

Environment and Emotion in *The Revenant*: A Cognitive Approach

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Abstract: This paper investigates the role of the environment in cuing spectator emotions in *The Revenant*. In order to analyze how the environment is portrayed to evoke emotional responses, this article utilizes a cognitive approach toward film. One important way in which this process works is through the protagonist's experience of his surroundings. By following Hugh Glass on his journey through the wilderness, the viewer shares his experience of it and responds emotionally in a congruent way: with terror, fear, and compassion as well as with curiosity and genuine interest in nature. However, *The Revenant* additionally encourages a different set of emotions toward the wilderness that are not connected to Glass's fate or desires. Spectators are invited to feel emotions toward the environment per se, both in *The Revenant* and in real life. Cutaways to fascinating shots of unspoiled wilderness invite contemplation about the human impact on natural life and the lack of willingness to change harmful behavior ever since the beginnings of environmental exploitation as depicted in *The Revenant*. The latter emotions can nevertheless not be regarded as independent from the narrative but rather as part of the cinematic experience, since they are evoked within the context of the film.

The “true power of cinema: visual story-telling [...] is [at] the very heart of moving-pictures as an art,” says director Alejandro G. Iñárritu in an interview about *The Revenant* (Hailey). Even without any knowledge of the film, this quote already reveals much about it. The protagonist's dramatic quest for survival is a highly aesthetic experience. In *The Revenant* (2015), Hugh Glass is part of a fur-trapping expedition to the American West in the 1820s. After Glass is severely wounded by a grizzly bear, his half Native American son Hawk and two other trappers stay behind with the promise to take care of him as long as needed. Due to Glass's critical injuries, his colleague Fitzgerald—who turns out to be the main antagonist—

tries to kill him in order to be able to move on. Yet his son witnesses the scene and desperately attempts to save his father. Thereupon, Fitzgerald murders Hawk in front of Glass before he buries the latter alive in the forest and sets out to rejoin the expedition group. Afterward, Glass is driven by an enormous will to survive and avenge the death of his son. Spectators follow him on his journey through the merciless depths of the wilderness with its unknown territory, harsh coldness, and dangerous animals until the final encounter with Fitzgerald and Glass's realization about the futility of revenge.

Whereas emotional engagement with characters tends to take center stage in the study of how films evoke affective responses, the environment that surrounds and influences the storyworld is often neglected. The landscape in the film can, in fact, be regarded as a character on its own: Although it is not able to speak and articulate its thoughts or wishes, it can—much like *The Revenant* itself—create power in a wordless manner. The success of the fur-trapping expedition to the American West in the 1820s greatly depended on the environment's willingness to cooperate with the explorers. Even though the analysis of *The Revenant* builds on fictional moving pictures—adapted from Michael Punke's eponymous novel—the story is based on true records of the hunter Hugh Glass. As a member of an expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1823, Glass turned into a national hero by surviving a bear attack and fighting his way back to life in excruciating conditions (Coleman ix). Indeed, his status as a national hero played an important role in the development of the concept of Manifest Destiny: the belief in American exceptionalism and the right to expand westward. Coleman points out that, “[i]nstead of American environmentalism, Glass serves up environmental Americanism” (x), which is accurately portrayed in Iñárritu's interpretation of early-nineteenth-century wilderness explorations. Nature played an important role in the founding of the nation, and the frontiersmen experienced it in all its relentlessness. Nevertheless, the main objective of the explorations was environmental exploitation for human purposes. I will argue that *The Revenant* not only invokes emotional responses in viewers by drawing attention to the natural environment, as it cues emotions toward the environment through the experiences of the protagonist and his relationship to the wild, but also allows spectators to free themselves from his concerns and establish connections to an important subtext of the film: environmental exploitation.

The following section offers a concise introduction to cognitive film studies to provide a suitable theoretical background for the subsequent analysis. Building on that, I will proceed with the first part of the analysis of *The Revenant*, which seeks to uncover and explain the ways in which the environment becomes the main force of the film: how it invites emotional responses through mental simulations and

embodiment, and how these emotions are supported through the main character's visceral experiences of it. The second part of the analysis will focus not only on the power of the landscape to evoke feelings about its beauty but also about its vulnerability, both in the fictional world of the film and in the real world. These are, however, unsettled by frustrating emotions related to the lack of environmental care in contemporary society, which are triggered through the juxtaposition of the unspoiled wilderness and environmental exploitation in *The Revenant*.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND ON COGNITIVE FILM STUDIES

Since the development of cinema, various discourses began to revolve around the role of film in society or the particularities of moving pictures themselves. On the basis of that, distinctive film theories emerged from the 1960s onward, including the “semiotic, psychoanalytic, cognitive, or phenomenological film theory” (Elsaesser and Hagener 2). In the 1980s, cognitive film studies was born as a reaction against psychoanalysis and semiotics—the leading disciplines in scholarly work on film at that time (Nannicelli). According to Nannicelli and Taberham, one defining criterion of the cognitive approach is “a general focus on the mental activity of viewers as the central (but not the only) object of inquiry” (4). The increasing evidence of a strong relationship between body and mind based on neuroscientific findings led to a consensus that “emotions and cognitions tend to work together [...] help[ing] us to evaluate our world” (Plantinga and Smith, Introduction 2). While trying to determine what happens in the viewer's brain and body, the cognitive approach is highly interdisciplinary, drawing insights from “[l]inguistics, artificial intelligence, anthropology, neurology, psychology, and philosophy” (4).

Psychological and philosophical scholarly work, in particular, aims to gain a deeper understanding about the specific role of emotions in the film-viewing experience “not as formless, chaotic feelings but as structured states” (Plantinga and Smith, Introduction 2). According to Plantinga and Smith, the processes involved in humans' emotive reactions toward real-life humans, nonhumans, imaginations, or beliefs are similar to responses toward fictional objects. Both comprise a bodily change affected by the feelings involved and by a cognitive assessment of the emotions (6). Yet the two types of emotional responses cannot be regarded as identical because spectators are constantly aware of the film's fictional nature. What happens is a so-called “mental simulation” of characters' emotions (6), meaning that viewers do not experience exactly the same feelings as characters but simulate these emotions “off-line, disconnected from their normal perceptual inputs and behavioural outputs” (Currie

144-45).¹ Nevertheless, these feelings still have the power to influence the cognitive mind and the body if they are effectively implemented in film.

Of central importance, from a psychological viewpoint, are emotional processes that lead to empathy and character engagement. A major breakthrough was achieved in the 1990s when mirror mechanisms were discovered in the human brain with the help of neuroscientific research (Wojciehowski and Gallese). According to Wojciehowski and Gallese, the mechanism involves “premotor neurons” that “typically discharge both when a motor act is executed and when it is observed being performed by someone else.” Further research demonstrated that not only actions could be mapped on one’s brain but sensory experiences as well. On this basis, the embodied simulation theory (Wojciehowski and Gallese), which includes “processes of affective mimicry, facial feedback, and emotional contagion,” was developed (Plantinga, “Scene” 240). Empathy—feeling with nonfictional or fictional objects—is therefore greatly based on these subprocesses of embodied simulation. The involuntary activities that imitate the observable behavior of objects, animate and inanimate, are combined with the primarily cognitive and, if successful, the emotional simulation of their inner life. The emphasis on objects and not merely animate beings as sources of emotion is particularly important for this paper as I use the cognitive approach to film in order to explore emotive responses toward the environment in *The Revenant* in the following section.

WHEN BACKGROUND BECOMES FOREGROUND: ENVIRONMENT AS AN ACTIVE AGENT AND ELICITOR OF EMOTIONS

The theoretical section served to explain how it is possible for humans to empathize with moving pictures. Consequently, relevant scenes of the environment as an elicitor of emotions will be analyzed in close relation to the outlined concepts of mental and embodied simulation, which should reflect the connection of mind and body in emotive responses. The opening sequence of *The Revenant*—Hugh Glass’s flashback of his Native American wife and their son—is followed by a shot of a creek, which is slowly explored by a moving camera. As the camera wanders alongside the water, viewers are transported into the world of the narrative during this long, uninterrupted take. In an experimental study, Gallese and Guerra showed that the feeling of motion created by a moving camera instead of a static camera results in a higher activation of mirror mechanisms in the brains of spectators (110). Due to the fact that subjective

1 For a more detailed account of the so-called mental simulation hypothesis, cf. Currie 139-63.

camera motion resembles the bodily movements of humans, it increases viewers' emotional responses (111). According to Wojcickowski and Gallese, embodied simulation, a process central to empathy, takes place when others' movements or emotions get mapped onto viewers' motor or sensory systems through neural mirroring. While they explain the embodied simulation theory merely in relation to "other human beings, and, to an extent, with some animals" (Wojcickowski and Gallese), Di Dio et al. carried out an empirical study on the perception of still images. Their results show that artworks solely portraying nature perform similarly to pictures depicting the human body in observers' responses—both lead to the activation of mirror mechanisms. Paintings featuring humans affirm the embodied simulation theory because bodies are generally associated with movement, whereas landscape pictures offer observers the opportunity to move through the depicted environment—both mentally and bodily—while looking at the artwork (14).

This suggests, as Weik von Mossner notes, "that we also map inanimate movement such as that of a waterfall (even one represented in art) onto the motor systems of our brain, simulating and thus understanding it in relation to our own bodies, regardless of the fact that our bodies are not actually capable of performing that particular kind of movement" (73). Although the motion of a creek is not a human motion, the visual representations of the rhythmic movements in the water, combined with foregrounded sounds of flowing water and low-pitched music, create a synergy that invites embodied simulation. After the camera incrementally raises its head and positions itself on Hawk's eye level, the musical score changes to a discontinuous and foreboding mixture of the sound of flowing water and the high-pitched call of an elk. When Hawk is called by his father, the camera turns around with him, exploring the forest like the fur hunters. Such movements, which can be achieved by a steadicam,² represent the human gaze and draw the spectators into the storyworld as an additional, invisible person (Gallese and Guerra 111).

Natural landscape is indeed present in almost every scene of the film, yet not merely as a setting for narrative events. More than a background space, it holds an active position in relation to the storyworld and the viewers' emotional responses. The fur trappers come to uncharted wilderness to explore and, ultimately, to exploit it. To be able to do so, they need to adapt to natural forces. Their aim is to use the obtained resources for capitalist purposes, but just like a character who tries to work against their plans, nature turns their efforts into a difficult journey. "The ideal of subduing

2 A steadicam is a "camera fixed to the body of the cameraman, walking towards the scene" (Gallese and Guerra 109). It increases the spectator's empathic response by conveying their "point of view inside the cinematic space-time, giving this point of view the immanence of a virtual body capable of moving in a very natural manner together with the film characters" (111).

nature for commercial purposes” (Brulle 117) was at the heart of Manifest Destiny, which is why the portrayal of the wild as the “villain” (Nash qtd. in Brulle 117) also becomes apparent in *The Revenant*. Frequently, the audience is presented with shots where landscapes are first introduced by the moving camera, which explores the space and only then ‘stumbles upon’ the characters, who initially appear diminutive compared to the surrounding environment before the camera finally approaches them. The viewers’ attention is mainly directed to the foregrounded environment before it is guided toward the characters and the roles are reversed. It needs to be repeated that the filmic environment in *The Revenant* rarely, if ever, serves as a mere setting for the narrative. This is representative of a sort of hierarchy: Nature was there first, while humans came second.

Therefore, the environment is the force that controls the men’s actions and the audience is invited to feel the dominance of Mother Nature, which surrounds and delimits everything the characters can do. This is not only supported by the exhaustively used extreme wide shots, which let viewers explore and immerse themselves in the environment, but also reinforced by camera movement, sound, and music. Jon Taylor, one of the sound mixers of *The Revenant*, observes that “music never just takes over, it always has spaces so that nature can come through and co-exist” (Woodhall). Inárritu puts a lot of emphasis on including natural sounds of trees, birds, or the wind that are not necessarily related to what is shown on screen but reinforce the illusion of reality and make the spectator feel they are part of the experience (Woodhall). “[T]o enhance the emotional storytelling [...] [and] create subjective feelings in the audience,” music interacts with the diegetic sounds in a melodic synchrony (Woodhall). This enables an “*affective congruence*,” in which “music emotionally matches the visual and narrative events, thereby heightening the viewer’s emotional experience” (Willemsen and Kiss 111).

As spectators are in allegiance³ with Hugh Glass, they empathize with him and see the environment through the character’s point of view. Alone in the wilderness, in harsh conditions, he moves forward against all odds. Throughout the protagonist’s journey, the environment often personifies a fearsome, unpredictable character that contradicts his wishes. The dangers become especially apparent when Glass is fiercely attacked by a bear. The whole struggle is filmed in a single shot, which shows Glass repeatedly being thrown to the ground, turned over, and mauled by the attacker. Close-ups particularly show Glass’s facial expressions in order to transmit his feelings of

3 Murray Smith defines allegiance—commonly termed identification—as a process which “pertains to the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator” (84). For a detailed discussion of the so-called structure of sympathy, cf. M. Smith.

agony to the spectators. While the bear grunts constantly, Glass screams in pain, and both breathe heavily. The lack of music in this scene draws attention to the sounds that the brutal animal versus human fight induces. These audiovisual aspects allow for a strong transfer of Glass's emotions to the spectator, who imitates some of the facial expressions and the heavy breathing through affective mimicry, which will be explained in more detail in the following paragraph. Although viewers are clearly aware of the fictional nature of the events and of the screen separating them from the actual storyworld, their imagination as a central component combined with the physical arousal taking place in their bodies creates empathy.⁴ Another noteworthy aspect is the singing of the birds in the background. According to Randy Thom, a member of the sound-mixing team of *The Revenant*, this demonstrates "[t]he humility that nature is this unimaginably huge thing [...] oblivious to human activity and human tragedy" (James).

Another way viewers emotionally engage with the environment and the protagonist alike is through the use of breath as a metaphor. After Glass sees how his son gets killed, he experiences intense emotions. His facial expression is shown in what Plantinga calls "*the scene of empathy*," designed not only to communicate strong emotions, but also to evoke spectators' empathy ("Scene" 239). This happens through involuntary "processes of affective mimicry, facial feedback, and emotional contagion" (240). In other words, viewers mimic fictional characters and, thereby, pick up congruent emotions themselves. When the viewer witnesses Glass desperately grunting with all the energy his body still has to offer, their moral approval of him lets them feel for him through mental simulation of his condition. With differing but corresponding emotions, these responses are then further intensified by the automatic mimicry of his facial expressions, allowing viewers to physically simulate exactly how the character feels. This is possible through embodied simulation, which Wojciehowski and Gallese describe as "*liberated*" because it is not connected to reality, making it even more akin to intense emotions. Knowing that it has no real-life consequences, spectators can fully empathize with Glass, who experiences the killing of his son as a helpless victim. In several other scenes, his breath becomes even more real as it obscures the lens due to the camera's proximity. This happens, for instance, when he has to leave his dead son or after his brutal fight with Fitzgerald at the end of the film. While the audience

4 This awareness of the fictional nature of the storyworld and the still present emotional involvement was first described by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 as the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" (ch. XIV). Wojciehowski and Gallese expand on this concept and add that it "becomes *liberated*" as it stands in no connection to the real world. Spectators' "defensive guard[s]" momentarily stop working, and they allow themselves to feel intense emotions due to the insignificance of the portrayed fiction to their real lives (Wojciehowski and Gallese).

consciously notices the camera, the breath also has the potential to create an immersive effect. Almost being able to touch his breath makes the viewer feel closer to the protagonist.

Nevertheless, nature can also be forgiving at times because Hugh Glass is ready to learn how to interact with it. Through his comprehensive knowledge of the land and his willingness to adapt to it, the protagonist—and thus the spectator—relates to it in a more positive way than his fellow fur trappers. One aspect of nature that particularly counteracts its unfathomable power is the role of the sun, which acts as a sign of hope for the audience through its bright rays of light. Although temperatures are extremely low and danger seems to be lurking everywhere, the sunlight demonstrates that nature can be as rewarding as it is dangerous. After Glass falls from a cliff with his horse while being chased by members of the Native American Arikara tribe, a tree cushions his plunge to the ground, saving him. This is an indication of the importance of trees in *The Revenant*, which will be further explored at the end of this section. Unfortunately, Glass's horse dies due to the fall. Heavily injured, Glass takes shelter from the freezing night in the animal's carcass. When Glass wakes up the next morning and crawls out of the horse's inside, the camera cuts back and forth between him and the sun. His blurred vision represents the torment of his past wandering through the wilderness. Then, the camera moves to a wide angle shot showing him standing beneath the sun. The audience sees him caressing the horse and appreciating the positive aspects of the environment before he moves toward the sun with new-found energy. Although he knows that the rays of light offer no physical warmth, he is determined to continue his expedition. With the snow conspicuously melting, noticeable on both the acoustic and visual level, his exhaustion seems to disappear as well.

The visual portrayal of trees in *The Revenant* provides an additional example of embodied simulation. In one scene, Glass remembers the words of his wife, which are delivered through a voice-over in the Pawnee language and subtitled in English: "As long as you can still grab a breath, you fight, you breathe, keep breathing. When there is a storm and you stand in front of a tree, if you look at its branches, you swear it will fall. But if you watch the trunk, you will see its stability." With the help of point-of-view editing,⁵ first a close-up of Glass's face looking up at something is shown, and then the object of his gaze is revealed: branches moving from one side to the other, while the roots remain strong. Here, the film invites the viewer to respond to both

5 Point-of-view editing refers to a so-called subjective camera that films the storyworld from a character's point of view. Usually, first the character's face is shown before their object of vision is represented in a reverse-angle shot, "180 degrees opposed to the previous shot" (Cardullo 279).

Glass's facial expression as well as to the trees' movement through embodied simulation. The fact that the trees' motion is closely linked to the character and his strength can thus result in a more intense embodiment. The wind is the breath of nature that makes the trees shake, but they will not fall, just like Glass will not surrender as long as he still draws breath. Since he rarely speaks, his breathing and grunting—as well as the emotions he puts into it—become a crucial part of his communication with the viewers.

In previous paragraphs, the mental imagination of the storyworld has been discussed in its interrelation with environmental embodiment and Hugh Glass' subjective experience of it. However, other types of landscape shots make up a considerable part of *The Revenant* as well. Their ability to evoke emotional responses separated from Hugh Glass and the immediate circumstances of the film will be explored in the following section.

INTRIGUING LANDSCAPE IMAGERY AND BITTERSWEET EMOTIONS

Throughout the whole film, wide-angle shots of powerful landscapes are interspersed, which do not derive their power from the dominant brutality of nature. Instead, their effect lies in the peace and quietness of it. If camera movement is present in these shots, it is very subtle. Predominantly, the shots act almost like still images with little sound and even less music. Sometimes, however, clouds move or the wind blows slightly. With the help of these images, a dichotomy between the brutality and the beauty of nature is created. The viewer's calmness stems from the absence of characters as the environment is portrayed as welcoming and kind in its solitude. Since these shots resemble traditional artworks, we can refer back to the results of the study by Di Dio et al., which illustrate that these vistas are able to lead to emotional responses in viewers. While witnessing character motion, actions get mapped on the spectator's motor systems because they, as human figures, can fulfill the same actions. Yet according to Di Dio et al., "the aesthetic processing of nature content paintings representing landscape scenarios would involve an additional sensori-motor component internally generated to favor imaginary exploratory behavior" (14). Thus, the observer sets out to explore the presented landscape, and what is important is that this exploration takes place "in an 'embodied' manner" (13). Spectators are invited to imaginatively explore the environment and physically simulate the tranquility and allure of it. Through embodied simulation, the peacefulness represented in the images is transferred to their own bodies, which then again affects their feelings or mood.

These images are introduced through a straight cut since the director wants to draw attention to them.⁶ They appear in the form of so-called cutaways, which Kooperman defines as “the interruption of a continuously filmed piece of action” while “something else is inserted” (94). Tan and Frijda claim that such an insertion of natural imagery falls under “the awe-inspiration theme” (62), arguing that “we enjoy the sight of a majestic landscape [...] regardless of what they mean to the protagonist’s fate and feeling” (52). Similarly, Lefebvre suggests that such cases lead to “the emergence of landscape in the film, assuring the autonomy of the exterior space from the narrative—even if only momentarily” (“Between Setting” 31). Indeed, the extreme wide shots do not advance the narrative in any kind of way, nor do they ever show any characters. Lefebvre claims that “the narrative function of *setting* may momentarily fade and the depiction of space acquires, in the spectator’s gaze, the kind of autonomy traditionally required by pictorial landscape imagery” (“On Landscape” 66). He distinguishes between setting and landscape, the former being any kind of environment within the storyworld and the latter being the independent scenery, thus arguing that viewers are “switching back and forth between setting and landscape” (Lefebvre, “Between Setting” 33).

However, Weik von Mossner criticizes this duality by arguing that “[i]t is somewhat limiting to assume that viewers’ minds operate in a binary mode that forces them to shift back and forth between a ‘narrative mode’ and a ‘spectacular mode’ of viewing, which are mutually exclusive” (59). According to Lefebvre’s definition, such an alternation between setting and landscape would take place a great number of times in *The Revenant* as natural vistas are frequently inserted in between scenes showing character action. This would most likely impair the flow of the narrative if these sequences were regarded as independent rather than as part of the viewing experience as a whole. Weik von Mossner’s argument that “spectacle and narrative can influence and reinforce one another” (59; cf. also King 17-40) can certainly be confirmed in the analysis of *The Revenant*, although in this case the emotions that the narrative and the spectacle produce are not reinforcing but rather contradictory. At a later stage, it will be shown that contradictions in emotion processing do not restrain each other.

While these landscape images can almost be enjoyed as pieces of visual art that remind spectators how captivatingly beautiful nature is, they have a greater function within the narrative as a whole and therefore cannot be regarded as instances “in which the cinematic landscape becomes a pure spectacle” (Weik von Mossner 57). As a matter of fact, they are not independent art pieces but deliberate parts of the entire

6 A straight cut, also called direct cut, is the most frequent type of cuts, in which shot A immediately shifts to shot B (Kroon 651).

film experience. One reason why cutaways are used in film, according to Kooperman, may be to navigate the focus to a “subtext” (94). Essentially, the film is Hugh Glass’ survival story, and spectators who are in allegiance with him want him to succeed and to learn to control nature for his own purposes. However, in this man versus nature survival narrative, the harm that humanity brings upon nature is a significant subtext. Viewers cannot help but notice the detrimental effects these men force upon the environment.

As these shots of beautiful landscapes are embedded in the narrative, viewers are invited to make a connection between them and the aspirations of the characters, whose main goal is to exploit the portrayed environment and thereby rob it of its beauty. Therefore, the human impact on the environment becomes stirringly obvious when these fascinating scenery shots stand in comparison to scenes in which, for example, a great number of dead animals used for fur trade are displayed. Cardullo calls these cutaways “temps mort” because they virtually stop the flow of narrative progression and cause a “returning to [...] a real world” (151). With regard to his definition of this filmic technique, the following can be assumed: When spectators are presented with these recurring wide shots of truly beautiful landscapes amidst the fur trappers’ often detrimental behavior toward nature, they are encouraged to think of the scarce presence of such places nowadays. In fact, such exploitative traditions still exist. In an interview, Inárritu mentions the modern-day connection by explaining that the “social context” in which “people killed so [many] animals and extract[ed] [resources from] nature and [caused] so much pain in nature, in animals, in communities is very resonant today. We keep doing the same and that was the planted seed of the global warming that now is the harvest of what we planted 200 years ago” (Olsen). Almost two hundred years later, the human species still has not learned from past mistakes and continues to harm the environment with abusive customs. This is what *The Revenant* asks viewers to realize, both on an emotional and on a cognitive level.

A perception of these landscape vistas might first lead to emotional responses through embodied simulation, because the involved processes are “involuntary, and pre-rational” (Wojciehowski and Gallese). Greg M. Smith developed the so-called associative model, defining that an “emotion system can be initiated without relying on conscious cognition” (111), which is exactly what happens during embodied simulation. Hence, the spectator is likely to first perceive solely the beauty of nature. However, taking into account those emotions that could be described as exasperation with humanity’s foolishness, a cognitive process is clearly involved. Firstly, cognition is of great importance as viewers need to understand the narrative and be able to link the society portrayed within the film to today’s society. Smith argues that the emotional

stimuli have to be intense in order to reach consciousness, but after that happens, thought is able “to influence the course of an emotion and vice versa.” Therefore, the viewer is able to link the imagery to the narrative and subsequently to reality, as the “[e]motional evaluation takes place in parallel to the conscious assessment of stimuli” (111). Based on the concept of “cooperative spectators,” who respond in agreement with the film’s intentions (Plantinga, “Trauma” 242), the emotional stimuli these vistas provide should indeed be enough to lead to emotional responses and thereafter allow cognition to affect or, in this case, alter the nature of the response. Hence, the final emotional response might not be “logically connected” to the stimulus (G. Smith 111)—frustration in the perception of a beautiful landscape—but as interconnectedness lies at the heart of this model, the outcome is a product of a number of processes.

At this point, it needs to be questioned how a viewer who responds to these images in the argued way is still able to develop strong emotions for the protagonist. The sense of anger or frustration with humanity for holding on to faulty traditions, which essentially stems from the traders’ actions, does not seem to be in congruence with character engagement. In his model, Greg M. Smith also provides an answer to this question by simply arguing that “the emotion system can connect emotions that appear to be opposites” (111). In *The Revenant*, these different emotions are not mutually exclusive because spectators’ emotional processes do not follow rigid systems that only allow for one-sided, unambiguous emotions. Moreover, Glass cannot be equated with other tradesmen: Although he shares part of the guilt being one of the fur traders, the narrative provides him with more depth and admirable character traits that—in the minds of the spectators—can compensate for his wrongdoings. One quality that distinguishes Glass from the average frontiersman is his vast knowledge of the environment, which is connected to his genuine and not merely profit-oriented interest in the American West. In close relation to this interest is his expression of both openness and affection toward Native Americans, which is particularly represented through the strong bond between him and his deceased Pawnee wife and their son Hawk.

Finally, it should be specified how the spectators connect their own world to the narrative world. When spectators perceive filmic representations that are reminiscent of the world they live in, they are able to create relations to the fictional world. Indeed, the perception of fiction is “governed by the same cognitive architecture that guides us through our real-world encounters” (Rushton and Bettinson 158). Yet it is not reality but a way of safe simulation of the latter. According to Keith Oatley, it is “a particularly useful simulation because negotiating the social world effectively is extremely tricky,” which is why “stories and dramas can help us understand the complexities of social life” (43). Mar and Oatley expand on that by arguing that

“stories can provide a means by which we use history to learn how things may occur in the future” (177). The film’s portrayal of American history and, more generally, humanity’s aim to gain infinite control over nature so as to pursue human interests are very resonant in today’s culture. This might even lead spectators to rethink their own position in such a society. Not all viewers are likely to respond in the argued manner toward the landscape vistas. However, having comprehended the narrative, including the implications it has for modern society, rethinking one’s stance is something the film evokes. If spectators are concerned about the environment and its ongoing destruction, an emotional response is possible as “emotion signifies that some concern of the individual has been affected” (Tan 44).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, a cognitive approach was applied to the analysis of *The Revenant* for the purpose of uncovering how moving pictures *move* viewers emotionally. The emphasis was put on the natural environment as the main elicitor of emotions. In the first part, I argued that emotive responses toward nature are mainly governed by the protagonist’s experiences. Through cognitive simulations of Glass’s hardships and the embodiment of his movements and expressions, the spectator empathizes with him throughout his journey in the wilderness. One important cinematic technique that calls for emotional responses toward the environment is the extensive use of wide shots with a lot of camera motion. This makes the spectator feel they are part of the storyworld, almost moving through it themselves. The focus on nature at the visual level that allows embodied simulation based on mirror mechanisms is commensurately present on the acoustic level since the sonic and musical choices constitute a crucial component of an emotional viewing experience.

However, there is a set of seemingly contradictory emotions toward the environment that are independent from character desires but not from the narrative as a whole. In the second part, I explored the direct cuts to visually compelling landscape imagery, which do not lead to a mere acceptance of beauty but also invite contemplation. Spectators are encouraged to link these images of unspoiled nature to the society in both the storyworld and in the real world. The explorers’ mission in the film is to change that purity and squeeze profit from it in any way possible, regardless of the consequences. This is reminiscent of present-day society that does not intend to break with traditions, although the damage they cause is obvious. After a conscious assessment, the first emotional perception of beauty is replaced by frustration. While these emotions predominantly take the real world as their object, they cannot be

discussed in isolation from the story because they are generated as part of the narrative experience. The power of fiction certainly lies in its ability to evoke strong emotions, which can raise consciousness toward societal issues. A potential effect on the audience's stance toward the environment is, of course, highly speculative, but if viewers accurately receive the discussed emotional potential that *The Revenant* possesses—governed by the combined effects of visuals, cinematography, sound, music, and editing—a change in real-world behavior is not utterly impossible.

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