

Characterization as Social Cognition in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*

• Michael Z. Newman

A middle-school girl clutching a tray surveys the cafeteria. Several empty seats are quickly taken. She looks around, dreading her choice. This is the opening of Todd Solondz's 1995 film *Welcome to the Dollhouse* and the beginning of the characterization of its protagonist, Dawn. As we watch we generate inferences about the girl; her thoughts and feelings, her social roles, and her personality traits. We also make some inferences about the setting and the other characters – in particular, they seem to be sources of suffering to Dawn.

One key aspect of characterization is the construction of character psychology, the attribution of mental states to fictional representations, (including intentional states such as beliefs and desires), personality traits that refer to psychological characteristics, and affect states such as moods and emotions. Some films accomplish this kind of characterization through the direct means of subjective narration or by describing mental states explicitly in dialogue. But a quick close-up of a face can be as expressive of a character's inner life as many more elaborate narrative techniques. Indeed, many films avoid subjectivity and verbal description to no aesthetic costs.

When we look at a face we see more than just its features, and it is this 'more', I argue, that is the most crucial facet of characterization in an audiovisual medium. Our instant uptake of information, based not only on the response to an image of a person, but also on prior knowledge, ideas about persons, and context, is a product of evolution. It is natural that we size people up. But it is a cultural process too, insofar as films are cultural artifacts with their own

history and their own film-specific practices.

Characters are products of social cognition, the human propensity for making sense of others.¹ However, they are also products of artists who fashion them to appeal to our nature as social beings. Watching a movie is not the same as experiencing reality. Social cognition shapes the creation and the experience of stories, but stories also shape the experience of social cognition that they offer. Cinema presents a streamlined, amplified version of reality, and understanding how we understand cinema requires that we grapple both with the natural processes subtending our experience and the cultural interventions that harness these processes for aesthetic ends.²

Understanding cinematic storytelling as a product of social cognition demands a rather different conception of character than we often find in film theory. It requires that we think of characters as persons,³ an approach in direct opposition to that of formalists, structuralists, and post-structuralists for whom characters are convention-bound signs. For instance, Kristin Thompson, in terms borrowed from Barthes, asserts that 'characters are not real people, but collections of *semes*, or character traits'.⁴ Characters are not *real* people, granted, but this does not mean that they are not people. Most are fictional people and of course they do have traits, but their traits are not them; they are descriptions of them. Characters are not some different category of being, distinct from persons. It would certainly be strange if we had a mental module for making sense of characters that was different from our means for making sense of other people; after all, narrative is an

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instrument for understanding human experience. To see characters as semioticians might, as a mere collection of traits, is to miss the rich cognitive resources we bring to the experience of narrative. However, to see the experience of character as simply and exclusively natural is also to miss the rich aesthetic resources that storytellers bring to their craft.

In this paper I argue that characterization functions as social cognition, and through an analysis of *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, I describe three processes of social cognition that are crucial for audiovisual characterization.⁵ Folk psychology is a process for making sense of a character's beliefs, desires, and the like. Attribution is a process of inferring a character's personality traits. And emotion expressions invite us to understand a character's feelings. In all three processes, artistic creation and social cognition work together. In some instances art struggles against ordinary psychology, but more often storytellers milk everyday habits of thought to maximize the impact of their art.



- The opening of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995): the camera surveys the cafeteria.



- It finds Dawn looking for a place to sit.

I. Folk Psychology in Characterization

Films solicit inferences about human behavior just as real life does, by presenting us with agents facing situations. Through a cluster of processes, spectators are able to make sense of film characterizations, often more successfully than they make sense of their own realities. Experts call this mental work *folk psychology*, which refers to both the content of such inferential activity and the faculty itself. Folk psychology is our everyday means of predicting and explaining the behavior of others in response to observed behavior, and constitutes a set of belief-desire inferences guided by assumptions and expectations.⁶

The significance of folk psychology to cinematic narration is that it establishes characters' knowledge. This is information that could be conveyed through direct means of characterization such as a voiceover, but it is often more artful to communicate it through indirect means. Seeing that a character sees or hears something makes the process automatic, as does seeing that she does *not* see or hear something. This kind of information is a baseline element of characterization. Inferences about characters' personalities or emotions depend on what spectators know they know or do not know.

In that first scene of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* in the cafeteria, we gather considerable information about Dawn, whom we are meeting for the first time. In any narrative, the cognitive efficiency of this kind of exposition depends on the clarity of the connections the narrative prompts us to draw among the settings and characters. Most crucially, exposition reveals a state of affairs and clarifies our knowledge in relation to characters' knowledge. In an audiovisual medium such as cinema, exposition might restrict itself to the representation of spatial and visual relations among characters as it introduces them and dramatizes their interactions, without offering any explicit description or backstory.

The opening shot of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* scans the space with a slow pan,

surveying the terrain, resting on the image of Dawn duplicating its gaze out into the crowd. In subsequent shots, we see several vacant seats being claimed by other kids. No one notices Dawn or offers her a place. Then she asks to sit at a table at which a sullen girl, Lolita, is eating alone. This brief sequence of shots is a remarkably rich though quite typical piece of expository visual narration. These first moments give us the character and her world. This is accomplished by the casting of Heather Matarazzo, an awkward-looking adolescent, but also via other details of the *mise en scène* such as décor, facial expressions, and costumes. Most crucially it is achieved by folk psychology activated in the presence of a person in a given situation whose beliefs and desires are made relevant to us.

Looking is crucial to how the film solicits our uptake of social information. Characters' eyelines establish not only spatial relations among objects, but more importantly the characters' relationships to their environment. We see that Dawn is looking for a seat; we see that she sees some spaces; we see that she sees the spaces get filled by others. Note the intentional state communicated by her eyes: Dawn desires a seat in the cafeteria, preferably at a table where she won't be alone. She believes that there may be one free, and she has the goal of claiming it. She is disappointed when the vacant seats are taken. There are, moreover, additional layers of this inferential knowledge. In relation to Dawn's psychology we are also able to discern the collective psychology of the crowd facing her, the desires of her classmates to avoid sharing a table with Dawn. And by understanding this much we are easily able to shift up to the level of metacognition – of nesting mental states within mental states – as we recognize that Dawn infers her classmates' beliefs and desires in relation to her, and that they recognize her beliefs and desires in relation to them. The visual narration of this opening has a clear and powerful rhetorical effect. By establishing the salient information about an individual in relation to an environment through inferential means, the film is soliciting our participation in the

characterization of its protagonist. The film asks us to think Dawn's thoughts with her. As Kuleshov demonstrated, matching gaze and object is a rich resource to visual storytellers, making viewers into participants in storytelling.

Knowledge and vision are closely linked in our minds, and folk psychology often demands that we follow other people's eyes, as in the opening scene of this film. Three mechanisms feed into the brain's folk psychology module: an intentionality detector, which attributes intentions (goals) to moving objects; an eye-direction detector, which recognizes eyes and attributes epistemic mental states to the people whose eyes are looking at things; and a shared-attention mechanism, which allows two people to attend to the same object and to infer that their vision is shared.⁷ Clearly, in order for two people to share their attention, they must have detected each other's eye directions, so it follows that the eyes are a crucial component of folk psychology. Intentionality is conveyed in a gaze. In a film, the shared attention occurs between the viewer and the character: we place ourselves in the scene and participate in unraveling its implications.

This characterization of folk psychology might seem like an argument in favor of a wholly naturalistic understanding of film comprehension. But clearly audiovisual representations do not merely reproduce folk psychology; they exploit it. Filmmakers take care to focus and isolate gaze-matching, making an aesthetic virtue of our natural propensity, emphasizing character intentionality to the exclusion of other information. Narratives select and select and select. They direct our attention to and away from details. They amplify aspects of their representation of human experience for maximum impact. So what is significant about the matching of looks and characters and settings is not just that it depends on social cognition, but that it intensifies an ordinary cognitive process to heighten its significance. In ordinary experience we have to seek out the social data that will be useful in making sense of people. We have to determine what is signal and what is noise. In a narrative, the noise is often

filtered out to make the signal more noticeable and powerful. This is what is going on in the opening of *Welcome to the Dollhouse*.⁸

II. Personality and Attribution in Characterization

Consider a pair of scenes at the dinner table of Dawn's suburban family home. In one her mother demands that Dawn tell her little sister, Missy, that she loves her. When Dawn refuses to do so she is punished by having to sit alone at the table all evening. In another her parents demand that Dawn dismantle her backyard clubhouse and when she refuses, they withhold dessert from her and she has to watch as her share of chocolate cake is divided among her eager siblings. In both scenes, Dawn sits stubbornly, defiantly, showing no signs that she considers capitulating to make her life easier.

As we watch, we must ask: what are the causes of Dawn's suffering? Is she merely a victim of circumstance or is she the sort of person who seems particularly liable to having bad things befall her? To answer these questions, we need to think about Dawn as a character with personality traits, and to think about how those traits function as explanations for behavior. Social psychologists call personality traits, such as extraverted or introverted, *dispositions* (which they contrast against *situations*).⁹ Dispositions may be as numerous as the words we use to describe people's personalities: friendly and shy, easy-going and difficult, upbeat and depressive, caring and callous, excitable and laconic, and so on. The significance of dispositions for characterization is that they create expectations about characters, shaping our understanding of them, and ultimately determine (or leave indeterminate) our understanding of narrative events.

The basic assumption of attribution theory is that social perceivers attribute the behavior of social agents either to the social agent's personality (her disposition) or to the environment within which she acts (the situation).¹⁰ According to the pioneer of attribution theory, Fritz Heider, social perceivers

act as 'naïve scientists', treating their worlds as experiments wherein they test their assumptions against the data they collect. Ultimately, their goal is to assess the causes of other people's behavior.¹¹

The standard framework for attribution theory stands on the notion that social perceivers infer causes for behavior by attributing intentions to social agents. These inferences depend on an agent knowing that her actions will yield certain outcomes, and also on her being able to bring them about. Given this knowledge and ability on the agent's part, intentions are inferred by the naïve scientist and become evidence of the agent's disposition. This is called the theory of 'correspondent inferences' because the inference of an intention corresponds to the inference of a disposition.¹² You observe a young man give up his seat on the bus; an elderly woman sits down. You infer that he knows his act will help her – that he is giving her his seat. And you infer that he is a helpful and selfless sort of person on the evidence of this action. In other words, the inference that he is trying to help someone and the inference that he is a helpful person correspond.¹³

Not all inferences are equal, however, in the social perceiver's mind. Social scientists have observed that we tend to emphasize dispositional over situational causes when making inferences about other people's behavior. In the above example, could it be that the young man believes that everyone on the bus expects him to give his seat up? Perhaps he is seated nearest to the old woman, is the youngest and most able-bodied person around, and senses that his fellow passengers are looking at him as if to say, 'Would you please give that woman your seat already!' Could it be, then, that he is just doing what anyone in his situation might do, and that his actions tell us little about how helpful or selfless a person he actually is, especially absent information about how many people in his situation would act the same way? Of course it could, which is why our attributions are mere inferences rather than certain knowledge.

The fact that it seems to make more sense to ascribe the young man's behavior to his

personality traits than to social pressure by other passengers is casual evidence of the *fundamental attribution error*, the tendency of naïve scientists to err on the side of dispositions at the expense of situations when they make their inferences about behavior.¹⁴ To take a simple case, when someone does poorly on a test, social perceivers are more likely to attribute that person's performance to their level of knowledge or intelligence than to the difficulty or fairness of the test or the situation in which it was given. Under conditions in which a situation has clearly been manipulated in favor of a specific outcome, social perceivers still tend to attribute causality to dispositions. For example, even when students debating a pro-Castro position were identified as having been assigned their stance by the experimenters, subjects still believed they were pro-Castro.¹⁵

This tendency is tailor-made for narrative fiction because it predisposes us to see the heroes of stories as causal agents.¹⁶ It works especially well with the protagonists of adventure or quest narratives whose individual exploits are the central feature of their narrative worlds. You would never say of James Bond that 'anyone in his situation would have done the same'. The fundamental attribution error ensures that we seek explanations for a character's behavior *in the character*. Hence the tendency of filmmakers to make protagonists the main causal agents of narrative events, especially in narrative feature films.¹⁷ Attribution theory attests that this convention is cognitively efficient. Filmmakers know intuitively that spectators will seek causal explanations in the character first.

The fundamental attribution error also works in the favor of storytellers working in forms less schematic than adventure stories. Independent films such as *Welcome to the Dollhouse* may avoid the more banal forms of character stereotyping, but they hardly avoid this basic approach to characterization. The fundamental attribution error functions to ensure that spectators will prefer characters' personality traits to other explanations when determining the causality of events. Our propensity to attribute behavior to a person rather than a situation goes a long way in explaining why narratives centre on

individuals even when they are concerned with describing larger social and historical forces. As social psychologists have shown, we have a person-centric means of understanding behavior, a bias in favor of individualistic explanations and against broadly social ones. Storytellers exploit this aspect of our psychology by crafting stories tailor-made to our tacit expectations about persons.

Welcome to the Dollhouse is a good example of a film in which a character is clearly constrained by her situation at the same time that she is shown to be the author of her own fate. As one watches it, the relevant question for this discussion of personality traits as causal explanations is to what extent the main character, Dawn, is a victim of her unfortunate circumstances, and to what extent the cause of her suffering is her disposition. There are powerful suggestions that lead in both directions.

The film makes clear that in some ways, Dawn is no different from the rest of the kids at her school, suggesting situational causes for Dawn's suffering. As a running motif, she is often shown treating others in ways she personally finds hurtful. The cheerleaders in the cafeteria call her 'lesbo', and at dinner that night she calls her younger sister Missy 'lesbo'. Brandon, the bully who later becomes her friend, mouths 'fuck you' at her during detention, and at dinner that night she mouths 'fuck you' at Missy. Late in the film she also insults her only friend, Ralphie, repeating the other kids' taunts of 'faggot'. Dawn's brother, Mark, treats her brusquely, ordering her out of his room. In turn, Dawn tries to treat Missy the same way. Watching the film, every time you start to sympathize with Dawn's suffering, she turns and tries to inflict the same treatment on Missy or Ralphie, the only two characters who are smaller and weaker than she is, neither of whom seems to suffer as Dawn suffers. By showing that everyone is doing it, it makes it seem that the social situation is a better explanation for the characters' behavior than their individual dispositions. Name-calling, taunting, insulting, and teasing are normal behaviors among middle-school students.

However, the film constantly isolates Dawn and solicits the reading of her disposition as the cause of her suffering. The situations in which Dawn teases and bullies others are different from those in which she is teased and bullied. She never does any of these things in school. Furthermore, despite this behavior, Dawn is still more of a victim than any other character. Only Dawn has her locker vandalized and only she is given an insulting nickname, 'Weiner dog', that even the other social outcasts use against her (Weiner is her surname). This suggests that on the school's social ladder she is at the very bottom. She is the only one without a seat in the cafeteria, the only one taunted by the cheerleaders, and the only one victimized by spitballs during the class assembly.

She is also portrayed as uniquely hapless. She is given a detention when Brandon tries to cheat by looking at her test, and then gets a D-minus because, she says, of being upset by the incident. She asks the teacher if she can re-take the test, and for that is assigned as punishment a one hundred-word essay on the subject of dignity, which in a scene of painful indignity she is forced to recite before the class. She is showered with spitballs during the assembly, but the one spitball she fires back is the only errant one, finding its way into a teacher's eye. When the family watches the video of the parents' anniversary party, everyone is impressed by Mark's amateurish musical performance and at Missy's cloying cuteness, but they all laugh at the one image of Dawn: a bit of cruel physical comedy in which she is shoved into a wading pool and splashes in on her backside. Everyone worries when Missy is kidnapped, but when Dawn disappears for a night to search for her sister no one seems to miss her.

In unraveling what we perceive to be the causes of Dawn's behavior, we must weigh several factors. Does she behave as she does because she is a social outcast, or does the causation work the other way around? Is her social status the cause or effect of her behavior? Can her actions be explained with reference to a disposition or personality – or at least to a number of traits that partially comprise a

personality – that the spectator infers on the basis of the narrative events? I think that the answer is clearly yes. The narrative events function partly to establish, via inference, aspects of the character's personality that are relevant to the scenario. Since this is a real-life process of social perception, I would argue as well that this personality effect is a universal feature of narrative comprehension. Consumers of narrative are always seeking to infer personality information on the basis of narrative events.

Dawn has a strong desire to be popular, to fit in, to be liked, to have friends, and to have a romantic relationship with a boy. But she lacks self-knowledge in certain important respects. She fails to see that her backyard 'special people's club' is pathetic and that she would not make a suitable romantic partner for the much more mature Steve. When she tries to look sexy for him by wearing tight pants and a skimpy top she seems to have debased herself in a way that she does not recognize. She also cannot see that her dinner-table battles against her parents are doomed to fail. When punished, it seems to strengthen her defiance, while as spectators we wish for her sake that she would just capitulate. As one who suffers constantly, she often fails to take opportunities to ease her own suffering. To sum up her dispositional traits, Dawn is friendly and outgoing while socially awkward, un-self-aware, and stubborn. Add to this her situational traits, the exterior factors that define her character: she is an outcast, picked-on and bullied and almost without friends, and her parents prefer her siblings to her.

Clearly, these dispositional and situational traits are mutually reinforcing. Being socially awkward and being a social outcast obviously feed into each other. Dawn's lack of self-awareness also feeds into her social status and vice versa. At the same time, however, some of her personality traits seem to defy her situation. Why is she hopeful of having a romance with the older and more mature Steve when she has never had a romantic relationship with any boy, when the boys in her school either ignore or taunt and tease her? In the film's final scene, why isn't she happy to be part of a class trip to

Disney World that gets her away from her family and her school environment? On one level, Dawn's lack of self-awareness, which we attribute to her on the basis of the narrative context, is a facet of her social outsider identity. If she were more aware, she would be able to fit in better. On another level, though, this trait is a hindrance to her ever escaping herself, which would be her only possibility for change. It cannot be explained only by her situation, but functions to maintain her personal hell of adolescence. The machinery of narrative guarantees that person-explanations such as this one will always have a primary function in our comprehension of character, because narratives are made to exploit a social cognition based in an individualistic conception of social experience. Storytellers maximize the appeal of their characters by rigorously individualizing them. It follows that one central appeal of narrative is that it caters to our ordinary ways of understanding people by heightening the extent to which people (characters) can be seen to be authors of their own fates.

III. Emotion Expressions in Characterization

The human face has always been a key feature of cinema's appeal to filmmakers and spectators alike, one source of its special powers. This is hardly surprising, given the face's significance as an emblem of identity and interiority.¹⁸ The representation of the human voice is another cinematic narrative technique with functions and possibilities similar to those of the face, though historically the voice has been given less attention by critics, theorists, and casual observers.

In *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, many of the most emotionally moving scenes feature either strong facial or vocal expressions. Dawn's voice is particularly expressive, rising and creaking when she begs her teacher for a re-test and barking angrily when she says to her sister, 'Drop dead, lesbo!' Dawn's parents often gaze at her sternly with looks of anger and contempt, as does the bully, Brandon, and also the school principal. Clearly a considerable degree of the effectiveness

of a film's characterization derives from the automaticity with which spectators read these emotion cues, instantly recognizing character affect as they would that of real people in their everyday environment.

There is considerable evidence that the recognition of facial and vocal expressions of emotion is a universal, cross-cultural capacity.¹⁹ Although there is disagreement among experts about how many emotions are recognized cross-culturally and about how this process works, there is widespread agreement that many facial and vocal expressions of basic emotions, such as anger and fear, are products of evolution that serve a communicative and self-sustaining function. Paul Ekman and his colleagues have coded the muscles in the face to arrive at a fine-tuned sense of what expressions of basic emotions, such as happiness, anger, fear, shame, disgust, and surprise, look like.²⁰ Other researchers led by Klaus R. Scherer have demonstrated some comparable findings in relation to vocal expressions.²¹ Based on Ekman's research program, several cognitive film theorists have asserted that the recognition of character emotions in cinema and their effect in terms of spectator emotions are a product of these universals of facial expression, which as Ed S. Tan argues, are often exaggerated in movies.²²

But we should not conclude hastily from this impressive research that the representation of characters' emotions is a simple matter of recognizing facial and vocal expressions. For one thing, this research is not without its critics within the field of psychology. Alan Fridlund, for one, proposes as an alternative to Ekman's theory a 'behavioral ecology' of facial expressions, according to which facial displays are not the physical manifestation of innate instincts but are communicative instances always 'specific to intent and context'.²³ According to this view, there are no six or seven 'basic emotions' but rather dozens or hundreds of expressions which arise in various instances, 'appropriate to the identities and relationship of the interactants, and the context in which the interaction occurs'.²⁴ Moreover, as many other researchers have argued, emotions are expressed

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- In *Bad Boys II* (2003), Will Smith displays a prototypical facial expression of anger.



- In *the Ring* (2002), Naomi Watts displays a prototypical facial expression of surprise.



- Teresa Wright displays a sorrowful face in the deathbed scene of *The Little Foxes* (1941).

and recognized along a multitude of channels, not merely by reading the face and voice. To account for our construction of character psychology, we must attend to all of these. This multidimensional approach has not, to my knowledge, been attempted by any film theorists.

Film spectators attribute emotions to characters in various ways. Characterization creates an emotion profile on the basis of multi-channel cues that are often redundant with one another. Each character is the product of this ongoing process combining information about narrative situations with visual and auditory input. One does not ordinarily use an angry voice absent an angry face, angry body language, angry words, and a context producing anger. While facial expressions are often seen to offer the best evidence of emotional experience, in practice people are receptive to all of the modes of interpersonal communication. Thus while I agree with previous theorists on the universality of some emotion expressions to some extent, I also want to assert the often greater significance of other factors in the construction of character emotions.

As in the other domains of characterization, and as emotions function in ecological (real-world) settings, context is all important. When asked to describe another person's emotional experience, subjects typically discuss context in narrative terms (they tell a story about the person's situation), as well as refer to various vocal and bodily expressions.²⁵ Context sets the spectator's expectations, and expectations guide attention and inference.

In experiments in which faces displaying clear expressions are shown to subjects, they have an easy time recognizing the corresponding emotions. Ecologically, however, people sometimes experience more than one emotion at a time and display blended expressions that correspond to blended emotions. Often people will display an emotion that they are not experiencing or experience an emotion that they are not displaying; this is a function of cultural 'display rules', which explain some of the variation in the expression of emotions among

different groups.²⁶ Moreover, emotions are often expressed only slightly or not at all when people are using their faces and voices for other purposes, such as talking, or because they are using them to indicate things that are not emotions, such as degrees of alertness, fatigue, boredom, hunger, or curiosity.²⁷ In one telling study combining psychological research with film analysis, a pair of researchers analyzed facial expressions of emotion in *Dead Poets Society* (1989), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), and *Ordinary People* (1980). (All had been praised for their realism by a well-known reviewer.) They identified more than one hundred episodes in which viewers agreed that a character was experiencing a basic emotion, and agreed on which emotion. They found that, with the exception of happiness, the basic emotions were rarely coupled with the facial expressions Ekman's model would predict. Most of the time no prototype emotion was displayed, yet some partial ones, such as a brow raise, were consistently seen for some emotions (surprise, in this case).²⁸ This experiment supports the position that in cinema as well as in real life, emotions may be expressed in subtle or partial ways that do not involve the classic facial patterns we think of as an 'angry face' or a 'surprised face'.

Dawn in *Welcome to the Dollhouse* is a good example of a character whose emotional experience is made very clear at the same time that it is not elaborated explicitly in classic, prototypical basic emotion expressions. Her affective experience is defined by simple situations and clear, basic emotions, and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* is a film in which understanding the character's emotions is of central concern to the spectator, as we are invited to empathize with her plight as an awkward misfit. Dawn's mental states are generally unambiguous and usually sympathetic. At various points in the narrative, she experiences humiliation (shame), anger, fear, and even happiness. Emotions are generally brief, and each one Dawn experiences is a response to a well-defined situation:

In the first scene, Dawn is humiliated by being

unable to find a place to sit in the cafeteria. She is humiliated quite frequently in subsequent scenes, as when she is forced to watch her siblings eat her cake, when Steve implies that she is mentally retarded, and when her family laughs at the video of her being pushed into the pool.

At the assembly, Dawn is angered when she is showered with spitballs by the bullies. She is also angered quite frequently, as when she calls her friend Ralphie a 'faggot', when she calls her sister 'lesbo', and when her brother, Mark, orders her out of his room. Her anger also arises whenever she feels she has been treated unfairly, for example, when she is given a detention and when she is forced to dismantle her clubhouse.

The best example of Dawn's fear comes when Brandon threatens to rape her. She is also made to fear Lolita, Brandon's friend, who forces Dawn to go to the bathroom with the stall door open and speaks to her in menacing tones.

Dawn's happiness is generally connected to Steve, her brother's band-mate whom she has a crush on. She is happy when she watches him sing, when she dreams about him, and when she entertains him with Hawaiian Punch and left-over fishsticks and plays piano (badly) for him.

We can also identify blends of emotion. When she is brought before the principal for returning spitball fire and injuring a teacher, Dawn sits next to her parents and is questioned about her social life. Over the principal's shoulder, we see the bullies through the window mocking and taunting her. She can see them but the others cannot. Like so many other scenes in the film, the overriding appraisal that the spectator makes is that Dawn is a victim of unfairness. But her emotions are harder to pin down: we might believe that she is shamed by being told she has no friends, angered by being the one who got in trouble when the instigators got off, afraid of being punished, and remorseful about having caused her teacher harm.

Note first that all of these episodes are context-dependent. Dawn's emotions are clear from my *descriptions* of them. Furthermore, they

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are represented in a multi-channel fashion. Dawn's voice rises and quickens when she pleads her case to her teacher and her parents. Her facial expressions soften with smiles and wide-opened eyes when she is around Steve.

In general, though, Dawn's emotions are hardly evident when considering facial expressions alone; that is, absent their context in the film.²⁹ Heather Matarazzo rarely uses any classic basic emotion faces described by psychologists and codified by acting manuals. Her expressions are much more often blank. This is not Solondz's general style; indeed most of the other characters are facially very expressive. Dawn's mother displays many clear, even exaggerated expressions of happiness, disappointment, anger, and fear. Brandon displays menacing, aggressive expressions to Dawn and plaintive, supplicating ones to Cookie, the popular girl who snubs him. Missy is frequently seen with smiles of happiness and Dawn's teacher displays brusque contempt. Yet Dawn's face is typically inexpressive. By de-emphasizing Dawn's face as an expressive technique, Solondz underscores Dawn's difference from the other characters and her alienation from her family and schoolmates.



- Dawn playing the piano for Steve. She displays no prototypical emotion expression.

This technique calls on us to activate assumptions about display rules: her stoicism in the opening scenes as well as later ones is likely a product of the suppression of affect states such as sadness, anger, fear, and frustration. These assumptions lead back into other assumptions and inferences about beliefs, desires, and dispositions. We might figure that an awkward misfit would suppress the display of negative emotions as a means of easing her social experiences, or as an attempt to overcome the negative emotions. Our inference suggests a resilient or defiant personality, which squares with Dawn's stubborn actions, or a denial of serious problems, which squares with her lack of self-awareness. The facial display is itself a



- At the dinner table, Dawn is told she must tell her sister she loves her. Her lips are slightly pursed and her gaze is strong, but this is hardly a prototypical display of anger.



- Brandon sneers in contempt at Dawn when threatening to rape her.

multidimensional cue, and by virtue of its inexpressiveness Dawn's face becomes a site of ambiguity, upping the interest in Dawn's character and, by contrast, making the others seem flatter.

The film's style underemphasizes her facial expressions but it underlines Dawn's emotional experience using other means. Matarazzo's voice modulates frequently, from quiet and endearing to loud and whiny. She mimics the bullies' firm tones of voice when speaking to Missy, but she speaks in a hush when threatened by Lolita and Brandon. Her humiliation when reciting her essay on 'dignity' is conveyed by her unsure posture and her weak, hesitant voice, which is seen again in another assembly scene when she addresses

the school and is humiliated by her classmates who catcall at her.

Other stylistic means de-emphasize Dawn's face. Solondz cuts to long or extreme long shots at moments of heightened feeling to detract from Dawn's face as an expressive device. For example, when Dawn runs away from Brandon, in the scene in which he has said he is going to rape her, she races to a chain link fence, where she is framed in an extreme long shot. Similarly, her humiliation at being pushed into the pool is a long shot seen only on a screen within the screen. In many instances, Dawn's face is simply kept out of our view, as when Lolita forces her to go to the bathroom with the stall door open and when Brandon bullies her and Ralphie at a convenience store. In these and many other instances, our understanding of emotions is constructed inferentially. Solondz also uses a musical cue during scene transitions, with distorted, rhythmic electric guitar and fast-tempo bass and tom drums. This cue becomes a shorthand for Dawn's frustration, anger and humiliation, a refrain to sum up each episode of her troubled adolescence.

Murray Smith has discussed how some art cinema directors encourage a style of acting that



- Mrs. Wiener's eyes open wide and lips purse tightly as she insists that Dawn tell her sister Missy, left, that she loves her.

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- Dawn's teacher reproaches her for 'grade-grubbing', displaying the bared teeth and furrowed brow of anger.

is intentionally facially inexpressive or enigmatic, each fitting this approach to the face into a larger aesthetic system for achieving specific effects.³⁰ Smith contrasts this approach with the clear basic expressions in films by Hitchcock. I suggest that facially inexpressive acting is one baseline technique of modern independent and art cinema which may function to involve the spectator in constructing the character's interiority, to increase narrative ambiguity, and to make the characters seem complicated and interesting. It is also not at all unusual in more mainstream films. Dawn's emotions are clear from her situation; but there is something intriguing about the stoicism with which she faces her circumstances. It sets her apart from characters in more conventional dramas about adolescence. What makes *Welcome to the Dollhouse* distinct as an indie film about adolescence is its unflinching portrayal of unfairness as a basic condition. By restraining her facial expressions, Solondz suggests an acceptance of this unfairness, of her routine humiliation, and an almost nihilistic expectation that it will continue unchecked for as long as Dawn is a child. In this way, he suggests that this is a natural state for adolescents. During the film's final scene, Dawn sings along with her classmates on a school trip with the saddest happy face one can imagine, which underscores both the pathos of her character and the extent to which situations determine emotions. Extracted from the film, this scene would have little of its emotional impact.

Films represent characters' emotions using a variety of redundant devices: facial and vocal

expressions of emotion, aspects of style such as *mise en scène* and music, and narrative context. As with folk psychology and causal attribution, the strongest factor is context, which constrains meaning and guides expectations.

Characterization prefers clear, vivid scenarios, filled with redundant, multi-channel narrative information, within which real-world processes of social cognition may function efficiently. By emphasizing and manipulating all of the factors that lead to emotion recognition, not just facial expressions, films focus and heighten the experience of character psychology just as they do with belief-desire inferences and personality trait attributions. They streamline ordinary social cognition processes for aesthetic ends.

IV. Conclusion

This discussion offers several suggestions for cognitive film theory. One is that research in the field of social cognition promises to illuminate many aspects of the spectator's experience. My discussion of character psychology only scratches



- When Lolita forces Dawn to 'take a shit' with the stall door open, Solondz never shows us Dawn inside the stall.



- After Brandon knocks Dawn's soda out of her hands, Solondz cuts to a shot of the soda instead of a reaction from Dawn.



- Art cinema directors often use inexpressive faces as in this scene of Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951).



- Bergman uses this same device in *Persona* (1966).

the surface of this robust field. Cognitive theory should consider the film viewing experience to be an instance of social cognition and should not ignore this research, rich as it is with insights into the ordinary functioning of mindreading. Films can systematically heighten, focus, or frustrate this process.

A second suggestion is more implicit but no less significant: thinking about spectatorship as social cognition assumes that a central concern of film viewing is the construction of selves as individuals with discreet identities. The construction of Dawn in the spectator's mind is a central activity of watching *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, and it should be clear that constructing a mental model of a fictional self is dependent on the same processes as doing so for a real person. Storytelling and self are inextricably linked, and social cognition is a way of understanding this nexus.³¹

Finally, this analysis should suggest how the use of social cognition theory can illuminate film criticism, since the discussion of character is a central concern of this endeavor. Indeed, social cognition can show narrative theory how character functions as a central appeal of storytelling. Film criticism informed by cognitive theory can be both descriptive and interpretive, as I hope I have illustrated in my reading of Dawn and *Welcome to the Dollhouse*. Ultimately, the effect of the characterization of Dawn is one of futility, of condemnation to suffering which bespeaks the incompatibility of adolescence and personal autonomy. It is typical of both the film's director and of independent cinema more generally to characterize adolescence differently from the Hollywood mainstream, and cognitive theorizing can help explain how this and a myriad of other cinematic achievements are accomplished.



- The other kids on the bus are animated as they sing on their trip to Florida.



- But Dawn sings along only half-heartedly, with her typically blank face.

- Characterization as Social Cognition in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*

Notes

- 1 Ziva Kunda, *Social Cognition: Making Sense of People* (Cambridge, MA, MIT University Press, 2002); Martha Augustinos and Iain Walker, *Social Cognition: An Integrated Introduction* (London, Sage, 1995); Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (New York, Random House, 1984); Leslie A. Zebrowitz, *Social Perception* (Pacifica Grove, CA, Brooks/Cole, 1990).
- 2 David Bordwell, 'Who Blinkered First? How Film Style Streamlines Nonverbal Interaction' in Lennard Hojbjerg and Peter Schepelern (eds), *Film Style and Story: A Tribute to Torben Grodal* (Copenhagen, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003), pp. 45–57.
- 3 Of course, some characters are not persons, e.g., Buzz Lightyear or Yoda. But we make sense of them in the same way as we make sense of persons.
- 4 Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 40.
- 5 I am not arguing that these are the only three relevant processes. Another important one is categorizing persons by type. See Michael Newman, *Characterization in American Independent Cinema* (PhD diss, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2005).
- 6 Nicholas Humphries, *The Inner Eye: Social Intelligence in Evolution* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986); Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, MIT University Press, 1995); Stephen Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York, W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), p. 330.
- 7 Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness* pp. 31–58.
- 8 Of course, in some films – especially modernist or avant-garde ones – this tacit inferential process is carefully stymied by the withholding or obscuring of important narrative data. But *Welcome to the Dollhouse* is not this kind of film and so I will leave this topic aside for future research.
- 9 Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1991).
- 10 *Ibid.*, 2–20. For an application of attribution theory to literary criticism, see Jonathan Culpepper, 'Inferring character from texts: Attribution theory and foregrounding theory', *Poetics*, 23 (1996), 335–61.
- 11 Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (New York, John Wiley, 1958). For overviews of attribution theory, see Fiske and Taylor, pp. 20–45; Perry R. Hinton, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Perception* (London, Routledge, 1993), pp. 138–55; Michael Roth and Garth J. O. Fletcher, 'Attribution and Social Perception' in Gardner Lindzey and Elliot Aronson (eds), *Handbook of Social Psychology*, vol. 2, 3rd edn (New York, Random House, 1985), pp. 73–122.
- 12 Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis, 'From Acts to Dispositions: The Attribution Process in Person Perception' in Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* vol. 2 (New York, Academic Press, 1965), pp. 220–66.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- 14 Ross and Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation*, pp. 125–39.
- 15 Kunda, *Social Cognition*, pp. 428–32.
- 16 Richard J. Gerrig and David W. Allbritton, 'The Construction of Literary Character: A View from Cognitive Psychology' *Style*, 24:3 (1990), 380–391.
- 17 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1985); David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1988).
- 18 Daniel McNeill, *The Face* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1998).
- 19 Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998). On facial expressions in particular, see Paul Ekman, *Emotion in the Human Face* vol. 2 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982). On vocal expressions in particular, see Klaus R. Scherer, 'Vocal Affect Expression: A Review and a Model for Future Research', *Psychological Bulletin*, 99 (1986), pp. 143–65; Tom Johnstone and Klaus R. Scherer, 'Vocal Communication of Emotion' in Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, *Handbook of Emotions* 2nd edn (New York, Guilford Press, 2000), pp. 220–35.
- 20 Paul Ekman and Erika Rosenberg (eds), *What the Face Reveals: Basic and Applied Studies of Spontaneous Expression Using the Facial Action Coding System (FACS)* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997).
- 21 Jeffery Pittam and Klaus R. Scherer. 'Vocal Expression and Communication of Emotion'. In Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones (eds), *Handbook of Emotions* (New York, Guilford Press, 1993), 185–97; Scherer, 'Vocal Affect Expression: A Review and a Model for Future Research' *Psychological Bulletin* 99 (1986), pp. 143–65
- 22 Carl Plantinga, 'The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face', in Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (eds), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 239–55; Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995); Ed S. Tan, 'Three Views of Facial Expression and Its Understanding in the Cinema', in Joseph D. Anderson and Barbara Fisher Anderson (eds), *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), pp. 107–27.
- 23 Alan J. Fridlund, *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View* (San Diego, Academic Press, 1994), p. 128.

- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Sally Planalp, 'Communicating Emotion in Everyday Life: Cues, Channels, and Processes' in Peter A. Andersen and Laura K. Guerrero (eds), *Handbook of Communication and Emotion: Research, Theory, Applications, and Contexts* (San Diego, Academic Press, 1998) pp. 29–48; Ursula Hess, Arvid Kappas, and Klaus R. Scherer, 'Multichannel Communication of Emotion: Synthetic Signal Production' in Klaus R. Scherer (ed.), *Facets of Emotion: Recent Research* (Hillsdale, NJ, Erlbaum, 1988), pp. 161–82.
- 26 Paul Ekman, 'Expression and the Nature of Emotion' in Klaus R. Scherer and Paul Ekman (eds), *Approaches to Emotion* (Hillsdale, NJ, Erlbaum, 1984), 319–343. See also Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage* (New York, Norton, 2001).
- 27 Planalp 'Communicating Emotion'; James A. Russell and José Miguel Fernández-Dols, 'What Does a Facial Expression Mean?' in James A. Russell and José Miguel Fernández-Dols (eds), *The Psychology of Facial Expression* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 3–30; James A. Russell, Jo-Anne Bachorowski, and José Miguel Fernández-Dols, 'Facial and Vocal Expressions of Emotion' *Annual Review of Psychology* 54 (February 2003), pp. 329–49.
- 28 James A. Carroll and James A. Russell, 'Facial Expressions in Hollywood's Portrayal of Emotion', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72:1 (1997), 164–76.
- 29 Plantinga 'The Scene of Empathy', pp. 251–3, also asserts the central importance of narrative context.
- 30 Murray Smith, 'Darwin and the Directors', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 February 2003, pp. 13–15.
- 31 Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002); Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1990).