John McDowell and the Future of Film Studies

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A key issue for the future direction of film studies is what is the nature of the perception film viewers have of a film and what is the nature of the perception characters in a film have of other characters in the film. The debate between the philosophers John McDowell and Hubert Dreyfus over the nature of perception in general illuminates this issue. McDowell argues that we must see perception as conceptual, while Dreyfus supports a non-conceptual view. McDowell's concept of second nature not only resolves this debate in his favor, but it provides a promising tool for the interpretation of individual films. Moreover, McDowell's conceptual view of perception rules out those approaches to the future of film studies that are based on a non-conceptualist framework. Finally, McDowell's approach leads to an emphasis on interpreting films with a focus on improving moral sensibilities. This perspective provides a viable blueprint for keeping film studies viable.

Keywords: film studies, surveillance films, *The Lives of Others*, philosophy of perception, conceptualism, John McDowell, Hubert Dreyfus, Robert Sinnerbrink

1. Introduction

The act of film viewing is foundational for the field of film studies. Without film viewing, there would be no film studies. Thus, a determination of the nature of this act is an essential starting point for deciding the future shape of film studies. However, perception of the film by the viewer is not the only perception to be considered when a film is viewed. The characters in a film also perceive one another. Each type of perception can potentially shed light on the other type. Thus, a surveillance film provides an effective tool to address the issue of the nature of film perception.

2. The Surveillance Film: *The Lives of Others*

The German film *The Lives of Others* is about the surveillance society the Stasi, the East German secret police, creates. The surveillance of the playwright Georg Dreyman by the Stasi agent Gerd Wiesler is the focus of the film. There are 56 separate shots of Wiesler conducting the surveillance of Dreyman.

The standard shot of Wiesler when he is conducting the surveillance operation from the attic of Dreyman's apartment building is a frontal, medium, static shot in which Wiesler is seated at a desk with headphones on surrounded by surveillance equipment. However, there is enough variation in the duration and camera position of these shots to keep them from being tedious. Moreover, the shots show many of the dramatic developments of the film.

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3. McDowell Versus Dreyfus on Perception

How should we conceive of the nature of Wiesler's perception during these surveillance sessions? The debate between the philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and John McDowell provides us with two options. It will also shed light on how we should conceive of our perception of film in general.

Dreyfus has a non-conceptual picture of perception. We perceive, not a world of propositional facts, but a world of "non-conceptual, non-propositional, non-rational... and non-linguistic facts" (Dreyfus, 360). There is no rational subject involved. Rather, we perceive a force "field of attractions and repulsions" (Dreyfus, 17-18).

Dreyfus concedes that conceptual content is involved when we are learning a skill, but once we achieve mastery, we respond directly to the solicitations of the situations we encounter. If the expert encounters a novel situation, he or she can usually deliver an "immediate intuitive response" (Dreyfus, 57).

Clearly, Wiesler is an expert Stasi agent, and that is why Grubitz, his supervisor, relies on him so heavily. Dreyfus must therefore view Wiesler's surveillance episodes, even when he is acting to protect Dreyman, as non-conceptual acts of perception.

In contrast to Dreyfus, McDowell views perceptual experiences as imbued with conceptuality. "Our perceptual relation to the world is conceptual all the way out to the world's impact on our receptive capacities" (McDowell, 338). Even though our perceptual experience is passive, it involves our conceptual capacities. Thus, McDowell must view Wiesler's highly skillful perception and coping as conceptual.

4. McDowell Wins the Debate With His Concept of Second Nature

This debate between Dreyfus and McDowell raises several questions. First, who is right? Second, what does it matter? The author will answer the first question. Then the author will answer the second, both in terms of its implications for the interpretation of *The Lives of Others* and its wider implications for the field of film studies.

Dreyfus uses two arguments against McDowell. First, Dreyfus argues that McDowell's conceptual view of perception necessarily implies an abstract, contemplative view of the world. This situation-independent view cannot explain the embodied coping with which our lives, especially the lives of skilled experts, are filled. Moreover, "since the concepts designed to get it right about a distanced reality decouple us from the reach of normative forces," such a detached view of the world has to be motivationally inert and therefore lack any practical force to direct our actions (Dreyfus, 23). McDowell's conceptual perceiver, standing over against an independent reality, will be unable to act.

In the course of this debate, McDowell repeatedly denies that Dreyfus accurately characterizes his position (McDowell, 339-342; McDowell, 366; McDowell, 42-45). He stresses that his view of perception and action is situation-specific and not detached, and thus quite compatible with embodied coping. McDowell's situation-specific perceiver confronts not a world of purely descriptive facts, but one filled with facts with practical significance. In the face of McDowell's repeated claims that his position has been badly mischaracterized, Dreyfus does relent bit by bit, but he never changes his underlying view of McDowell's position. Dreyfus is never able to see mindedness as not distanced.

The reason for this blindness on Dreyfus's part is that his second argument is against McDowell. Dreyfus argues that McDowell is unable to accurately characterize expert performance. He argues that in expert coping there is no conscious conceptual accompaniment. The expert perceives and acts with no conscious "I think" or

“I do.” “An ego that does the coping is not part of the content of the absorbed coper” (Dreyfus, 28). Moreover, if the expert does engage in explicit conceptual activity, this degrades his or her experts performance. Dreyfus refers repeatedly to the example of Chuck Knoblauch, a highly skilled baseball player, who is unable to throw to the first base once he begins to consciously think about his throwing. “If it was the same sort of content before reflection, there would be no way to explain why Knoblauch performs so well under one condition and so poorly in the other” (Dreyfus, 360; Dreyfus, 34-35).

McDowell’s response to Dreyfus is to concede that in skillful coping we do not explicitly think about what we are doing and that if we do, our performance will decline. However, neither concession entails that when we are engaged in embodied coping, we are not also engaged in conceptual activity. The expert “knows what he is up to; he knows what he is doing and why” (McDowell, 48). The expert acts knowingly even if he is not explicitly thinking of his act. Therefore, McDowell can easily handle the case of Chuck Knoblauch. “When Knoblauch still had the bodily skills he lost, his mindedness was in operation in exercises of his skill. His throwing efficiently to first base was his realizing of a concept of a thing to do” (McDowell, 367). Thus, Dreyfus’s arguments against McDowell collapse.

McDowell’s primary argument against Dreyfus is that he succumbs to a form of the Myth of the Given. McDowell outlines several conditions that a mental state with empirical content must have. First, the state must be conceptual. It must be able to enter into normative relations with other mental states. Second, the mental state must be subject to the tribunal of experience. There must be an external constraint on our empirical thinking (McDowell, XII, 43).

If you conceive of the external constraint as a mere sensory input, you succumb to a form of the Myth of the Given. The reason why it is a myth is that epistemological significance cannot be given to a “brute impact from the exterior” (McDowell, 8). Mere sensory impingements offer “exculpations where we wanted justifications” (McDowell, 8). Thus, they cannot constitute a tribunal of experience because they cannot be a normative constraint on our thinking.

The rise of modern science increases the appeal of this form of the Myth of the Given. It leads to two contrasting spheres or spaces of explanation: the space of law and the space of reasons. The space of law is the space of what science explains. The space of reasons is the space of conceptual activity. Given the division between these two spaces, it is understandable that modern science attempts to place sensory experience in the space of law (McDowell, 70). After all, McDowell’s third condition on empirical content is that it must be the result of a transaction in nature, since it involves the activity of our sensory receptors. However, if experience is conceived in this way, it cannot be a tribunal.

This is the form of the Myth of the Given to which Dreyfus falls prey, and he does so exactly because he, under pressure from modern science, places sensory experience in the non-conceptual space of law. In spite of his disdain for cognitive science, Dreyfus sees himself and his phenomenologist forebears as having, through careful scrutiny, discovered aspects of subpersonal-level mental processing. Dreyfus goes on to make the same error that some cognitive scientists do when they argue that subpersonal-level content can be given personal-level epistemological significance by a welling-up process (McDowell, 55, 123). This is to succumb to the Myth of the Given. At the personal level, the level of the space of reasons, what is important is not what the eye tells the brain, but what the eye tells the mind.

If treating sensory experience as non-conceptual impingement cannot avoid the Myth of the Given, which approach can? Is there any approach that can satisfy McDowell’s three conditions? McDowell’s condition that

empirical content must have a conceptual aspect means that the space of reasons cannot be collapsed into the space of law. On the other hand, the condition that experience is a natural transaction means that our conceptual activity cannot be completely disengaged from our animal life (McDowell, 81-84).

McDowell's solution is to treat experience as natural and conceptual. This is to deny that nature must be placed exclusively in the space of law. Humans have a second nature, which, although it is natural, also involves conceptual activity. Second nature is what humans acquire when they are integrated into a community of language users (McDowell, 126, 184).

The concept of second nature allows McDowell to meet his three conditions on empirical content. Experience is conceptual and thus can be a genuine tribunal. Moreover, since McDowell has not restricted nature to the space of law, he can see second nature as natural and meet his third condition. Second nature is how we realize our biological nature as rational animals (McDowell, 344; McDowell, 78, 85, 115).

Thus, McDowell wins his debate with Dreyfus. We must view perception as conceptual. Wiesler's perception while conducting his surveillance operations is conceptual. Similarly, our perception as viewers of Wiesler is also conceptual.

5. McDowellian Interpretation of *The Lives of Others*

Next the author will examine the implications of McDowell's arguments for the interpretation of *The Lives of Others*. A McDowellian interpretation of the film will focus on his concept of second nature and thus on the formation of conceptual sensitivities. The concepts the author will focus on in examining Wiesler's education are humanism, love, and friendship.

The concept of humanism arises right away when Wiesler's first interrogation subject denies knowing why he has been detained. Wiesler replies, "You think we imprison people on a whim? If you think our humanistic system capable of such a thing, that alone would justify your arrest." Wiesler then goes on to demonstrate what the East German "humanistic system" is capable of as he directs a harsh, 40-hour interrogation of the prisoner.

After the interrogation scene, Grubitz takes Wiesler to a premiere of one of Dreyman's plays. The play is called *Faces of Love*. Hempf, a member of the East German Central Committee, later accuses Dreyman of writing plays that display a "love of mankind" and presumably *Faces of Love* does just that. This is the first of four works of art to which Wiesler is exposed in the film. At the performance, Wiesler observes the love between Dreyman and Christa, Dreyman's actress girlfriend, but this has no softening effect on him. He is eager to monitor Dreyman as an "arrogant" "enemy of socialism."

The next important scene in the film is Dreyman's birthday party, during which Wiesler conducts his first surveillance session. Wiesler learns of Dreyman's friendship with Jerska, Dreyman's blacklisted former director. Jerska is sitting alone at the party reading a book of Brecht poems and Dreyman tries to cheer him up. Hauser, an artist friend of Dreyman, confronts Dreyman about his attitude toward the Stasi collaborator who has replaced Jerska. Hauser shouts at Dreyman, "If you don't take a stand, you're not human. If you want to take action, call. If not, we don't have to meet again." Hauser's strong rebuke causes Wiesler to reflect. This is the first shot of Wiesler in the film in which the camera circles him.

Wiesler's next educational experiences about the concept of love occur when he exposes Christa's affair with Hempf to Dreyman. The effects on Christa and Dreyman are devastating. Christa cries and vomits in the shower. Dreyman is stunned, but when Christa requests, "Just hold me," he readily complies. This reaction greatly surprises Wiesler.

The next important event in Wiesler's conceptual education is the call to Dreyman about Jerska's suicide. Dreyman's friendship for Jerska is so deep that Dreyman is unable to say anything during the call. Instead, after the call he plays *Sonata for a Good Man*, the piece of music Jerska gives him for his birthday. The camera circles Wiesler for the second time. So deeply moved is Wiesler that he actually weeps.

Wiesler now takes steps to protect Dreyman and Christa. He convinces Christa to stop meeting Hempf. When Dreyman then decides to write an article about suicide in East Germany, where it is an officially ignored phenomenon, Wiesler works to protect him, at great personal risk. When Wiesler hears Dreyman read the finished article, the camera circles him for the third and final time. Even when Christa reveals that Dreyman is the writer of the suicide article, Wiesler still acts to protect them. As the camera pans slowly from Grubitz to Wiesler, Grubitz asks Wiesler, "Are you still on the right side?" Wiesler replies that he is. He has learned the concepts of humanism, love, and friendship.

Grubitz is not able to prove what Wiesler has done, ironically because of Wiesler's skills as a Stasi agent, but he banishes him to a job of steaming open letters. However, Wiesler gets a reward of sorts when Dreyman discovers that it is Wiesler who protects him. Dreyman writes a novel called *Sonata for a Good Man*, which he dedicates to Wiesler. Whether or not the novel is Wiesler's story, *The Lives of Others* is a sonata to the good man he learns to become through the education of his conceptual sensitivities.

6. McDowell's Conceptualism and the Future of Film Studies

The author will now consider the wider implications for film studies of McDowell's views. The author will do so by comparing his approach to the history of film studies outlined by Robert Sinnerbrink.

Sinnerbrink begins his survey with the era of Grand Theory, in which Freudian, Marxist, and semiotic film interpretation dominate. Relying on material from Carroll, Allen, and Smith, he succinctly summarizes the problems of Grand Theory and why it represents, in his view, the past of film studies (Sinnerbrink, 175). Grand Theory, because it is designed to attack Western rationalism, always has proclivities toward obfuscatory writing and deferential appeals to authority. Massive empirical disconfirmation of its predetermined theoretical frameworks only heightens these tendencies.

The next step in Sinnerbrink's history is the analytic-cognitive paradigm, which he presents as the present of film studies. The analytic-cognitive paradigm's basic task is to construct scientific theories which explain the subpersonal-level processing involved when watching films (Sinnerbrink, 178, 185; Sinnerbrink, 25, 44).

Sinnerbrink points out a serious deficiency in this paradigm. It can provide rigor, but not existential relevance. Because it is focused on constructing scientific theories, the analytic-cognitive paradigm must eschew the interpretation of individual films. Sinnerbrink refers to this phenomenon as the disenfranchisement of film (Sinnerbrink, 25-66, 33; Sinnerbrink, 173-174, 182-184).

In place of the analytic-cognitive paradigm, Sinnerbrink recommends as film studies' future the film-philosophy approach. The chief characteristic of this proposed paradigm is that it will substitute "non-conceptual forms of experience and understanding" for "conceptual comprehension" of film (Sinnerbrink, 182, Sinnerbrink, 25-26). The result will be a "distinctively cinematic kind of thinking" which will reenfranchise film (Sinnerbrink, 180).

Therefore, in the debate between McDowell and Dreyfus, Sinnerbrink clearly comes down on the side of Dreyfus. Sinnerbrink's cinematic receptivity is Dreyfus's non-conceptual perception. Since there is no

personal-level, non-conceptual content, the results of the film-philosophy paradigm will be a replay of many of the problems of Grand Theory pointed out by Sinnerbrink. He hopes that the film-philosophy approach will restore that the “ethico-political dimensions” of Grand Theory will not be realized, because without truth there is no rigor, and without rigor there is no relevance (Sinnerbrink, 185, Sinnerbrink, 42).

The irony is that McDowell’s position is well-suited to accomplish the goals the Sinnerbrink sets for film studies. Many of Sinnerbrink’s valid criticisms of the analytic-cognitive paradigm do not apply to McDowell. Because of his separation of the space of law from the space of reasons, McDowell is opposed to scientific theories pitched at the personal level. His position is much closer to the interpretive approach that Sinnerbrink wants than it is to that of a natural science.

Therefore, the approach of McDowell does not disenfranchise art. As the work of Alice Crary demonstrates, McDowell’s separation of the two spaces gives a vital role to narrative and narrative techniques in forming our conceptual capacities (Crary, 325-326). McDowell can meet Sinnerbrink’s demand for transformative, existential relevance. My discussion of *The Lives of Others* through the lens of second nature hopefully exhibits this possibility. Moreover, since he is an analytic philosopher, McDowell can deliver this relevance while retaining rigor, unlike Dreyfus’s non-conceptualist position. McDowell represents the foundations of a viable future for film studies.

7. Film and the Education of Moral Sensibilities

When Dreyman plays the music Jerska gives him, he asks, “Can anyone who hears this music, I mean truly hears it, really be a bad person?” Dreyman’s hypothesis is that art can change people for the better. Even though Hempf explicitly disagrees with him when Hempf argues that people cannot change, Wiesler does change and his exposure to art plays an important role in that change. Is Dreyman’s hypothesis correct? Can art change people in the real world, not just in a film? Can watching *The Lives of Others* make us better people? If McDowell’s view of second nature is correct, then art must have the ability to change our conceptual capacities or we do not understand what it is to be a person. Hempf’s mendacious compliment to Dreyman that “writers are the engineers of the soul” is actually true, because we live our lives in the space of reasons.

This conclusion leads to another way in which McDowell’s approach is the future of film studies. Humanities departments are facing an existential threat now that universities are being run by accountants as cost centers. However, everyone has to live. Humanities departments can fulfill a vital role and fill their classrooms by presenting and interpreting narratives that are sonatas that show good men and women and thus show how to live.

8. Conclusion

McDowell’s concept of second nature is crucial for the future of film studies. It shows that film studies must follow a path where perception is viewed as conceptual not non-conceptual. His concept also provides a robust tool for the interpretation of individual films. This process was illustrated by an interpretation of the German surveillance film *The Lives of Others*. Finally, McDowell’s approach ties in naturally with an emphasis on the cultivation of moral sensibilities through film and film interpretation. This focus is the best approach for keeping the field of film studies vital in a challenging academic environment.

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