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Beyond Sadness: The Multi-Emotional Trajectory of Melodrama

by JULIAN HANICH and WINFRIED MENNINGHAUS
translated by STEVE WILDER

Abstract: In this article we investigate the astonishing variety of emotions that a brief scene in a film melodrama can evoke. We thus take issue with the reductive view of melodrama that limits this genre's emotional effects to sadness, pity, and tear-jerking potential. Through a close analysis of a melodramatic standard situation—a “news of death” scene—in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *21 Grams* (2003), we reveal the emotional dynamics and the high density as well as rich variety of affective phenomena likely to be experienced during the trajectory of this two-minute scene.

On the Emotional Diversity in Melodramas. In 1912, Alfred Kerr, the most famous German theater critic at the time, went to the cinema. He was aware of the powerful effect of film melodrama. Still, he rubbed his eyes in disbelief over what he saw: “I’m a hardened theatergoer and am familiar with many different kinds of effects—and am still really a sucker for a moving-picture event.”¹ Kerr described a melodrama in which a young man runs away from home. Years later, after becoming a wealthy man in the New World, he’s overcome by a desire to see his mother. Just as he returns home, the now-impooverished mother’s last few possessions are to be auctioned off. The son drives away the bill collectors, and his mother sinks into his arms with joy. “I know, all that is as silly as can be. But as a viewer you suddenly notice that ‘you have something in your eye.’ How can that be explained?” asked Kerr.²

In 1928, Thomas Mann, the most famous German writer at the time, went to the cinema. He saw King Vidor’s World War I melodrama *The Big Parade* (1925) and was deeply moved. Mann, too, was aware of all the things that melodramas can do to viewers. And still, he cried in surprise:

1 Quoted in Margrit Frölich, Klaus Gronenborn, and Karsten Visarius, foreword to *Das Gefühl der Gefühle: Zum Kinomelodram*, ed. Margrit Frölich, Klaus Gronenborn, and Karsten Visarius (Marburg, Germany: Schüren, 2008), 7.

2 *Ibid.*, 7.

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Tell me why we spend every moment in the cinema crying, or more precisely, sobbing like a servant girl! Recently we were at the premiere of *The Big Parade*, including Olaf Gulbransson, whom we met at the exit. The jovial, muscular Eskimo's face was covered with tears. "I haven't dried off yet," he said apologetically, and for some time we stood there with him, our eyes moist in simple-minded weeping."³

In 1933, the famed sociologist Herbert Blumer published his Payne Fund study on the effect of film, *Movies and Conduct*. His analysis was academic in tone, but it showed how deeply impressed he was by the effect of melodramas:

Anyone with a merely casual acquaintance with the movies will probably recall some picture which was particularly effective in arousing intense feelings of grief and impulses to weep. *Over the Hill* and *The Singing Fool* are two outstanding examples of pictures of this kind. Of those who witnessed these pictures probably few . . . did not experience some tendency to feel sad or to weep. It is not only such special pictures, however, which may induce those effects. The extent to which motion pictures induce such experiences is probably much greater than one would ordinarily think.⁴

We could list more such quotes, dating right up to the present, and each would confirm that there is no doubt about one thing: melodramas can move their viewers deeply, stir up their emotions, and bring tears to their eyes. With the exception of the horror film, there is probably no genre that more closely resembles Ed Tan's general characterization of the medium of film as an emotion machine.⁵ Long before Tan, the Russian formalists saw an emotional teleology in the poetics of melodrama: "All elements in melodrama—its themes, technical principles, construction and style—are subordinate to one overriding aesthetic goal: the calling forth of 'pure,' 'vivid' emotions."⁶

At the same time, examinations of melodrama's affective impact in the field of film studies have long remained surprisingly simplistic. Debates concerning melodrama in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were dominated by stylistic issues and criticisms of ideology, and they either ignored affective impact entirely or implicitly took it for granted.⁷ The situation has changed since then, as emotions have come to occupy a significant

3 Thomas Mann, "Über den Film," *Schönemanns Monatshefte*, August 1928, 769–770, reprinted in Ludwig Greve, *Hätte ich das Kino! Die Schriftsteller und der Stummfilm* (Stuttgart: Schiller-Nationalmuseum, 1976), 213–215. Olaf Gulbransson (1873–1958) was a Norwegian artist best known for the caricatures and illustrations he contributed to the German satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*, which was published in Munich, the city where the encounter with Thomas Mann most likely took place.

4 Herbert Blumer, *Movies and Conduct: A Payne Fund Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 95.

5 Ed Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996).

6 Daniel Gerould, "Russian Formalist Theories of Melodrama," *Journal of American Culture* 1, no. 1 (1978): 154.

7 A concise overview can be found in John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London: Wallflower, 2004).

place.⁸ However, the predominant tendency is still to reduce melodramas to the most important emotions they elicit, such as pity and sadness, or to focus exclusively on how they induce crying. For example, Torben Grodal states laconically, “The emotion evoked by melodramas and tragedies is sadness.”⁹ And according to Noël Carroll, the focus is pity and admiration. He considers these emotions separate core emotions, the occasional emotional blend of which constitutes *the* “melodramatic emotion” as such.¹⁰ However, as we attempt to show in this article, melodrama’s emotional spectrum extends far beyond sadness, pity, and admiration.¹¹

Linda Williams notes critically that “the understanding of melodrama has been impeded by the failure to acknowledge the complex tension between different emotions as well as the relation of thought to emotion.”¹² Reaching out beyond the limitation of the genre—or the aesthetic mode, as she would put it—to sadness or pity, she regards melodrama in terms of a dialectic of pathos and action, ranging from the too late of the moment of suffering to the in the nick of time that ends suspense: “If pathos is crucial to melodrama, it is always in tension with other emotions.”¹³

In this article, we intend to do justice to Linda Williams’s claim and to examine the “complex tension between different emotions” that she emphasizes in melodramas. Carl Plantinga and Jens Eder have recently made similar attempts.¹⁴ We go one step further by zooming in for a close-up and reducing the shot size even more, namely, to a microanalysis of a particularly moving moment in Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *21 Grams* (2003) that provides a starting point for examining the diversity of emotions found in melodramas.

We show that even Williams falls short of doing justice to the full complexity of the emotional trajectories of melodrama. Within two minutes, a single scene from *21 Grams* sends viewers on an intense affective trajectory involving more than a dozen emotions that, moreover, respond to different (ontological) strata of the viewing experience:

8 See Steve Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” *Screen* 27, no. 4 (1986): 6–22; Ed Tan and Nico Frijda, “Sentiment in Film Viewing,” in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 48–64; and Hermann Kappelhoff, *Matrix der Gefühle: Das Kino, das Melodrama und das Theater der Empfindsamkeit* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2004).

9 Torben Grodal, “Pain, Sadness, Aggression, and Joy: An Evolutionary Approach to Film Emotions,” *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 1, no. 1 (2007): 95.

10 Noël Carroll, “Film, Emotion, and Genre,” in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: An Anthology*, ed. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 231. Jonathan Frome is a bit more nuanced in this respect. In a recent discussion about why films provoke crying, he claims that a major reason is intense emotion: “In the case of melodramas, that emotion is primarily sadness, although other emotions may play a secondary role.” Jonathan Frome, “Melodrama and the Psychology of Tears,” *Projections* 8, no. 1 (2014): 30.

11 In addition to Carl Plantinga, who is mentioned later, Ed Tan is also a welcome exception among the cognitivists. He writes the following about the reception of films in general: “It will be clear that a film may evoke a wide variety of emotions at one and the same time, and that the blend of these emotions is constantly subject to change.” Tan, *Emotion and the Structure*, 61.

12 Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 49.

13 Ibid.

14 Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 169–190; and Jens Eder, “Casablanca and the Richness of Emotions,” *Journal of Literary Theory* 1, no. 2 (2007): 231–250.

emotions that relate to what happens in the fictional world, emotions directed at the film's character as an artifact, meta-emotions relating to the viewer's own feelings, and emotions nourished by a personal memory or a concern about the future. To be sure, we do not claim that every viewer experiences all of these emotions. Rather, our microanalysis aims to reveal the scene's emotional *potential*—and this potential goes decidedly beyond the mere elicitation of sadness and pity.

Methodologically grounded primarily in film phenomenology, cognitivism, and philosophical aesthetics, our analysis freely incorporates insights from emotion psychology, the phenomenology of emotion, psychology of music, literary studies, and empirical aesthetics. Such openness to various domains both within film studies and beyond is necessary if the goal is to increase our understanding of how viewers are emotionally affected. Moreover, a minute microanalysis is particularly revealing in this respect. The dynamics of emotional episodes in films can be so rapid, manifold, and oscillating, and the density of affective responses so high, that a focus on a few predominant emotions can be misleading.

News of Death: A Standard Situation in Melodrama. What happens in the selected scene? Christina Peck (Naomi Watts), a married mother of two girls, waits in a hospital hallway with her father (Jerry Chipman) and sister (Clea DuVall). Two doctors arrive with devastating news: Christina's husband was seriously injured in a car crash, and the couple's two daughters did not survive. Her father and sister show their sympathy, and Christina collapses in tears.

Such scenes—in which news of a death is delivered—are as common as they are stereotypical. They can be found in numerous melodramas and tearjerkers. They also appear as melodramatic “building blocks” in a number of other genres and modes, such as war films and action movies, European art-house films, and American independent movies, to name but a few.¹⁵

In the field of film studies, and in research on melodrama in particular, the dramatic concept of a situation has gained in currency over the past two decades.¹⁶ Lea Jacobs, Ben Singer, and others have argued that melodrama employs a narrative structure that is different from that of other genres in classical Hollywood cinema: rather than causally and logically following a densely woven plot in sequential scenes, it comprises

15 Here are some other films that contain a news-of-death scene: melodramas and tearjerkers include *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970), *Out of Africa* (Sidney Pollack, 1985), *My Girl* (Howard Zieff, 1991), *City of Angels* (Brad Silberling, 1998), *Message in a Bottle* (Lois Mandoki, 1999), and *Things We Lost in the Fire* (Susanne Bier, 2007). War movies and action films include *Aliens: Director's Cut* (James Cameron, 1986, 2003), *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), *Enemy at the Gates* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2001), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (Paul Greengrass, 2007). European art-house films include *Romeo and Juliet* (Franco Zeffirelli, 1968), *Die Ehe der Maria Braun* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1979), *Christiane F.* (Ulrich Edel, 1981), *Trois couleurs: Bleu* (Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1993), *La stanza del figlio* (Nanni Moretti, 2001), *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2004), *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (Ken Loach, 2006), and *Auf der anderen Seite* (Fatih Akin, 2007). American independent films include *In the Bedroom* (Todd Field, 2001), *Garden State* (Zach Braff, 2004), and *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006).

16 See Lea Jacobs, “The Woman's Picture and the Poetics of Melodrama,” *Camera Obscura* 31 (1993): 121–147; Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

a series of loosely connected situations.¹⁷ These standard situations, which hark back to the stage, function in a relatively autonomous way: they provide sensational scenes and intense emotional effects. According to Jacobs, what characterizes the situation is that it brings the action's linear progression to a standstill, or at least presents an obstacle. Of course, as Jacobs points out, elements that delay a resolution and impede the protagonist are employed in most other types of narratives. However, in these other cases, such obstacles are always related to the protagonist's objectives and/or the narrative's progression and are therefore bound to the plot's sequential logic.¹⁸ In contrast, a scene of pathos, such as the news-of-death scene, focuses on the protagonist's suffering and is therefore primarily tailored to produce emotional effects in the viewer, but it could well be dispensed with in terms of narrative economy. Thomas Koebner, who has championed the term "situation" (*Standardsituation*) in German-language film studies, adds another aspect of the situation: its stereotypical nature enables experienced viewers to compare the scene with a mental script, a cognitive pattern, a norm.¹⁹ A token-type comparison can make innovations tangible, thus enabling the viewer to react to specific nuances in a more discerning way.

Because the scene in *21 Grams* involves a standard melodramatic situation, it seems to be particularly suited for an exemplary microanalysis of the emotional poetics of melodrama. The scene is, moreover, ideal for such an analysis because the actual effects of its poetics on viewers' emotional responses have already been measured. In an empirical study we conducted with psychologists on why watching emotionally moving situations is pleasurable, this scene, as compared to other film clips featuring similar situations, had by far the greatest emotional effect on the seventy-five study participants.²⁰

Suspense Structure: Suspense, Relief, Shock. We first examine the scene's suspense structure, which involves emotions such as suspense, relief, and shock. In her analysis of the climax in D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920), Linda Williams shows that the tear-jerking happy endings in melodramas are frequently preceded by suspenseful action sequences.²¹ But suspense need not necessarily be action packed; nor does it have to precede the moment of pathos in the form of an independent sequence.

17 Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 46.

18 Jacobs, "Woman's Picture," 131. Singer defines situation as a "striking and exciting incident that momentarily arrests narrative action while the characters encounter a powerful new circumstance and the audience relishes the heightened dramatic tension. Situation often entails a startling reversal or twist of events that creates a dramatic impasse, a momentary paralysis stemming from a deadlock or dilemma or predicament that constrains the protagonist's ability to respond immediately. Action might be temporarily suspended when characters are stunned by shocking news." Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 41.

19 Thomas Koebner, "Dramaturgie," in *Reclams Sachlexikon des Films*, ed. Thomas Koebner, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2011), 156–161. See also Thomas Koebner, ed., *Standardsituationen im Film: Ein Handbuch* (Marburg, Germany: Schüren, 2016).

20 Julian Hanich, Valentin Wagner, Mira Shah, Thomas Jacobsen, and Winfried Menninghaus, "Why We Like to Watch Sad Films: The Pleasure of Being Moved in Aesthetic Experiences," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 8, no. 2 (2014): 130–143.

21 Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 62–80. See also Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 26–42.

In the *21 Grams* scene, the elements of suspense and pathos are not separated. Instead, a comparatively calm but gripping form of suspense and the moment of pathos are initially intertwined. Thus, the first part of the *21 Grams* scene—the news of death proper—still conforms to a causal narrative logic. Only in the second part, when the moment of pathos fully replaces the suspense element, does the action come to a halt (as is characteristic of the situation, according to Jacobs and Singer).

The scene begins with a close-up of the female protagonist, Christina Peck. She stares off into space, bent slightly forward and apparently nervous. At this point, after only three seconds, the viewer may begin to wonder about the reason for this. The objective is clearly to arouse the viewer's interest and curiosity—two mental states that can be considered emotions, according to psychologists such as Carroll Izard and Paul Silvia, as well as film scholars such as Ed Tan and Noël Carroll—within a short period of time.²² In the second shot, the view of the space behind Christina, who is breathing nervously, opens up down a hospital hallway, with two men approaching (Figure 1). The white coat and light-blue scrubs they wear reveal that they are doctors. Because a telephoto lens was apparently used for this shot, creating a relatively shallow field of focus, the two are not clearly recognizable at first, although their bodies take on more contours with each step. Because the



Figure 1. Christina Peck (Naomi Watts) and her father (Jerry Chipman) wait for the doctors arriving in the background in *21 Grams* (This Is That Productions, 2003).

sound of their footsteps becomes louder and louder and Christina's father looks up at them, something becomes clear: it is Christina they are approaching.

At this point in the film, the viewer's rather vague interest should turn into anticipatory suspense (if it hasn't already done so): Why is Christina sitting nervously in a hospital hallway? What do the two doctors want? What news will they be delivering? A combination of general media competence, knowledge about the genre, and familiarity with news-of-death situations suggests that this message is likely to be negative. At this point, the viewer has an advantage over the character in terms of information, thanks to a genre-based anticipation that does not typically inform comparable "real" events. In terms of the differentiation between sympathy (feeling for) and empathy (feeling with) in film studies, this instance of dramatic irony and hence surplus of knowledge suggests that the viewer sympathizes with the character: concerned and

22 See Carroll E. Izard, *The Psychology of Emotions* (New York: Plenum Press, 1991), especially chaps. 5 and 6; Paul Silvia, *Exploring the Psychology of Interest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Ed Tan, "Entertainment Is Emotion: The Functional Architecture of the Entertainment Experience," *Media Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2008): 28–51; and Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

hopeful, the viewer may well wish for a positive outcome *for* Christina.²³ While this is not an action sequence, it does involve a kind of suspense tinged with fear and hope, in the sense of a prereflective weighing of a positive outcome for the protagonist (which is unlikely) and a negative one (which is more probable).²⁴

Throughout most of the scene, this suspense structure is maintained. Rather than revealing the message all at once, the doctors tell Christina a little bit at a time. On the one hand, the scene is dominated by a forward-looking urgency amplified through Christina's repetitions of pleading questions, which call for an answer and also a closure of the open gestalt. On the other hand, fleeting phases of relief repeatedly interrupt the scene's forward progression. The five back-and-forths between question and answer have the potential to affect the viewer like a highly condensed and physical dynamic of tension and resolution.²⁵

After one of the men introduces himself as Dr. Jones (Tom Irwin; the other, played by Roberto Medina, is never identified), Christina rises nervously and interrupts him with the question "What happened to my family?" This is followed by the first retardation, as the doctor evades Christina's question and asks her to sit down. This could also be regarded as an increase in tension, because such a request is often connected with particularly sad or even shocking news in film. In this case, a negative outcome is virtually unavoidable and would confirm the viewer's anticipation. At the same time, asking someone to sit down implicitly refers to, or anticipates, the phenomenological experience of something being burdensome and difficult to bear. In many cases, experiences of grief and sadness are accompanied by a feeling of heaviness or a burden, despondency, and oppression, and with these a heightened gravitational tendency. When someone is grieving, he or she collapses—which Christina does shortly thereafter.²⁶

"No, I'm OK," responds Christina, as she wants to know what happened. Whoever expects a definitive resolution at this point will be surprised. One after the other the two doctors provide some important information. While they do this, the camera

23 Alex Neill, "Empathy and (Film) Fiction," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 175–194. We use the term "dramatic irony" in the same way as Manfred Pfister, who regards it as a concept involving the discrepant awareness that is broadly identical with tragic irony and differentiates it from more general irony in drama. Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*, trans. John Halliday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 50.

24 See Noël Carroll, "The Paradox of Suspense," in *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses, and Empirical Explorations*, ed. Peter Vorderer, Hans J. Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 71–92.

25 For more about this dynamic of tension and resolution, see also Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956). This affective trajectory could also be called, in the words of the philosopher David Velleman, an emotional cadence. He illustrates the concept with the metaphor of the ticking clock: "Some episodes . . . set off an emotional *tick* to which subsequent episodes can provide the answering *tock*." J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *Philosophical Review* 112, no. 1 (2003): 20.

26 Christoph Demmerling and Hilge Landwehr write the following on the phenomenology of sadness: "The feeling of sadness is characterized by a feeling of heaviness and 'downward' pressure; it constricts and closes. Sad persons feel oppressed by a weight, they feel weighted down and burdened, which is reflected in their physical posture. They let head and shoulders hang, lower the gaze and are bent forward. Sadness and grieving tire the individual with such feelings, and they impede their vital motivation. Such individuals . . . feel as if they were enveloped by a dark cloud. Sad individuals 'close themselves off,' 'separate' themselves from the world, are 'immersed' in grieving. Intense forms of sadness lead to paralysis and loss of drive." Christoph Demmerling and Hilge Landwehr, *Philosophie der Gefühle: Von Achtung bis Zorn* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2007), 261.

focuses on Christina in a close-up, and the doctors' voices can be heard off-screen. Dr. Jones: "Well, your husband and your daughters were hit by a car, and we had to perform emergency surgery on your husband." Unnamed doctor: "Your husband suffered multiple skull fractures, and we had to remove blood clots from around the brain. [From this point on the doctor is shown in a reverse shot.] He's in critical condition, and we're concerned that he's showing low brain activity." Christina, extremely worried and confused, persists, and in response the second doctor assures her that they are doing the best they can.

Christina seems to be relieved by this relatively positive news and asks about her two daughters. Dr. Jones hesitates, apparently searching for the right words. Another retardation follows and with that an increase in the level of suspense. The relief briefly experienced by the protagonist and (possibly) the viewer has vanished. The new feeling of suspense—what has happened to the woman's daughters?—may cause the viewer to pre sense or pre feel something, anticipating feelings of shock and sadness in a pre-reflective manner. In his book *Sweet Anticipation*, David Huron provides an extremely useful differentiation between two "pre-outcome responses" that begin before the actual event: the imagination response and the tension response.²⁷ With the imagination response, we as viewers anticipate what will probably happen: the coming event colors the situation, and one could say that here the future has a backward effect on the present: we pre feel the future possibilities.²⁸ Because we have most likely expected terrible, sad news from early on in the *21 Grams* scene—and certainly by this point at the latest—we can be affected by the terrible news to a certain degree at this point in time.

The imaginative presentation of the bad news coincides with a mental and physical "preparation" for the associated negative experience, which Huron calls a "tension response." The viewer not only pre senses something; he or she also becomes literally tense—mentally, because of the focus on what will happen next, and physically, because the viewer feels a bodily tension and constriction that is tangibly different from viewer responses to filmic moments of partial resolution or relief. In other words, such expectations involve both physical and mental anticipations.

However, suspense does not result from the question of "what" alone; it also involves the event's "when." Most viewers would presumably prefer to see this tense situation come to an end as quickly as possible: they look for speedy closure of the gestalt, as this could offer welcome relief. Yet the interval of the doctor's silence delays the scene's resolution once again, leaving the viewer hanging with the expectation of particularly excruciating news. Christina's tense and pleading face, shown in a close-up, turns from one doctor to the other, increasing the urgency associated with the expected message and making tangible a phenomenological extension of time.

In addition, the viewer is briefly deceived when the doctor hesitates before delivering the terrible news, a hesitation, though, that is completely comprehensible in psychological terms. "Your youngest daughter was brought in with severe bleeding," he says. By mentioning an injury at first, he gives the viewer a ray of hope, preparing

27 David Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 7–12.

28 *Ibid.*, 8.

the situation for an outcome similar to the discussion of Christina's husband. But that is not what happens. All at once the ray of hope is shattered completely. The dreadful statement "She [the youngest daughter] just wasn't able to get here in time" is followed immediately by even worse news: "I'm very sorry. They . . . they both died in the accident." This double-barreled message triggers a totally horrified reaction on Christina's part, a fall into an abyss of despair. Because of the considerable disappointment of expectations and the destruction of the rays of a budding hope, this message presumably shocks the audience as well. The viewer's expectation is confirmed: the news is bad. But then, this expectation is even surpassed: no, it just can't be true! At that moment the audience's advantage in terms of information vanishes. Both the viewers and the characters are confronted—simultaneously—with unexpectedly excruciating news.

A speculative question arises in this regard: is this turn toward hopelessness not the point at which viewers would be most likely to break out in tears? According to Ed Tan and Nico Frijda, tears frequently appear when cognitive resistance coupled with physiological turmoil is broken down by a sudden turn that makes further tension unnecessary—because either the situation has turned positive or it has turned out to be hopeless.²⁹ As a result of the disappointed expectations in the *21 Grams* scene and the negative resolutions to the open questions, a great deal of viewers' tension is eliminated, as they are forced to recognize the hopelessness of the situation and their own powerlessness. Linda Williams offers a similar argument. In melodramas, tears are often caused, she claims, when the utopian path to happiness is blocked once and for all: "The release of tension produces tears—which become a kind of homage to a happiness that is kissed goodbye. Pathos is thus a surrender to reality, but it is a surrender that pays homage to the ideal that tried to wage war on it."³⁰ In phenomenological terms, the relief of tension comes in tandem with an expansion of the lived body's space (as this term is used by Hermann Schmitz)—and this very expansion could further encourage the physical weakening and dissolving into tears.³¹ (Later we will see that the viewer's crying is also encouraged by affective mimicry of Christina's tears qua low-route physical empathy.)

From this point on, from approximately the middle of the scene, the emphasis in terms of filmic mode shifts. The narration moves to the background, and the emotional spectacle (or attraction, in Tom Gunning's sense of the word) takes over.³² The forward direction of suspense gradually makes way for the standstill of pathos. But

29 Ed Tan and Nico Frijda, "Sentiment," 53. See also Jay S. Efran and Timothy J. Spangler, "Why Grown-Ups Cry: A Two-Factor Theory and Evidence from the Miracle Worker," *Motivation and Emotion* 3, no. 1 (1979): 63–72.

30 Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 155.

31 See Julian Hanich, "A Weep in the Dark: Tears and the Cinematic Experience," in *Passionate Politics: The Cultural Work of American Melodrama*, ed. Ilka Saal and Ralph Poole (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 27–45.

32 Our use of the term "spectacle" follows a common distinction in film studies, where "spectacle" is often opposed to "narrative" as an element that tends to work against the development of the story line. The opposition is most famously articulated in Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18. We do not imply that spectacle and narrative exclude each other; indeed, we argue to the contrary. For the term "attraction," the primary reference is, of course, Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectators and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990): 56–62.

because suspense and pathos are intertwined in this scene and not clearly separated as in *Way Down East* (the example used by Linda Williams), a kind of coda follows. The strategy of false hope described earlier is briefly employed once again in connection with the two daughters. Christina, frantic, first asks, “Where are they? Where are they?”—after which Dr. Jones answers in an attempt to calm her, “Mrs. Peck, your girls are here, and you can see them if you like, but . . .” This statement is likely to give the viewer a sliver of new hope, as it includes an implicit promise: Christina will see her daughters one final time, if only at their deathbeds. Furthermore, it seems as if they have not been completely disfigured in the accident. This tiny bit of relief is immediately extinguished in the next scene, however. When Christina sobs that she wants to see her daughters, Dr. Jones responds, “Mrs. Peck, I wouldn’t recommend it.” This laconic response implies that while Christina has the legal right to see her daughters, doing so is not advisable in psychological terms. This advice, which refers to the daughters’ serious injuries, carries an implication that points to the future with a pall of literal hopelessness: mother and daughters will never again be together, neither dead nor alive, and not even at the girls’ deathbeds. In addition, the death of children in particular must have a devastating effect on viewers, as the loss of options in life—that is, what the future might have held in store for them but will never happen—is particularly staggering. The narrative constellations of being too late and never again, which can be found quite frequently in melodramas, are done full justice here.³³

Thus, the scene has features of a veritable crescendo—or, even better, a rhetorical climax. Punctuated by brief moments of relief and release of tension, the true extent and significance of the news is communicated progressively: from an apparently unexceptional car accident to the husband’s serious injuries, to the emergency surgery and the death of the first daughter, to the death of both daughters, culminating with a suggestion of the horrific disfigurement of the bodies and the fact that the mother will never see her children again. In terms of the viewer’s affective experience, the scene’s effect, as we have already suggested, is produced by an intensified succession of lived-body constriction and expansion.³⁴ Change and contrast play significant roles here: the change of bodily experience is felt in a particularly pronounced way when it contrasts strongly with the preceding lived-body state. Gustav Theodor Fechner, founder of the field of empirical aesthetics, already wrote about the principle of aesthetic contrasts in the nineteenth century.³⁵ Against the backdrop of the preceding shock, the positive moments of relief have a particularly intense effect. In contrast, their brevity places the shocking news in sharp relief.

Even if one would prefer not to regard interest and curiosity as genuine emotions in the same way that Ed Tan and Noël Carroll do, one thing is clear: because of the accompanying feelings of suspense, relief, surprise, and shock, all of which potentially

33 For more information on “being too late” in melodrama, see Franco Moretti, “Kindergarten,” in *Signs Taken for Wonders*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgasc, and David Miller (London: New Left Books, 1983), 157–181; Neale, “Melodrama and Tears”; Williams, “Film Bodies”; Williams, “Melodrama Revised”; and Williams, *Playing the Race Card*.

34 For more information on the concept of lived-body constriction and expansion, tension and swelling, see Hermann Schmitz, *Der Gefühlsraum* (Bonn: H. Bouvier, 1969).

35 Gustav Theodor Fechner, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Verlag Breitkopf & Härtel, 1925).

affect the spectator, speaking of sadness alone would not capture the emotional signature of this sequence.

Evocative Verbalizations: Suggested Horror. The fact that this scene can arouse a variety of different emotions is confirmed by a brief look at the feelings evoked through the characters' language—more precisely, through their evocative verbalizations. In the previous section, we argued that the doctors' choice of words is evocative in that it suggests to the viewer a supplemental activity of his or her imagination—following reception aesthetics' triad of omission, suggestion, and filling in the blanks.³⁶ In the at times extremely suggestive and fragmentary report provided by the doctors, a series of mental visualizations could be set in motion in the viewer's mind, and they may all coincide with the feeling of suggested horror.³⁷ The charge is frequently made that mental visualizations, which are of central importance to novels and radio plays, do not play a role in film.³⁸ The case of *21 Grams* proves this wrong: on the basis of a character's suggestive speech, mental visualizations can either move to the foreground in a distinct way or flare up indistinctly. At the same time, they refer to both past events, the accident and the emergency surgery, and the present situation, that is, the husband's coma and the daughters' disfigurement.

Here, too, a gradual intensification takes place. The first doctor's description of the accident remains comparatively vague ("Well, your husband and your daughters were hit by a car, and we had to perform emergency surgery on your husband"), but the second refers to the surgery in more concrete terms ("Your husband suffered multiple skull fractures, and we had to remove blood clots from around the brain"). This may not only facilitate the emergence of a visual imagination of the surgery in the viewer's mind; a number of mental visualizations of the husband lying in a coma could be evoked by the mention of a low level of brain activity and the hospital staff's heroic efforts. The viewer's emotions are possibly involved to an even greater degree somewhat later, in connection with what happened to the daughters. After Christina pleads to see her daughters, the doctor answers sensitively but firmly: "Mrs. Peck, I wouldn't recommend it." If viewed as a simple linguistic utterance with a focus on its purely literal meaning, the inconspicuous, socially polite, and professionally advice-giving character of this response might not have inspired an overly drastic visualization in the viewer's mind. However, the verbalization is actually very powerful in rhetorical terms. It discreetly and indirectly evokes what it leaves unsaid and avoids describing (i.e., the horrifying view, unbearable to the mother, of the disfigured bodies of the two children); and its mismatch-driven expressivity (the wording is very subdued, yet the message is horrifying) is further strengthened through the rhetorical virtue of brevity

36 See Julian Hanich and Hans Jürgen Wulff, eds., *Auslassen, Andeuten, Auffüllen: Der Film und die Imagination des Zuschauers* (Paderborn, Germany: Fink, 2012).

37 For the concept of suggested horror, see chapter 4 of Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 108–126.

38 See Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008); Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); and Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

(Greek *brachytes*, Latin *brevitas*): compared to the richness of ideas and associations it activates in a non-denotative fashion, the utterance is laconic. Seen in this light, it is precisely the avoidance, or omission, of any description of the victims' state that promotes a horrible realization: her daughters' bodies must be so severely disfigured that their mother can't be expected to bear the sight.

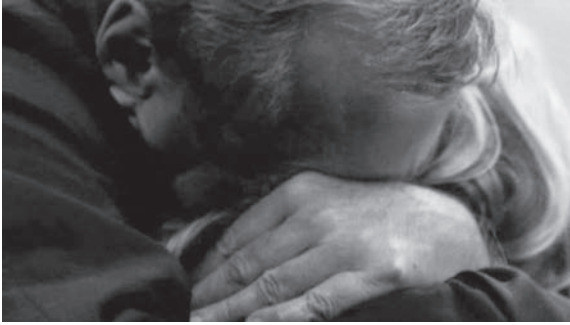
In addition to suspense, relief, and shock, this indirectly evoked suggested horror can be identified as another emotion involved in this scene, even before we turn to the complex question of empathy and sympathy, sadness, and being moved. Claiming that suggested horror forces its way into the foreground as the dominant emotion would certainly be an exaggeration. At the same time, suggested horror clearly figures among the ingredients of the complex emotional trajectory of the scene.

The Fulfillment of Prosocial Norms: Satisfaction, Gratitude, and a Sense of Security.

Except for the feeling of relief (and possibly a pleasurable form of suspense), our analysis so far has teased out primarily negative viewer emotions. Without a doubt, the presence of the four other characters—Christina's father, her sister, and the two doctors—certainly represents a positive contribution to the viewers' overall experience of this scene.³⁹ Their attention, which is directed at Christina, and, more important, their considerate pity closely correspond to prosocial norms, and the viewer cannot but positively appreciate how these norms are lived up to. This becomes especially clear when one imagines a different scenario: If a number of anonymous hospital visitors were present and merely hurried past without acknowledging Christina, her phenomenological distance from the world, the product of grief, would be particularly pronounced. If these anonymous visitors paid Christina at least a limited form of attention, her existential solitude would presumably be less noticeable. The effect would be of yet another nature if these people showed an increased amount of attention and were close to Christina (in both senses). The latter scenario is the case in this scene.

First, there is the father. We see him for the first time in the second shot, sitting next to Christina. He is also bent forward and stares at the floor. The compositional parallelism suggests that he intends to literally be at Christina's side in this difficult moment (Figure 1). When the news that both Christina's daughters are dead sweeps over them and she cries "Oh my God!" several times, stunned and sobbing, then collapses, he wraps his arms around her and pulls her close, pressing his head against hers (Figure 2). This prevents her from falling and seems to undermine the phenomenological heaviness and downward pressure, mentioned earlier, that comes with grief. By embracing his daughter, the father simultaneously creates physical and phenomenological closeness. To Christina, the terrible news can mean nothing but radical alienation, a distancing from the world and her fellow humans: a lostness that opens a vast chasm, shown externally by the tears that serve as a protective film between her perception and the external world. Because a grieving person's radical distance from the world is accompanied by an existential solitude, Christina's father attempts to counter her distance by means of extreme closeness, thereby re-creating a final shred of a sense of security. In her state of bewildered distance from the world, Christina seems to regard

39 Additionally, a nurse passes through the background briefly, but she doesn't make another appearance.



Figures 2 and 3. Christina's father embraces her closely. The two doctors, played by Roberto Medina (*left*) and Tom Irwin (*right*), show pity and polite restraint in *21 Grams* (This is That Productions, 2003).

is marked—especially underlined in the dubbed German version—through close miking: placing the microphones close to the actors' mouths creates an acoustic effect of intimacy. Second, their polite manner stands out. Third, they show pity in several different ways: by proceeding carefully and not coldly throwing the terrible news in Christina's face by means of a single laconic phrase (the concomitant suspense effect has been mentioned earlier), by trying to spare Christina the horrible sight of her daughters, by treating her husband with professionalism and care (“we're doing the best we can” and “we have to get back to Mr. Peck”), by withdrawing respectfully and leaving the family alone to grieve after delivering the news. The latter is revealed by their glances at each other, the prolonged hesitation before talking about the daughters' condition, the three verbal expressions of condolence, and—in a way—their swift withdrawal, exhibiting the painful burden of the messenger who feels pity for those to whom the news of death has been delivered.

The fourth character who is present during Christina's awful plight is her sister, who sits somewhat apart from the others. In contrast to Christina's father and the doctors, the sister does not actively console her. Her clearly recognizable emotional reactions are relevant to the viewer primarily as prosocial acts of compassion. Similar to Christina, the sister undergoes an emotional transformation in the three shots she appears in: tense worry in the first (Figure 4), shock in the second, and finally, profound sadness and compassion accompanied by tears in the third. While she does not actively provide consolation, the viewer can clearly see that Christina's sister is truly concerned about her sibling and feels profound compassion that moves her to

her father as a kind of lifeline. This is made particularly clear by a moving gesture at the end of the scene: Christina clutches the sleeve of her father's shirt. One could even say that she digs her fingers into it, as if to avoid falling into the deep abyss of solitude.

In addition to Christina's father, who is a silent sufferer, the two doctors play a significant role by virtue of their remarkable verbal presence. Though not close family members, they are also characterized in a positive way, which creates intimacy (Figure 3). First, the gentleness of their voices



Figure 4. Christina's sister Claudia (Clea DuVall), half hidden behind other characters, follows the doctor's report in a state of worry in *21 Grams* (This is That Productions, 2003).

silent tears. Important factors here are the extent of her compassion and the resulting satisfaction of another (pro)social norm: by managing to hold back loud sobbing and crying silently instead, she does not push her way into the foreground, leaving it to the children's mother alone.

Furthermore, Christina, her father, and her sister all remain silent in their shared suffering. On the one hand, this involves the reservation they display, which we mentioned earlier. On the other hand, a character's inability to articulate his or her feelings is a common feature of melodramas. Peter Brooks reminds us that in Diderot's aesthetics of the theater, which had an important influence on melodrama, emotional climaxes are limited to wordless action: "What is it, asks Diderot, that moves us when we observe someone animated by strong passion? It is less the words that he speaks than 'cries, unarticulated words, broken phrases, a few monosyllables that escape him intermittently, an indefinable murmur in the throat, between the teeth.'"⁴⁰ Elaborating on the reasons underlying such responses, Brooks continues: "Diderot's implicit answer is clear enough: these cries and gestures signify because they are the language of nature, the language to which all creatures instinctively have recourse to express their primal reactions and emotions."⁴¹ While language would succeed only in creating distance, the characters' wordless crying and gesticulations indicate direct feeling.

Diderot believed that aesthetic enjoyment derives from the immediate presence achieved by expressions of emotions that circumvent the rational distance of language, thereby giving the viewer direct access to the characters' feelings. In the view of Friedrich Schiller, however, it is reason that assumes a special importance. It could be that the father's self-restraint and, more important, the self-restraint of the sister

40 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 66.

41 *Ibid.*, 67–68.

provide a different source of pleasure: our admiration of the characters' self-control. According to Schiller, the independence and moral freedom—in other words, nothing less than reason and the will—of humankind is expressed in the visible struggle with the “power of emotions”:

It is impossible to know if the power of composure [*Fassung*] which man has over his affections is the effect of a moral force, till we have acquired the certainty that it is not an effect of insensibility. There is no merit in mastering the feelings which only lightly and transitorily skim over the surface of the soul. But to resist a tempest which stirs up the whole of sensuous nature, and to preserve in it the freedom of the soul, a faculty of resistance is required infinitely superior to the act of natural force.⁴²

The fact that the viewer regards the four characters' prosocial participation as gratifying becomes clear, once again, with a thought experiment in which the situation is reversed: if Christina's father were absent due to some banal excuse, if the doctors had delivered the news in a curt manner, or if the sister had pushed her way into the foreground, sobbing or remaining coldly distant, the viewer would consider these responses inappropriate and disruptive and would experience them in a negative way. Even though the expressions “elevation,” “admiration,” or even “reverence” would be too strong for the viewer's response to the scene presented in *21 Grams*, one could still speak of milder forms of other-praising emotions, of feelings of appreciating and embracing how the other characters behave.⁴³ Against the backdrop of a hypothetical absence of this prosocial participation, one may even speak of a certain amount of relief and gratitude on the viewer's part for the other characters' compassion and comportment: the viewer may feel pleased by this form of emotional presence, as the mother is not left alone in her darkest moments. Thus, the scene also entails a powerful kind of socially and morally virtuous behavior. For Peter Brooks and Linda Williams, the lucid intelligibility and exemplary nature of such behavior is the main function of melodrama in morally complex postreligious societies.⁴⁴

At this point, we would like to add another speculative question: could this scene possibly also elicit a sense of security in the viewer—as strange as this might sound in light of its extreme emotional nature? Initially, in empathetically participating in the existential solitude Christina experiences as she grieves, viewers may themselves also feel pushed in the direction of solitude. However, the other four characters' prosocial participation in the scene counters this solitude, briefly creating a form of relief that can be expressed as a sense of community and security.⁴⁵ Williams argues in a similar

42 Friedrich Schiller, “The Pathetic,” 1793, in *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, produced by Tapio Riikonen and David Widger (translator unknown, translation slightly modified), last modified November 6, 2012, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6798/6798.txt>.

43 See Sara Algoe and Jonathan Haidt, “Witnessing Excellence in Action: The Other-Praising Emotions of Elevation, Admiration, and Gratitude,” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 2 (2009): 105–127.

44 See particularly chapter 1 of Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 1–23, and the approving discussion in Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 51–53, and Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 18, 315.

45 For example, the philosopher Patrick Colm Hogan and the literary scholar David Miall argue that one of the main functions of literature (and film as well) is overcoming our existential solitude. Patrick Colm Hogan, “Literature,

way when she interprets the sensationalistic nature of melodramas (and the accompanying sensations of the recipient) as a means to an end of higher significance, namely, “the achievement of felt good, the merger—perhaps even the compromise—of morality and feeling into empathically imagined communities forged in the pain and suffering of innocent victims, and in the actions of those who seek to rescue them.”⁴⁶ Philosopher Susan Feagin offers similar reflections. For her, however, overcoming solitude is less firmly anchored in the characters’ prosocial behavior than in our own empathy and sympathy with the characters’ suffering. When, in a meta-response, we see and embrace ourselves as individuals who respond to suffering and injustice in a fashion conforming to prosocial norms and self-ideals, this realization gives us a sense of satisfaction accompanied by a feeling of being in good company: “In showing us we care for the welfare of human beings and that we deplore the immoral forces that defeat them, it reminds us of our common humanity. It reduces one’s sense of aloneness in the world, and soothes, psychologically, the pain of solipsism.”⁴⁷

Artifact Emotions: Amazement. In addition to satisfaction, gratitude, and a sense of security, affective reactions that are directed at individual formal aspects of the film and to the film in its entirety as an artifact can likewise make a positive contribution to the viewer’s overall emotional trajectory. In this regard, Ed Tan has introduced the helpful term “artifact emotions” (A emotions), which he contrasts with “fiction emotions” (F emotions) that respond to the characters and events of the fictional world.⁴⁸ Artifact emotions originate in a shift in the viewer’s perspective: although they may predominantly view a melodrama in an involvement mode and feel fiction emotions, artifact emotions result from an appreciation mode. The viewer can alternate between these two perspectives easily, rapidly switching between A and F emotions.

In the *21 Grams* news-of-death scene, the most important sources of positive A emotions are the acting of Naomi Watts and Clea DuVall. Playing Christina and her sister, respectively, the two actresses deliver difficult portrayals of fear, relief, disbelief, shock, and the onset of grieving in a highly credible manner. In comparatively lengthy shots lasting eighteen and seventeen seconds, respectively, they convey these emotions in a gradual process of changes and transformations. As viewers, we witness two such astoundingly complex emotional transformations, acted in a single shot and not assembled via montage after the fact (Figures 4 and 5). Thomas Morsch reminds us that tears shed in film are often accompanied by the viewer’s knowledge of their artificiality, and for this reason they can result in a critical “technical examination” on the viewer’s part for the purpose of evaluating the actor’s work.⁴⁹ The minimal movements of Watts’s

God, and the Unbearable Solitude of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 11, nos. 5–6 (2004): 116–142; and David Miall, *Literary Reading: Empirical and Theoretical Studies* (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2006), 80–81.

46 Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 21.

47 Susan Feagin, “The Pleasures of Tragedy,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1983): 98.

48 See Tan, *Emotion and the Structure*, 65–66 and 81–83.

49 Thomas Morsch, “Mascara Meltdown: Über heiße Tränen und kalte Blicke,” *Nach dem Film* 4 (2002): www.nachdemfilm.de/content/mascara-meltdown/.Mar.

glassy eyes, bobbing larynx, slightly trembling lips, and her collapse in sobs are what make her performance so credible.

In addition, this scene's great emotional intensity can provide viewers an opportunity to experience a kind of positive meta-artifact emotion. The philosopher Jesse Prinz points out that we sometimes feel positive surprise or pleasure after noticing the degree to which one artwork affects us compared to others.⁵⁰ In other words, we not only feel pleasure from a scene's intense effect per se; we are amazed by the power a film can exercise, despite our belief that we have already seen nearly everything in cinema. When a film exceeds our expectations, it gives us pause in a positive way. And when a scene has an equally intense effect in subsequent viewings (as the authors can confirm in this case), this can also produce an amazed meta-artifact emotion. Of course, there is also the possibility that the scene will elicit a number of negative reactions. Rather than admiration for the actresses, the audience could be filled with a sense of kitsch.⁵¹ Rather than amazement at the actors' performance, viewers could sense a kind of ashamed astonishment at how little this depiction of human grief and loss affects them. Feelings of anger directed at the film's director are also possible, as he has chosen to confront the viewer with such intense suffering.

Being Personally Concerned: Personal Relevance and Anxiety. Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Roland Barthes—numerous theorists have disputed the belief that viewers' minds can "wander off" while watching a film and become lost in their own fantasies. This claim might have a certain relevance when film is compared with painting or literature, but in its sweeping generality it is simply wrong. Significant differences are likely to apply to various filmic modes and genres: a meditative experimental film virtually invites the viewers to drift off with their fantasies, whereas action blockbusters tend to prevent their minds from wandering. For our discussion, personal mind wandering is significant to the extent that additional affective reactions could be produced, which would also form part of the large range of emotions targeted by the film's trajectory.

Herbert Blumer has already pointed out that personal involvement can make some viewers cry.⁵² In a similar way, the psychologist Thalia Goldstein, in an experimental study of film clips concerning sadness, singled out the aspect of personal relevance: participants whose own parents had divorced reacted with a greater degree of sadness to *Kramer vs. Kramer* (Robert Benton, 1979), a film about divorce.⁵³ While the viewer's personal involvement in this case concerned a past event, it can also concern the future. In the first case, I remember a past event in a reality mode triggered by the film ("yes, that's about how it was for me when my father was in a car accident and we waited for the doctor's news in the hospital"). In the second case, I fantasize or

50 Jesse Prinz, "Emotion and Aesthetic Value" (lecture, Pacific Division of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, 2007), <http://subcortex.com/EmotionAndAestheticValuePrinz.pdf>.

51 On the sense of kitsch, see Ludwig Giesz, *Phänomenologie des Kitsches: Ein Beitrag zur anthropologischen Ästhetik* (Heidelberg, Germany: Rothe, 1960).

52 Blumer, *Movies and Conduct*, 98–99.

53 Thalia R. Goldstein, "The Pleasure of Unadulterated Sadness: Experiencing Sorrow in Fiction, Nonfiction, and 'In Person,'" *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 3, no. 4 (2009): 236.

daydream about a future event in a *possibility mode* inspired by the film (“What would it be like if my children died in a car accident?”).⁵⁴

The great potential that *21 Grams* has to arouse concern or even anxiety is linked, first, to the fact that the melodramatic situation progresses comparatively slowly: none of the characters moves quickly, there’s no fast music, and few rapid camera movements or changes in shot length are employed (expressed in purely quantitative terms, the seventeen shots are on average slightly more than seven seconds in length). This makes it easier for the viewer to enter modes of fantasizing or remembering. In addition, it is impossible for the viewer to have an influence on the situation given the melodramatic “too late” and “never again”: the audience is powerless in light of the fact that Christina’s daughters are dead. In other words, nothing can be hoped for, let alone done, regarding the situation; it can only be accepted as catastrophic beyond remedy or hope.⁵⁵ As a result, the viewer’s narrative expectations and the anticipatory tension may be reduced. The narrative standstill in the moment of pathos—dominated by the emotional spectacle of Christina’s collapse—gains the upper hand. We have advanced the speculation that this moment seems predestined to make the viewer cry. At the same time, it could also serve as a gateway for the viewer to drift off in reminiscence and daydreams, as the narrative standstill reduces the cognitive effort required on the part of the audience. This drifting off in memories of a relative’s death or fantasies involving the death of a child or partner could in turn intensify the flow of tears.

Scenes That Arouse Empathy or Sympathy: Pity and Sadness. Could the viewer’s emotion of sadness also be accounted for by the model of parasocial interaction, or PSI?⁵⁶ According to this model, developed in the 1950s and widely used and discussed in mass communication studies and media psychology since the 1970s, viewers’ behavior toward individuals on television (and fictional characters in film) is similar to their behavior toward individuals in real life. Thus, one may assume that a strong parasocial attachment to (or companionship with) a fictional character built over a certain time may result in sadness when that character dies. However, since the two dead girls play virtually no role at all before the scene under scrutiny and there was thus no opportunity to develop a parasocial relationship with them, a parasocial emotion of loss with these girls as intentional object cannot reasonably result from the plot of *21 Grams*. What is possible in television series and—in a less intense form—in films once a strong bond with a character has been established seems to be out of reach in this case: a feeling of sadness not evoked by empathy with a character but by the viewer him- or herself experiencing the death of a fictional character as a personal loss. (Consider the wholly unexpected death of Omar Little [Michael K. Williams] in season 5 of *The Wire* [HBO, 2002–2008].)

54 See also George L. Engel, Mark Frader, Carole Barry, and Gary Morrow, “Sadness Evoked by a Film on Grief: An Experimental Study,” *International Journal of Psychiatry in Medicine* 14, no. 1 (1984): 1–30.

55 See Tan and Frijda, “Sentiment,” 54.

56 The concept was first introduced in Donald Horton and Richard Wohl, “Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance,” *Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (1956): 215–129. For an overview of the literature, see David C. Giles, “Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research,” *Media Psychology* 4, no. 3 (2002): 279–305.

Nevertheless, by means of affective and motor mimicry, facial feedback, and somatic empathy with the frightened, then relieved, then disbelieving, then shocked, and then grieving Christina, we as viewers presumably also feel something like sadness.⁵⁷ It is possible that the transmission of emotions works so well here because at some point Christina is unable to speak: her tears, her wordless sobbing, her collapse, her hiding her face and searching for protection demonstrate the unspeakable nature of her suffering in such a clear, even unmistakable way as to be nearly inexpressible. Put differently, when someone is able to articulate him- or herself clearly in a situation of profound grief and shock, he or she does not seem to be left speechless and hence is unlikely to enter the state of crisis expressed by tears. This, at least, is the case according to Helmuth Plessner and Jack Katz, who regard crying as a crisis reaction of the body, a form of expression that takes over when words fail.⁵⁸

In a recent neuroscientific study, using melodramatic scenes involving cases of death from the movies *Stepmom* (Chris Columbus, 1998) and *Sophie's Choice* (Alan J. Pakula, 1982), Gal Raz and Talma Hendler suggest a distinction between two types of cinematic empathy according to two different neural networks active during the process of empathizing.⁵⁹ On the one hand, there is the top-down, cognitively driven theory-of-mind type of empathy that relies on the perspective-taking inference of another's mental state through attributing beliefs, thoughts, desires, and so forth. On the other hand, there is the more basic, bottom-up, viscera-driven embodied simulation process of empathy connected to the vicarious sharing of a bodily state with an observed other. Interestingly, Raz and Hendler also speculate on the importance of the temporal structure of the scenes they used: in the scenes from *Stepmom*, the future cancer-related death of the mother, which she explains to her son and daughter, might be the reason for the strong activation of brain regions associated with the theory of mind; in the *Sophie's Choice* fragment it is the terrified and extremely sad mother's harrowing here-and-now decision to sacrifice her daughter at Auschwitz that could have sparked the activity of the viewers' neural networks connected to embodied simulation. Following this distinction, we might hypothesize that in our scene, the perspective-taking theory-of-mind type of empathy may prevail before the revelation of the news of death, whereas embodied simulation may predominate after Christina and her family have learned the sad news.

However, in what sense is sadness involved in the case of Christina—and of the viewer who may somatically empathize via embodied simulation? Regarding the filmic episode analyzed in this article, the term seems problematic. An empathetic adoption of the protagonist's emotional trajectory would, in fact, involve quite different emotions—namely, fear and anxiety leading to relief and later disbelief. Even as Christina becomes aware of her daughters' death nearly one minute into this scene and her fearful suspicion is replaced by certainty, her emotional breakdown and her sobbing

57 See Carl Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 239–255.

58 Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970); and Jack Katz, *How Emotions Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

59 Gal Raz and Talma Hendler, "Forking Cinematic Paths to the Self: Neurocinematically Informed Model of Empathy in Motion Pictures," *Projections* 8, no. 2 (2014): 89–114.

are far from adequately categorized as “sadness.” Rather, she is completely shocked, horrified, and devastated, far beyond what might be called a feeling of sadness (Figure 5). The extremity of Christina’s reaction suggests that she is experiencing the first stage of the grieving process rather than pure sadness.

Even though we, as empathetic viewers and witnesses, may feel something like sadness from the moment Christina is told about her daughters’ deaths, the situation is more complex in this regard as well. As Hans Jürgen Wulff points out, “Empathy does not appear in isolation, nor is it directed at individual characters; a complex context of counter-perspectives held by the characters involved and their interpretations of the situation represent the ‘true’ objective of the empathetic activity.”⁶⁰ If this holds true, then bonding with characters cannot consist of adopting—via embodied simulation or other routes—a single person’s perspective.



Figure 5. Christina responds to the news of her daughters’ death with shock and horror in *21 Grams* (This is That Productions, 2003).

As already noted, four other characters are involved in the scene under scrutiny: in addition to Christina, the complex empathetic field includes her father and sister and the two doctors. The shots of the others provide the viewer not only with a certain amount of relief, enabling, at least at the visual level, an escape from Christina’s agony for a few brief moments; they also invite us to empathize with these characters. Especially interesting in this regard is Christina’s sister. She sits somewhat apart from the others, observing the scene in a way similar to how the viewer observes it. This gives her a dual function: on the one hand, she serves as an emotional amplifier for the viewer, as her clearly recognizable reactions double nearly all of Christina’s movements. Edited between Christina’s transformation from fear to disbelief, shock, and finally grief, a similar emotional metamorphosis can be observed taking place in the sister, although it is somewhat delayed. Its function as an emotional amplifier becomes particularly clear in that the film refrains from showing the two characters one might expect to see, namely, Christina and the doctor, when the latter recommends that she not view her daughters’ dead bodies. While the news Dr. Jones delivers and Christina’s shocked reaction can be heard from off-screen, we are shown only the sister, in a seventeen-second shot.

At first it seems odd that the reaction of Christina’s sister is delayed until after Christina’s: she starts crying only as the doctors recommend that Christina not visit the bodies, not when Christina is informed about the deaths. However, the reason is

60 Hans J. Wulff, “Empathie als Dimension des Filmverstehens: Ein Thesenpapier,” *Montage/AV* 12, no. 1 (2003): 139.

obvious in terms of the effect this scene is supposed to have on the viewer: this delay is the only way the filmmakers can show the emotional transformation process (including the sobbing) a second time; only thus does the film present once again the effect the girls' deaths have on the people close to them. In a renowned article, Carl Plantinga termed these emotional climaxes "scenes of empathy": "The prolonged concentration on the character's face is not warranted by the simple communication of information about character emotion. Such scenes are also intended to elicit empathetic emotions in the spectator."⁶¹ By using a succession of two scenes of empathy—eighteen seconds for Christina, seventeen for her sister—the film increases the empathetic potential.

However, Christina's sister does not only serve as an emotional amplifier. As a substitute for the viewer, she also provides hints regarding an adequate audience reaction, namely, sympathy with Christina. The sister not only feels horror and grief at the loss of her two nieces; she also feels sympathy for Christina, knowing that the news must be much harder for her to take, as their mother. Following Max Scheler, one could differentiate between *Mitgefühl* ("fellow-feeling") and *Miteinanderfühlen* ("feeling-in-common"); in addition to her own sadness, Christina's sister shows a high degree of pity or "fellow-feeling" with Christina. However, she cannot "feel in common" with Christina's motherly emotions, because of her slight remove, being an aunt.⁶² In other words, Christina's response and her sister's do not have the same intentional object. While Christina's intentional object is the death of two daughters, her sister's emotions are directed at the death of her nieces and qua compassion felt for the grieving sister. The film underlines this slight distance in five different ways: by placing the sister somewhat apart from the others, by not showing her in a close-up like Christina but rather hiding her slightly behind another character in a medium shot, by directing her gaze off-screen and toward Christina, by withholding from the viewer a point-of-view shot of her own gaze, and by having her react silently (Figure 4). It follows from this highly nuanced and complex choreography of the emotional field that the viewer feels pity for Christina qua empathy with her sister.

But where is the sadness? In contrast to Torben Grodal's dogmatic position, that sadness is *the* emotion in melodrama, we can make a surprising observation. In this scene, sadness as a concrete emotion directed at an intentional object and focused on personal loss is felt by the viewer only to a limited extent. As ascertained already, a direct sadness not based on empathetic processes exists only in quite rare cases in which a strong parasocial bond to a character has been established. The scene in which Christina is told of her family members' deaths does not contain an intentional object that could, if lost, make me sad as a viewer myself, never having had a chance to see the daughters. In an indirect way I can feel sadness relating to empathy with a character (e.g., Christina's sister). However, this empathetic sadness is for the most part combined with other emotions: while the sister may also be sad, she predominantly feels pity (and fear, disbelief, horror, and shock). The viewer—removed from the on-screen action through medial, fictional, ontological, temporal, and other forms

61 Plantinga, "Scene of Empathy," 239.

62 Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2008 [1923]), 12–14.

of distance—primarily feels concern about the characters. The most reasonable term for this is indeed “pity.”⁶³

The situation might be slightly different for those viewers for whom the scene has a strong personal relevance and who therefore feel prompted to engage in the two types of mind wandering mentioned earlier: the reality mode, in which a past sad event is remembered, and the possibility mode of daydreaming about a future sad event. These viewers may well experience strong forms of sadness based on memory or anticipation. But even such viewers presumably are not exclusively sad; their experience may still be tinged by the emotions described already—unless they have completely withdrawn from the film for the moment.

Empirical studies based on subjective, post hoc questionnaire ratings—like the one by Raz and Hendler or our own already-mentioned one—report highly “sad” feelings and intense feelings of “being moved” in response to scenes like the one from *21 Grams* but fail to capture the minute emotional changes constituting the second-by-second dynamics of the scene. We would argue that this divergence reflects not a contradictory but a complementary nature of the two accounts. On the one hand, empirical rating scales can capture only what they ask for; as a result, if empirical studies exclusively ask for ratings of sadness, this does not imply that they would not have yielded, if they had tried to do so, positive results for any of the other emotional ingredients identified through our close analysis. On the other hand, our analysis follows the microdynamics of the film scene, but the two terms used in the empirical studies were chosen to capture the overall impression of the scene. Ratings for how “sad” a film scene is or for how strongly it elicits feelings of sadness in the viewer may well adequately capture the overall emotional tonality as well as the sad outcome of a scene like the one under scrutiny. Moreover, ratings for how “emotionally moving” the film is may even well capture the multi-emotional trajectory of the scene in a summarizing fashion. After all, feelings of being moved have been shown to result from the interplay of a range of different—including antithetical—emotional ingredients.⁶⁴ Yet the term “being moved” does not by itself reveal the fine-grained dynamics and the many ingredients of the emotional trajectory to which it refers in an overall fashion. Therefore, a close analysis of the film’s second-by-second unfolding provides important insights that cannot be arrived at by mere ratings for “sadness” and “being moved”—and we would argue that precisely this surplus of the method employed here is indicative not only of melodrama’s rich emotional potential but also of the actual aesthetic experience of viewers.

63 See Nicole C. Krämer and Thomas Witschel, “Demystifying the Sad Film Paradox” (unpublished manuscript, 2010), 11. Krämer and Witschel refer to an article by the specialist in the psychology of emotion Klaus R. Scherer, “Emotionsprozesse im Medienkontext: Forschungsillustrationen und Zukunftsperspektiven,” *Medienpsychologie* 10, no. 4 (1998): 276–293.

64 See Milena Kuehnast, Valentin Wagner, Eugen Wassiliwizky, Thomas Jacobsen, and Winfried Menninghaus, “Being Moved: Linguistic Representation and Conceptual Structure,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 1–11; and Akihiko Tokaji, “Research for Determinant Factors and Features of Emotional Responses of ‘Kandoh’ (The State of Being Emotionally Moved),” *Japanese Psychological Research* 45, no. 4 (2003): 235–249. See also Winfried Menninghaus, Valentin Wagner, Julian Hanich, Eugen Wassiliwizky, Milena Kuehnast, and Thomas Jacobsen, “Towards a Psychological Construct of Being Moved,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 6 (2015): 1–33.

The Observer Position: The Viewer as Eyewitness. In this final section, we look at an aspect of the film’s aesthetic strategies. Interestingly enough, from the very beginning, the *21 Grams* scene makes clear to the viewer that his or her position is like that of a documentary observer. In doing so, it undermines the strategies of classical Hollywood cinema, which, while providing the best possible view of the filmic world, attempts to conceal to a great degree its character as an artifact (a familiar principle in the field of film theory known as “continuity style” or “suture”).⁶⁵ Camera work and editing should not draw attention to themselves and as a result to the mediating narrative agent; they should instead make the film images especially transparent for the depiction of the diegesis. In other words, the viewer should be placed in an ideal observer position without being made aware of this fact. In *21 Grams*, in contrast, a number of film-aesthetic strategies are employed to underline the viewer’s observer status, even though the camera cannot be identified with the characters’ points of view. This is where the narrative makes itself obvious, resulting from a slightly jerky handheld camera that must repeatedly reframe what seems to slip out of sight; a fast pan of the group of characters; cuts that do not follow the classical shot–reverse shot pattern, at times switching from one character to another in the middle of a sentence and also repeatedly showing the sister while other characters continue a conversation she is not involved in; and out-of-focus figures in the back- and foregrounds who sometimes block the action, at times significantly (Figures 4 and 5).

At the same time, these four characteristics contribute to the film’s “documentary” or “realistic” quality. The jerky handheld camera, the fast pan, the nonclassical editing, and out-of-focus images are as much a part of the documentary code as the ambient background noises and the absence of nondiegetic music (only in the beginning can quiet, diegetic Muzak be heard in the background). In addition, another element of the mise-en-scène is intended to create a reality effect, as described by Roland Barthes: this is the television at the hospital’s entrance that shows the ten-o’clock news behind the doctor (Figure 6). At first this screen seems to have little if any significance in



Figure 6. The television in the background, indicating the exact time of day, creates a reality effect in *21 Grams* (This is That Productions, 2003).

the scene, but it contributes to the scene’s realism precisely through its surplus of information. Assuming that televisions are intended to help relieve the boredom of visitors waiting in the hospital, the fact that Christina and her father initially ignore it in the scene’s

65 See David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985); and Daniel Dayan, “The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema,” *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1974): 22–31.

beginning is an additional reference to the tension they feel. These two people are anything but bored; they stare at the floor apprehensively.

On a semantic level, we should also note the place—or, applying anthropologist Marc Augé’s famous term, we might also speak of the “non-place”—where the ghastly news is delivered.⁶⁶ Melodramatic climaxes are often set at transitional spaces that indicate an intermediate status, where someone has not yet arrived at a final destination and has not truly left either. Similar to classic transitional spaces such as airports, train stations, and streets, the hospital corridor is associated with a change in condition. The hallway is a place where people wait, where time and its passage occupy the foreground, and where the passing of time for Christina will ultimately be connected to the passing away of her daughters.

According to Augé, non-places are characterized by solitude, anonymity, and a lack of history: “What reigns there is actuality, the urgency of the present moment.”⁶⁷ This transitional non-place is where, at least for Christina, the daughters will have left their place on earth for the ultimate non-place: death. In the “realistic” non-place of the hospital hallway, transience is made particularly obvious. From this point of view, the television, with the emphasis it places on the precise time, has significance after all: it shows an objective time scheme in contrast to the characters’ subjective sense of time and the timeless death of the two girls.⁶⁸ For all the characters, the precise timing of the ten-o’clock news has lost all meaning. While time continues to move forward, they have in a sense become disconnected from it. By making us conscious of time’s irreversibility, melodramatic situations can place us in a weeping mood. Taking a lead from Franco Moretti, Williams writes, “We cry when something is lost and it cannot be regained. Time is the ultimate object of loss; we cry at the irreversibility of time. We cry at funerals, for example, because it is then that we know, finally and forever, that it is too late.”⁶⁹

If we follow for the moment Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological film theory, the film itself represents for the viewer a perceptible intentional object: a “film body” that possesses a certain attitude, motor functions, gestures, and emotionality—in other words, a certain filmic style.⁷⁰ What we, as viewers, perceive when we watch a film is the visible expression of the camera’s visual and auditory perception. In other words, the “film’s body” perceives the world in a certain way and makes its own perception available for us on the screen. We therefore do not perceive the “film’s body” from

66 See the chapter “From Places to Non-Places” in Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 75–115.

67 *Ibid.*, 104.

68 Moreover, the ten-o’clock news also underscores the weight of the present-moment characteristic of non-places, where actuality predominates and, as Augé notes, “a few snippets of news are offered to—inflicted on—[those] who are present. *Ibid.*”

69 Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 69.

70 Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: Phenomenology of the Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006). Interestingly, Ed Tan also mentions empathetic processes involving a film as a whole: “There are also empathetic A emotions, which have to do with synthetic proprioceptive activity, such as mirroring a certain type of movement on the screen. One example might be the viewer’s delight at a whirling camera movement in combination with a lyrical soundtrack.” Tan, *Emotion and the Structure*, 82.

the outside but, as it were, from inside its own peculiar way of perceiving the world through the camera. Through its perceptive activity, every “film’s body” expresses a personal style of being in the world: “The film emerges as having an existential presence in its own right. As it comes into being through projection, the film becomes. As it has being on the screen, the film behaves. It *lives* its *own* perceptive and intentional life before us as well as for us,” Sobchack writes.⁷¹ But what is the advantage of introducing Sobchack’s challenging notion in the present context? If we accept the risk of being accused of anthropomorphizing film, we could say, in the sense of Robert Vischer’s, Theodor Lipps’s, or Karl Groos’s aesthetics of *Einfühlung*, that the viewer may empathize with the “film’s body” of *21 Grams*. All of a sudden, the notion of empathy—in the broader sense of *Einfühlung*, which also comprises aesthetic objects—can be brought into play not only with regard to characters in the film but also with regard to the film as an artifact with a certain style as a whole.⁷²

But how can we describe this “film body” that the viewer may empathize with? Precisely because the film clip does not conceal its nature as an artifact, it lacks elegance and calmness. It makes a nervous impression and seems at times almost tremulous. Moreover, warm colors such as yellow, orange, and red are almost wholly and conspicuously absent from the scene. Shades of green, dark blue, and black dominate in the characters’ clothing. Only the antiseptic colors of the doctors’ clothes and the hospital hallway (white, beige, and light blue and green) brighten the scene somewhat. And the characters’ faces seem pale, even ashen. The clip radiates a pale nervousness. It would not be completely misguided to think of a morgue’s chilly atmosphere. At the same time, the film body seems to reflect an effort to capture as much of the action as possible, even though its “attitude” or “moral conduct,” as Sobchack calls it in a different context, does not feel obtrusive or even invasive—rather, it reveals a concerned curiosity.⁷³ This is the impression made, in particular, by the constant reframing and the frequent attempts to approach Christina and her sister as closely as possible, past the obstacles presented by the background figures or by looking past them. All in all, the film seems to resemble a pale and nervous, though still curious and concerned, observer who is affected by the events.

The result produced for the viewer may be a “realistic” effect of a distanced presence. On the one hand, the film places the observer at a distance by demonstrating its artifact nature and employing abrupt transitions to interfere with the flow of perception. The conscious emphasis on the quality of being an artifact prevents the viewer from truly becoming immersed in the scene. On the other hand, this may precisely pull the viewer in by suggesting the “realistic” observer position with respect to

71 Sobchack, *Address of the Eye*, 216 (original emphasis).

72 For various perspectives on this concept, see Robin Curtis and Gertrud Koch, eds., *Einfühlung: Zu Geschichte und Gegenwart eines ästhetischen Konzepts* (Munich: Fink, 2009).

73 Even though Sobchack deals with the ethical stance of documentary films displaying real-life death, it does not seem out of place to reference her in a discussion of a scene that assumes a documentary-like style and deals with emotional responses to death. Vivian Sobchack, “Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary,” in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 226–257. The “attitude” and “moral conduct” quotes can be found on pages 243 and 245.

a documentary film through its repeated attempts to approach the action as closely as possible. What could be conducive to the emotional effect on viewers is their becoming conscious of an aspect of the situation that is one of the basic requirements for the mixed emotion of being moved: the observer position. This scene's powerful effect is not only a product of the intense scenario in which the excruciating news of the two girls' deaths is delivered; it is not only because of its complex suspense structure (nor is the other characters' prosocial participation the sole reason for it)—the scene's powerful effect also derives from the way the viewer, by means of genuine strategies of film aesthetics, is placed in an observer position, one in which he or she can be profoundly moved. *

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