**Murray Smith** **(2017) *Film,* *Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 314 pp.**

Murray Smith’s *Film, Art, and the Third Culture: A Naturalized Aesthetics of Film* reopens the methodological debate between the natural and human sciences, and explores the boundaries between the two fields in reference to our understanding of art in general. Smith begins by situating his argument in reference to C.P. Snow’s call for a “third culture” – a domain of academic methods, theories and practices for the analysis of cultural products situated between the nominally distinct domains of the humanities and the natural sciences (p. 1). The exact problems and opportunities created by any attempt to foster a beneficial and reciprocal relationship between these two domains are explored by the author through a systemic series of enquiries into topics associated with the study of film aesthetics.

The need for a consideration of scientific methods in the field of film studies is immediately intuitable when we consider the centrality of technological and neurological matters to the very apparatus of cinema itself. Smith’s argument takes up the challenge of organising a more serious theoretical engagement with the interdisciplinary imperative of cinema as a multi-sensory and multi-layered domain of cognitive engagement. His four-part distinction between what he calls *replacement naturalism* (which treats the humanities as a sub-division of the natural sciences more generally), *cooperative naturalism* (which treats both domains as being mutually-compatible and capable of profitable association and influence), *autonomism* (which treats both domains as separate and incompatible fields of practice) and *cherry-picking* (an augmented automatism which tolerates a superficial and pragmatic appropriation of certain theories, ideas and models between domains) presents a useful means of differentiating the methodological values of “third culture” approaches (pp. 2-3). Smith’s call is for a renewed investigation of the second approach – cooperative naturalism. The ground is then set for a discussion of how aesthetic theory can benefit most profitably from the natural sciences by developing a two-way interaction without strict disciplinary boundaries.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is concerned with developing a ‘triangulated’ methodological approach towards aesthetic products – one that treats them as experiences that need explaining in terms of a cooperative and naturalised approach, resulting in what Smith calls “thick explanation” (p. 51). Thick explanation (a concept appropriated from Gilbert Ryle and Clifford Geertz) describes the result of a supposedly beneficial triangulated approach to the study of artistic products; it is the result of a non-hierarchical triangulated interaction between methodologies adopted from the study of neuroscientific data, psychological theory and phenomenal experience (pp. 60-69). Each set of data may be used as a starting point, yet none has a privileged explanatory role. In individual cases, when two sets of data appear to suggest incompatible explanations, the third may act as a tiebreaker. Thick explanation is the desired goal of a naturalised aesthetic methodology. Since there will perhaps never be a perfect correlation between experienced phenomena and the data provided by scientific analysis – Smith’s illustrative example is the cognitive incongruity between knowing the Earth is round and yet perceptually experiencing it as, more or less, flat – the concept of thick explanation provides a means to set ourselves a goal that will direct us towards a search for always-better explanations.

Methods from the natural sciences are by no means intended to replace more traditional approaches in the humanities, but, rather, “the ambition of naturalized aesthetics is [merely] to provide a theory of aesthetic and artistic phenomena in the light of our more general, scientifically informed understanding of the world” (p. 220). A naturalised aesthetics of film “sees film art as a manifestation of a cluster of deeply entrenched, basic human capacities, and thus treats it as a phenomenon which is likely to be illuminated by various types of scientific as well as traditional humanistic research” (p. 3). In Smith’s own terms, naturalism requires robust engagement with scientific knowledge in order to produce thick explanations of observable phenomena. As these ideas should make clear, the results of Smith’s investigations apply not just to film, but to the study of artistic products in general.

Part two of the book then returns to territory that will be more familiar to readers of Smith’s previous work (see Smith 1995), as the naturalised aesthetics of film are expanded on to a series of filmic case studies regarding the topic of emotion. Facial and gestural cognitive inputs, the interaction between biological and cultural influences, and environmental factors associated with the theory of the ‘extended mind’ demonstrate the continuity of the third cultural debate across a variety of aesthetic concerns in the study of film experience. Among the many topics selected for discussion is the need to develop a more complex understanding of the relationship between generic types and our traditionally limited conception of emotional categories, attempting to account for the particularity of individual works by considering the unique effect of individual films. Once again, the benefits of a triangulated approach to film aesthetics are demonstrated in reference to a host of topics, some old, some new (including empathy, gesture, montage, consciousness and ‘mirror neurons’ [p. 99]), but with all being relevant to the formation of a third cultural methodological toolbox.

Smith’s understanding of the human mind and its relation to the world appears to be indebted to the Kantian foundations of cognitive psychology. He subscribes to that hypothetical model, the “representational theory of mind”, which treats knowledge as the product of the interpretation of sense data that has been mediated by an *a priori* schematic framework (pp. 222-223). In terms of their twentieth century roots, Smith’s ideas are also indebted to the analytic philosophical school, rather than the critical or hermeneutic traditions. Despite the complex and more general dimensions of Smith’s approach, the task of integrating ideas from the natural sciences into film studies must attempt to account for the aesthetic appreciation and interpretation of individual films themselves. Therefore, *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* explores its neurological subjects through the analysis of a range of case studies from a variety of audiovisual media. A range of filmic case studies, from the Hollywood mainstream blockbuster to the experimental art film, frame his discussion of subjects including perception, empathy, ‘seeing-in’ (the cognitive ability to extrapolate a fictive three-dimensional space from the perception of two-dimensional images [p. 42]), facial emotion and various other multi-dimensional sensory experiences. The distinctness of individual aesthetic experiences can be analysed through taking a naturalised and triangulated approach to the analysis of their individual qualia. Films such as *La passion de Jeanne d’Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, France, 1928), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 1975), *Sonatine* (Takeshi Kitano, Japan, 1993) and *20,000 Days on Earth* (Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, UK, 2014) are enlisted to illustrate Smith’s triangulated analysis of filmic representations, demonstrating the applicability of naturalised thick explanation across various categoric, temporal and aesthetic boundaries.

Overall, Smith’s project appears to represent a return to David Bordwell and Noël Carroll’s call for piecemeal theorising, only one insisting upon a more rigorous theoretical engagement between the methodological paradigms presented by each tradition of academic activity. Murray Smith’s *Film, Art, and the Third Culture* will no doubt become a standard text for film theory, bearing as it does upon various methodological factors regarding interpretation, analysis, psychological approaches, aesthetics and affect, and developing a range of interdisciplinary insights which add much methodological weight to the ever expanding interest in the prospect of a rigorous and adaptive approach towards the third culture.

Will Kitchen

University of Southampton

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Smith, M. (1995) *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.