2013). Most of the perpetrators are members of a paramilitary

⁸ Here I am discussing the director's cut of the film. Moreover, Oppenheimer made another documentary on the Indonesian genocide called *The Look of Silence* (2014), which is focused on the survivors' look upon these tragic events and their actual condition.

armed group called Pancasila Youth, which is officially supported by the central government and which, even after Suharto's departure, plays a major role in the repression of dissent. Oppenheimer discovered this *unknown* genocide during the production of a series of documentaries about labour exploitation in Indonesia called *The Globalization Tapes* (theactofkilling.com/background, 2013).

The film presents a historical tragedy without offering any moral solution. On the contrary, it describes the triumph of a regime of terror and violence and how it has become socially acceptable. In order to discuss this unsettling issue, Spinoza's political theory and ideas on the generation of moral models will be useful to generate productive interpretations of the cognitive and social mechanisms visualised here. One of the main reasons for this application is based on his refusal of the Nature-Culture dichotomy. Spinoza based his 'social theory' on body metaphors according to the tradition of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) where, as the famous book cover suggests, the political authority (or the form of sovereignty) is identified with a superior organism that physically summarises all its subjects. Humans are not born in 'civilisation', but create this collective body in order to overcome a state of absolute chaos and embody *habitus*, experiential moral models that they apply in accordance with this systemic relational condition. Therefore, concepts of law, sin, inclusion and exclusion do not exist objectively and eternally, but only in relation to the dynamics of a certain 'order', which, in turn, reflects its functioning in the construction of feelings of recognition, belonging and, in negative terms, senses of guilt, resentment and boastfulness (Spinoza, 2002, p. 689; 750). Furthermore, Spinoza also believed that, like any other living body, society as well must actively embrace a continuous becoming, thus becoming able to transform, expand its territories, build new values and, consequently, generate new 'life forms'. This endless tension has the purpose of avoiding cancerous regressions of the 'desires' of society, and requires a critical openness (and political invention), able to analyse, criticise and modify the same foundations of a particular social system (Deleuze, 2005, p. 272; Spinoza, 2002, p. 537). In a letter to the friend Jarig Jelles, Spinoza explained that the only difference between him and Hobbes is that, for the English philosopher, society should completely replace and substitute the Natural State, whereas for Spinoza the latter expresses the plane we live in and we always refer to, and so it cannot be summarised by a fixed and crystallised form of power, however effective it may be (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 891-892). In accordance with these

reflections, we are now going to test these instruments in the analysis of this particular case study and highlight the creative opportunities they establish for viewers' interaction.

From the first moments of the film, and by reading the opening superimposed text, we understand that no moral solution is provided and no sense of guilt or shame is present in the perpetrators for the atrocities they committed. On the contrary, the director informs us that when the executioners were first interviewed by him, they proudly told stories of the murders and provided details of the violence they perpetrated as if there was no secret to hide. In order to obtain the most effective portrait of this massacre and to understand the mechanisms and reasons that led these people to perpetrate these brutalities, Oppenheimer decided to ask them to re-enact the genocide, to simulate it by making a movie about their actions in which to create scenes of the killings in whatever ways they wished. Therefore, we know that the film is the exact chronicle of this process and documents its consequences. Thus, from the very beginning the film pulls down the barrier between reality and fiction and renounces to a journalistic function of the documentary to watch from a 'cold', rational position. However, this definition is not in accordance with our experiential model, since we have outlined that every artistic form is affective and establishes a set of sensations combined with intellectual participation (cf. Tan, 2014, p. 119). The film stages the lack of a God's eye perspective, which reconstructs the events from a higher existential point of view; it generates the consequent impossibility for emotional and rational detachment, and calls for an 'alignment' with the semantic world of the killers without strong prejudicial elements. By displaying and materialising the executioners' imaginary and fantasies through performances and bodily expressions, the film forces us to understand the world of these persons, to approach their territory and, to use Lakoff's definition, their 'moral' politics (Lakoff, 2002, p. 28). The director describes his style as investigative in the sense that it helps us understand not only what we see, but also how we see it and how we imagine it; the resulting film may best be described as a 'documentary of the imagination' (Rayns, 2013).

Additionally, Oppenheimer as interviewer is as unobtrusive as possible, but continuously encourages the perpetrators to talk about the extermination without expressing any personal evaluations or other comments, so that they do not appear forced or manipulated in their revelations. As early as in the first images, which will

be recurrent during the vision, we understand that the film is an expression of the killers' inner and conceptual reality. By means of a long shot (long take) this scene depicts a big fish-shaped architectural structure from which several young, beautiful dancers emerge. The photography is refined and characterised by bright colours, while the acting and the music playing in the background (muffled and blurred) is slow and choreographically coordinated. The result on the viewer is a combination of sensorial excitement due to the major presence of saturated tones, and relaxing sensations suggested by the calm and elegant actions and by the rhythm of the music, elements that together trigger the conceptual resonance of an integrated dreamlike situation (Brunick, Cutting, 2014, p. 133; Chion, 1994, p. 8). For this reason critics like Steven Boone pointed out the similarities that the killers' performative fantasies share with the work of Alejandro Jodorowsky, John Waters and surrealist filmmakers because of their grotesque and baroque (sometimes even gore and splatter) visual components (Boone, 2013). There is also a strong connection among American film styles and genres, such as Elvis Presley's films for example, and the aesthetic of the 'prosecutors' film', which is shot drawing from these artistic forms, representations that the killers loved the most and influenced their desires and aspirations. By establishing these interactive dynamics, Oppenheimer thus makes it possible to enter their experiential background and ideological frame, to comprehend how they attributed value to things and could perform and justify certain acts of massive violence.

The first characters that we encounter are also the main protagonists of this experiment: Anwar Congo, executioner and famous gangster, and Herman Koto, officer of the above-mentioned paramilitary organisation. Most of the film and of this analysis focuses on the emotional and relational world of the former because it is in his behaviour and in his reactions that it is possible to notice the contradictions and the peculiarities of the conceptual world of these perpetrators. In one of the initial sequences, we see Anwar and Herman going around a district of Medan, the Indonesian city where most of the documentary takes place, looking for ordinary people to take part in their production and showing what kind of actions they must perform in front of the camera. They ask the residents of that area to play the role of the communist victims. At the beginning, they are all scared to cooperate because of the fear of being accused of dissent, but then they join the fiction and the re-enactment of the burning of a house and the killing of a family while the

executioners admire the reproduction of their past 'glories'. Anwar, in particular, remarks upon the significance of the film in making public the things they did when they were young, the importance their fight has in Indonesian history and the pride he feels for it. He also shows how he invented a metallic string to kill people more quickly and cleanly, since the presence of numerous bleeding corpses on a rooftop caused an awful smell of blood and required the use of alternative methods of extermination. Therefore, from these very initial scenes we are called to face the emotional contradiction of watching people talking about cruel activities with a serene and calm attitude, and sometimes even with boastfulness, as if they caused no concrete suffering or did something that is never comparable to a real slaughter.

The emotional incongruence of an unspeakable violence and its positive perception reflects the idea of genocide without real victims motivated by the fact that 'the act of killing' does not take on the semantic value we usually attribute to it. Thus, we already have the definition of an intellectual model according to which a certain type of brutality against a specific alien and inimical identity is justified and encouraged. Another linguistic element that has a strong value in identifying and understanding their ideological frame emerges from the fact that Anwar and his comrades always associate the idea of gangsters to that of 'free men'. This is due also to the fact that the Indonesian word *preman*, which indicates urban gangs, comes from the Dutch expression *vrijman* (free man) that described traders who were independent from the Dutch East India Company. The characters, on the contrary, associate this term with the old concept of *jago*, that is of a strongman who operates justice and 'people's will' (McAlinden, 2013). They think that criminals and private gangs defend personal and individual freedoms, which are condensed and effectively communicated by Hollywood stars like Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Al Pacino. When the two men remember their youth and recall their work in movie theatres, they mention the heroes they loved and imitated by following their behaviour as a model. As a consequence of this, they admit to having committed torture and killings 'happily' as if they constituted the accomplishment of an ideal goal. Another interesting element that they refer to is their love for dancing, trendy clothes, sexual 'freedom' and the right to enjoy life and have fun, pleasures that they thought a communist government would have forbidden, and which they wanted to defend. Thus, there is also a deviation from the usual communicative strategy adopted in media culture that represents the perpetrators as inhuman and

having no emotions (or as simple sadistic figures). Indeed, with this typical visual conceptualisation it is possible to establish a clear moral structure in accordance with which viewers can judge negative figures clearly and effectively (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 81; 99). On the contrary, they are ‘ordinary’ people defending values that are common also to modern western societies, and most of all a specific idea of freedom. Indeed, many of them are presented as good and caring family men. For instance, one of the paramilitary leaders, Haji Anif, claims to have spent 200 million dollars to build a natural reserve for birds. They want to be distinguished from the image of grey bureaucrats and, as per the short interview with Yapto Soerjosoemarno, leader of the Pancasila Youth, demonstrates, defend a lifestyle made of ‘Relax and Rolex’, of consumerism and economic well-being. They defend private initiative, independence, efficiency and the bravery to risk personal business in order to accomplish their desires. It is also interesting to notice that, in a public speech, Soerjosoemarno defends the legitimacy of the operations of gangsters and paramilitary groups by using the same argument Mussolini employed in the Italian Parliament to defend fascist squad against the accusation for Giacomo Matteotti’s murder, that is: ‘if they are criminals or gangsters, then I am the biggest one’.

Additionally, we see also the images of a propaganda film (*Pengkhianatan, G30s/PKI*, Arifin C. Noer, 1984), which children must watch in schools, and which depicts the communists as cruel and immoral individuals by using a tone of theatrical and grotesque violence. All these elements contribute to align with their imaginative and abstract world, since they all give the possibility to generate a model of these perpetrators, of the way they think and desire or to understand how their fantasies are built and shaped. Anwar feels proud of having exterminated those people who looked so aggressive and brutal in films and confesses that it is one of the things that make him not feel guilty for the hundreds of victims he produced. The movie has the power to reassure Anwar about the legitimacy of what he did since it provides him with a clear justification for violence or an instrument to frame it within an abstract order of things. The Communists and the Chinese embodied the negation of their values and of their concepts of happiness. These imaginary enemies contrasted the idea of well-being expressed by Anwar and his comrades, thus summarising what appeared as impure and filthy to their eyes. The perpetrators attributed to this unreal category of leftist hatred for private property, sexual promiscuity, disrespect for family, atheism and the prohibition of the things they enjoyed as pleasures. In

addition to these things, the executioners assumed that they expressed also a hidden envy and a profound resentment against richness. The ‘communist makeup’, made of blood and wounds on the faces (and sometimes of drag queen costumes), is similar to a zombie mask used in order to reproduce this idea of enemies as infected and immoral persons. What the viewer is urged to recognise is that the conceptual models Anwar and his comrades use work as a complete validation and rationalisation for their actions, so that the film makes us reflect upon the terrible contradiction whereby it is not the absence of morality and order that causes evil and domination, but the opposite. As Spinoza affirmed, sin exists only in relation to society, and also violence and forms of punishment are established in accordance to an ethical model and standard (Spinoza, 2002, p. 689). Thus, we find out that the paradigm these executioners bring forward is based on an extreme contraposition between a certain idea of ‘individual freedoms’ (which they defend) and an abstract category (the communists and the ethnic Chinese) that opposes them. A contrast from which they created their categories of normal-abnormal, included-excluded (and various intermediate shades) that involve each other dialectically, and which the perpetrators continue to use as personal and social consciousness to orient themselves in the world.

Moreover, from this interaction we gain a definition of what is human and inhuman in accordance with their conceptual models and the mechanisms of guilt and debt they entail (Spinoza, 2002, p. 289). These are other elements that make it possible for us to understand how they could assume to have the right to kill and to commit a massacre without evaluating their victims as such. Within the cognitive systems of the perpetrators, ‘being a communist’ coincides with Giorgio Agamben’s *homo sacer*, with the bio-political notion of the non-human body that is present inside society, which has no citizenship, and thus can be killed (Agamben, 1998, p. 72). Paradoxically, we see that this idea is not opposed to a rational, normative political organisation, but reflects its extreme dynamic and selective mechanism. Indeed, it is in accordance with these functions that suffering and violence are distributed within society (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 116). This elaboration of ‘social sin’ generates an intellectual externalization of evil, and conceptualises it as an intruder, which threatens and poisons the ‘organism of society’. A Spinozan approach, then, is useful to identify how we generate ideological models from the codification of experiential and relational systems. Because our political and ethical frames work as

cognitive structures that condense sets of sensations, it is therefore wrong to assume that they are generated through abstract reasoning or that they are manufactured through intellectual manipulation. Ideologies take shape in the way we desire and perceive things and in the relations we establish with other individuals or, in other words, in the way our subjectivity is perceived as such. For this reason, it is difficult to deconstruct and question them, because they affect our everyday life. As Maurizio Lazzarato points out by discussing Spinoza's concept of 'moral rationality', there is also a mimetic and emulative component in the construction of desires, which indicates its core and essential generation on an affective and pre-linguistic level of cognition (Lazzarato, 2012, pp. 98-99). The problematic point of the film is that it prevents us from using simple dialectic and moral mechanisms, thus staging what Elsaesser would define as a failed performance (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 8). However, as the same scholar noticed, these interactive situations can become an ethical opportunity by forcing us to analyse the killers' behaviour and the significance it manifests with a critical attitude. It seems that by unleashing this 'theatre of cruelty', paraphrasing Antonin Artaud's famous expression, Oppenheimer gives us a practical application of Nietzsche's analysis of the role of violence in human communities and of the cognitive and psychological processes involved in it. Cruelty here does not refer to the violence of the expression but to the ability of breaking the representational coherence or purity of a communicative modality and the values and 'rationalisations' related to it. The desire to kill 'happily', the association of carnival and massacre recall Nietzsche's idea that punishment in society is always linked to celebration, to the reinforcement of leading concepts at the foundation of the political system and as an instrument to preserve purity, an idea of well-being (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 54). This 'moral' justification and rationalisation also apply to the fact that killing is not perceived as such and, on the contrary, it becomes *lawful* and an act of *justice* (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 55; Spinoza, 2002, p. 698).

Nonetheless, by applying the instruments of Experientialism, it is possible to highlight that the codification of a specific moral order for different persons does not imply that everyone will react in the same way, reproducing exactly the same behaviours. On the contrary, we see that the perpetrators, whilst sharing some *values*, all subjectify these schemas in accordance with their personal experience or their social role, which involves specific and different agencies (Lakoff, 2002, p. 16). Some prosecutors like Ibrahim Sinik did a bureaucratic job by scheduling the

opponents and registering their confessions or declarations, and for this reason do not want to be associated with the gangsters or with the army (whose members, on the contrary, want to distinguish themselves from bureaucrats in order to stress their being men of action), with an idea of brutality; indeed, they perceive themselves as detached agents and as the brain of a structure of power.

Another example of different embodiment of the same form of power is presented by Adi Zulkadry, another executioner who recognises the absolute violence of what they did, but at the same time justifies it as the normal path of power and of the human struggle for survival. The man argues that they did 'what the Americans did with Indians', and that they were allowed to do it and so they did it. He states that he has no regrets and that their righteousness is demonstrated by the fact that they have not been punished for the killings. He also thinks that in relation to this type of act, you only have to find an effective excuse to go on doing it and not feel guilty. For this reason, he wears a shirt that reads 'apathetic' to show that he feels detached from empathic sensations and to reinforce his internal convictions. We can experience the fact that, in this case, the moral explanation is generated around the concept that power is violence and domination, and therefore, Adi can exercise it in the name of a natural order based on strength. He hides behind the nihilistic idea that morality is relative in order to motivate the fact that he must not question himself about the legitimacy of cruelty. This indicates a 'reactive' and passive type of 'administrative' thought, as Nietzsche defined it when he denounced the weaknesses of Spencer's Social Darwinism (Nietzsche, 2007, p. 52).

Anwar, on the contrary, always looks for reassurances since he is starting to perceive that there is something immoral or destructive in his behaviour and admits having nightmares about the genocide; several times we see him puzzled in front of the simulation of violence, even though he does not abandon his moral system. He feels the need to fill an ideological vacuum and for this reason he looks for a continuous imaginary compensation. In different scenes he dresses like a cowboy, torturing a victim with a rope and simulating John Wayne's acting style, showing how he finds a moral justification for violence by reproducing the behaviour of these fictional characters. The use of bright and varied colours (even in the context of beautiful landscapes) in the re-enactments produces 'excessive' sensorial stimulations so that sometimes it seems that we are experiencing the visualisation of the perpetrators' fantasies, ideal places where no negativity is acknowledged. This is

evident during a sequence that reiterates the initial situation of the girls dancing near a lake and getting outside of the fish-shaped structure, accompanied by Herman singing a popular tune from his youth. The words describe the romantic rendezvous at a movie theatre of a gangster and his woman, who watch an American film and imagine being like their heroes and living their life happily. With this experiential visualisation we have a concrete association among the positive, dreamlike sensations suggested by the song, the girls' dance, the beautiful landscape and the idea of pleasure and accomplishment they desire and try to fulfil. Again, the viewer has the chance to understand the fundamental symbolic role played by film-idols within this imaginary world, as abstract containers of all the positive values they believed in. This aesthetic dimension, then, gives the viewer the possibility to concretely experience their inner dimension and, at the same time, to understand the way they relate to their social context by interacting with these imaginative situations, which give a body to their ideological and cognitive systems.

We see these ideals and social mechanisms perfectly embodied by the characters and visualised during one of the first re-enactments. A peculiarity of this scene, which is supposed to reproduce an interrogation, is that it involves a real Chinese in the role of a dissident, Suryono, Anwar's neighbour, and the stepson of a victim. Before the shooting, the man confesses and reveals the terrible moments of his youth, trying to convince the gangsters to include the episode of his stepfather's death in the film they are producing. He is visibly scared and reassures the interlocutors that he has no intention of criticizing them or of overturning history, but is just offering his point of view. We can observe that this situation gives Suryono the opportunity to 'rewrite the official version' and achieve a bit of recognition for what he personally suffered as many others like him. The viewer as well can assume that this minimal request is moved by the desire to find new agentive space to reframe his identity, express his torment, and generate a new capacity to act within the social system, but the executioners and their staff do not accept and provide different explanations to avoid his requests. During the shooting of the interrogation scene Suryono is petrified, he is immobile, keeps his head down and dares not to establish eye contact with the others, and then he is tied to a chair. Thereafter, we see the prosecutors simulating all the torture procedures and humiliating Suryono in the same way they did in the past. The victim starts a desperate and sincere cry, begging them not to kill him and to let him speak to his

beloved for the last time, thus manifesting a real preoccupation for his life. With him, they reproduce the technique of choking applied on their opponents by using a metal wire and, after that, Suryono cannot recover his previous emotional state and calm down. I argue that here the viewer can experience a traumatic frustration, expressed by the total negation of Suryono's demands for moral recognition and by his absolute mortification. He has been so strongly disrupted that even the perpetrators recognise that if they succeeded in realising that scene with such a degree of violence and sadism, the result would be a complete reversal of their version of history, the winners' version. Here we have a clear effect of what the power of false (or the virtuality of the real) is, i.e. the capacity of fiction and filmic expression to convey experiential and affective dimensions, and consequently to make us participate in semantic and social values related to them (Deleuze, 2008, pp. 135-137). The awareness that it is a fictional performance does not prevent Suryono from feeling like a real victim. Therefore, he re-enacts the terrible sensations many others suffered in the past, and experiences motivated feelings of anguish and desperation. This performance reproduces and emphasises the state of submission and dominance Suryono is still obliged to undergo and cannot modify. Thus, the sequence urges the viewer to share all the disturbing emotions deriving from the torture; it conceptually visualises the social mechanisms of exclusion and the description of how 'power' justifies its cruelty and violence. Nonetheless, this re-enactment also has the ability to deconstruct the executioners' point of view and to deprive their acts of their allegedly glorious and heroic aura by presenting them like merely sadistic gestures.

Another significant re-enactment is constituted by the simulation of the massacre of Kampung Kolam, the attack and the destruction of a village inhabited by alleged dissidents, in which many women and children died. For this major sequence Anwar and Herman ask for the help of many young recruits from the Pancasila Youth and even receive the direct support of the Deputy Minister of Youth and Sport, Sakhyani Asmara, who was an executioner as well. He encourages the young paramilitaries to show their brutality, while Herman tells them that with this reproduction of their heroic deeds they will achieve worldwide fame. By looking at the scene of this attack from the outside, as a viewer, the Minister expresses his worries about the fact that the members of the Pancasila Youth could appear as animals (he is also concerned about his public image), and states that what they are

showing is not characteristic of their organisation. They must exterminate communists, but it must be done in ‘a more humane way’, even though they can simultaneously show how cruel they can become. Sakhyan maintains that the scene is useful as a simulation of their rage, but recognises the intrinsic bestiality that characterises him and his fellows. This reinforces the idea that fiction possesses an emotional power enabling the viewer to take on a different cognitive position, with the possible result of putting into contradiction and revealing the fallacies of entire experiential models. During the following moments, the camera is as close as possible to the events, so that we can observe the simulation of this attack from the inside, a situation that reproduces the communicative modalities typical of a ‘war-drama’ scenario (Plantinga, 2014, p. 150). Flames and burning cabins surround the image and the set, women and children cry and try to escape, the diegetic sound is muffled and confused so that it results in an undistinguished series of screams that convey the sensation of being directly involved in this experiential situation of violence (Hesselberth, 2014, p. 79); at the same time, the executioners get inside the camp and re-enact this mass murder with great accuracy. The movements of the handheld camera are fast, unsteady and insist on close details of the aggressions and tortures, while we see Herman and Anwar leading the attack, which happens with a merciless precision and without any disturbances or doubts.

These moments produce a general feeling of agitation and stage a situation of inescapable brutality we engage and are forced to perceive in all its destructive power. The situation changes when the ‘actors’ ask for the cut, and the directing style returns to the previous type of shots, more static and depicting the whole scene from a wider perspective, thus suggesting a major emotional change from the direct and aggressive state experienced before. There are fewer cuts, and the diegetic sounds are clear again so that it is possible for us to distinguish individual reactions to the scene. The responses to this terrible re-enactment are manifold, but most of the executioners are satisfied that they have shown their strength and the effects of their rage. Herman even scolds his daughter, who played the role of a casualty, because she cannot stop crying while he is so proud of having participated in this performance and does not understand her fear. Nonetheless, the concrete effect of this fictional scene is that most of the people who played the victims’ role are crying, many are shocked to the point of not being able to move, particularly the children, who are clearly scared, while others faint. The establishment of this cognitive and

experiential situation has given those who were in the position of the persecuted the possibility to experience a state of total passivity so that, as we have observed, many of them are overwhelmed by the negative emotions they suffered during these moments, even though they were fictional and not accompanied by a real threat. The perpetrators, on the contrary, have the opportunity to show their violent, sadistic side and to carry out this simulated massacre without any embarrassment as the manifestation of a legitimate violence, since it implies the definition of a relational system where these procedures are allowed in full. Not incidentally, the theatrical version of the film opens with a superimposed Voltaire's aphorism: 'All murderers are punished, unless they kill in large numbers, and to the sound of trumpets' (*Rights*, 1771). As we can infer by observing their emotional reactions through our experiential psychological paradigm, the scene offers them an opportunity to reinforce a cognitive model on which they affirmed their idea of power and their capacity to act (cf. Spinoza, 2002, p. 306). Thus, Anwar and his comrades can sense again the idea of pleasure and satisfaction that characterised their past crimes.

Nonetheless, because of the absence of the 'real' communist threat, these moments also give them the possibility to reflect upon the nature and the necessity of this violence. Seeing the children crying and the women desperate and perceiving their suffering, Anwar confesses that he never expected that this scene could look so awful. He imagines how their future can be influenced by the fictional tortures they have suffered during these shootings and thinks that they will curse him and his comrades. The reproduction of the massacre, which was previously seen as a great epic moment turns into a condition of emotional and conceptual difficulty since it increases the doubt he is already sensing, and does not provide him with the superior and moral justification he has been looking for. The fact that there is no concrete cognitive element of rationalisation for the massacre gives him the possibility to perceive the real cruelty of violence for the first time. Viewers interact with this emotional wavering and, by aligning with his affective condition, we can imagine that it implies the incapacity to recover the coherence of the semantic system that holds up his behaviour. Again, we have a practical expression of what the power of the false is and of its capacity to express new relational situations, not only by giving the actors the possibility to manifest their imaginative world, thereby letting the viewers interact with it, but also for their agents to revive particular moments from a different perspective. Consequently, we can see that the documentary has also the

power to show how cinema generates ‘worlds’, kinaesthetic and relational systems based on audiovisual experience (cf. Frampton, 2006, p. 5). With an experiential perspective of film experience we have defined aesthetic situations as metaphorical containers, agentive and performative spaces where actions of the individual components are allowed and gain significance because of a certain semantic framing (Buckland, 2000, pp. 46-47). We have demonstrated that this process defines scenarios and source-path-goal schemas that allow the projection and the embodiment of the events on the screen by the viewers, who can understand and interact with the motivations of the actions portrayed. In this case, we can observe how the relational situations staged by Oppenheimer and the prosecutors define agentive spaces where violence is allowed and justified. For this reason the killers fill these ‘performative containers’ with their fantasies, offering us disturbing experiences of sharing their perception of the world and the way they desire and glorify their actions. As Slavoj Žižek also points out, this film is in a way a documentary about the real effects of living a fiction (Žižek, 2015). Of course, the possibility to perceive themselves committing atrocities does not imply that every perpetrator automatically becomes aware of the violence he has committed or is surprisingly able to understand the victims’ emotions and pain. On the contrary, it simply has the effect of disclosing the incoherence of someone’s behavioural code, therefore testing the cognitive models of those who have difficulties in reconciling themselves with their actions.

Anwar’s ‘hesitancy’ is also accompanied by a memory that torments him in his nightmares, which he describes in another sequence. It is the image of one of his victims who suffered a long and painful death: he beat him and spontaneously cut his head off, but forgot to close his eyes. Anwar regrets not doing it just after the killing and admits to always feeling the gaze of those eyes that make him feel guilty. If we analyse this imaginative element with the instruments of experiential thought, we see that Anwar associates these terrible recollections to the idea of something that is not resolved and did not find its natural end, and thus remains as a deficiency in the model he approves. The concept of an ‘undying object’, of something that remains even though it has been eliminated is easily associable to the idea of persecution and guilt. These feelings are followed by the consequent need, always presented by Anwar, for a strong emotional reconciliation, which makes it possible for him to resolve this incongruence without questioning the entire systems of meaning he

believes in. We can also observe how this minimal sense of guilt does not provide by itself a reconsideration of his model. From Spinoza's analysis of human emotions we know that this sensation is not necessarily related to a superior consciousness, but simply defines the deficiency of a moral or conceptual order, or the fear of punishment (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 316-317). This is the reason why we can consider that this negative feeling of 'debt' is also experienced by other executioners, although it is manifested in different forms. For instance, the need to obliterate the communists' life becomes for them the 'duty' to negate what is not in accordance with their values and the vehicle for their affirmation. Spinoza always put in relation boastfulness and shame as different effects of the same emotional process dependent on the uncritical acceptance of a shared model of community and group (Spinoza, 2002, p. 350). These two emotional reactions (shame and boastfulness) are both related to the need for recognition, to a desire for social approval and to reinforce the sense of belonging to a community. These feelings denote the incapacity to evaluate things adequately and a passive and destructive attitude. For this reason, we can infer that because of these psycho-social mechanisms Anwar is the most enthusiastic about the idea of a film about the communists' genocide, since he desires a continuous external approval for what he has done and loves going on television and being acclaimed and recognised as a hero.

Anwar's fear of future punishment and other negative sensations are perfectly visualised in a subsequent sequence, where we see him sitting on a pier at night looking at the sea in complete darkness. He is afraid of this natural spectacle that gives him an incredible discomfort, and affirms that it would be terrifying to find oneself in a similar situation surrounded by obscurity. The man also relates this position to the idea of *bad karma*, i.e. divine judgment. He associates this perceptive state with insecurity and terror, a condition that enhances and visualises his weaknesses. With an experiential account we can recognise that these physical conditions, constituted by the absence of concrete reference points and by external confusion, express inadequacy in action and make the viewer embody a sense of uncertainty and anguish (Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2015, pp. 277-278). Moreover, Anwar connects these negative feelings with the apprehension that everything he has done will turn against him. In turn, this cognitive situation of uncertainty generates, as a meta-emotional response (Appel, Bartsch, Storch, 2010), the desire for completion, recognition and reassurance, which we have seen expressed and

manifested during the re-enactments. Therefore, he receives the impossibility to fulfil his desires and accomplish an inner pacification as the failure of his personal framework. The conceptual opposition between ‘emptiness’ and ‘fullness’, or ‘distinctness’ and ‘indeterminacy’ that we perceive in these different moments, reiterates the role played by ideology as a force generating desires and their expressive coordinates. It works as a concrete intellectual instrument that organises and ‘fills up’ perception, and as a model around which it is possible to elaborate any particular activity, even manifestations of violence and brutality. As a consequence of this, the absence of this determination or of this physical clarity presents the incapacity to act properly or to define general coordinates for specific actions and, therefore, also the vacuity of Anwar’s fantasies and dreams. This problematic ambiguity contrasts with another fictional scene characterised by high-key lighting and saturated colours that we see at the end of the film, and which shows the characters joyously dancing near a waterfall with the kitsch remake of John Barry’s song *Born Free* as soundtrack (Robey, 2013). Thereafter, we see a ‘victim’ removing the metal wire from his neck and giving Anwar a medal for what he did, saying: ‘I thank you a thousand times for having executed me and sent me to heaven’. The perpetrator is moved by this sequence when he watches it again; he admits that he never expected to do something so great and to express such great feelings. This visual situation has a strong, direct metaphorical structure that the viewer can easily engage. It establishes a supreme moral reconciliation and justification, with the same victims acknowledging the necessity of their death and rewarding Anwar for it, all located in a beautiful natural setting with a waterfall in the background. These images suggest ideas of relief and pacification like the figure of the water washing away negative feelings. The song’s lyrics are also a (grotesque) celebration of the gangsters’ imaginary, and we can infer that this sequence synthesises and conceptualises the entire moral and ideological structure of the perpetrators (McAlinden, 2013). When Anwar watches the sequence, he feels a complete empathic involvement with this imaginative description that establishes the complete realisation of his desires. In these moments, we can recognise these feelings of approval and consolation by simulating Anwar’s body states and facial responses, which make us align with his affective-intellectual world and understand the significance he attributes to this visual conceptualisation.

Another interrogation sequence staged by Anwar and his comrades constitutes a crucial moment for our emotional and conceptual engagement in the film and the reiteration of the main themes mentioned above. During this re-enactment, they are dressed like American film gangsters, and the low-key lighting of the scene resembles the style of noir films. Initially, Anwar plays the role of the torturer and accuses the victim of being envious and immoral, of desiring the things he possesses and of preventing him from enjoying his lifestyle. He continues by saying that they do not want to be poor and just try to be happy like movie stars and, then, before choking him with a rope, he provokes the victim by offering him a 'neo-colonialist' cigar, thus mocking the communists' anti-Western rhetoric. He also simulates the torture of a mother with her child, performed by Herman with a stuffed animal. Anwar takes the puppet and stabs it repeatedly, accusing the woman of being a barbaric person who pretended to save her own life by using her son as a shield and, therefore, she must be considered responsible for his death. Here the viewer must confront another example of the ideological and metaphorical frame these people express. These cognitive models associate the idea of gangsters' lifestyle with individual freedom and economic well-being, while communists embody its negation, and for this reason they deserve tremendous levels of cruelty since they do not share the equivalent degree of humanity. Anwar's words also reveal that he believes (or pretends to believe) that his violence is necessary, that he is forced to behave the way he does by the abnormal nature of the opponent, who also takes the blame for having required 'ordinary people' to become cruel. After that, he is the subject under interrogation and he is visibly scared and shocked by the 'reproduced' cruelty and by the humiliation he suffers. Herman, who is now playing the perpetrator, must repeat the killing with the metal rope many times since Anwar cannot stand it and appears on the verge of fainting from fear. Because of these emotional reactions this re-enactment manifests many interesting aspects of the intellectual models of the executioners, but at the same time stages a curious cognitive reversal.

For the first time Anwar has the chance to experience a relational situation of complete passivity from the inside, though he knows that it is fake. The fact that he undergoes torture makes him perceive the nature of violence as such or, at least, in its destructive and not idealised aspects, and gives him a further example of the effects of what he has done. If we try to read the mind of the executioner and relate

these situations with the previous sequences, we can recognise that his discomfort and psychological breakdown is also motivated by the doubts and the uncertainty he already feels, and which are increased by this passive condition that prevents him from prettifying and justifying brutality. These sensations are reiterated in one of the last scenes, where we see Anwar watching his torture on television. At first, he wants to see the sequence with his young nephews (maybe to use them as an emotional shield), and reassures them that it is only fiction, but then he sends the boys off because the action becomes too violent. He looks disturbed by these images and asks Joshua if the persons he tortured felt the same way he did for the scene, since he experienced a complete loss of dignity and the sensation of being possessed by fear. This is the first moment Oppenheimer intervenes directly by expressing a personal evaluation, and affirms that the real victims suffered much more because they knew they were going to die for real. This minimal recognition of the real pain he caused and the fear that he is going to be punished for it makes Anwar cry desperately. Here we see the breaking of semantic and agentive systems, the failure of his apparent coherence caused by the same boastfulness with which the executioners exhibited their crimes. The reproduction of the violence generated the unexpected result of overturning a situation of domination and of revealing its fallacies and ambiguities. This emotional change is also evident in their second visit to the rooftop of his office where he killed the dissidents. While the first time he proudly and happily showed and explained how he exterminated the dissenters, this time he is embarrassed and disgusted and appears on the verge of vomiting many times. Anwar confesses that his conscience told him that it was right to kill them at that time, he says that ‘it had to be done’, but now he is not sure anymore and calls the victims human beings for the first time. We perceive that the failure of his ideological model leads him to a semantic and evaluative turn, starting to recognise communists not as completely alien bodies and subjects, but as someone sharing common characteristics with him. Nonetheless, this moment does not stage for the viewer an emotional catharsis or the experience of Anwar’s moral punishment and remorse. Actually, what we experience is the deconstruction of his desires, namely that it is not possible for him to hide the massacre behind a curtain of fantasies and dreams about a superior justice he and his comrades should have perpetrated.

We have observed that *The Act of Killing* forces the viewer to interact with the emotions and the semantic models of the perpetrators of the Indonesian genocide.

Therefore, the film does not simply avoid relying on classical moral structures and descriptions as categories for judging the characters: it makes us recognise the fact that these actions are expressions of a pre-determined way of desiring and reasoning, and so they were performed ‘thoughtfully’ and not as a consequence of collective madness. For this reason the film prevents the viewer from using the classical dialectic of victims and perpetrators. Concurrently, through the use of the re-enactments, it offers the most effective critique of ideology and relations of power allowing us to question and deconstruct them in their very foundation, and to reveal their absolute vacuity. This aesthetic and conceptual characteristic also has the effect of making the vision an uncomfortable and disturbing experience since it is based on the acceptance of the killers as individuals like us and, as Oppenheimer himself admitted, of the fact that every human is able to carry out the same violence that they did (Film Courage, 2013). Deleuze defined this complex sensation as *shame of being human*, namely the recognition that, though there is no correspondence and equality of victims and prosecutors, the violence they operated belongs to us in some way and needs to be addressed (Boutang, Parnet, 1996). Furthermore, the traumatic effect is reinforced by the fact that the perpetrators express their admiration and attachment to western lifestyle and do not belong to a ‘primitive and uncivilised culture’ so it is not possible to assume that their brutality depends on alien and ‘exotic’ moral systems. Therefore, this traumatic, cruel visual experience has an ethical power since it forces us to recognise violence as such, by showing, as Brown affirmed talking about extreme cinema, ‘the monster within us’ (Brown, 2013). It is on this negative admission that the whole relation of the viewer with the documentary is based, which apparently defines the pessimistic denunciation of human brutality. On the contrary, the film gives the viewer the possibility of using the actions portrayed as material to understand ideological systems and their functioning, and to become aware of the agency and relational dynamics they involve.

As we have observed with the use of Spinoza’s and Lakoff’s concepts, here we are confronted with a certain idea of morality that is built on the necessities and desires of the executioners and on an idea of purity that must be followed and carried out. We understand that genocide describes the extreme and definitive expression of these common social and imaginative mechanisms, and the film gives us the opportunity to acknowledge and analyse them. The very title of the film introduces this issue, namely what are the psychosocial cognitive processes that produce the act

of killing. Nevertheless, the documentary also has the capacity of revealing the plastic, interactive nature of audiovisual communication and its intrinsic power in providing the instruments to experience new realities and to go beyond the boundaries of the self as we typically conceive them. This traumatic experiential situation forces us to share the territory and values of criminals and killers but, as we have observed, it also obliges the executioners to engage in a relation that undermines the ideals they so proudly try to defend or, in the case of Anwar, to sense the pain and the atrocity of being a victim. As with *Melancholia*, this uncanny tension encourages a strong participation in the viewer, who can take on a distanced, more reassuring perspective on the events described. At the same time, the film offers an incredible productive material to ‘critically rewrite history’, which, nonetheless, requires a strong affective-intellectual participation on the part of the viewer. Indeed, by embracing the challenging nature of the film and by employing it to generate new understandings in the absence of easy reconciliations, final solutions and main paths, we can make a productive use of *parapraxis*. As Elsaesser and Boljkovac affirmed, particular negative media performances liberate new possibilities in our interpretation of history and give us a retroactive and creative power, which makes us conscious and active agents of our own passions and memories (Boljkovac, 2013, p. 11; Elsaesser, 2014, p. 320). Therefore, the film shows us that knowledge is not the act of a detached and cold reason that observes things from the outside. It is the conscious involvement in the world and the capacity to reframe concepts actively, which is also the best way to respond to deadly desires, to resist any idea intended to destroy and devalue life.

CHAPTER 8

Time is a Flat Circle: *Only Lovers Left Alive*

The last film I will analyse is a peculiar love story by Jim Jarmusch, who is well-known as one of the most prominent independent film-makers of contemporary American cinema. Jarmusch is appreciated for the difference and distance he manifests from conventional aesthetic codes by favouring the use of long takes and particular suburban locations, as for the description of social outcasts and ‘losers’ as the main characters of his films, who often die or fail to reach their objectives. This happens, for instance, in films like *Stranger Than Paradise* (1989), *Ghost Dog: The way of the Samurai* (1999) or *Dead Man* (1995). In this case, *Only Lovers Left Alive* deals with the relationship of two undying loving vampires, Adam (Tom Hiddleston) and Eve (Tilda Swinton) and how they behave in the contemporary world.

Vampirism has been one of the recurrent subjects in film history and also the central theme of a number of masterpieces thanks to its great symbolic and mythological power, which gives it the possibility of being adapted to different contexts with the purpose of discussing various issues (Romney, 2014).

Great film directors have interpreted vampirism in accordance with their worldviews and often work in the wake of the influential tradition of gothic and horror novels, while others, like Abel Ferrara, use this myth to discuss social and moral topics. In the film *The Addiction* (1995), for example, he compares bloodlust to drug addiction, and uses this condition of dependence and passivity as an instrument to reflect upon morality and the absence of Good and Evil. We will see that with this film Jarmusch did something similar, taking vampires away from their typical representation, and describing their lifestyle as a particular predicament. This different perspective is accompanied by a consequent interest in their singular perception of the modern world and the feelings emerging from their unusual standpoint on time (Intro Magazin, 2013). Thus, the two vampires are not supernatural beings, who differ from mankind because of particular alien characteristics, but are described as individuals with a peculiar existential and experiential dimension (Film Society of Lincoln Center, 2013). Specifically, the movie deals with concepts related to the absence of progress and the refusal of linear coordinates in human history, schemes that are reflected in the overall setting of the

film, with its decaying structures and a general atmosphere of inertia and passivity. The peculiarity of this film is that, by showing this different perspective on time, it visualises duration as an experiential concept based on concrete perceptive states and not as an abstract category. Hence, we can relate these elements to Spinoza and Lakoff's notion of time as a modular structure for events, which is generated by sets of sensations and integrated maps of body states. Lakoff and Johnson, indeed, have pointed out how time is spatialised (e.g. as a metonymical container to indicate a particular temporal setting), and its progression is generally conceptualised with models of motion, which indicate a change of state (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 142). Therefore, when we indicate the linearity of time we often use source-path-goal schemas, which are also associated with progress and improvement. In this case, we will see that the two characters perceive Time as a circular structure and observe how the viewer can embody this unusual cognitive model. In addition, the film gives us the opportunity to look into how these two old vampires relate differently to this mood and into the role of knowledge, love and mutual comprehension as the 'only' modalities to resist this negative perception of the world.

The first sequence of the film powerfully introduces and primes the viewers their experiential and affective dimension by using particular visual associations and conceptualisations. After the opening credits, we see the large detail of a turntable (which will be repeated many times during the narration) playing the song *Funnel of Love* by Wanda Jackson⁹. The music speed is slowed down and the LP crackles several times, thereby conveying a muffled, confused sensation. The reverb effects and unconventional tuning are produced through pedal distortion and by placing the guitar pickups close to the amplifier (as we see Adam do later in the film). This musical choice creates a dizzying, disorientating effect; indeed, the sensations conveyed by blurred sound accompanied by a loose rhythm are comparable to a state of sensorial limitation that recalls a perceptual weakening and a physical abandonment. These aesthetic choices help us to align with Adam and Eve, since they mirror the characters' disillusionment and lack of positive and constructive emotions (Trafton, 2015). Thus, we have an example of *synchresis* in the sense of Michel Chion's expression, a palpable blending of musical sensations with a

⁹ This version of the song has been composed for the film by Jim Jarmusch with the band SQÜRL, also featuring the indie rock singer Madeline Follin.

conceptual and perceptive state (Chion, 1999, p. 19). Indeed, the following images alternately show Eve and Adam statically lying in their respective rooms in Tangier and Detroit, while the camera (the cinematography is by Yorick Le Saux) recalls the circular motion of the record and slowly moves from a faraway position to close ups of the two characters (the dolly lasts for 1 minute and 42 seconds). The combination of the synchresis discussed above with this description of the characters reinforces the idea of abandonment expressed by the soundtrack and associates it with a motionless state. This unusual dolly also describes a non-linear trajectory of motion, since circular camera movements do not indicate a change of state, but a continuous repetition and the absence of progression (cf. Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2015, p. 252). Then, we visualise for the first time a few concepts that will be essential in the generation and characterisation of the intellectual and emotional mood of the film. We have, indeed, a kinaesthetic concept connected to repetition of movements and to a consequent negation of source-path-goal schemas. The viewer can relate this description of an almost stationary state to a sense of decay and deficiency of sensorial enthusiasm, which is also suggested by the use of low-key lighting, soft colours (which will be constant during the film also because of the nocturnal set), and reinforced by the length of scenes and actions.

The entire film is set around these metaphorical associations and other experiential situations, which define the ontological dimension the figures live in and become with. These imaginative schemas describe the parts-whole logic of this peculiar film, working in accordance with the intellectual mechanism of conceptualisation of experience we have discussed through Spinoza and Lakoff. The simulation of these body states allows the viewer to align with the characters and to generate their person schemas (M. Smith, 1995, p. 102), thus having the opportunity to embody their perception of time and life, which identifies a circular organisation of movement (against source-path-goal metaphors) and, therefore, establishes a state of discomfiting indeterminacy. This affective/conceptual activity, then allows us to give significance to Adam and Eve's behaviour, to generate semantic models and person schemas in order to engage the sense of their actions and to understand how they orient themselves in their living environment. The two vampires are sophisticated, cultivated persons, their houses are full of every kind of ancient and modern books written in different languages; they show a vast knowledge of art forms, which they often talk about, and are also educated in the sciences (they refer

to plants and animals by their technical names). As *Melancholia*, also this film is full of quotations and references from art, literature and sciences, which, if acknowledged, can help the viewer to understand the emotions and conceptual world of the characters. For example, another vampire friend, Kit (John Hurt), who also lives in the Moroccan town, actually is Christopher Marlowe and he is indicated as the real author of Shakespeare's tragedies, thus ironically connecting the film to the dispute about the authorship of the work (Wloszczyna, 2013). Moreover, Adam's imaginary is visibly influenced by many modern and ancient artists (such as Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, jazz musicians and many others) as the 'Wall of Fame' in his room shows. Although the viewer does not recognise all the cultural references, the engagement and comprehension of their worldviews is in any case accessible through the experiential situations the film visualises. The two vampires speak in an elegant manner, and have few relations with the external world, which they seem to look at from a distance. However, this aspect of their behaviour is also motivated by their specific need of living at night, having bloodlust and protecting the secret of their peculiar nature.

In the following few moments we see an effective visualisation of their existential detachment. After the initial appearance of the characters, we see Eve observing the nightlife in the street from the roof of her apartment and, in cross cutting, Adam looking at the outside of his house from a security monitor, and then checking the arrival of a human collaborator, Ian (Anton Yelchin), through the window. Their common perceptual positions indicate remoteness from the world as well as an individual attitude to survey the events from a lofty perspective (top-down), an orientational metaphor that reflects their emotional state and their desire for security (cf. Fahlenbrach, 2007, p. 107). Their privileged condition is further enhanced by the fact that their senses are heightened, as we notice several times during the narration. Another sign of this 'aristocratic' attitude is expressed by the fact that when they are outside their houses, they always wear gloves, which prevent them from direct contact with the world and the other individuals, which are, therefore, perceived as a source of danger and impurity. The man's behaviour, in particular, highlights this elitist manner, which is associated with melancholic feelings and a negative perception of history. Adam is an underground musician and virtuoso instrumentalist, whose publications are anonymous, since he does not want to have fans or worshippers, and his art is characterised by a sorrowful, lugubrious

tone. The vampire, an admirer of Nikola Tesla, uses and reproduces many engines based on the inventions and hypotheses of the famous scientist, whose studies were marginalized. This is for Adam a further element to support his discontent and anger against humans, who never took into adequate account the farsighted reflections of intellectuals in history. He ironically admits to his wife that he is composing a lot of funeral music and that he is obsessed and tormented by the way ‘zombies’ (a term that obviously indicates a total lack of consciousness in common people) treat the world and by the violence they perpetrate on each other.

The overall melancholic feelings of decadence the character is immersed in are perfectly conveyed in several subsequent sequences through effective topographical mappings. Adam’s house already expresses a certain sense of deterioration because of the absence of lighting in the rooms, the disordered accumulation of objects, and the rotten walls and dusty furniture, which seem to reflect his feeling and the passivity he suffers, and which is also justified by the lack of clear goal-oriented structures (Fahlenbrach, 2007, p. 109). These aesthetic choices do not simply reinforce the melancholic mood of the film or facilitate our alignment with Adam; they also constitute layers of time, since they express the impossibility for progress and positive evolution through a sense of physical decline. Here we have another visual spatialisation for the circularity of Time, which happens through the combination of decaying architectures and untidy spaces with Adam’s passive condition. The capacity for ‘forms’ to mirror or function in combination with the affections and ideas of the character is particularly evident during Adam’s night driving sequences. In the first one we see him driving through some abandoned districts of Detroit and observing its suburban landscape. The slow, powerful images of the car moving across an uninhabited area characterised by crumbling empty factories and buildings recall the idea of a ghost town, of a total decadence, and resemble the spectacle of a place after a nuclear catastrophe, a vision of a disturbing beauty. The city surrounding Adam visualises the idea of a dying world he constantly refers to; this further contextual element helps the viewer to comprehend his suicidal tendencies, which are a reaction to this apparently inescapable situation. There are no events that change this ontological dynamic or seem to introduce a significant evolution, thus reinforcing his negative perception of things. He also uses an expression that clearly indicates this suffering and passive position, when he says that he feels like ‘the sands at the bottom of the hourglass’. This association

describes a body state without motion and, therefore, reiterates the idea of the circularity of time and reinforces a sense of desperation and ineptitude. The incapacity to act is accompanied by the idea that there is no concrete source of new life, enthusiasm or agency, and offers the viewer an effective conceptualisation of his emotions and desires, thus allowing us to align with Adam and to embody his state (cf. Morari, 2007, p. 96). Because of the sadness that afflicts her husband, Eve decides to join him and bring him comfort. The images of the city's decaying environment are presented again during the night rides the couple goes on to spend time together. Adam complains about the corruption and death that surrounds them, pointing to places that used to be the locations of great inventions and activities, expressions of an intense life. Eve replies that the town is full of water and that in time it will rise again.

This response is not unusual from Eve, who manifests a more 'positive' approach to existence and history, which is also manifested by her apartment in Tangier and clothes, characterised by brighter colours (light blue and gold). She often reminds her husband that human life is made of catastrophes and that there is no reason to be obsessed by them or to suffer for the lack of solutions. Due to this dissimilar attitude, the viewer is able to engage another conceptual schema for this character, which distinguishes it from Adam's entirely melancholic feelings, and shows her as being a more stoic person, who accepts the cosmic situation they live in as the natural cycle of disasters human existence is made of. The idea of the circularity of time is strongly condensed and reiterated in an additional sequence, which describes one of their walks around the city and constitutes an effective metaphorical association for the absence of progress. They visit what remains of the big Michigan Theatre, which once was a wonderful location for concerts and movie projections, capable of seating four thousand people and nowadays turned into a parking lot. The camera follows the two lovers slowly moving inside the location and then, with multiple pan shots, shows the conditions of the structure, which is in ruin, while Adam speaks of its former glory, and the magnificent aspect it once possessed; then the focus returns to the two vampires, who back to back look around the place. Again there is the description of a structure erased by time associated with the absence of progress and activity, and the two lovers in a contemplative, passive position. The ending image of the sequence situates them in the middle of this environment (medium shot), observing the transformations of the site in an almost

static way. We notice another metaphorical mapping that works by setting experiential coordinates, namely kinaesthetic images based on the absence of goals and procedural structures expressed by their body states and associated with a general sense of consumption. We are forced to participate in the ontological inertia conveyed by the characters and the spaces that, as the director affirmed, have their own ‘mood and significance’ (Intro Magazin, 2013). Therefore, these visual conceptualisations work by establishing a sense of indeterminacy that depicts the failure of the possibility of teleology and completeness, of an ultimate goal or of a direction for actions and for a positive change in time (cf. Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2015, p. 255). These sensations can thus be associated with the idea that history mostly consists in a process of physical deterioration that we can recognise from the debris left by its passage. Indeed, within this context every form of life and being is just a remnant or a survivor, as Eve describes herself. These sequences, then, convey a catastrophic sense of passivity related to the incapacity to react to a process of unavoidable decline and to establish a constant, balanced evolution in human history.

This perception of time and of ontological partiality connects us with Spinoza’s and Lakoff’s models, which indicate chronological definitions as the conceptualisations of particular interactive and relational systems with a determined duration, which all exist on the same plane and are all expressed in actual eternity, the *Aion* (Spinoza, 2002, p. 233; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999, p. 138). The main metaphorical blending the film stages can be summarised by the expression: ‘Time is a Flat Circle’. We have seen that this spatialisation of time is initially produced by the opening sequence, and by the association between the detail of the turntable, by its circular motion and by the top-down perspective. This visual metaphor, which will be reiterated several times during the film, negates the realisation of source-path-goal schemas and, therefore, points out the non-linear development of life and a state of predetermination. By simulating the characters and reading their minds, the viewer embodies a frustration in accomplishing a result for actions, and a sense of powerlessness deriving from the inability to affect reality successfully. Thus, we experience the idea of history as the eternal return of the identical; as a consequence of this, we may say that the film conceptually negates the positivistic model of reason and human agency within it, and the idea of a necessary, straight progress based on the human ability to identify the general functioning and sense of the world.

The two vampires express different attitudes in relation to this perceptual dimension: while Adam responds with a pessimistic vision of humanity, blaming mankind for this decay, Eve tries to be unaffected by this predicament, and finds consolation and joy through the contemplation of art, beauty, and nurturing affective relationships. Her sensitivity is also highlighted by the fact she has a great capacity to recognise the date and the manufacture of objects only by touching them or at a superficial glance. This differentiation between the two lovers is effectively explicated during one of their conversations, which takes place after the woman has found a gun with a wooden bullet. She is frightened by this discovery and asks her husband for explanations, while Adam reveals that he procured it for himself because he is tired of all the suffering that afflicts the world. Eve remarks that his feelings are a self-obsession and a waste of living that could be devoted to the 'surviving things' and the enjoyment of their loving bond. This is a further reference to the semantic system that describes life as something made of remnants, residual objects and transitory possibilities that should be enjoyed and protected as long as they last, since there is no guaranteed evolution for mankind.

This conversation reiterates the idea of existence as a transient phenomenon; nonetheless, at the same time, it introduces a reflection on the role of love and mutual affective assistance, as connective and productive instruments to face life and to establish new existential possibilities. To respond to this sad moment, Eve invites Adam to dance to Denise La Salle's song entitled *Trapped By a Thing Called Love*. Moreover, this moment is portrayed with the same visual association we observed at the beginning, which connects the top-down perspective and the circular motion of the characters to the detail of the disc moving on the record player, thus reproducing the feeling of repetition we experienced initially. Within this context their dance takes on the value of a strong reconciliation. We can notice this change and emotional evolution in the fact that they get physically closer again (during the confrontation they did not touch each other), thus overcoming the negative dimension in which they seem to be trapped through mutual emotional support.

Zarzosa's analysis of melodrama and tragedies showed that sad passions play a prominent role in the moral and conceptual world of these artistic forms, since their purpose is to establish a logic and a reason for suffering. The problem emerges when we perceive the incapacity to attribute a precise meaning to negative sensations or when we feel the absence or failure of a superior order of things that regulates and

categorises them (Zarzosa, 2013, p. 4). Usually, to solve this situation, dramas portray stories of sacrifice and desperate acts that restore this moral and cognitive dimension giving new connotations to the failed values. The uncomfortable effect is that we, like the two vampires, do not have a clear cognitive framework to redistribute this melancholy and question the reasons for their abandonment into isolation. Therefore, the alignment with these characters is further facilitated by the general negative atmosphere in which they are immersed. The interaction with their conceptual and affective paradigm shows the implicit meta-emotional mechanism involved in their conduct, which makes us easily accept immoral actions (such as hiding corpses etc.), overcoming simple Manichean morality structures (M. Smith, 1995, p. 216). The negative perception of history they share produces sad passions that in turn justify and generate their need for safety and loneliness, desires that motivate their retirement into a private and controlled existence, which protects them from external influences and traumatic changes. This is a clear example of Anne Bartsch's ideas of filmic emotional state as a set of complex sensations, in which even depressive moods establish productive effects or, in Spinozan terms, that even destructive modes of reasoning have their internal descriptive and affective power (Bartsch, 2010; Spinoza, 2002, p. 337). As I have repeated in many occasions, the fallacy of an idea is evaluable by the negations it expresses and not by superior methods of judgment. Thus, the viewer is encouraged to participate in their feelings and to embody their experiential world motivated by a serious, critical perception of the general context. The general sensations of consumption and erosion that indicate the absence of new possibilities for human history and describe a state of impurity prompt their isolation, and are reinforced by their aristocratic behaviour and ideas that refuse a strong, direct involvement in the environment. One of the cognitive elements that enhance this mechanism is, therefore, the strong relation the film establishes between the characters' emotions and the surrounding world, which both affect each other.

The sense of estrangement from a harmonic order they feel is also reinforced by the occurrence of unusual natural phenomena, such as the presence of particular mushrooms, *Amanita Muscaria*, out of their season, and by the poisoning of water and blood (the world is physically dying because of human pollution). The unusual growth of these *fungi* is connected to the fact that they work as antennae, receiving information from space, like Adam's generator and, because the signals they receive

are completely unbalanced, they react accordingly. Additionally, the description of blood is interesting and revealing: they believe that, because of the water pollution produced by mankind, it has lost its original 'purity' and therefore it does not have the same taste and effect it used to (it has become even poisoning). For this reason they do no longer go 'hunting' and, in every context they live, they try to establish clandestine agreements with doctors in order to obtain a medically controlled 0 negative blood type, which is for them the most unadulterated kind of food. The moments when they consume blood are also depicted in a very peculiar way: these sequences are shot in slow motion and with particular changes in the aesthetic modalities. We see the three characters' close ups (there is also Christopher Marlowe) and the calm and accurate preparation of the drink, which is served in refined sherry glasses as liquor. After the ingestion, they instantly appear relieved and euphoric, they beam so as to reveal their fangs, and fall relaxed lying on their bed and sofas. This state of sudden joy and rest is rendered through a particular shot constituted by the use of a body-mounted camera, which follows the actors' actions (in slow motion) without any change of perspective, zoom or movement. The effect is that, in addition to the vampires' blissful and peaceful expressions, we have a sense of isolation from the external world, because the camera generates a privileged focus on them and mirrors the consequent dulling of their sensory activities, which is also highlighted by the soundtrack (in absence of diegetic sounds) that is *Sola Gratia Part 2* by SQÜRL and Jozef Van Wissem. The song is constituted by the slow and repeated rhythm of a lute that suggests a slackening of the senses, a melody combined with the electrical distortion used before, thus reinforcing their responses to the substance. Furthermore, we have discussed the cognitive role of slow motion in the amplification of particular emotional states, e.g. the enhancing of depressive sensations in *Melancholia* (Rogers, 2013, p. 153). In this case the slow cutting rate contributes to the generation of an overall state of abandonment and detachment from a previous condition. As a consequence of this, the combination of all these elements provides us with a conceptual model for the specific role that blood usage plays and the effects they expect from its intake.

Blood is not simply their source of food for survival, but it is also an instrument of relief and consolation, since blood produces in them a reaction comparable to the use of opiates and other types of sedative; they also tend to consume the drink with moderation and in small doses in order not to overindulge in

its use. Thus, they can estrange themselves from a situation of suffering, depression and shortage of stimulations and ambitions. Furthermore, they also look for purity in blood, not only because this is related to the medicine's quality and to the following maximisation of its effects, but also because this additional trait reveals their idea of wholesomeness and their desire for uncorrupted objects within a dying world. We have seen with Lakoff and Spinoza that morality and ethical models are based on the accomplishment of particular images and conceptualisations of purity and well-being, which work as reference points for actions, but also as ultimate goals to reach (Spinoza, 2002, p. 239; Lakoff, 2002, p. 43). In this sense we can recognise how in an environment of complete decadence they try to find the surviving elements of a lost perfection and 'cleanness', which they identify in this particular kind of blood. This is a further characteristic that reveals their elitist nature and their desire to separate themselves from the world around them by indicating an essential superiority from other beings.

Despite the elevated intellectual capacities of the two vampires, there are contradictory aspects in their behaviour. Adam, for example, always complains about human atrocities, says that he has no heroes but, at the same time admires and mentions scientists, artists, intellectuals (as his Wall of Fame testifies), enjoys and uses inventions, and appreciates craftsmanship in every field. Furthermore, on two occasions, when they notice wounded persons, we see Adam and Eve revealing the animal and predatory nature they conceal in their everyday life. The attention of the characters is expressed through long and close details (in slow motion) of the bleeding injuries these subjects reported, which are accompanied by long close ups of Adam and Eve observing the wounds with rapacious attention. These aesthetic choices have the clear purpose of communicating the special focus the vampires have on these sources of food. One moment in particular exemplifies this contradictory attitude, when we see Eve on her flight towards Detroit reading Shakespeare's famous *Sonnet 116* (we listen to the words through her voice off-screen), which she attributes to Marlowe. Eve is overwhelmed and moved by the beauty of the poem and by its reference to the eternity and immutability of love as a force that overcomes the accidents of life, an important theme for her since it defines her relationship with Adam and the value their bond expresses. At a certain point, she notices that another passenger injured his finger by opening a can and is bleeding profusely. Eve's attention instantaneously shifts to this event, and her facial

expression manifests a ravenous interest in the blood; indeed, she clenches her teeth as a predator and stops looking at him with difficulty. Therefore, although Adam and Eve developed a great knowledge and have a certain awareness of history and of the human condition, they still remain linked to a physical nature, which prevents them from feeling completely estranged from a relational and an 'ecological' dimension. The expression of this physical and beastly element is in semantic conflict with the person schemas they convey through their common behaviour and, at the same time, allows us to perceive them as complex figures. Therefore, we do not experience Adam and Eve as monolithic, coherent and self-sufficient persons, but as dynamic individuals who experience affective-intellectual uncertainty and conflicting emotions.

The contrast between these aspects of the characters appears evident on the arrival in Detroit of Eve's sister, Ava (Mia Wasikowska). She is another vampire, but is completely different from the three figures we have encountered so far. She does not follow most of the vampires' traditions and costumes, such as asking for approval to pass the threshold of someone else's house. Instead, she behaves like a spoilt teenager and always wants to be amused. Ava does not show an equivalent interest in culture and literature (although she enjoys music), dresses in a trendy way and lives inside the human environment, to which she has adapted. Furthermore, Adam blames her for past events and, at the same time, despises Ava for her passive acceptance and participation in the human modern lifestyle. She comes from a metropolis like Los Angeles, which Adam describes as 'zombies' central', and asks him where she can download his music that she finds amazing. The aristocratic man, instead, despise this common technology (particularly internet and YouTube), although he is an expert of sciences and engineering, because he wants to remain anonymous and unpopular. Ava demonstrates her childish nature also because she drinks blood without control and, as a consequence of her different personality, her reaction to the substance implies particular effects. The moment she drinks 0 negative is depicted with the identical technique used for the other vampires (with the camera mounted on the body of the actors, closely following their actions), she also falls down on the sofa and shows her fangs in a euphoric response, but she enjoys its incredible ecstatic power as an interesting stimulation rather than as a sedative; she always wants more of it. This different way in which she interacts with

this object (the motif used as soundtrack is also different) reflects the semantic divergences from the other figures and the peculiarity of Ava's personality.

If we conceptually categorise the three vampires, we can establish an affective and intellectual difference between the models expressed by the characters and compare them. We have seen that the cognitive and experiential dimension communicated by Adam and Eve is that of sophisticated and measured individuals who choose an intellectual detachment from the external world because of their lack of trust in progress. Through our alignment with Ava, then, we can see that she embodies a complete opposition to the values of the two older vampires. She does not restrain her predatory nature and needs and, for this reason, she continues to hunt humans although she is aware of the contamination of water and blood. The incompatibility among them becomes unacceptable when she seduces and kills Ian, an event that causes her to be immediately banned from the house. In response to their decision, Ava accuses the two vampires of being just 'condescending snobs'. This opposition and Ava's accusation have the power to reveal the contradictions and limits of the main characters and enable the viewer to criticise and deconstruct their conceptual models. We can infer that Adam and Eve's actions derive from a semantic schema that implies a refusal and an escape from life and social involvement, which causes discomfort and suffering and encourages the continuous search for consolations and tools to avoid pain. Then, we see them withdrawing into a private and controlled context that prevents them from undergoing negative experiences and sensations. For this reason they are well-mannered and avoid strong emotional reactions that can cause excessive agitation. The contrast of these distinctive elements with the unproblematic and openly disinterested behaviour of Ava, who only cares about her momentary needs, allows us to look at their choices from a different perspective and to evaluate their actions as an explicit rejection and mortification of life. The interactive system put in place by Adam and Eve, this ancestral couple captured in absolute decadence, is easily connectable with the pessimistic concept of the ascetic illustrated by Spinoza in the fourth part of *The Ethics*. It is the idea of a man saddened by life, unable to change his condition, who finds safe refuge only in its denigration and condemnation (Spinoza, 2002, p. 338). By interacting constructively with these figures we can align and empathise with their state, and understand that this lack of expectations has its own internal reasons and descriptive power to the extent that it denies a faithful and uncritical acceptance

of progress and trust in human capacities. We have also observed that the film visually conceptualises these themes and establishes a melancholic mood through effective spatial and temporal metaphorical associations.

As Spinoza explained, the precariousness of the human condition leads many to devaluate social life and to look for a pure, detached living condition, which is assumed to be more genuine and pure. These reflections are frequently accompanied by sad passions, by a general sensation of uselessness and powerlessness, which have a value and an intellectual power mostly if they are confronted with a naïve passive optimism (Spinoza, 2002, p. 330). Consequently, the alignment with the two vampires allows us to share their affects and desires, and to enjoy the meta-emotional aspects of their lifestyle. Adam and Eve's vision of the world (though we see that they subjectify these concepts in different ways) is strongly related to the metaphorical perception of circular time and history that we have highlighted, and to the fact that they do not experience human evolution as a process of improvement. However, Adam and Eve's evident limitations are their inability to generate new forms of living and coexistence, and their common desire for remaining simple spectators of the unavoidable collapse of the world, a decision that also stops them from transforming and renovating. Therefore, it is in accordance with this experiential perspective that they can deny the physical and instinctual aspects of their nature and not take into account how these elements reflect concrete needs. By accepting these elements we can say that they would contradict their image as 'pure' and abstract creatures, and necessarily confront more complex definitions of themselves and of the reality that surrounds them.

The last part of the film stages a troubling situation for the two lovers, who must move to Eve's mansion in Tangier because of Ava's homicide. This change constitutes the real turning point in the narration because it forces the two vampires to change their habits. Furthermore, until this moment, we have experienced the succession of events in the film as a repetition of similar structures, namely the description of how Adam and Eve manage existence in an overall context of decay and decline. Therefore, the circularity of Time is not only spatially constructed, but the viewer embodies it also through the development of the plot, which does not stage particular improvements in the narration. On the contrary, all the events take place in accordance with a sort of homeostatic principle that maintains a certain stability in the two vampires' life. Therefore, narrative schemas also play an

important role in the generation of a particular filmic mood and frame by establishing general cognitive structures for the development of the events. Indeed, visual metaphors and filmic moods, as we have discussed, define a particular film experience by establishing complex experiential coordinates, by motivating the actions on the screen and by inserting them into an ontological framework (G. M. Smith, 2003, p. 47; Plantinga, 2014, p. 149).

However, the difficulty of the voyage and the lack of blood supplies leave them really weak, and when they seek Marlowe's help they find him on his deathbed uttering his last words. He has been poisoned by contaminated blood, and complains about the fact that the world has never acknowledged his work and his merits, but the two vampires console him by reminding him that his tragedies and poems are immortal and will remain as long as humanity will live. The vampire recites one of the best-known lines of *Hamlet*: 'What a piece of work is a man' and Adam replies from the same soliloquy: 'What is this quintessence of dust?'. Although the literary reference is not understood or interpreted in a sophisticated way, it clearly reveals another conceptual opposition upon which the whole film is based, namely the conflict between the expressive capacities of humankind and the fragility of its predicament, which reduces human existence to an ephemeral event that necessarily decays; a concept that we have seen perfectly visualised during the night walks in Detroit. Therefore, the quotation from *Hamlet* contributes to communicating the discomfort the characters experience, and stresses their difficulty in adapting to the world by exposing a further inability to create something stable and durable, a sensation accentuated by Marlowe's imminent departure. We have seen that all the characters are preoccupied with building a safe environment within which they can preserve their lifestyle, in a way that allows them to defend their 'aristocratic' values and their intellectual detachment from the world.

This sad moment leaves them desperate and without reference points; while they are resting in a street of the city, they both say simultaneously: 'What are we going to do?', a question that reflects their state of indeterminacy. These sad passions are reinforced by low-key lighting and by their actions, such as passively laying on the walls of the street. Moreover, the complexion of their faces is extremely pale while the music (the main themes are *This is Your Wilderness* and *Our Hearts Condemn Us* by Jozef Van Wissem) has a loose rhythm made of lute and distorted guitars, thus conveying an integrated sensation of physical and moral

dejection. As Ed Tan demonstrates (Tan, 2013, p. 353), by simulating their bodily conditions and facial expressions, and by inserting their behaviour within the overall melancholic frame of the sequence, we can read the characters' minds and embody their affective-intellectual state. Therefore, we can align with their melancholic emotions and, at the same time, experience an extreme state of passivity and resignation. The situation changes when they incidentally attend the exhibition of a Lebanese singer, Yasmine Hamdan, who plays the song *Hal*. They enthusiastically comment on Hamdan's powerful performance and Adam even says that she is 'too good to become famous' and he hopes it will not happen. The constant references to art and music they make and the situations described in these two sequences help us understand the role that aesthetic expressions play in the film and within the cognitive framework of the figures. Their sensibility for arts and cultural phenomena is emblematic of their sophisticated and elitist nature (the vampire's comment is revealing in this sense), and it reinforces the idea of a distinction between them and ordinary unaware humans. This attitude contributes to the justification and validation of their specific experiential perspective on the world. At the same time, it involves an interactive power because the worship of music, literature, and science also has an affirmative and positive capacity, revealing unknown possibilities of the real and fascinating discoveries. This is evident during the sequence that portrays Eve's preparation for her trip to Detroit. The scene is characterised by another song with the same title as the film (by Jozef Van Wissem and SQÜRL), and whose rhythm and melody are slow and gentle (there are no diegetic sounds). We see the woman filling her luggage with books of all kinds and in several languages, choosing them from large piles, and details of her hands delicately turning the pages. These images are interspersed with close-ups that show her joyous facial expression while reading with cupidity and enthusiasm, and with details of her eyes quickly moving from page to page; Eve also brushes the books and treats them as precious objects. The fact that she takes explicit 'care' of these items and the mix of positive emotions combined with the tune of the lute, which enhances the relaxing mood of the scene, indicate the semantic paradigm to which literature is associated, namely as something extremely valuable and the source of intense emotions.

We can infer that these operations are not a consolation or a refuge, but constitute a concrete, powerful instrument for actively participating in life and inventing. The same passionate tone appears every time they talk about arts and

science, justifying the attention they give to these phenomena and the length of the sequences dedicated to them. Not incidentally, across the film there are several performative moments that enhance the importance and creative role of art in life. In addition to the above-mentioned performance by Hamdan, we see Adam playing his music several times (and people enjoying it and dancing in a club), another rock band, the White Hills, performing live and frequent effective literary quotations. The style of the scenes describing performances (which are mainly characterised by fixed shots or slow camera movements) allows the viewer to appreciate all the details of the exhibitions and to experience them not as external sophisticated references, but as solidly integrated components of the film. Many reviewers criticised the film as pretentious, maintaining that the director was merely celebrating his knowledge of music and the arts (Romney, 2014; Scott, 2014). However, these elements contribute to communicate the affective power of these phenomena for the characters (e.g. the scene with Eve choosing books for her journey) and allow the two vampires to experience new forms and possibilities of the real.

Our discovery of Yasmine Hamdan singing effectively condenses the idea of the creative role of art in life. She is first revealed to the viewer through the sound coming from the background, and then through slow handheld camera movements starting from the close up of Adam leaning on a wall and following him approaching the club where she is singing. These camera movements simulate his perceptive state and change of focus and a shift from a situation of stillness, to the detection of a new agentive space, and finally to the replacement of the space of action, which independently becomes a new experiential situation (the set of the performance as a new space). Therefore, there is a physical visualisation of the sensation of discovery, which is emphasised by the metaphorical construction of the scene (a homospatial source-path-goal schema, see Coëgnarts, Kravanja, 2015, p. 231) that stages Adam's shift from a condition of passivity to curiosity and enthusiasm. The simulation of these actions allows the viewer to embody this physical and intellectual shift, thus acknowledging the performance as an unexpected, surprising encounter emerging from the environment surrounding the characters and as a new existential potentiality. By configuring new experiential conditions, this scene reinforces the idea of art's creative role in life and, at the same time, by staging an emotional change in the characters, it attributes to artistic expressions the capacity to resist and overcome sad passions.

After the show, Adam and Eve are extremely weak waiting for their imminent death from starvation. At a certain point they see a young couple flirting and decide to kill and transform them in order to survive, thus betraying their own 'customs'. The sign of this violation is also expressed by the fact that they remove their gloves, implying a more direct involvement in the context. The film ends with the image of the two lovers approaching the victims and showing their fangs (and murderous intentions) by looking into the camera. This image is followed by the end credits, and the viewer is left in an ambiguous position because of the unresolved conclusion and of the fact that the two vampires have renounced their alleged moral superiority. This acknowledgement complicates our emotional alignment with Adam and Eve by demonstrating other contradictory aspects of the characters. An interesting stimulus stands in the conversation they hold before the homicide about Einstein's theory of the 'spooky action at a distance', which implies that if a body, once connected to another, is affected or changed in some way, the other, though at the opposite side of the Universe, will react accordingly. This theory describes a world where no transcendence is admitted and where every living being exists as part of a relation, of a composition that requires an endeavour for empathic connection and mutual assistance. This scientific model, then, perfectly shows the affective bond of the two lovers, who simultaneously decide to feed off the couple and share common preoccupations and desires. It also highlights, in a Spinozan way, the characteristics of their experiential dimension, namely the fact that they perceive themselves as living on the same existential plane, so that everything that happens to one of them influences the other (cf. Spinoza, 2002, p. 337). A further semantic effect of this 'quantum entanglement' is that it describes Adam and Eve as equal subjects and denies any transcendental order or the chance to estrange them from reality and history. This contradicts all the ideas of aristocratic detachment they have manifested thus far by placing existence into a radically immanent perspective. Therefore, one of the ethical effects of the film is that, in general, it negates the idea that intellectuals can live on a higher hierarchical standpoint. Therefore, as Spinoza maintained, we all exist as part of the world, we are involved in it and, in order to live intensely, we need to address the issues of life refusing easy and consoling solutions (Spinoza, 2002, p. 369). This radical immanent position is the same as the one reflected in the model of spectatorship described in this thesis, based on the embodiment of visual concepts and on the idea of film experience as a dynamic and

interactive phenomenon, which blends affections and ideas, and forces us to address the problematic power of sad passions.

These concepts of immanence and empathy bring us back to the analysis of Adam and Eve's love bond and of the importance of reciprocal care to them. In their moments of intimacy we see them acting with extreme tenderness and passion, always looking into each other's eyes, gently hugging and touching each other. As we noticed, for instance, in the dialogue followed by the dance, their relationship is also characterised by the continuous and mutual endeavour to understand, comprehend and comfort the partner. A clear visualisation of their strong connection, capable of overcoming time and distance is offered when we see for the first time Adam playing his 'funeral music' (the song is not incidentally called *Spooky Action at a Distance* by SQÜRL) and in cross-fade Eve in Tangier dancing in tune with the music. Furthermore, this affective-intellectual bond is reinforced by the reiteration of the circular kinaesthetic image of the beginning. Their reliance on each other is not only expressed in abstract imaginative terms, but also in a corporeal, more direct way showing them leaning on one another at times of difficulty and weakness. Thus, the viewer can engage the dynamic significance of their relationship and, at the same time, observe that it has the capacity to make them go through the ontological sense of inertia and passivity they are immersed in. Their bond configures a state of mutual recognition and care, but it also involves the description of an existential potential that allows them to react creatively to the difficulties they must undergo. It is a human assemblage based on harmony (or agreement) in power as Spinoza would define it (Spinoza, 2002, p. 336).

As we have seen, the film ends by disclosing a failure in the vampires' moral code; however, it opens up new opportunities for the viewer to generate synthetic and constructive explanations of this experience, and therefore it allows him/her to embody and overcome the traumatic feelings we must deal with. Throughout the vision we are called to witness that their melancholy has a concrete experiential basis, and we can interact and empathise with this affective dimension by understanding its effectiveness in capturing the tragic and dramatic aspects of the real. Nonetheless, their relationship offers the most concrete model to become active in relation to this decadent condition. By aligning with the characters and sharing their affective-intellectual world it is possible to observe that the mutual assistance they provide to each other, the inventive value they attribute to human expressions

all determine a possibility to counter the absence of teleology. Indeed, the negative emotions we experience in the film are based on this destructive acknowledgement, namely the negation of a certain positive evolution for human existence. However, as is the case with the two vampires, affective bonds allow us to define human existence as a shared predicament, and generate the possibility for reciprocal aid and comprehension, even though there is no certain ultimate goal to reach. We can connect this with Spinoza's ideas concerning *conatus* and its correlation to social life. We have seen that, according to Spinoza, no end in history is provided to humankind and that our way of establishing collective forms of living is linked to the opportunity to affirm desires and our power to act, not to transcendental inner qualities (Spinoza, 2002, pp. 338-339). Therefore, if we share the uncomfortable territory of these two lovers, in the light of the experiential model of spectatorship developed earlier, we will see that empathy and creativity give them a chance to deal with the state of ontological incompleteness they experience. Attachment to other individuals and worship of the arts and knowledge in general are not mere diversions or sophisticated ways for intellectuals to spend time while waiting for death to come. They are expressions of love for life, of the genuine desire to generate new possibilities of the real, an *Amor Dei Intellectualis* in Spinozan terms. Adam and Eve's only supernatural power consists, despite their contradictions, in perceiving Time as an infinite cycle of decay, thus violating the traditional progressive configuration of history and giving us the opportunity to embody this experiential perspective. Through this conceptual achievement, we can also consider this predicament as something other than a metaphysical conviction to eternal inadequacy. This condition becomes a source of renewal and a spur to action and creation in the absence of clear paths in history, thus generating the possibility to convert the sad passions experienced into joyful and active emotions. As the film's title highlights, it is through the productive value of love, for others and for life, that we can affirm new realities and respond to situations of total passivity, allowing existence to endure and transform itself.

CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have tried to address films as conceptual systems and to elaborate a model of spectatorship in accordance with this intention. To this end I drew inspiration from cognitive film theory and from different philosophical models that highlight the concreteness and physicality of consciousness, thus affirming that knowledge is an affective and interactive phenomenon. For this reason, Baruch Spinoza has been my north star throughout my work since he, more than any other, demonstrated that philosophy and all the expressions of human faculties are ways of becoming active in life, describing relations and establishing connections among beings. I analysed film experience in accordance with this assumption and tried to show that even aesthetic forms may be considered types of thought, and how viewers can productively interact with them. Therefore, I discussed four audiovisual works characterised by sad passions and I explained how we can manage these emotions without resorting to negation and detachment, but on the contrary trying to reveal how we can turn them into affirmative sensations.

In Chapter 1 I discussed and analysed in detail many aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, from his conception of the Substance to his psychological and ethical theory. I demonstrated that his idea of Nature as absolute immanence, which does not acknowledge intermediate stages and different degrees of reality, implies a radical change in the typical distinction between sensations and reason. Thought is an embodied phenomenon, and always reflects body states and interactive situations so that it is impossible to separate it from the set of affections and perceptions it involves. For this reason, Spinoza establishes a perfect parallelism between imaginative and physical activities. I emphasised the relevance of his *Imitation of the Affects* theory, which, by describing human interaction as a constant process of simulation of body states (and of their imaginative parallel), provides a new definition of empathy as a continuous semantic negotiation. Moreover, I have argued that this model of imitative processes is largely effective in describing the features of viewers' emotional involvement in film and our engagement with fictional characters. In the light of this analytical framework, every form of human expression has a cognitive and descriptive power and needs to be analysed for its intensive and affirmative qualities. Films are, therefore, forms of thought manifested through audiovisual terms, and can be examined in accordance with the interactive structures

they establish with the viewer, who, at the same time, can use this experience in creative and unpredictable modes. The privileged attention this philosophical perspective places on the experiential factors of human activities entails a semantic and agentive approach to film analysis, since conceptualisation verifies at a pre-linguistic level of cognition. At the same time, this account does not deny the effectiveness of linguistic and semiotic studies on cinema. Spinoza's psychological and ethical theory, which emerges as a consequence of these theoretical assumptions, constitutes another fundamental element discussed in this section. We have seen that he divided passions into sad and joyful, and that he maintained that activity and adequate knowledge are always associated with positive sensations. Knowledge becomes the most powerful of the affects and also derives its power by our capacity to transform negative emotions and traumas (and their conceptual world) into new, active understanding. Then, I examined the effect of this unconventional 'ecological' psychological theory of the film viewer indicating a new method to manage sad passions without resorting to detachment and catharsis, but by describing possibilities for expanding our affective and intellectual territory and finding a new power to act.

In Chapter 2 I examined the work of George Lakoff and the theoretical consequences of his semantic and experiential approach to cognitive linguistics. He maintains that our imaginative and intellectual faculties rely essentially on the capacity to associate body states and abstract concepts. For this reason, Lakoff argues that language derives from the conceptualisation of experiential situations, and from the capacity to frame actions and operations within multimodal systems of thought. His theory, then, is distinct from Cartesian Representationalism and Scientific Objectivism as well as from Radical Empiricism because of the importance it attaches to conceptualisation and abstract operations. Then I observed the role of ICMs, i.e. idealised cognitive models that allow the transformation of sensori-motor conditions into ontological systems and integrated visions of the world. In particular, I highlighted the importance of source-path-goal schemas and kinaesthetic images in associating motion and ideas. This notion is useful to realise how viewers can understand the meaning of the action on the screen and embody camera movements and their intellectual effect. Later on, I discussed the most important aspect of Lakoff's work, i.e. his theory of metaphor, which enables individuals to transfer operations and notions from one semantic domain to another,

thus allowing conceptual creativity and the capacity to define new connections among different intellectual models. I argued that it is possible to understand film experience in accordance with these cognitive activities describing viewers' participation as an active process of embodying visual concepts. Furthermore, through Heidi Morrison Ravven's analysis, in this chapter I highlighted the similarity among Spinoza's philosophy, Lakoff's semantic theory and several notions of neurocognitive studies. Thus, I connected Spinoza's thought to contemporary theories on the embodied mind and defined an innovative experiential model of the film viewer, who is capable of connecting sensations and ideas and of experiencing new performative situations via cinematic interaction.

In Chapter 3 I re-evaluated Cognitive Film Theory through the Spinozan model previously outlined starting from David Bordwell's top-down perspective and its limits in analysing the affective and semantic aspects of film experience. At the same time, I stressed the reductionism that is sometimes present in some radical empirical approaches to film theory, in particular looking at Joseph D. Anderson's and Torben Grodal's work. Their contribution is largely effective in connecting sensorial stimulation and aesthetic appreciation by drawing upon ecological neuropsychology and evolutionary studies on human cognitive faculties. At the same time, I demonstrated that it risks cutting off conceptual and imaginative aspects of viewers' interaction or reducing them to subjective associations. In contrast to this, I believe that the viewer's creative intellectual participation in films is one of the most important qualities of the cinematic experience and of artistic interaction in general. For this reason I emphasised the importance of low-level affective stimulation (colour saturation, cutting rate etc.) for the generation of a whole integrated conceptual model for a specific audiovisual work. I stressed the importance of Warren Buckland's semantic analysis, which succeeds in combining abstract operations and metaphorical categorisation with sensorial stimulation. Then, I discussed the viewer's emotional engagement, and pointed out the importance of Murray Smith's theory of alignment and *person schemas*, i.e. conceptual models viewers generate to interact with film characters. The affective power of movies is also one of the central aspects of Greg M. Smith's and Carl Plantinga's studies, and I argued that the conceptual models they describe (*scenario* and *moods*) are fundamental in my film analyses. Scenarios are cognitive models for films characterised by a series of complex emotions with different value and purpose,

which can indicate affects oriented to a specific task and enable us to recognise particular filmic genres. Moods express an overall affective-intellectual state that frames a particular film experience. At the same time, I critically examined Plantinga's study of negative emotions and brought to light some of its fallacies, which a Spinozan psychological account can productively address. To be more precise, I stated that it is possible to engage sad passions and damaged characters without resorting to catharsis or emotional detachment, which are psychological mechanisms through which we rationalise trauma without addressing the problematic power of negativity. Subsequently, I discussed Ed Tan's theory of emotional resonance and of mind reading processes through sensori-motor simulation, an activity that also involves abstract and moral participation. I demonstrated that these arguments are all compatible with Spinoza's theory of the imitation of affects and with his models of human semantic negotiation, which in turn are in line with Vittorio Gallese's Shared Manifold Hypothesis and innovative notion of empathy. In the closing part of the chapter I discussed the work of Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Anne Bartsch, and Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja on filmic metaphors and associations. They largely demonstrated the effectiveness of an experiential model of audiovisual communication, by which it is possible to interpret films as synthetic and synesthetic expressions, or rather as forms of thought under particular perceptual modalities. Therefore, I connected a Spinozan cognitive model (combined with Lakoff's Experientialism) to several positions in embodied cognitive film theory in order to obtain a portrait of the viewer, who is always involved in a creative affective and intellectual experience.

In Chapter 4, after assembling a personal experiential perspective of film analysis, I analysed the results of this combination in the light of several philosophical approaches to film studies. I discussed Richard Rushton's, Daniel Frampton's, Robert Sinnerbrink's, and John Mullarkey's ideas of the film medium as a creator of ontology, of entire realities starting from sensorial stimulation, and of the imaginative and productive challenge it offers the viewer by making him/her experience new worlds and new existential possibilities. In accordance with these assumptions, I examined Pepita Hesselberth's work on *cinematic chronotopes*. As a consequence of this we have seen that audiovisual communication is understood not only as a (simple) symbolic activity, but as an agentive and relational situation where we can experience temporal modalities and embody different ways of being

(becoming) in the world. This conclusion also emerges from Michel Chion's work and in particular from his concept of *synchresis*, which states that sound stimulation works in combination with visual elements to generate a conceptually integrated whole, so that we can affirm once again the nature of film as a form of thought. The idea of percepts, of concepts expressed with blocks of sensations is the starting point of Gilles Deleuze's work on cinema. Deleuze has been a constant reference in this work, because of the importance of his interpretation of Spinoza and the productivity of his philosophical perspective on films. I argued that his notions of territory, of becoming (in the middle) are essential to understanding how we interact with entire conceptual and agentive systems. I also maintained that many of his arguments are largely compatible with the experiential perspective previously discussed. I analysed Patricia Pisters' and William Brown's studies, which effectively combine neurocognitive theories of film with Deleuzian philosophy. The latter, in particular, has established a common ground among these different accounts with his notion of *enworldment*, which highlights the power of films in generating new possibilities for the Real. In the last section of Chapter 4 I addressed Thomas Elsaesser's, Agustín Zarzosa's, Nadine Boljkovac's, Elena Del Río and William Brown's ideas on sad passions in film. I demonstrated that their approach to negative performative situations, which rejects catharsis and conciliatory methods to master traumas, is easily connectable with a Spinozan model of the viewer. This is possible because these new analytical perspectives recognise the conceptual valence of melancholic and disturbing perceptions of the world. Consequently, they define a new type of spectatorship, able to embody the reason for the negative, and thus capable of generating completely new interpretations with unpredictable results. As I discuss the role of trauma in film experience, I must acknowledge that a completely new theoretical debate is emerging upon this issue, constantly providing new analytical opportunities, and highlighting the problematic potential of feel-bad films (see also Lübecker, 2015; Williams, 2015).

In Chapter 5 I analysed my first case study, *A Serious Man*, which stages the failure of a moral system together with the disappointment of the main character's desires and expectations. I observed that viewers can embody these concepts through the simulation of Larry's bodily conditions (image-schemas and kinaesthetic situations) and of the continuous unproductive and harmful interactions he is involved in. At the same time, I highlighted that these individual misfortunes are

placed within an ontological mood of uncertainty and anguish generated by the absence of precise information and stimuli for the viewer, and by other aesthetic elements (use of long takes, colour tonalities, use of soundtrack). I also demonstrated how we can engage these concepts and address the incapacity to place evil and suffering within a superior whole in order to manage them. In my conclusion, I proved that with a Spinozan perspective we can transform this traumatic position into active knowledge, not by eliminating its disturbing effects but, on the contrary, by embracing the world it describes.

In Chapter 6 I demonstrated how Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* visualises an ontological and individual sense of collapse and decay by describing the breakdown of source-path-goal schemas, which, by falling apart, communicate the absolute incapacity to accomplish concrete results in our actions and efforts. The film also stages an unavoidable catastrophe, which, as overall mood, generally prevents the viewer from generating easy consolations and responses to this traumatic sensation. At the same time, I demonstrated how, through the embodiment of Justine's behaviour, we can appreciate the reason for a completely negative perception of existence and its surprising conceptual and moral strength. We have seen that aligning with her depressive state has the power to 'free' the viewer from the search for a conciliatory happy ending and gives us the opportunity to generate true 'ethical behaviour' as it happens when Justine builds 'the magic cave'. From a Spinozan point of view, the *wise* and the *mad* man have the same natural right to exist and to express potentialities of life, so their quality must be evaluated in accordance with the connective and creative power they display.

In Chapter 7 I discussed Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary *The Act of Killing*. I explained that the very challenging aspect of this film resides in its unconventional perspective. It addresses an Indonesian genocide without a distanced look on historical events; on the contrary, it 'gives a body' to and displays a performative space for the executioners, who directly show their inner and imaginary world. Thus, the film prevents the viewer from finding any emotional consolation and establishing a moral order of evaluations. It forces us to experience the perpetrators' fantasies traumatically, and to share their same existential plane but, for this reason, I demonstrated that it also releases a revolutionary potential. With the perspective on trauma presented here we can concretely understand how destructive desires are generated within the social body and the cognitive mechanisms that allow

their embodiment as acts of justice. Therefore, the film gives us the power to resist and to oppose the deadly, negative tensions that characterise every one of us as social agents and political subjects.

Chapter 8 was dedicated to the analysis of my last case study: *Only Lovers Left Alive* by Jim Jarmusch. I examined the quality of the film in visualising a singular, challenging temporal and existential modality condensed into the metaphorical definition of Time as circular structure. The viewer can embody this existential position by aligning with the two main characters (the vampires Adam and Eve) and by imitating and simulating their sensori-motor conditions. Their actions are placed within an agentic context without source-path-goal schemas or precise orientational metaphors for actions. Moreover, the decaying setting that surrounds them helps in generating an idea of history as a non-linear process, and as a cyclical succession of catastrophes. Therefore, we interact with a perception of time as eternal return and we can understand their way of living and empathise with their desires for safety and detachment from the world. At the same time, although we feel the impossibility to trace a linear and progressive path in history, we can experience the productive power of knowledge and love as instruments to counter decay and passivity or, in Spinozan terms, as the most powerful of the affects, with a genuine inventive and transformative quality.

I am persuaded that cinema is an instrument for experiencing new worlds and for assuming different perspectives and emotional positions thanks to our faculty to embody and simulate others' conceptual and affective dimensions. The capacity to open our subjectivity up to new realities does not imply the loss of our specificity or the definition of fixed mechanisms of response; on the contrary, it enables a dynamic process of complex semantic negotiation with unpredictable results, which encourages synthetic and abductive reasoning. It is for this reason that it was possible to establish a comparison between film and philosophy, not because of the opportunity to simply juxtapose or interchange them, but in light of the fact that cinema makes us confront the infinite plurality of existence through audiovisual perceptions. In conclusion, and paraphrasing Nietzsche's purpose to philosophise with a hammer, by violating the constraints of thought, here I hope to have demonstrated, in a personal way, how it is possible to make philosophy with films.

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