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Theory of Mind and Fictions of Embodied Transparency

1. UPPING THE AGONY

It's another day at *The Office*—a British mock documentary about the "boss from hell," David Brent, regional manager of a fictitious paper company. David (played by Ricky Gervais) is about to interview two candidates for the position of secretary, and he has just put his receptionist, Dawn Tinsley (Lucy Davis), in an embarrassing situation, flaunting his own lack of professionalism and making Dawn seem somewhat complicit in his offensive behavior. Used to her boss's ways yet painfully ashamed of his antics in front of the two strangers and the camera, Dawn stands next to him silently, now smoothing her hair nervously, now checking her nails, and trying to avoid any eye contact (Figure 1).

The Office cultivates such scenes of recorded unease. The documentary format allows the film crew to focus pitilessly on people's faces just when they would rather not be seen, encouraging the kind of staring that would be considered rude in real life. As Gervais, who co-directed the mini-series with Stephen Merchant, puts it, one "advantage" of having the ever-watchful camera in *The Office* is "that it would up the agony" (Commentary). And although we may share some of that agony as we watch Dawn cringe and squirm, we remain glued to our screens.

Such moments of embodied transparency—we can see what Dawn feels even if she doesn't want us to see it—appear to arise naturally out of the unique makeup of this particular show: its genre (documentaries have a complex relationship with

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Fig. 1. The Office

voyeurism), its setting (offices build strange interfaces between intimacy and bureaucracy), and the peculiar sensibilities of the directors and actors. However, I want to consider yet another factor behind *The Office's* obvious fascination with putting people into such trying emotional situations that they can't control their behavior and so their feelings are written all over their bodies: a factor grounded in our cognitive evolutionary heritage and, specifically, our Theory of Mind.

Why turn to evolutionary history? We know so much about the immediate cultural history of *The Office* that it is not at all clear why we must also put Dawn's squirming into a hundred-thousand-year perspective. As this essay will argue, however, by cultivating moments of transparency, *The Office* participates in a particular representational tradition that extends well beyond its immediate genre, but to uncover this fascinating pedigree we need that hundred-thousand-year-old evolutionary perspective.

I begin with a brief overview of Theory of Mind,[1] drawing on the work of cognitive evolutionary psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists. I then spell out the key assumptions underlying my argument, first, that Theory of Mind is a "hungry" adaptation that constantly needs to process thoughts, feelings, and intentions, and, second, that the body occupies a double position in relation to this cognitive hunger, figuring as both the best and the worst source of information about the mind. I show further how this double perspective informs our cultural representations—novels, paintings, and moving images—in which bodies are temporarily forced into functioning as direct conduits to mental states. I conclude by speculating about further applications of this cognitive-evolutionary view of the body to analyses of cultural media, including the Internet. Prompted by *The Office*'s commitment to "agony," my essay thus seeks to explain why our cultural representations repeatedly invent

new contexts for making characters reveal their true feelings, often against their will, and why these moments of embodied transparency must be brief to be convincing.

2. THEORY OF MIND

Theory of Mind, also known as *mind-reading*, is the term used by psychologists and philosophers to describe our ability to explain behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions. We attribute states of mind to ourselves and others all the time[2] (e.g., we see somebody reaching for a cup of coffee and assume that he is thirsty). Our attributions are frequently incorrect (the person who we thought was thirsty might have actually wanted to read the name of the manufacturer on the bottom of the cup[3]). Still, making them is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment. When Theory of Mind is impaired, as it is in varying degrees in the case of autism and schizophrenia, communication breaks down.

Cognitive evolutionary psychologists believe that mind-reading adaptations must have developed during the "massive neurocognitive evolution" that took place during the Pleistocene (1.8 million to 10,000 years ago). The emergence of these adaptations was evolution's answer to the "staggeringly complex" challenge faced by our ancestors, who needed to make sense of the behavior of other people in their group, which could include up to two hundred individuals. As Simon Baron-Cohen points out, "attributing mental states to a complex system (such as a human being) is by far the easiest way of understanding it," that is, of "coming up with an explanation of the complex system's behavior and predicting what it will do next" (21). In other words, mind-reading is both predicated on the intensely social nature of our species *and* makes this intense social nature possible. (Lest this argument appear circular, think of our legs: their shape is both predicated upon the evolution of our species' locomotion *and* makes locomotion possible.)

Note that the words *theory* in Theory of Mind and *reading* in mind-reading are potentially misleading because they seem to imply that we attribute states of mind intentionally and consciously. In fact, it might be difficult for us to appreciate just how much mind-reading takes place on a level inaccessible to our consciousness. For it seems that while our perceptual systems "eagerly" register the information about people's bodies and their facial expressions, these systems do not necessarily make all that information available to us for our conscious interpretation. Think of the intriguing functioning of "mirror neurons." Studies of imitation in monkeys and humans have discovered a "neural mirror system that demonstrates an internal correlation between the representations of perceptual and motor functionalities" (Borenstein and Ruppin 229). What this means is that "an action is understood when its observation causes the motor system of the observer to 'resonate.'" So when you observe someone else grasping a cup, the "same population of neurons that control the execution of grasping movements becomes active in [your own] motor areas" (Rizzolatti et al 662). At least on some level, your brain does not seem to distinguish between you doing something and a person that you observe doing it.[4]

In other words, our neural circuits are powerfully attuned to the presence, behavior, and emotional display of other members of our species. This attunement begins early (some form of it is already present in newborn infants), and it takes numerous nuanced forms as we grow into our environment. We are intensely aware of the body language and facial expressions of other people, even if the full extent and significance of such awareness escape us. As cognitive neuroscientists working with Theory of Mind speculate,

> [Mirror] neurons provide a neural mechanism that may be a critical component of imitation and our ability to represent the goals and intentions of others. Although the early functional imaging studies have mostly focused on understanding how we represent the *simple actions* of others . . . recent articles have proposed that similar mechanisms are involved in understanding the *feelings and sensations* of others. . . . The growing interest in the phenomenon of empathy has led to the recent emergence of imaging studies investigating sympathetic or empathetic reactions in response to others making emotional facial expressions or telling sad versus neutral stories. (Singer et al *xv–xvi*)[5]

Cognitive scientists thus begin to enter the territory that has been extensively charted by philosophers and literary critics exploring mimesis (from Aristotle's *Poetics*, David Hume's "Of Tragedy," and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* and Walter Kauffmann's *Tragedy and Philosophy*, to the recent rethinking of mimesis and performativity in cultural studies), phenomenology (such as George Butte's compelling reintroduction of Maurice Merleau-Ponty into literary and film studies, *I Know That You Know That I Know*), and intentionality (such as Martha Nussbaum's critique of the tradition of correlating "an emotion and a discernible physical state" [96]). Although the work on mirror neurons is still in a relatively early stage, one can see exciting possibilities emerging at the intersection of traditionally humanistic research and the inquiry into the neural basis of interpersonal subjectivity.

3. TWO UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS

The first assumption underlying my argument is that cognitive adaptations for mind-reading are promiscuous, voracious, and proactive. Their very condition of being is a constant stimulation delivered either by direct interactions with other people or by imaginary approximations of such interactions, which include countless forms of representational art and narrative.

To clarify this assumption, it is useful to compare our adaptations for mind-reading with our adaptations for seeing. Because our species evolved to take in so much information about our environment visually, we cannot help seeing once we open our eyes in the morning[6], and the range of cultural practices grounded in the particularities of our system of visual adaptations is staggering. Similarly, as cognitive evolutionary psychologist Jesse M. Bering observes, after a certain age people "cannot turn off their mind-reading skills even if they want to. All human actions are

forevermore perceived to be the products of unobservable mental states, and every behavior, therefore, is subject to intense sociocognitive scrutiny" (12). Hence, although we are far from grasping the full extent to which our lives are structured by adaptations for mind-reading, we should be prepared that the cultural effect of those adaptations may prove just as profound and far-ranging as that of being able to see.

The second assumption is a paradox. We perceive people's observable behavior as both a highly informative and at the same time quite unreliable source of information about their minds. This double perspective is fundamental and inescapable, and it informs all of our social life and cultural representations.

To appreciate the power of this double perspective, consider the reason we remain suspicious of each other's body language. When I am speaking to somebody, she counts on my registering information conveyed by her face, movements, and appearance. That is, she can't know what particular grin or shrug or tattoo I will notice and consider significant at a given moment; indeed, I don't know either. Our evolutionary past ensures, however, that she intuitively expects me to "read" her body as indicative of her thoughts, desires, and intentions. Moreover, the same evolutionary past ensures that I intuitively know that she expects me to read her body in this fashion. This means that I have to constantly negotiate between trusting this or that bodily sign of hers more than another.

Were I to put this negotiation in words—which will sound funny because we do *not* consciously articulate it to ourselves—it might go as follows: "Did she smile because she liked what I said or because she wanted me to think that she liked what I said, or because she was thinking of how well she handled an argument yesterday, or was she thinking of something altogether unrelated?"

Thus, we treat with caution the information about the person's state of mind inferred from her observable behavior precisely because we can't help treating her observable behavior as a highly valuable source of information about her mind—*and we both know it*. Because the body is *the* text that we read throughout our evolution as a social species, we are now stuck with cognitive adaptations that forcefully focus our attention on that particular text.

Nor would we want to completely distrust the body—our quick and far-from-perfect reading of each other is what gets us through the day. Still, as we unreflexively interpret each other's observable behavior in terms of underlying mental states, on some level we keep active the hypothesis that the observable behavior is misleading. (Note, too, that it does not have to be intentionally misleading: If I meet a person whose natural expression is a frown, I may incorrectly assume that he does not like me. The body may misrepresent the mind.)

What all this adds up to is that we are in a bind. We have the hungry Theory of Mind that needs constant input in the form of observable behavior indicative of unobservable mental states. And we have the body that our Theory of Mind evolved to focus on in order to get that input. And that body, the object of our Theory of Mind's obsessive attention, is a privileged and, as such, potentially misleading source of information about the person's mental state.

The research on Theory of Mind complements our own discipline's insight about the body as a site of performance. Because we are drawn to each other's bod-

ies in our quest to figure out each other's thoughts and intentions, we end up *performing* our bodies (not always consciously or successfully) to shape other people's perceptions of our mental states. A particular body thus can be viewed only as a time-and-place-specific cultural construction, that is, as an attempt to influence others into perceiving it in a certain way.

Cognitive evolutionary research thus lends strong support to theorists in cultural studies who seek to expand the meaning of performativity, such as Joseph Roach, who argues that performance, "though it frequently makes references to theatricality as the most fecund metaphor for the social dimensions of social production, embraces a much wider range of human behaviors. Such behaviors may include what Michel de Certeau calls 'the practice of everyday life,' in which the role of spectator expands into that of participant" (46). Indeed, work on Theory of Mind indicates is that our everyday mind-reading turns each of us into a performer and a spectator, whether we are aware of it or not.

A closely related implication of the studies on Theory of Mind is that they encourage us to think of a broad variety of cultural institutions and social practices as both reflecting our overarching need to attribute minds *and* remaining subject to the instabilities inherent to our mind-reading processes. For example, our social infrastructure seems to be chock-full of devices designed to bypass our fakeable, performable, constructable body in reading the person's mind. We use blood and hair samples, credit and medical histories, fingerprinting and polygraph tests to avoid the situation in which we have to make an important decision based on information provided solely by the person's immediate observable behavior.

Some of these devices succeed better than others and none are perfect. We may not yet be living in the future depicted in *Gattaca* (1997), whose protagonist (played by Ethan Hawke) fakes his blood and hair samples to deceive others about his intentions, but that sci-fi moment does capture an important sociocognitive feature of our world: there is a constant arms race going on between cultural institutions trying to claim some aspects of the body as essential, unfakeable, and intentionality-free, and individuals finding ways to perform even those seemingly unperformable aspects of the body.

Again, compare this cognitive-evolutionary insight with the work done by cultural theorists ranging from Judith Butler to Peggy Phelan, who have written extensively on the body as a constantly receding signified, a perennially contested depository of reliable meanings. Think, for example, of Phelan's observation that whereas "the living performing body is the center of semiotic crossings, which allows one to perceive, interpret and document the performance event," we long to "return to some place where language is not needed," an "Imaginary Paradise" where there are no "linguistic and visual distinctions between who one is and what one sees" (15, 29). Think, too, that some of the resistance to the view of the body as always constructed and always performed can come from our hoping against all hope that it *must* be possible to carve some zones of certainty in the exasperating world where our favorite source of information, the body, is often untrustworthy in direct proportion to the extent to which we trust it.

4. TO KNOW AND KNOW NOT

With such a peculiar setup in place, what should we expect from our cultural representations? Or, to put it differently, how will our worldview change if we think about our culture as enmeshed with paradoxes and instabilities of our greedy Theory of Mind? Of course, this big question cannot be answered in one essay. But as a starting point, let us consider step-by-step what it means to live in a world in which we know and at the same time don't know what other people are thinking.[7]

First, we *know* that there must be a mental state behind an observable behavior. Say you see somebody jumping up in the middle of a meeting. Try making sense of his action without talking about his presumed mental state; for example, he had an idea; he remembered something suddenly; he wanted to see how high he could jump; he felt something sharp on the seat beneath him; he saw a snake and was terrified; he wanted to check if everybody was awake.

Our belief that there must be a mental state behind a behavior is itself a cognitive artifact that reflects the way we perceive people. The question of whether my colleague over there *truly and really* had some thought, feeling, or emotion that prompted him to jump is relatively irrelevant.[8] What is relevant is that for you and me and every other human being with fully functional Theory of Mind, his jump signals an underlying mental state.[9]

Second, even though we know that there must be a mental state behind a behavior, we don't *really* know what that state is. That is, there is always a possibility that something else is going on behind even the most seemingly transparent behavior. We can remember situations when our thoughts did not fit the circumstances, and no observable behavior could reveal them to people around us, or so we hope. On these occasions we say to ourselves, "Thank God, we can't read each other's minds, so that they have no way of knowing what goes through my head."

Third, even though we can't really know what other people are thinking, we conduct our daily lives on the assumption that we do, more or less. To borrow from a related discussion by the cognitive literary critic Ellen Spolsky, our everyday mind-attributions are "good enough."[10] Obviously, I don't know what that man is really thinking as he strides purposively toward that particular weightlifting machine, but it has served me well in the past and is likely to serve me well in the future to assume that he wants to use it right away, which means that for the next five minutes I'd better turn to a different machine. Such rough-and-ready interpretations get us through the day. To quote the cognitive evolutionary anthropologist Dan Sperber, in "our everyday striving to understand others, we make do with partial and speculative interpretations (the more different from us the others, the more speculative the interpretation). For all their incompleteness and uncertainty, these interpretations help us—us individuals, us peoples—to live with one another" (38).

Were we to stop and try to figure out what the people around us are really thinking, we would become socially incapacitated, overwhelmed with possible interpretations, and unable to commit to any course of action. Perhaps the reason that we even notice our moments of "Thank God, we can't read each other's minds!" is because

they stand out amid our daily unreflective mind-attribution. They interrupt its course. They force us to juxtapose a *good enough* mind-attribution—that is, what people could be expected to think in such a situation—with an *exact* and unexpected mind-attribution: what I really thought in that situation.

Fourth, because we go around knowing that there must be a mental state behind the behavior, and because we don't really know what that state is, even as we act as if we know, our cultural representations exploit this precarious state of knowing and not knowing. One important distinction between daily life and fiction is that we generally get through the day with our far-from-perfect attributions of intentionality, but authors are less interested in such "good enough" attributions.[11] Works of fiction magnify and vivify various points on the continuum of our imperfect mutual knowledge: Spectacular feats and failures of mind-reading are the hinges on which many a fictional plot turns.

5. EMBODIED TRANSPARENCY

Here is one specific argument we can make approaching cultural representations from the cognitive perspective outlined above. There seems to be a representational tradition, which manifests itself differently in different genres and individual works, of putting protagonists in situations in which their bodies spontaneously reveal their true feelings, sometimes against their wills. Such moments are carefully foregrounded within the rest of the narrative. In each case an author builds up a context in which brief access to a character's mental state via her body language stands out sharply against the relative opacity of other characters or of the same character a moment ago.

Every moment of transparency is thus entirely relative and context-dependent, but the wish to create and behold such moments seems to be perennial, grounded in our evolutionary history as a social species. Representations of embodied transparency regale us with something that we hold at a premium in our everyday lives and never get much of: perfect access to other people's minds via their observable behavior. As such, they must be immensely flattering to our Theory of Mind adaptations, which evolved to read minds through bodies but have to constantly contend with the possibility of misreading and the resulting social failure. The pleasure derived from moments of embodied transparency is thus largely a social pleasure—a titillating illusion of superior social discernment and power.

To see what forms such illusions of perfect access may assume, consider the three following examples, which deal respectively with novels, genre paintings, and moving images.

A. Angry Bodies and Sadistic Benefactors

At first glance, novels seem to be an unlikely setting for cultivating special moments of embodied transparency because they are *already* in the business of revealing their characters' thoughts and feelings. Alan Palmer captures this when he

observes in his remarkable *Fictional Minds* that one "of the pleasures of reading novels is the enjoyment of being told what a variety of fictional people are thinking. . . . This is a relief from the business of real life, much of which requires the ability to decode accurately the behavior of others" (10).

Yet there can be an important difference between telling how the character feels using omniscient narration and making the character show his true feelings. Thus in the first proposal scene of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), we hear of Elizabeth's anger but we *see* Mr. Darcy's anger. Here is Elizabeth's listening to Mr. Darcy's confession that he "struggled . . . in vain" to repress his love for her: In spite of her deeply-rooted dislike, she could not be insensible to the compliment of such a man's affections, and though her intentions did not vary for an instant, she was first sorry for the pain he was about to receive; till, roused to resentment by his subsequent language, she lost all compassion in anger. She tried, however, to compose herself to answer him with patience, when he should have done (129).

Elizabeth does not fully succeed in composing herself. Toward the end of Mr. Darcy's speech, "the colour [rises] into her cheeks." Still, heightened color can be indicative of a variety of mental states, some flattering to the suitor, whereas Mr. Darcy's subsequent bodily reaction to Elizabeth's disdainful answer provides direct and unequivocal access to his feelings: "Mr. Darcy, who was leaning against the mantelpiece with his eyes fixed on her face, seemed to catch her words with no less resentment than surprise. His complexion became pale with anger, and the disturbance of his mind was visible in every feature. He was struggling for the appearance of composure, and would not open his lips, till he believed himself to have attained it" (*ibid.*).

Note the contrasts that went into constructing Mr. Darcy's transparency. Not only is he now more readable than Elizabeth, but he is also more readable than himself earlier in the novel and a moment before. In the first sentence of the last quoted passage, he is described as *seeming* to catch her words with no less resentment than surprise. That is, there is still some possibility of misinterpreting his body language at that point—he *seems* to be resentful and surprised, but he might not actually be so. Then the next sentence ("His complexion became pale with anger" (ibid.)) leaves no doubt that his body reflects his mind fully and faithfully. These contrasts convey a strong impression that this moment of perfect mental access cannot last long, sharpening our appreciation for the vision of the body caught in spontaneous emotion.[12]

Here is an example from a more recent work, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999). Fielding's treatment of embodied transparency is particularly interesting because, written from the first person point of view and obsessed with the issue of gender and communication, her novel provides an apparently exhaustive report of Bridget's feelings and those of women surrounding her. Men's minds remain strategically obscured—in the tradition of Austen, whose *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* inspired "Bridget Jones" duology.

But even in the novel in which transparency (at least for women) seems to be the default narrative mode, moments of embodied transparency are still presented as rare and valuable flashes of insight. For example, there is the scene at a ski resort in which Bridget is talking to her boyfriend, Mark Darcy, and an attractive woman,

Rebecca, who is trying to steal Mark from Bridget. Rebecca invites Mark and Bridget to a skiing party, where she would have more opportunities to flirt with Mark, especially if Bridget, a poor skier, could be separated from him:

> "Oh, it's so exhilarating," said Rebecca, putting her goggles on her head and laughing into Mark's face. "Listen, do you both want to have supper with us tonight? We are going to have a fondue up the mountain, then a torchlight ski down—oh sorry, Bridget, but you could come down in the cable car."
>
> "No," said Mark abruptly, "I missed Valentine's Day so I'm taking Bridget for a Valentine's dinner."
>
> The good thing about Rebecca is there is always a split second when she gives herself away by looking really pissed-off.
>
> "Okey-dokey, whatever, have a fun time," she said, flashed the toothpaste advert smile, then put her goggles on and skied off with a flourish towards the town. (73)

Observe all the careful framing that goes into foregrounding Rebecca's embodied transparency. First, her involuntary giving "herself away by looking really pissed-off" is contrasted with her fake spontaneity one moment earlier, when she appears unable to contain her good spirits buoyed by skiing, and her fake friendliness right after, when she smiles broadly to show that she does not mind Mark's rejection. Second, Rebecca's bodily display of feelings is contrasted with Mark's opacity—his answer is "abrupt," which means that nothing in his body language has prepared the two women for what he is about to say. Third, Fielding has Bridget actively draw our attention to both the value of this revelatory moment ("the good thing about Rebecca . . .") and to its transience: it lasts only a "split second," so one is lucky to catch it.

It may seem, based on my examples from Austen and Fielding, that embodied transparency always finds an appreciative spectator within the story itself (for example, when Mr. Darcy looks angry, Elizabeth is there to observe him and interpret his body language), but the situation is more complex. Many fictional characters remain oblivious of others' momentary transparency. In Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Tom ignores Lawyer Dowling's uncomfortable twitching during their conversation about Tom's parentage. Similarly, Mr. Allworthy remains blind to Doctor Blifil's grimacing attempts to conceal his laughter in response to Allworthy's heartfelt "sermon" about love and marriage (62).[13] Sometimes such obliviousness is gently glossed over by the narrative; sometimes it is strategically foregrounded to illustrate the protagonist's unfortunate lack of awareness or his tactful reluctance to pry into other people's thoughts.

But if characters may notice or miss moments of embodied transparency, we readers are always made to notice them. We may perceive such moments as perceived by characters in the story or as *not* perceived by them, but, either way, they offer us a dazzling possibility of an escape from our double perspective of the body as a highly privileged and yet unreliable source of information about the mind.

This is why Bridget Jones's insight is our gain but so is Mr. Allworthy's blindness. We look at Doctor Blifil and we see what Mr. Allworthy does not see—a body that desperately does not want to be read and thus *is* readable in this desire not to be read. So when I speak of representations of embodied transparency and their effects, I mean primarily their effects on the Theory of Mind of *readers*. We are the ultimate appreciative audience for such representations.

Hence a fascinating sub-tradition in the novelistic treatment of embodied transparency, which I call a tradition of sadistic benefaction. Some fictional characters do not seem to be content with serendipitously observing (as Elizabeth and Bridget do) other people's spontaneous reactions. Instead, they want to *script* such reactions, forcing others into revelatory body language and appropriating, in effect, the privileged positions of readers as ultimate observers of moments of embodied transparency. The ethics of these situations are extremely ambiguous. The characters are presented as believing that their actions will ultimately benefit the people whom they are forcing into transparency, but the impression of emotional sadism lingers.[14]

Consider, for example, Sarah Fielding's *The History of Ophelia* (1760), in which a rich man sends a poor man on an emotional rollercoaster to enjoy the spectacle of his feelings against his will. The novel's protagonist, Lord Dorchester, comes across a starving half-pay soldier, Captain Traverse, and decides to help him. Through his connections at the court, he secretly procures Traverse the choice of two jobs and then proceeds to torture the man by telling him first only of the job that he knows the Captain will not be able to take due to family circumstances. The poor Captain, unwilling to appear ungrateful, receives "this News with as much Gratitude as if it had been the very Thing he wished" and turns it down politely. Lord Dorchester then expresses his disappointment in such terms as to drive the Captain to break down in tears when he thinks nobody is watching (1: 252)—when, in fact, everybody is.

Not yet content with this show of emotions, Lord Dorchester then reveals the Captain's family waiting in the next room and urges him again to take the first job. In response, the Captain "faint[s] away instantly," terrifying his wife and making the onlookers fear for his life. When the Captain comes to, Lord Dorchester augments "the general Joy" that his recovery occasions by telling him of the second job, one that is completely acceptable and will save the whole family from starving. The joy now increases "to a great Degree of Extacy," raising to a "Height that must have been painful." The Captain and his wife look upon the "Lord with Adoration, and [give] way to Raptures that would have forced a Heart the most insensible to the Sensations of others, to partake of theirs" (1: 254–55).

Lord Dorchester is a grotesque embodiment of the eighteenth-century obsession with private philanthropy, social class, and sentimental discourse. His privileged social standing allows him to torture such people as Captain Traverse before helping them. Fielding thus draws on recognizable cultural contexts of her day to construct a scene in which the poor man's feelings are rendered transparent against his desires and observed hungrily by the rich benefactor.

Lest we think that the eighteenth-century sentimental novel holds the exclusive right to such scenes, consider Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), in which Tyler Durden holds a gun to a head of a man he's just met (who turns out to be a twenty-

three-year-old college dropout) and extracts from him the promise that he will go back to school to finish his degree in veterinary medicine. Tyler wants to impress on "Raymond Hessel" (the name he reads off his driver's license) an important life lesson: Death can strike any minute, so study hard and follow your dreams.

But before Tyler gets to the salutary follow-your-dreams part, he uses every grisly cliché to convince Raymond of his imminent and terrible demise. He explains to the crying man how he will "cool" down, passing from a "person" to an "object" and how his "Mom and Dad would have to call old doctor whoever and get [their son's] dental records because there wouldn't be much left of [his] face." The scene is so structured that Tyler seems to merely report the images arising in his victim's mind. Raymond is forced into embodied transparency: half-paralyzed with fear, crying harder and harder, following meekly Tyler's orders, thinking of things that Tyler tells him to think of.

When Tyler finally lets Raymond go, his thoughts stay on him as he muses with great satisfaction: "Raymond fucking Hessel, your dinner is going to taste better than any meal you've ever eaten, and tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your entire life" (155). Like Lord Dorchester, Tyler apparently believes that to intensify somebody's happiness you have to first make him truly miserable. More important, like Lord Dorchester, Tyler treasures every moment of transparency he can wring out of his victim. Tyler enjoys knowing exactly what Raymond is thinking now and what he will be thinking tomorrow.

Or does he? Scenes of sadistic benefaction reveal an asymmetry in novels' treatment of embodied transparency. Readers are indeed occasionally allowed to transcend the double position of the body and enjoy the illusion of perfect readability (Mr. Darcy looks angry and he *is* angry; Rebecca looks pissed off, and she *is* pissed off), but when characters themselves try to create contexts of such direct access, the results are often mixed. Subversion lurks. Because there is a potential for a gap between the forced emotion and the actual emotion, the performing body may reassert itself.

Look again at the scene in *Fight Club* in which Tyler reads his victim's body as an open book: "You [are] going to cool, the amazing miracle of death. One minute, you're a person, the next minute you're an object, and Mom and Dad would have to call old doctor whoever and get your dental records because there wouldn't be much left of your face, and Mom and Dad, they'd always expected so much more from you and, no, life wasn't fair and now it was come to this" (153).

If we return to this scene after we have finished the novel and found out that Tyler is what we call an unreliable narrator,[15] we may start seeing problems with this assured interpretation of Raymond's body. We may notice, for example, that Tyler's account of Raymond's thoughts draws on conventional images provided by crime dramas. That is, we cannot know exactly what really goes through a person's head when he has a gun pressed to his cheek. After all, he might be thinking that now he won't have to go through his scheduled biopsy to find out what that scary lump is. We do, however, have a visual repertoire of scenes associated with violent deaths, for example: cut to the bereaved family; cut to the corpse in the morgue; cut to the dentist, or some other doctor, confirming the victim's identity; and so forth. This is the repertoire that Tyler dips into for his "report" from Raymond's head.

Similarly, when Tyler confidently foretells what Raymond will be thinking even after he is out of Tyler's clutches ("tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your entire life"), I see his point. I can certainly imagine how tomorrow Raymond might feel almost unbearably happy to be alive and thankful for every crumb that passes his lips and for every leaf that he sees trembling in the wind. I can also imagine Raymond racing to school, profoundly grateful for the opportunity to "work [his] ass off" (154) on various hard subjects, just as Tyler told him he should. Finally, I can imagine Raymond eventually becoming a successful veterinarian, loved by his family, respected by his neighbors, and remembering now and then with wonder and gratitude that fateful moment when a stranger with a gun forced him to turn his life around and make the most of it.

But then I can also imagine Raymond falling into a profound depression soon after his encounter with Tyler, thinking obsessively that his life depends on the whim of some jerk with a gun, and killing himself one day after school.

In other words, Raymond's body remains transparent and his mind accessible as long as we consider this scene in isolation from the tradition of unreliable narration. For within this tradition, when a first-person narrator reports another character's thoughts, he is almost immediately suspect and his reporting must be scrutinized for signs of inconsistency, vested interests, or even madness. So Palahniuk's readers believe that Tyler really knows what Raymond is thinking only as long as they are not aware that Tyler is an unreliable narrator. Once they are aware of it, they have an option—which, of course, they may choose not to follow—of assuming that they have learned very little about Raymond's actual feelings on the occasion.

But even if we do not consider this episode in relation to the tradition of unreliable narration, something else in it alerts us to the possible gap between Tyler's assured interpretation of Raymond's body and Raymond's actual mental state. The scene's timing is off. Tyler keeps reading Raymond's mind for three straight pages, and somewhere along the way embodied transparency is bound to become a performance. The same applies to the protracted exchange between Lord Dorchester and Captain Traverse. Tyler and Lord Dorchester may convince themselves, egomaniacs that they are, that they can sustain their victims in the state of spontaneous emoting for as long as they choose. The longer they keep it going, however, the more willing we are to entertain the possibility that after a while Raymond and Captain Traverse intuit something about the twisted psychology of their torturers/benefactors and start performing their despair and gratitude at the top of their lungs.

In contrast, think again about Helen Fielding's emphasis on transience as she describes Rebecca's body language: her give-away "pissed off" expression is visible for only a "split second."[16] Think, too, how quickly Austen's Mr. Darcy regains control of his features and ceases to be transparent. True, Austen emphasizes that time slows down for Elizabeth as she watches his internal struggle—"the pause was to Elizabeth's feelings dreadful" (130)—but we know that this pause could not really have lasted very long. To be credible, embodied transparency has to be brief and spontaneous. Brevity makes it ethically defensible, too[17]: we don't want to think that Elizabeth actually enjoys watching Mr. Darcy at his most transparent.[18]

There is yet another side to the issue of spontaneity. It is not enough if a specific moment of embodied transparency in a specific work of fiction is unexpected and short. To be convincing, it also has to look unconventional in the larger context of its genre. I said earlier that there is a constant arms race going on between cultural institutions trying to claim some aspects of the body as performance-free and individuals finding ways to perform even these seemingly "essential" aspects of the body. The history of cultural representations that create contexts of transparency must be viewed in the relation to this larger arms race. Writers, artists, and movie directors have to keep inventing *new* ways of forcing the body into a state of transparency because as soon as one way of doing it emerges as an established convention, it becomes vulnerable to subversion and parody. The mind retreats further, leaving the body as a front going through the expected motions of "revealing" the "true" states of mind. The double perspective of the body returns with vengeance.

As an example of such a subverted context of transparency, consider the eighteenth-century sentimental novel with its loving attention to blushing, crying, panting, fainting bodies. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1739), such bodily displays still stand for real feelings,[19] but in his next novel, *Clarissa* (1747–48), they are already consciously faked for the benefit of naïve observers.[20] The term "sentimental" itself undergoes a change between 1740 and 1820. Originally neutral, "characterized by sentiment," or positive, "characterized by or exhibiting refined and elevated feeling," it acquires a pejorative meaning of "addicted to indulgence in superficial emotion."[21] In other words, keep looking at the emoting body in hopes that it will keep providing direct access to the person's mental states, and you will soon be treated to "superficial emotion," performed for your viewing pleasure. So when Lord Dorchester tries to script Captain Traverse's embodied transparency in 1760, not only is his script too long but it is also quickly becoming outdated.

B. Problem Pictures and Proposal Compositions

At first glance, genre paintings seem another unlikely candidate for bracketing off special moments of embodied transparency. Paintings that depict people engaged in everyday activities rely as heavily on our Theory of Mind as do novels. To make sense of such scenes we have to attribute intentions to each character, or to a group of characters if the painting encourages us to construct them as sharing a certain attitude. Still, compare two kinds of genre paintings, partially overlapping in time but pointedly different in their treatment of transparency: problem pictures and proposal compositions.

Problem pictures, writes Pamela M. Fletcher in her *Narrating Modernity: The British Problem Picture, 1895–1914*, "were an extraordinarily popular feature of the Edwardian Royal Academy. The term referred to ambiguous, and often slightly risqué, paintings of modern life which invited multiple, equally plausible interpretations" (1). Consider John Collier's *A Confession* (1902), which depicts a "couple engaged in an emotional conversation," in which the woman's face is "in shadow, while the man, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, brings his face into the light of the fire," staring down and slightly to the viewer's right (62; Figure 2).

Fig. 2. The Confession

According to Collier, he received "many inquiries" about the picture's subject. In one extant letter, the "writer pleads: '*Oh!* Honourable John, I want to know *very* badly which (*please* tell me) is confessing in your Royal Academy picture—the man or the woman'" (62, original emphasis). In response to such queries, the artist apparently offered "multiple interpretations," cultivating "oracular ambiguity" along the lines of "The woman did it and the man confessed it" (63). In 1913, he revisited the subject with his *Fallen Idol*, in which a "woman kneels at a man's feet, her upper body resting on his knees and her head bowed in an attitude of grief or shame. The man holds one of her hands in his, and stares directly out of the canvas, his face illuminated by a shaft of light" (129). As Fletcher reports,

> Critical responses in the press were almost equally divided between those who read the story as completely open to interpretation, and those who assumed that the woman had 'fallen.' The *Daily Mirror*, *Queen*, *Reynolds's*, and the *Daily Sketch* all read the picture as ambiguous, predicting, 'Lots of stories will be woven around this picture, and probably none of them the right one.' The *Daily Mirror* made the point by 'quoting' two visitors: "'Of course, he's just con-

fessed something he's done,' said one woman yesterday confidently. 'She's just been found out' said the next comer with equal assurance.' (130–31)

The spatial arrangement of the figures in problem pictures and the pattern of lighting do not consistently single out one gender as more mysterious than the other: the man is just as likely as the woman to be "in the position of the 'problem'" (62). Contrast this with the pattern identified by Stephen Kern in his study *Eyes of Love: The Gaze in English and French Paintings and Novels, 1840–1900*. As Kern puts it, when "French and English artists . . . depicted a man and a woman in the same composition [they] typically rendered the face and eyes of the woman with greater detail and in more light. Most important, the men are in profile, while the women are frontal" (7). These works exemplify what Kern calls a "proposal composition":

Such a composition highlights the woman's moment of decision after the man has proposed that the relationship move to some higher level of intimacy. At such moments she must respond, whether it be to his searching look or friendly inquiry, or more significantly, to his seductive offer or proposal of marriage. Her eyes convey an impending answer to the question *Will she or won't she*? And because she is thinking about many possible consequences of her answer, her expression is especially intriguing. In contrast, the man has done his thinking and said what is on his mind. He wants to hear a *Yes*, so his face bears a more predictable and less interesting expression. (7)

Kern makes a convincing case against the accepted critical view that visual representations of women—especially beautiful women—always objectify them. He argues that in proposal compositions, such as, for example, William Midwood's *At the Crafter's Wheel* (Figure 3), women "are not objectified by the male gaze but retain a commanding subjectivity that, in comparison to the man's more erotically focused purpose and expression, conveys a wider range of thoughts and emotions" (228).

More interesting, *less* predictable, *especially* intriguing, conveying a *wider* range of emotions—contrasts and degrees are at the heart of proposal compositions. Of course, any art that appeals to the eye must cultivate gradients. As Ernst Gombrich observed, "even newly hatched chickens classify their impressions according to relationships" (298). Still, what is important for the purpose of the present argument is that using both our interest in contrasts and the familiar social script of courtship, proposal compositions construct the context in which the body of one protagonist is maneuvered into embodied transparency. We know what the man is thinking, his "erotically focused" purpose made even more obvious because it is contrasted with the "intriguing" thought processes of the woman.

In her study, Fletcher demonstrates that interpretations of problem pictures reflected some of the "most pressing issues of the early twentieth century, including the nature of modern marriage and motherhood, the emergence and definition of the new professional classes, and the existence of a specifically feminine morality" (1). No doubt many of the same issues were at play in proposal compositions, but

Fig. 3. At the Crafter's Wheel

observe the crucial difference between their respective constructions of protagonists' subjectivity. Whereas a problem picture leaves their feelings largely open to interpretation and only somewhat constrains them within broad categories, such as "distress" or "surprise," the proposal composition constructs one participant as more transparent than another.

Moreover, it turns out that the issue of time, so important in fictional representations of embodied transparency, is just as important in paintings. In a proposal composition, we know what a man is thinking, but this moment of transparency cannot last. For, depending on the woman's reaction, the man will soon adopt a different posture, attempting perhaps to conceal his disappointment if she says *no* or hesitates for too long. The same cultural narrative—the courtship narrative—that makes the instance of transparency convincing ensures that it is but an instance, serendipitously "caught" by the artist.

Something else might be at work in sustaining this illusion of a serendipitously caught moment of transparency: it steals upon the spectator unexpectedly. After all, "proposal compositions" were not known as such to their contemporaries. Whereas

"problem picture" is a recognizable historical term referring to a particular subgenre associated with a specific style, "proposal composition" is a term introduced by Kern to describe not so much a genre as a recurrent compositional pattern and interpersonal dynamic that can be found across different schools, styles, and representational traditions of the second part of the nineteenth century.

Note too that the titles of such paintings rarely indicate that we are witnessing a scene of romantic inquiry and hesitation (in contrast to the straightforward titles of problem pictures, e.g., *A Confession*). Very few titles are leading (e.g., *The Proposal*, *Pleading*, or *Showing a Preference*); the majority are all over the place, referring to a setting, to a prominent artifact present on the scene, or to the main protagonist (e.g., *A Dance in the Country*, *Nameless and Friendless*, *Waiting for the Ferry*, *Effie Dean*, *A Rest by the Seine*, *Blossom Time*, *The Picnic*, *The Umbrellas*, *At the Crafter's Wheel*[22]). Because there is neither an explicit genre affiliation nor a title that would mark a proposal composition as such, viewers have to infer on their own in the case of each specific painting that it contains a deliberation induced by a proposal of marriage or romantic liaison.

So as contemporary spectators approached a painting, say, Renoir's *A Dance in the Country*,[23] Osborn's *Nameless and Friendless*,[24] or Horsley's *Blossom Time*,[25] they did not know beforehand that the body of one of its protagonists was supposed to be strikingly readable (even though they could see it right away). Had it been known—that is, had the proposal composition indeed emerged as an established subgenre with its own set of typical titles—the man's transparency would have eventually become a convention and as such would have required an extra effort to be rendered convincing. (The fate of French eighteenth-century absorptive paintings, as discussed by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality*, is a vivid example of what conventions and expectations can do to destroy the illusion of immediate access to a represented subject's mental state.[26]) This did not happen, however: the impression of serendipity was not marred by the thought that in this artistic subgenre serendipity *is* a convention.

I am not making any teleological claims about the history of proposal compositions, such as that late nineteenth-century artists and art critics consciously avoided recognizing a new subgenre in their midst in order to be able to continue constructing compelling narratives of embodied (male) transparency. Rather it seems that authors of proposal compositions differed widely from each other in their styles and sensibilities and did not give much thought to this particular common denominator, and neither did their audiences. We needed Kern's book to finally see this common denominator, and we need research on Theory of Mind to see why we intuitively value so much the moments when bodies reveal minds so vividly.

C. Mock documentaries

Let us now return to the scene of social torment that opened this essay. Observe that what *The Office* does here (and for the purposes of this discussion I am thinking of this mock documentary as representing moving images at large[27]) is similar to what novels and paintings do when they build their moments of transparency.

The Office cultivates contrasts. That is, Gervais and Merchant constantly prod us to gage one character's embodied transparency as contrasted to that of other characters or to her own embodied transparency a moment ago. For example, in the scene in which David makes a fool of himself in front of Dawn and the two job candidates, both interviewees must be unpleasantly surprised by David's behavior. Still, the scene is shot so as to emphasize the contrast between what we may infer about their respective feelings and what we may infer about Dawn's feelings. We can see that Dawn goes through the agony of embarrassment *and* tries to conceal her disapproval of David's actions. Because we can imagine how much mental energy this must take, we conclude that it is highly unlikely that Dawn is capable of thinking of anything else at this moment (e.g., about her fiancé, Lee, her co-worker, Tim, or the book that she was reading earlier). Just now Dawn is strikingly transparent.

Not so Karen and Stuart, the interviewees. Karen smiles a lot, and at one point she also shoots a curious glance at Dawn. We may infer that she is taken aback by David's lack of professionalism but determined to get through the interview. Other than making this tentative inference, however, we have no way of knowing what goes through her head as she listens to David's harangue.

Stuart is even less transparent than Karen. We may guess that he is disappointed and angry, and that he has already given up on this job and is now keeping up the appearance of polite interest because the camera is present. These speculations, however, draw more on the context of the scene than on his body language. For he wears a small, noncommittal smile throughout and otherwise betrays no emotions.

The contrast propels the story. We take in the characters' body language—almost all at once—and then align it along the continuum of transparency. This subconscious process of comparing, contrasting, and aligning builds both on the cues planted by the directors (e.g., the actor playing Stuart must have been told to maintain a poker face) and on the particularities of our information processing (i.e., to make sense of our world we need to construct it in relational terms). As such *The Office* is similar to thousands of other television shows and feature movies—but also to novels and paintings—whose makers intuitively cultivate such hierarchies of transparency to charge their tableaux with inner dynamism.

Then there is also the issue of time. We have seen already how important it is for writers and artists to convince their audiences that the moment of transparency is transient and hence particularly valuable. Did the makers of *The Office* do something special to keep the instances of embodied transparency brief?

It turns out that they did, even if they didn't think about it in these terms. In their commentary to *The Office*, Merchant and Gervais explain that they wanted to avoid the feel of "situation comedy" and to keep their material jumpy and raw. To achieve that, they made a point of cutting abruptly from one scene to another. Note, however, one important side effect of this editing technique: it ensures that whenever characters are forced into a state of embodied transparency, we never stay with them long enough for them to seize control of the situation and start performing their feelings.

This really is an effective narrative trick. *The Office* never dwells on the same person for a long time, yet it leaves us under a strong illusion that it does, by making us aware that we stare at the protagonists when they are embarrassed or making fools

of themselves for much longer than would be polite in real life. So we are made to feel that we have seen too much when, in fact, we have seen just enough to be convinced that the protagonists were caught off-guard and didn't have time to rally their spirits and put on a suitable performance.

With its treatment of embodied transparency, a mock documentary occupies a peculiar position in relation to its grandparent genre of regular documentary and its immediate progenitors, cinéma vérité and direct cinema.[28] Cinéma vérité thrived on the spontaneous embodiment of emotions—indeed actively looked for contexts that would allow for maximum transparency. As Hope Ryden, who wrote, directed, and produced documentary films from 1961 through 1987 and was part of the Drew Associates team that developed cinéma vérité/cinema direct in the early sixties,[29] puts it, "What we were doing was finding an upcoming event in which some character would have a great stake. At that moment they would either win or lose. And it didn't matter whether they win or lose. What mattered that the cared a whole lot about what they were doing" (*Cinema Vérité*).

And what this caring "a whole lot" meant for a movie is that no matter what a character might do on camera during that make-or-break moment, viewers knew what she or he was really feeling. So if the character showed emotions, such as anxiety, happiness, or disappointment, those emotions could be counted on as being authentic; and if she didn't show any, she would still be transparent, because the viewers knew that she was trying hard to conceal her feelings. In the words of Robert Drew, who directed the documentary *Primary* (1960), featuring presidential candidates Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy during the Wisconsin primary elections: "The idea of capturing human emotion spontaneously as it happens was the key idea that made *Primary* work, that made all of our films work, and that is making cinéma vérité work today in many ways across the spectrum of television" (*Cinema Vérité*). As historians of documentary film, Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane put it:

> [In] *Primary*, Humphrey and Kennedy were much more concerned with winning an election than with how they would appear on screen. . . . *Mooney v. Fowle* (1961, aka *Football*) builds up the climaxes with high school football game in Miami, Florida, between two rival teams. It concentrates on the players, coaches, immediate families—those most completely preoccupied with this contest. *The Chair* (1962) centers on the efforts of a Chicago attorney, Donald Page Moore, to obtain a stay of execution for his client, Paul Crump, five days before it is scheduled to take place. *Jane* (1962) concerns Jane Fonda in the production of a play, from the rehearsal period through the negative reviews following its Broadway opening and the decision to close it. (216)

So, when in *The Chair*, "the attorney breaks into tears and expresses his incredulity after he receives a phone call from a stranger offering support for him in his efforts to save his client's life" (219), we cannot doubt that we see the man at his most transparent, that his body language provides the direct access to his mind.

Yet doubt is never far enough given the cognitive underpinnings of the phenomenon that we are dealing with. We can't escape for long the double view of the body:

the promise of direct access is always fraught with the possibility of manipulation and deception. Once a culture becomes aware of a seemingly reliable representational context for embodied transparency in its midst, that context is rendered suspect. (We have seen it happening in the eighteenth-century sentimental novel: in *Clarissa*, Lovelace carefully fakes "spontaneous" body language.)

Thus, on one hand, it was the credo of cinéma vérité that their "subjects would reveal what they really felt and were like when unself-consciously relaxed or deeply involved in some activity" (Ellis and McLane 217). On another hand, however absorbed the subject may be by what she is doing, it is still possible that the presence of the camera influences her emotional responses, if even ever so slightly. As Jean Rouch, the director who originated the term cinéma vérité, saw it, "the camera acts as a stimulant. It causes people to think about themselves as they may not be used to doing and to express their feelings in ways they ordinarily would not" (Ellis and McLane 217).[30] The double perspective of the body worms its way into "vérité."

So perhaps we should look at certain films made between the late 1960s and now as attempts by filmmakers to reclaim the documentary as a reliable context for embodied transparency.[31] Among such attempts would be documentaries that depict people killed during rock concerts (e.g., *Gimme Shelter* 1970), victims of war in Vietnam (e.g., *Hearts and Minds* 1974), people dying of AIDS (e.g., *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* 1994), and people literally growing up on camera (Michael Apted's "Up Series" of 1970, 1977, 1984, 1991, 1998, and 2005). Such a perspective would be both cognitive (that is, acknowledging that we remain ever-seducible by the body's promise of direct access to the mind) and historicist (that is, following specific circumstances that led, but didn't *have to* lead, to the creation of each film).

Note how many of these films depict death: the ultimate moment of embodied transparency. Of course, with exception of certain unique circumstances, such as those created by the epidemic of AIDS in the eighties and nineties,[32] the directors did not and could not set out expecting to film *that* kind of transparency.[33] It is interesting, then, that the seventies saw a number of movies appearing to be documentaries shot in cinéma vérité style, such as *No Lies* (1973), a "staged film about rape,"[34] and *Rushes* (1979), a staged film about suicide.[35] Following in the wake of the original cinéma vérité of the sixties, these fake documentaries indicated the genre's intuitive awareness that a strenuous extra effort might eventually be required to sustain its claims to direct access. And they were right to the extent to which in the years to come the real cinéma vérité did turn to death and other unfakeable physiological experiences, such as growing up.

Where would *The Office* and other recent mock documentaries fit our hypothetical narrative of the twentieth-century documentary filmmakers' intuitive quest for reliable contexts of embodied transparency? They are the direct descendants of the fake cinéma vérité films of the 1970s. (Note that not all of those films dealt with injury and death. There were others, for example, ones in which the camera filmed everyday life of families and of women in the workplace.[36]) *The Office* takes the original cinéma vérité promise of transparency as it absolute raison d'être. Whereas

cinéma vérité *hoped* to catch at least some moments of embodied transparency and looked for situations that were likely to produce such moments, a mock documentary *transforms* every situation into an occasion for embodied transparency.

As one brief illustration of how this transformation happens, consider Gervais' commentary on the "talking heads" of *The Office*. He refers to the scenes in which the protagonists are interviewed individually and thus can presumably put on any attitude or personality:

> I really love the talking heads in the show. Because we shot it like a documentary, we couldn't do things people wouldn't do in front of the camera. They can't shut the door and take a line of coke. Or they can't blurt out things they're thinking.
>
> But, ironically, when they're by themselves and they're just being filmed, they're a little bit more honest. People do let their guard down because it's flattering. When a camera's pointed at someone, they think, "This is my chance, this is my platform. I can tell the world my all great philosophies on life." And of course, they open their mouth and they blow it and can't take it back.

Note what just happened here. The least likely moment for revealing one's true thoughts is turned into its opposite. It's one thing to be *caught* on camera as Dawn is in the scene with David and the two job candidates; it's quite another to be invited into a separate room to be filmed during a formal interview. In the latter case, you have all the opportunities in the world to prepare well and to act out your better self. After all, many early cinéma vérité directors prided themselves on *never* interviewing their subjects. Interviews were the mainstay of stodgy traditional documentaries—they spelled out performance. But in *The Office* this context of performance par excellence becomes yet another context for transparency. The protagonists "blow it and can't take it back."

6. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER INTERPRETATIONS

I wrote this essay because I wanted to understand why our cultural representations repeatedly invent new contexts for making characters betray their true feelings and why these moments of embodied transparency are generally short-lived and unstable. To think through these issues, I developed a four-level model, going from the broadest question to the most specific. I first asked how our worldview will change if we begin thinking about our culture as enmeshed with our hungry Theory of Mind (Level One). More specifically, I wondered how our cultural representations engage with our double view of the body as both a highly informative and at the same time quite unreliable source of information about the mind (Level Two). Even more specifically, I wanted to see how our novels, paintings, and moving images construct the contexts of forced transparency, when the double view of the body is temporarily transcended and the observable behavior serves as the reliable index to the underly-

ing mental state (Level Three). And, most specifically, I wanted to know if certain features of these fictional moments of mental transparency are actually defined by the impossibility of reliable and lasting escape from the double perspective of the body, itself grounded in our cognitive evolutionary history (Level Four). Thus I suggested that artists and writers might actively look for pointedly short-lived social situations—such as the moment between the man's proposal and woman's answer (in proposal compositions) or a moment of acute social embarrassment (in mock documentaries)—to construct more *plausible* contexts for complete mental access.

To what extent is this four-tier model applicable to further literary and cultural analysis? It seems to me that whereas my fourth question is geared toward a very specific set of problems, the first three can be used to approach a variety of cultural representations. Of particular interest here might be cognitive-historicist interpretations that place our flawed need to read bodies for states of mind within specific historical and socioeconomic environments. One may ask, for example (staying on the first level), what happens when a mind-reading species, such as ours, enters a capitalist economy. How do the laws of supply and demand operate when you have a mind that wants to process representations of other minds and a marketplace geared toward offering an increasingly broad range of such representations? A student of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature and culture may speculate here about the proliferation of hybrid genres and publication outlets and ask how the economics of publishing drove the readers' cognitive appetites and vice versa. A student of contemporary culture may similarly think of how the rapid fragmentation of cultural production and consumption caters to and cultivates new mind-reading interfaces.

To quote Nick Gillespie, when "everywhere we look, the cultural marketplace is open and ready for business," when "in economic terms, the opportunity costs of both making and enjoying culture have dropped through the floor; [and when] it keeps getting cheaper and cheaper to produce and to consume culture under increasingly diverse circumstances," one result is "more and more of everything" (48–49). And "more of everything" means, in the words of Charles Paul Freund, that in a consumerist society, people can "grab the first opportunity to escape the traditionalist boundaries of selfhood" by experimenting "with different modes of self-presentation" (29).[37] To put this in terms of second-level inquiry, people can now engage in endlessly diverse experimentation with our double view of the body as a privileged yet unreliable source of information about the mind.

Moreover (to continue with this example, but coming to the third level) new cultural forms and niches generate new attempts to carve the zones of certainty in our perception of the body. Think of the Internet today—a powerful cultural institution that thrives because it offers us yet another way of figuring out what is happening in other people's minds. Yet if you ask yourself which feature of the Internet has been causing us the most anxiety since its inception, the answer will be the absence of the body behind the message. The "disembodied" nature of electronic communication leaves its users strikingly vulnerable to deception. As Peter Steiner's cartoon in *The New Yorker* has it, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." The physical body thus gets implicitly re-valorized as the source of "true" information about our correspon-

dent. If only we could see the actual man or woman typing in his or her message—if only for a second!—oh, we would surely know what he or she is really about!

As a matter of fact we would not. To be reminded just how informative the sighting of the actual body is, we have websites such as dontdatehimgirl.com, which features letters from women who have been deceived by flesh-and-blood men and now want to warn other women who may unknowingly come in contact with those cheaters. Ironically, the disembodied medium thus re-alerts readers to the unlimited lying potential of the body. Some aspects of this situation are captured by yet another *New Yorker* cartoon, by Liza Donnelly, in which a street vendor with a laptop offers to passersby a service called "Vet your date." (Although, of course, there is no way of knowing if anonymous reports posted on dontdatehimgirl.com are actually written by women, just as there is no way to gage the trustworthiness of those posts.[38]) The double view of the body thus continues to shape our representations. Whereas we cannot predict the exact forms that the construction of embodied transparency will yet take on the Internet, we know that the arms race between rendering some aspects of observable behavior transparent and subverting that transparency will go on.

ENDNOTES

I am deeply grateful to James Phelan for his thoughtful response to an earlier draft of this essay, to Stephen Kern for his detailed corrections and suggestions, and to Anna Laura Bennett for her superb editing skills.

1. For discussions of applications of research on Theory of Mind to literature, see Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, Vermeule, "God Novels," Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*.

2. As Goldman puts it, in his account of simulation theory of mind-reading, "people routinely track the mental states of others in their immediate environment" (301).

3. I am referring here to the scene from Bryan Singe's *The Usual Suspects* (1995), in which, we assume, Roger "Verbal" Kint uses the name of the cup manufacturer to corroborate his yarn.

4. See Goldman for a discussion of the relationship between mirror neurons and Theory of Mind.

5. See also Ramachandran for a discussion of anosognosia (38) and autism (119) as possibly associated with damage in the system of mirror neurons.

6. Unless, of course, our visual system is severely damaged.

7. And what you yourself are thinking, too. For discussion, see Palmer.

8. Compare to Baron-Cohen's description of Daniel Dennett's view of the Intentional Stance: "Dennett is not committed either way on the question of whether there really are such things as mental states inside the heads of organisms. We ascribe these simply because doing so allows us to treat other organisms as rational agents" (*Mindblindness* 24)

9. I concede that in a sci-fi movie, his jump may mean that there was a magnet planted in his body and he was pulled up by aliens who use such magnets to reel in earthlings to their ship. Note two things, though. To counterbalance our immediate tendency to read a mental state into his behavior, I had to come up with a truly outlandish scenario. ToM-less explanations apparently require quite a bit of work. And, furthermore, my explanation is not really completely ToM-less. I didn't manage to get rid of intentionality altogether. Only instead of ascribing an intention to the man, I ascribed it to the aliens. See if you can do any better.

10. Spolsky, *Satisfying Skepticism* (7); "Darwin and Derrida" (52).

11. For a related discussion, see Spolsky's "Purposes Mistook."

12. Note that in this context I use the word *emotion* interchangeably with *mental state*. For a discussion of the relationship between emotion and cognition, see Hogan, Keen, and Palmer.

13. For a discussion, see Zunshine, "Lying Bodies."

14. Compare to physical torture as another attempt to render the body the direct index of the mind. As Michaels puts it in his discussion of *American Psycho*, "You can be confident that the girl screaming when you shoot her with a nail gun is not performing (in the sense of faking) her pain" (70). See also Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (35–38).

15. Using James Phelan's categorization of unreliable narrators, we can say that Tyler underreports and underreads (219) Raymond's mental states.

16. Compare to Alan Richardson's analysis of Johanna Baillie's tragedy *Count Basil* (1798), in which Victoria, the main heroine, "ends up resorting to all but nonstop simulation of emotion, allowing her genuine feelings to become manifest only obliquely, largely against her conscious wishes, and in the briefest of flashes" ("Facial Expression," in press).

17. Compare to Cohn's discussion of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Master Flea* in *Transparent Minds*. She writes that in Hoffmann's story, "the microscopic magician of the title gives to his human friend Peregrinus Tuss a tiny magic lens, that, when inserted in the pupil of his eye, enables him to peer through the skulls of all fellow human beings he encounters, and to discern their hidden thoughts. Peregrinus soon curses this 'indestructible glass' for giving him an intelligence that rightfully belongs only to the 'eternal being who sees through to man's innermost self because he rules it'" (3). Peregrinus thus forces "all fellow human beings" into a state of embodied transparency *which can last infinitely*—an ethically indefensible situation that is resolved to the extent to which Peregrinus is rendered unhappy by his privileged access.

18. For a related argument, see Spolsky, "Elaborated Knowledge."

19. See Mullan (61).

20. See Zunshine, "Richardson's *Clarissa*."

21. *OED*; second online edition, 1989.

22. I am using the titles of paintings from Kern's lavishly illustrated study.

23. For discussion, see Kern (71).

24. For discussion, see Kern (93).

25. For discussion, see Kern (65). Note that I am purposely choosing proposal compositions of very different styles.

26. For discussion, see Zunshine, "Theory of Mind and Michael Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality*."

27. For a useful broader perspective on Theory of Mind and cinema, see Per Persson's brilliant *Understanding Cinema*.

28. Here I use the terms cinéma vérité and direct cinema interchangeably, but there are important differences between the two. For an overview of these differences, see Ellis and McLane (216–18).

29. Quoted verbatim from Hope Ryden's official website, <http://www.hoperyden.com/disc.htm>, as accessed on August 18, 2007.

30. And the other side of this issue is that such revelatory moments were carefully staged and edited. As Frederick Wiseman, a pioneer of direct cinema, puts it, "It's all manipulation. Everything about that kind of movies is a distortion" (*Cinema Vérité: Defining the Moment*).

31. Compare to Michael Fried's argument in *Absorption and Theatricality* (61), and my analysis of it in "Theory of Mind and Michael Fried's *Absorption and Theatricality*."

32. *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* (1994) and *Silver Lake Life: The View from Here* (1990) were made by filmmakers diagnosed with AIDS, who chronicled their fight with the disease until they died. For a discussion of these movies, see Ellis and McLane (284–87).

33. Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin (*Gimme Shelter*) could not know that a person would be killed on camera during a Rolling Stones performance. For a discussion of the history of that moment, see Ellis and McLane (290–91).

34. Ellis and McLane (236).

35. For a discussion, see Ellis and McLane (237).

36. For a discussion, see Ellis and McLane (235–36).

37. Compare to Dick Hebdidge's earlier argument about "the articulation of commodity consumption, personal identity and desire which characterizes life under hypercapitalism" (*Hiding* 168) and his yet earlier analysis of subcultures' movement through "commercial and cultural matrices" (*Subculture* 130).

38. For a discussion, see Alvarez and Jones.

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