BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Claudia A. Barriga was born in Chicago in 1972, where her father was pursuing a Ph.D. in Mathematics, but her roots and hometown are in Santiago, Chile. She got her undergraduate degree in Psychology at the Universidad Diego Portales, where she also received professional qualification as a Clinical Psychologist. She has worked as a counselor and a school psychologist, but found herself more interested in her work as teaching assistant and instructor of Psychology of Communication, under the guidance of her academic mentor, Eduardo Llanos Melussa. Her interest in Communication as a field that could breach gaps between psychology and media studies led her to pursue a graduate degree at Cornell University. Claudia is presently working towards completing her doctoral program at Cornell.

Esta tesis esta dedicada a mi familia: a mi mamá, a mi hermana Paula y a

Gabriel, porque está aquí gracias a ellos, como yo.

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Introduction

Moral stories are common in movies and television. Viewers are often exposed to tales that show moral choices, moral conflicts or direct moral lessons. *Cold Mountain* shows moral choices that common men and women have to make at times of war: is it ok to steal? Desert the army? Kill in self defense? *The Last Samurai* presents the way in which a man follows his own moral code in the face of adversity. *The Life of David Gale* tells the story of how a group of characters face the problem of the death penalty. For centuries scholars have assumed that the moral elements in stories can influence our thoughts and behaviors. This assumption has tended to generate concern that movies have negative effects on people's values and moral behavior For example, Rockwell and Bryant examined the possibility that exposure to television with sexual indiscretion made teenagers more prone to consider them acceptable (Rockwell & Bryant, 1994). Narvaez (1999) finds that the combination of adolescent moral development and movies with rebel heroes may be a toxic one. It is often assumed that part of this influence of movies works "unconsciously"; we may be influenced without even noticing it. However, there is also the less studied possibility that this influence occurs through conscious thinking about the moral issues presented in movies. This study focuses on conscious thoughts about movies, and the role they play in our movie watching experience.

I decided to do research on this topic after finishing a study consisting of a discourse analysis of movies about psychotherapy (Barriga, 2001). One of the main findings was that moral elements of the relation between therapist and patient was a central issue to the plot, and that it was dealt with in complex and sometimes ambiguous ways, to the point that it was hard for me, as a viewer, to determine what was right and wrong within the context of the story. It seemed to me that these movies

enclosed a complex message and offered the viewer an opportunity for in depth

reflection about some moral conflicts and dilemmas that they might face in a

therapeutic situation, whether they were therapists or clients. I wondered if "common

viewers" were able to grasp the moral complexity and took the chance to reflect on

these issues.

This led, with time, to a more general question. Do people, when confronted to

the moral dimension that is central to many movies, take the chance to process this

thoughtfully and challenge their current structure of moral thinking? A question that

comes even earlier is: do people think about moral issues at all?

A review of research in this area showed that there is very little research that

looks at what people consciously think about while viewing films with moral content.

We do not actually know if people think about the moral element at all. This study is a

first attempt at finding out if people think consciously about moral elements in

movies, and to explore what kinds of moral thoughts emerge. This is, in my opinion, a

first step towards knowing whether people are close to using movies as a tool to reflect

upon their own moral beliefs and developments. A better understanding of conscious

moral thoughts about movies would probably be helpful to understand the mechanisms

by which people are morally influenced by movies, if at all. It would also help to

better understand the role of moral thoughts in the appreciation of stories in general,

beyond moral damage or moral growth.

This study intends to answer these questions by exploring a sample of online

reviewers' comments for 14 contemporary movies on the Internet Movie Database

(IMDb), an extensive website devoted to film. The IMDb reviews allow us to examine

thoughts about movies that were produced in a natural setting[1]; an advantage in terms

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[1] There may be questions raised about the ethics of content analyzing data posted on the world wide
web. I take the stance that reviews published in the IMDb are public information, in the same way that
an article in a newspaper, or even the section of "letters to the editor" in a newspaper or magazine are.

of knowing whether people think of moral issues at all after they watch fictional films in their everyday lives.

The idea that stories can have a moral influence is an old one, beginning with Aristotle claiming that a fable with a moral can make people virtuous. This idea has led to some research on the way in which people are morally influenced by stories. I will examine this research to see what it tells us about the ways in which people are affected by moral stories in terms of positive moral development and/or negative moral effects. This requires an examination of some current ideas about moral psychology and moral development. The content analysis performed in this study will then examine whether the moral thoughts of the online reviewers behave like the moral thoughts discussed by these theories of psychological moral development.

Another line of research assumes that people are always thinking morally while they watch movies, and that these moral judgments are linked to their enjoyment of the film. I will examine this theory to see what role it assigns to moral thoughts, what evidence it provides that people think of movies morally, and what kinds of moral thoughts it assumes that people are making. The content analysis will then examine whether the online reviewers are thinking of the movies in a way that fits with those notions of the role of moral thoughts.

A review of this literature leads to a realization that some questions can be raised about the way research in this area has been conducted so far. Particularly, some issues have been neglected. Most of the research has focused on stories that are very simple: good guys and bad guys. This study proposes that many movies are morally complex, and that research that accommodates that moral complexity is

Newspapers are commonly content analyzed, and I assume that it is acceptable to do so with these data, which is public to anyone online (the website does not even require registration or a password). Of course, I also take the precaution of protecting the individual identities of the posters. Their tag names are not disclosed, and I have tried to minimize the use of direct quotes that could lead to their tracking and identification.

needed. I will devote a section to define these different levels of moral complexity in stories. Another problem is that the research on moral thoughts has focused almost exclusively on people's thoughts about the characters and plot of a story. It is necessary to incorporate other elements that people might be thinking about, including the creators of the movie, the general audience, themselves, and other elements.

The Influence of Stories on Moral Thought

The interest in people's interpretations of moral issues in stories has been present since ancient times. The most evident example of this is the existence of fables and their often explicit morals. From ancient times children have been told stories in fable form, with their explicit moral, assuming that this will carry on to their moral development and behavior. Aristotle claimed hat any story is a form of moral argument, and that understanding this moral argument of stories could help to make us all more virtuous. In modern days, moralists like William Bennett (1993) publish collections of moral stories for children and adults, to act as a guide for moral self-improvement. Such endeavors seem to assume that being exposed to a moral argument in narrative form would, *per se*, be helpful to our moral development.

Several professional education institutions concerned with developing the ethical sensibilities of their future graduates have created ethics courses that use narratives. These projects use films or stories that present ethical issues associated with the profession (business, psychiatry, medicine, dentistry, etc.) and then have discussion sessions about these issues (Williams, 1998; Rudin, Edelson & Servis, 1998; Hunter, Charon & Coulehan, 1996; Crellin & Briones, 1996). The evaluations of these projects show that they do produce an increase in the level of complexity with which the students deal with ethical issues. Conscious discussion of the issues seems to be crucial for this improvement to occur. Indeed, one would think that a positive

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moral effect would not happen if the reader or viewer did not at least *think* and elaborate about the morality of the story. Being merely exposed to the story would not be enough. Thus, my study focuses on *conscious* moral thoughts about movies, with the understanding that conscious moral thought is key if "moral improvement" is to be found. Do conscious thoughts about morality appear if there is no one there to point out the moral elements of a film?

It may be relevant at this point to examine what is meant by "moral improvement" in the context of present day social sciences, and why exactly it is that the presence of conscious thoughts is an important element to keep in mind. Does moral improvement mean that people change from "bad values" to "good values", they go from being "bad" to being "better"? One clue to answer this question comes from the literature in moral psychology and moral development. This literature is not only about the values themselves, but about the way people think about moral problems and decisions, and how that thinking changes as a person develops through his/her lifetime.

The approach assumes that throughout the course of their lifetime, people's conceptions of what is right or wrong not only changes, but develops into broader and more complex understandings of the elements that come into play when making judgments and decisions about what is right and wrong.

Historically, the starting point of this tradition is in the work of Jean Piaget (1932) who, through observation of his own children (and later thousands of other children) determined three different stages of cognitive development, and corresponding stages of moral development. One of Piaget's more important realizations was that children, as they grow up, change the criteria through which they determine whether actions were "good" or "bad." The approach of very young children to morality is based on the concrete consequences of the action: if someone is

hurt, or something is destroyed, then there was a moral fault committed, and the gravity of the fault is directly proportional to the extent of the damage. As children grow up, they learn to consider intentionality of the actor as a key element to determine whether they have done right or wrong. The actual action and its consequences are not as important as the intentions behind the actor. For example, if I hurt someone badly, but accidentally, I am not "bad" any longer, whereas if I hurt someone a little, but intentionally, I may be considered a wrongdoer (Piaget, 1932; Lapsley, 1996). Kohlberg (1976), who reformulated and extended Piaget's work to explain moral development after adolescence, also includes the focus on rewards and punishments as a characteristic of primitive stages of moral development, In general, only young children will tend to make moral judgments based on whether an action was punished or not, or on whether it had individual negative consequences or not.

According to Kohlberg's description of moral development, after these initial stages in which morality is based on punishment and rewards, and as people learn to consider the viewpoints of others and of society at large, they reach higher stages of cognitive moral development. First, they will judge moral behavior to be the one that protects and respects close relationships, then the one that follows social rules and norms that are beneficial to societal operations, and finally the one that is guided by higher order principles, namely justice, respect for human life and egalitarianism (Kohlberg, 1976).

Although this is just a rough summary of Kohlberg's main ideas, it is enough to convey a couple of points about moral psychology that are relevant to this study. The first one is that people may achieve different levels of moral thought at different times of their lives, and that these different levels of moral development can be considered as different cognitive structures; like different sets of cognitive tools that people have to think about moral dilemmas. Moral development, according to these

scholars, is not entirely about finding out the right values, it is also about *thinking* of those values in a broader, more complex way. Moral development would be, to an extent, cognitive development. It is about how we *think*. As is the case with other aspects of cognitive development, or general change in cognitive structures, people need to be exposed to information that is conflictive or challenging of their current structures in order to begin the process of restructuring their set of cognitive tools (Piaget, 1932; Tappan, 1998). This is the mechanism we would expect to be behind moral development through stories. If people are faced with, for example, a story that presents a morality issue in a light that is conflictive with their existing cognitive structures to think about morality, one would hope they engage in a *thoughtful* process that could (though not necessarily would) lead to a structural change (Piaget, 1932; Lapsley, 1996). If people are presented a story in which moral issues and their resolution is consistent with their moral structures of thought, then one might would expect little thoughtful processing of that information, and probably no change in cognitive structures. This leads to the hypothesis that more explicit thoughts about morality will appear when people comment about movies that present moral complexity or ambiguity (I will define these movies later), because such morally complex movies are more likely to present moral issues in a way that is not consistent with the viewer's current moral structures.

Recognizing the moral dimension in movies

Of course, in order to actually produce conscious moral thoughts, people would have to recognize that there are moral elements present in the movie. Is this likely to happen? Actually, we do not know. People, regardless of their level of moral development, might still not reflect upon moral issues at all when exposed to a movie. They might fail to recognize the moral issues implied within the plot, they might fail

to deal with a movie as if it was a moral dilemma or presented one. Most research conducted under the Kohlbergian paradigm has been based on presenting people with brief story-like moral dilemmas, in which people are explicitly asked to make a moral decision, and in which the moral nature of the story is very clear and explicit. The moral nature of the story is clear because of the experimental context, the questions asked or the characteristics of the story itself. It has been proposed that before people can actually think morally about a real life dilemma, they must first recognize the moral implications of a situation (Rest, 1984). However, not all real life situations are built in such ways that we can recognize the moral aspects involved. Likewise, in complicated narratives such as movies, spectators do not necessarily have to acknowledge the moral aspects of the plot to understand it or be entertained. Thus, it is an open question whether people will recognize the moral issues involved in any movie at all. And this is a relevant question, because just as identifying moral issues is the first step towards high order moral behavior, it might also be the first step towards high order moral thought, and thus the possibility of moral change and development. Therefore, it speaks directly to the old assumption, being questioned and explored here, that merely being exposed to moral stories can help the spectator be more virtuous.

At this point it might be important to clarify an important distinction for this study; the one between moral thoughts that are prompted in some way by an experimenter, teacher or other person, and those moral thoughts that people may have spontaneously when exposed to a narrative. A fair amount of research on the area of moral psychology and morality focuses on prompted thoughts: people are presented with either a story like dilemma (the Kohlbergian approach, followed by Rest) or a story proper and asked specifically to evaluate the moral aspects of the plot. The advantages of this, proposed initially by Kohlberg (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987), are that

prompted thoughts can make people respond using their highest levels of cognitive moral competence (the moral complexities and issues they can at least understand, regardless of whether they are the ones used by them in daily life), whereas spontaneous thoughts would "just" reflect what Colby and Kohlberg call the "hard stages"; those moral structures of understanding that come to people automatically, even if they are not the highest they can produce (Lapsley, 1996).

Of course, if one's intended applications are educational or developmental, as is the case with much of the research conducted in these traditions (Williams, 1998; Rudin, Edelson & Servis, 1998; Hunter, Charon & Coulehan, 1996; Crellin & Briones, 1996), knowing just what the highest level of understanding of people is of great importance. According to modern constructivist learning theory, one needs to know people's "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978): that which a person can achieve with the help of others, but not by themselves. Clearly, if one thinks of an educational application for encouraging moral development, prompting the highest levels of moral thought that a person can produce and understand is important. The teacher or mediator will be there to help the subject deal with the difficulties of the high stage, and prompt its stabilization.

This study, however, focuses on spontaneous thoughts, those that according to Colby and Kohlberg (1978) can only tell us about *hard stages*: those thoughts that come to people easily, and are probably the ones most in use in their everyday lives. Thus I am interested in thoughts that are both *conscious* and readily available to people in their everyday lives. These would be the thoughts we expect to appear when people produce an informal movie review.

Let us remember that one of the issues that communication has been concerned with is the possible influence of media messages on people, particularly considering that there are no major mediating steps between the self and the exposure to the

message. Namely: I see a movie and rarely is there any prompt or mediator to make me thing about specific issues, much less in an educational way. This is particularly so for adults. (We can assume that at least some children and teenagers get mediated experiences of the media, through their parents or the educational institutions they belong to). However, what happens once there are no longer such "natural" mediators, and, at the same time, adults are faced with mediated messages of higher levels of complexity? We know that people can completely neglect issues that are clearly present and relevant in a message if they are not prompted to find them and are rather left to their spontaneous evaluations (see Livingstone, 1989, for people's neglect of the issue of social class in soap operas). We also know that people are not necessarily good at detecting moral elements of news stories and news stories production if they are not made salient (Rebecca A. Lind, 1997; R. A. Lind & Rarick, 1999; Rebecca A. Lind, Swenson-Lepper, & Rarick, 1998). By examining the spontaneous moral thoughts that viewers produce when commenting different types of movies, we can know something more about people's moral processing of messages in natural environments, as opposed to experimental or educational settings.

Will any kind of moral thought make you virtuous?

As has been noted, it is important to discover whether people even think spontaneously of moral issues when watching movies. It is also important to find out how they think about moral issues when they do. A further exploration of some research on moral development and narratives shows that not just any moral thought is likely to lead to moral self improvement. The content analysis presented here can then contrast the moral thoughts reviewers produce with the ones that would be more likely to have a positive influence on moral development.

One way in which contemporary authors have approached the understanding of Kohlbergian moral stages, is to think of them as cognitive schemas. Cognitive schemas are defined as domain specific structures that allow us to know what to expect in a certain situation, and what elements to consider in that situation. They are "cognitive structures that represent knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relationship among the attributes" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p.139). The classic definition of schema comes from studies in narrative interpretation (Bartlett, 1933). These studies showed that people interpret ambiguous story elements by inserting what they would expect in a particular story in their culture. Within the realm of morality and moral development, schemata are supposed to shed light on the issues that people consider when they process a moral dilemma: a person who is at a stage of moral development that involves considering the effects of an action on interpersonal relationships may be very aware of relational issues involved in a dilemma, but ignore normative societal issues. This provides an interesting way to understand people's approach to moral issues in narratives. In studies with small children, eighth graders and college students, Narvaez and her colleagues have found that moral stories are understood in different ways depending on the reader's cognitive abilities in reading comprehension and on their different moral schemas (Narvaez, 1998, 2001, 2002; Narvaez, Gleason, Mitchell, & Bentley, 1999). People will be more likely to recall the moral arguments that are coherent with their schemas and cognitive development, disregard others even when they are present, add their own arguments even when absent in the story, and ignore the intended moral message of the author if it is incoherent with the cognitive and moral structures available to them (Narvaez, 1998, 2001, 2002). People may be thinking about a story morally, but will do so in terms of their own ideas and cognitive structures, to the point that the author's intended moral message of the movie may be

completely neglected. In terms of Piaget's cognitive theories, this would be a case of "assimilation" (assimilating the new information to the old cognitive structures), instead of "accommodation" (reforming the cognitive structures to accommodate for the new information).

Perhaps even more interesting, from the point of view of my intended study, is that people have different levels of reading comprehension and interpretation of moral issues in stories depending on their reading purposes, such as entertainment vs. study (Narvaez, van den Broek, & Ruiz, 1999). In this case, the purpose of the activity of reading would be acting as the leading schema, instead of the stage of moral development being the schema. This is quite relevant when we think of people's spontaneous appraisal of movies, because it may mean that people's moral thoughts (if any) depend on what their goals are when they approach the movie viewing experience. If their goal is solely entertainment, their level of moral processing and interpretation may be quite different than if they conceive of movies as an opportunity for insight, introspection and growth. We know that people may approach films with either of these motives, and more. Thus I would expect to see some variation in presence of moral reflections or thoughts, and in the role these thoughts play for each viewer. I also might expect different kinds of movies to create different expectations (Bruner, 1986), such that maybe simple movies, with a stereotypical or unambiguous approach to moral conflict, would elicit more relaxation/entertainment expectations, whereas more complex movies, presenting moral ambiguity of some kind might generate expectations associated with personal insight, elaboration or reflection. The kind of movie may have an influence on the viewing purpose. Thus I may expect moral thoughts about movies to correspond to different kinds of viewing goals, as well as to different attitudes towards challenging moral content (assimilation vs. accommodation).

The object of moral thoughts

We may also expect to see a difference in the object of people's moral reflections once these moral reflections emerge in the reviews. People may focus their moral commentary on the plot of the movie and its characters, or they may focus on the movie's "authors" (producer, director, even actors).

Some evidence on how such different objects of moral reflection may appear stems from research on people's ethical sensitivity to news reporting. This line of research follows viewers' reactions to news stories that can be seen as involving ethical issues, such as political or sexual scandals. It measures the level of the audiences' "ethical sensitivity"; this is, to what level they are able to perceive the ethical issues involved in a news story, the people that it may affect or help, and the consequences that it may have (R. A. Lind & Rarick, 1999; McAlister, 2000). This is one of the few lines of research that I found that has incorporated the difference between moral thought about the story itself, and moral thought about the way the story is told. The results of this line of research show that people are better at distinguishing ethically relevant issues of the story itself (content) than at perceiving ethical issues involved in reporting the news story in a certain manner. These results hold true across news stories about different topics (e.g. the Clinton scandal, a sensationalistic report of a child accident, an investigative report about real estate practices). The research also establishes individual differences in ethical sensitivity, such that some people are more likely than others to consider ethical issues, whether about the story's content or the manner of the reporting itself (Lind, 1997; Lind & Rarick, 1999; Lind, Swenson-Lepper, & Rarick, 1998). In general, their results show that people tend not to raise ethical issues that are relevant to the story but not salient in the news: the ethical issues must be made salient in some way for people to pick

them up (Lind, 1997). This research indicates that the news story must make moral issues salient in order to get the viewer to think about them.

More importantly in terms of my goals, this research shows that people are capable of making moral comments about different objects in a story: the news story itself and the reporting of the story. Moral thoughts about the manner of reporting are, in a way, moral thoughts about the story's source. In the case of movies, the equivalent would be moral thoughts about the creators of the film. Other possible objects of moral thought (the audience, the reviewer him/herself) can also be expected to emerge in the reviews.

The influence of moral thoughts in our enjoyment of stories

Until now I have been considering the way in which moral thoughts may lead or not towards moral development or moral awareness. However, there are other roles that moral thoughts may be playing when we watch movies or listen to stories. Producing moral thoughts may be necessary for us to enjoy dramatic movies, regardless of movie's effects on our moral development. Zillmann's Disposition Theory of Drama Enjoyment (1994, 2000) states exactly this. According to this theory, viewers are "constant moral monitors" of dramatic movies. Viewers constantly make moral judgments about who is good, and who is bad. These moral judgments determine their liking of a character (good characters are liked, bad ones disliked) and the viewer will enjoy the drama to the extent that good characters are rewarded and bad characters are punished. The theory does not concern itself with the moral effect of movies, but it does propose that people are constantly thinking morally about dramatic films.

Does this mean that a content analysis like the one I present here should find a large number of moral statements? Not necessarily. Disposition Theory research has

dealt with these "constant moral judgments" as automatic and implicit judgments, which are guiding other evaluation processes. Typically, researchers interested in this approach will manipulate a message to ensure a certain moral judgment (by making the characters thoroughly good or evil), then assume that the judgment took place (using a manipulation check), and finally showing that this implicit judgment is accountable for other behaviors exhibited by a reader/viewer, such as their reported enjoyment. One of the classic studies in this line of research manipulated the moral judgment orientation by having fairy tales in which the characters' behavior was either "thoroughly good" or "thoroughly evil" (Bryant & Zillmann, 1975). Such a manipulation guarantees an automatic implicit moral judgment: children exposed to these stories could not but judge characters as good or evil. The experimental paradigm produces an automatic and probably implicit judgment that then guides the child's enjoyment of the story, such that when characters get "what they deserve," the story is enjoyed. Most research developing disposition theory follows this paradigm. More recently, Raney (2002; Raney & Bryant, 2002) has developed a way of testing disposition theory with actual TV content. The studies manipulate clips from crime drama series to leave cues to the goodness or badness of the characters in or out. The severity of the crimes committed and of the punishments received is also manipulated. This allows more complicated experimental designs in which an overall measure of appropriate retributive justice can be had. Still, the moral judgments that the viewers make, which in turn lead to their enjoyment of the clips, are assumed to be implicit and automatic, and they are expected to follow the direction of the manipulation. Even if the participants have had more complex thoughts about the moral behavior of the characters in the clips, or moral thoughts about the intentions of the message, the producers of the message, or the audience that the message was designed for, the

experiment does not offer an instance for measuring them. Explicit conscious moral thoughts are ignored.

For purposes of this study, I will distinguish between such automatic implicit judgments, and relatively more thoughtful explicit judgments, like the ones accessible through the IMDb User Comments Board. Instead of asking about the potential effects of an implicit moral judgment on narratives, I ask what kinds of explicit moral thoughts people make when confronted to a narrative. Although implicit moral judgments have definitely been found to be a good predictor of enjoyment in certain contexts, they can't say much about the impact of narratives on thoughts about morality itself. An exploration of people's explicit thoughts may be a better indication of the thoughts that viewers take with them from a movie, and later discuss with friends or reflect upon.

There are two ways in which Disposition Theory research connects to our study. First, I propose that just like implicit moral judgments are found to be a tool to understand the entertainment aspects of some narratives, explicit moral thoughts may be found to shed more light on the contribution of narratives to development of morally complex thought, as proposed in moral development theory. Secondly, even if moral judgments were irrelevant to moral development, and I was only interested in enjoyment of movies, an examination of explicit moral thoughts could say something more about the enjoyment process.

Explicit judgments, then, are at least conscious enough to be expressed verbally, and subject to all the possible processes of elaboration and complexity that that entails. I do realize that they involve processes of self-censorship and, on the other hand, may be motivated by self-presentation issues. Thus, these thoughts do not tell everything that goes through people's minds in terms of moral judgment, nor do they necessarily give the best approximation to their first moral reaction. They do,

however, say a lot about people's conscious conceptualizations of the moral impact of the film, whether on themselves or others, and I believe that they are a good entry to the ways in which moral themes in movies have an impact on people's moral development or change.

Moral Ambiguity: Are all stories the same?

Most of the research I have described so far deals with a certain structure of story: one in which there are good guys and bad guys (Raney, 2002; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Zillmann, 1994, 2000; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). Research that studies the effect of stories on children's morality uses the same paradigm of extreme good and extreme bad (Krcmar & Cooke, 2001; Krcmar & Valkenburg, 1999). Are stories in the real world like this? One way to look at this is to see if there is a standard template for movie morality.

There has been some work devoted to unraveling the main template of moral messages in the media, in order to then examine whether this supposed generalized template has an effect on people's moral views. Two main questions have been asked. The first one inquires what are the main values conveyed by the media system. The second question attempts to find out whether there is a generalized "moral template" guiding fictional media messages, in which good always wins over evil. Results are conflicting for both issues. There is some evidence that TV presents mainstream American values (Selnow, 1986; 1990) defined broadly as "good winning over evil", "honesty", etc. For example, moral violations in soap operas (infidelity, corruption) are punished in the long run (Sutherland & Siniawsky, 1982). However, Potter (Potter et al., 1995) presents conflicting evidence by finding no support for the presence of a "morality play template" in a sample of entertainment television involving aggression (good does not consistently win over evil in his sample of aggressive television). The

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findings fail in their attempt to discover one main moral template in the system of narratives (movies and television mainly) to which Americans are exposed daily. It must be noted that by "morality template" we refer here to the basic Aristotelian notion that, in a narrative, good must always win over evil in the end: otherwise there is a violation of justice and the main –moral- purpose of the narrative genre is not fulfilled.

The fact that researchers have failed to find a generalized morality template of this sort is not necessarily surprising. The sheer number and variety of messages that we are exposed to daily guarantees the difficulty of finding one main "moral template". Given this diversity, one of the goals of this study is to shed some light on how people may think differently about movies that have different moral templates, this is, different ways of dealing with "good and evil" in their plots. This should, in turn, help better understand what kinds of moral development possibilities and insights we can expect people to have, given the broad spectrum of ways in which movies deal with moral issues. The incorporation of different kinds of movies with different approaches to moral issues is relevant not only because studies of people's reception and interpretation of moral issues in media messages is scarce (Rosenkoetter, 2001), but, more importantly, because if we assume that moral development is indeed influenced by narratives, then the way in which the moral influence occurs for different kinds of narratives should be accounted for.

Thus, my goal is to examine whether people do spontaneously have conscious thoughts about moral issues in film, as common sense knowledge has assumed for centuries; and also how those spontaneous thoughts may vary depending on the kind of moral templates that the movie presents. I attempt to achieve this goal by content analyzing informal online reviewers' spontaneous and explicit thoughts on a sample of dramatic movies. The content analysis intends to examine whether people have

spontaneous thoughts about moral issues in movies, what kinds of moral thoughts they are, and how those moral thoughts differ depending on the "moral template" of the movie. Because the study is interested in spontaneous and explicit thoughts, as in unprompted by questions, instructions or a general research context, I chose to develop it by examining people's comments in a naturalistic setting. The chosen setting is a website devoted to film and movies: the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).

Categorization of Movies According to Moral Ambiguity

I defined three kinds of movies, depending on the way in which their plot deals with moral issues: movies that are morally unambiguous, movies that are morally ambiguous, and movies that are not morally centered.

As I just discussed, Potter (1995) was unable to find support for the existence of one main morality template in a sample of television fictional programs involving aggression. By "morality template" Potter meant mainly a narrative template in which "good" won over "evil" in the end. Of course, such a template requires that good and evil are easily recognizable and identifiable in the narrative. This is often the case in a certain kind of narrative, namely, one where there are good guys, who are sympathetic and right, and whose actions can always be morally justified. Classic examples are the "hero" movies, in which a good super hero (Superman), that does nothing but good, faces an archenemy that does nothing but evil. Even if the hero engages in morally reprehensible behavior, such as violence (killing others or destroying property), it is always because the archenemy threatens with an even greater danger, and shows unjustified evil intent. There are more subtle versions of this "unambiguous" template: ones in which human characters, who are flawed, manage nevertheless to resist temptations and make the "right" decisions in the end, always in the face of an antagonist who justifies any wrongs that may be committed. In these cases, the hero

faces not only evil incarnate in an enemy, but in his or her own inner temptations and moral conflicts. However, he or she comes out of it victorious, having defeated the inner demons as well as the outer evil. This pattern would also fit within a classic morality template, inasmuch as "good" wins over "evil" in the end. I propose, in the framework of this study, to call movies that follow such templates "morally unambiguous". Basically, when a movie provides a clear opposition of "good" and "bad" within its schema, I define it as a morally unambiguous movie.

In fact, I propose here to include even a third possibility within our definition of "unambiguous": a movie where "good" and "evil" characters are easily identifiable, even if good does not win in the end. A clear example of this within our sample of movies is *Cold Mountain*. In the movie *Cold Mountain*, we see one of the protagonists, Inman, murder another man. This could be considered a morally reprehensible act. However, the movie gives us enough information about the "victim" (a rapist and a torturer amongst other things) to indicate that he deserves to be killed, and that his death is in truth an act of justice in a world in which regular systems of justice are corrupt. Thus, Inman does not lose his "good guy" standing, even after an act that could be morally questionable by itself. Within the schema of the story, he still is a good guy. In the end of the movie, Inman dies tragically. This could be considered a violation of the template, because "good" is not rewarded with a happy ending. In our opinion, this would be a too simplistic approach to understanding narratives. *Cold Mountain* does not necessarily violate a "good" vs. "evil" template because the end, although tragic, provides meaning for the rest of the good characters involved, and because "evil" is not shown triumphant either. This example helps illuminate two points about my definition of a morally unambiguous movie. First; the determination of whether a movie, as a whole, corresponds to the morally unambiguous template does not depend on isolated judgments about the morality of each act, but on the extra

evidence provided by the story's context (in the example, murder is justified by a major threat of evil). Secondly; the classification of a movie as morally unambiguous does not depend on whether good or evil "wins" in the end, but rather on whether there is an underlying message that a meaningful lesson can be learned from goodness.

As opposed to unambiguous templates, I define ambiguous moral templates. These are, in a way, even harder to define than unambiguous templates, as they include a broader spectrum of ways in which morality plays out in the story. As opposed to unambiguous movies, in ambiguous movies it is hard for the viewer to determine who the good guys and the bad guys are. This may happen for several reasons. One possibility is that the protagonist (the one which would be thoroughly good in an unambiguous movie) has both positive and negative moral traits. For example, we may have a character, like the preacher in *21 grams,* who is a former criminal and alcoholic, redeemed through newborn Christianity and community work, but who still is extremely violent to his children and wife. He accidentally runs over a couple of children killing them, and is consumed by great remorse, so he turns himself in. When he gets out of jail, however, he is cruel to his family, and finally abandons them. Is this character good? bad? beyond moral discussion? This character, as well as other throughout this movie, is not clearly classifiable as a "good guy" or a "bad guy." The movie is not organized around that polarity. For this study, I define this kind of movie, where characters are not clearly good or bad, but the presence of moral issues and choice is clear, as a "morally ambiguous" movie.

A second way in which a movie can make it hard to determine the "good guy"/"bad guy" structure, is by showing a character that engages in morally reprehensible actions, but also showing the detailed circumstances that lead to the moral transgressions. This pattern encourages understanding of the final actions, pity, or at least some level of emotional connection. However, one may still recognize that

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the behavior is morally reprehensible *per se*. An example of this within my sample of movies is the film *Monster,* which shows the emotional neglect and abuse that leads a woman to become a serial killer; including the fact that the first murder was committed in self defense. I consider such movies to belong in the morally ambiguous category because they make it hard for audiences to fully adhere to the notion that a character is "good" or "bad," by involving emotional identification or empathy. This emotional involvement, as I will discuss in our next section, has an impact in people's ability to make moral judgments. Research on feminist ethics, for example, shows that women, who tend to engage more in the process of understanding the motivation for moral transgressions, are less likely to make clear-cut moral judgments that people are "good" or "bad" (Gilligan, 1982). Thus, when this pattern appears in film, it can be considered to render the moral issues and characters treated there as "ambiguous."

Finally, a third way in which movies make it hard for spectators to engage in a "good guys/bad guys" schema is by showing a scheme of protagonist and antagonist in which both parties have righteous claims in a conflict. The movie shows both their viewpoints, and both characters present behaviors that vary along a spectrum of moral acceptability. The viewer is forced to change his or her viewpoint following the reasoning of each character, to the point that they can't side with either. A clear example of this is the movie *House of Sand and Fog.* In this movie, a man and a woman are engaged in a legal and emotional struggle for a piece of property. They both have righteous claims to the house, and the viewer also witnesses the emotional needs and specific circumstances of each character. The movie does not privilege the viewpoint of one or the other, and thus it is hard for the audience to make a judgment of who is the "good guy" and who is the "bad guy". Thus, the moral conflict is presented as "ambiguous".

Any of these three conditions enables us to think of a movie as having a level of moral ambiguity that renders it radically different from movies that deal with the morality of characters and events in a clear cut way. This difference may have an influence on people's interpretation of moral issues in narratives, and the number and kinds of moral thoughts they produce. This study is a first step towards describing and understanding what that influence may be.

Finally, it must be noted that in both the ambiguous and the unambiguous templates, moral issues are essential to the narrative: it may be easier or harder to determine what is good within the film, but clearly the issue of what is good is at stake. Not all movies give such a relevant role to morality. Some films are mainly explorations of interpersonal and emotional issues, and although one can identify in them some instances in which a character's behavior could be judged as morally more or less adequate, it is marginal to the main conflicts of the film. An example of such a film is *The Station Agent,* a film that deals with the way in which three very different and solitary characters get to connect emotionally and become true friends. Rather than eliminating such films from the sample, they were incorporated as a third category: movies that are not morally centered. It may be of interest to see how these non-morally centered films compare to the two main morality templates: ambiguous and unambiguous.

The study, then, will attempt to determine whether IMDb online reviewers present spontaneous explicit moral thoughts about different kinds of movies: morally unambiguous, morally ambiguous and not morally oriented; and it will explore possible differences among moral comments for these different kinds of films.

Are all comments with moral content the same?

What kinds of thoughts am I expecting to find in a context like the IMDb user comments board? Do reviewers stick to talking about the film's plot, or do they go beyond that? In other words, what themes, moral or other, do people bring up when commenting/evaluating films? And, if they do comment on moral issues, what kinds of comments are they? The answers to these questions will help us define the categories we will use when coding people's reviews for movies in the Internet Movie Database. Answering these questions leads us to define four different nominal variables. The thoughts of each reviewer could theoretically vary along each of these four variables.

Object of reference

One variable I want to detect is what people are talking about. At first sight, there seems to be an easy answer: they are talking about the movie –the movie is the object of reference of their comments and thoughts. This is not necessarily so. As we will see, people will also comment on many elements that are external to the movie itself. Wilson and Busselle (2004), in a content analysis of people's thought-listed reactions to stories, coded these kinds of comments giving by them the global name of "extra-narrative." In their scheme, extra-narrative comments include a broad array of possibilities: from comments somehow related to the story (story's style, author's uses of technical elements), to personal stories evoked by the narrative (memories, anecdotes, reflections), to thoughts completely extraneous to the narrative and more closely related to the experimental situation ("I am hungry", "the experimenter is ugly", etc.). Although this broad categorization was good enough for the purposes of their study –they were interested mostly in the "narrative" thoughts- it is not necessarily good enough for ours. It is important, in terms of the goals of this study, to

differentiate between, for example, thoughts about the self and thoughts about the creators of the message. Thoughts about the self can be interpreted as a sign that the reviewer has considered moral issues as relevant to his own moral development or system of beliefs. Moral thoughts about the creators of the message may be acting as a judgment towards others. Since these two types of thoughts have very different implications in terms of possible moral development and judgments about film, I distinguish them in the coding scheme.

I define the variable "object of reference" as having five different categories - five different potential "objects" of the user's comments, i.e., five different elements of the movie watching experience that they can be addressing in their reviews. First, as in Wilson and Busselle's categorization, there are *narrative* thoughts. If a movie is considered as a message that has content and a context, I can say that narrative thoughts focus on the content of the message, the story itself. In a way, this is what has traditionally been considered to be a "story" and it refers to the general plot and the characterizations. *Narrative thoughts* are thoughts about the plot and characters.

Next, there are "extra-narrative" thoughts. I identify here three different types of extra-narrative thoughts, following the classic communication model of sender-message-receiver. Some extra-narrative thoughts are about the senders/creators of the message. In this case, this pertains to the movie's authors (directors, producers, writers), and also to the actors, inasmuch as they are part of the system of movie production (message sending). Thoughts about the creators of the movie: directors, actors, writers and producers are *sender thoughts*. Other extra-narrative comments are about the receivers of the message. The receivers, for purposes of this categorization, are of two kinds: firstly, the writer of the comment, the "self" (*self thoughts*), can be commenting on him/herself as a receiver of the message. On the other hand, there may be comments about reception of the film by "others": a generalized public/audience

that is understood to be receiving the same message (*receiver thoughts*). Finally, there may be comments about the world at large. These are coded as *external world thoughts*, as they refer to the "real world" and not the narrative world. These thoughts about the external world are important because they may represent ways in which viewers connect moral issues in the plot with moral issues in the real world.

What kinds of differences do I expect the level of ambiguity of the message to have on the object of the thoughts? In general, and in accordance to Wilson and Busselle's (2004) results, I would expect most of the comments to be narrative, in all types of message. Indeed, these authors found that a large majority of the thoughts produced were about the plot and characters. It makes sense that when commenting on a story; people would focus mainly on this aspect. However, this study expects to find an increased rate of extra-narrative comments for morally ambiguous movies, in comparison to non-ambiguous ones. Mostly because, as general research on resolution of ambiguity shows, when faced with ambiguous stimuli, people need to find contextual cues that help them decide towards one interpretation or another. Thus, for ambiguous word or verbal information, people will refer to the discourse context (Sereno, 1995; Spivey Knowlton, Trueswell & Tanenhaus, 1995; Vu, Kellas, Metcalf, & Herman, 2000; Vu, Kellas & Paul, 1998). Although there is no research for how these decisions would work in terms of morally ambiguous elements, I would expect people to refer to contextual issues, too, to resolve the ambiguity. For example, movies that seem to provide ambiguous political messages may be determined by the spectator to be "liberal" or "conservative" depending on his/her judgment of what the general media bias is (Jones, 2005). This is an example in which a judgment on extra-message elements (in this case, a judgment on the senders of the message) has a role in people's resolution of mediated messages that are in some way ambiguous.

For purposes of this study, I would expect that, to the extent that morally ambiguous movies provide a "problem" for viewers, they may increase their tendency to reflect on extra-narrative elements, as a means to at least elaborate on the issue of ambiguity, or come to a decision. Particularly, they would generate comments about the senders of the message. This leads me to formulate the first hypothesis of the study:

H1: In general, the presence of extra-narrative thoughts about the sender of the message, will be significantly higher on ambiguous movies than on unambiguous or non-morally-oriented movies.

I would also expect ambiguous movies to generate more commentary focused on the receivers, whether it be the self, or the generalized audience (other) understood to be the target receiver of the film. In a way, I would expect people to refer to their own ideology, moral notions and life experiences when having to solve an ambiguous moral issue, thus needing to refer to themselves and their experience on similar issues. Similarly, I expect people to make judgments about the effects of ambiguous messages on others. These comments might follow the pattern described in the well known third person effect, in which people think that negative media messages affect others more than they affect themselves (Perloff, 2002). For the case of moral ambiguity in movies, viewers they may think that morally ambiguous messages might be more confusing or somehow detrimental to others than to themselves. Of course, this is based on the assumption that moral ambiguity be perceived as problematic, an assumption for which at this point there is no solid grounding. Still, in general, this reasoning leads us to believe that there will at least be an increased focus on reception as an object of commentary when the movie is ambiguous, since issues of differences

of interpretation between receivers, such as comparisons between the self and others, become more relevant in the face of ambiguity. Thus, our second hypothesis,

> H2: In general, the presence of extra-narrative thoughts about the receivers of the message, whether the self or others will be significantly higher on ambiguous movies than on unambiguous or non-morally-oriented movies.

Whether or not there is a phenomenon akin to third person effect will be examined qualitatively once we have a subset of comments about self and others.

Dimension of appraisal

Once it is clear what the object of each reviewer's comments is, there is a second question to be asked. What aspect of that object is being evaluated, described or judged? What kind of thing is predicated of this object? If the object is the narrative (plot and characters) are people discussing moral intricacies of the plot, or emotional issues? If the object is the sender, say, the director of the film, are people dealing with technical commentary on style and cinematic craft, or with the moral choices the director made in telling the story? There is no one single correct way of defining the range of things people may address in their comments, so determining the categories for coding may become a daunting task.

To elaborate a limited and manageable number of categories for the dimension of appraisal, I combined three criteria. First, I wanted to have categories that were relevant to the goal of the study: thus, "morality" was one of the dimensions of appraisal. Secondly, I need the categories that cover appraisal dimensions that are to be expected given the kind of website that we were gathering our data from: thus "technical elements", "aesthetic value" and "entertainment" emerge as categories that encompass concerns that we expect people to have, when posting on a movie discussion board (as opposed to, for example, a religious board in which people

comment films to see whether they are appropriate to their beliefs). Finally, I consider categories that have been found to be relevant in similar research, such as "information."

Existing research on people's spontaneous commentary on narratives shows that people will devote most of their time to "information" (Wilson & Busselle, 2003). Information, as a category for coding, refers to any comments that describe or summarize the plot of a narrative without making evaluative judgments about it, or to comments that provide unknown facts or data. Basically, information comments correspond to a relatively objective portrayal of events in the movie or surrounding the movie. People tend to provide background information about the plot before stating their opinions: all such comments are categorized as information. Information comments can also appear in the form of questions that point to missing elements in the plot and hypothesis about future events or the fate of the characters. Comments are categorized as informational as long as they remain within a descriptive realm, rather than an evaluative one. In Wilson & Busselle's study, "information" was restricted to commentary about plot elements. In this study, comments about some issues external to the movie world can also be coded as "information", namely, comments that are about circumstances that surround the production of the film, but do not entail an evaluative judgment (i.e.: "the budget of the film was cut, so it had to be filmed in the US instead of Scotland"). In the scheme of Wilson and Busselle, information comments could include comments on morality or emotion. For example, if a comment described a moral dilemma in the film, or an emotional process. Such a coding is not conducive to the goals of this study, so we differentiate these, which allows us to better examine the role of moral issues as well as the connections between morality and emotion. Thus, we code as information most descriptive, summarizing and factual comments, excluding those on moral and emotional elements. In

accordance to Wilson and Busselle's study, we would expect most of the comments to be "information" comments.

A second category that needs to be included[2] when coding people's thoughts on narratives, particularly in the context of a website devoted to cinema, is the reference to technical aspects of crafting the message. For the specific case of story-telling through film, the technical dimension includes comments on the abilities of directors, producers, actors, screenwriters and technicians, as well as comments on particularities of cinematic style and structure. I expect such comments to be frequent for reviews of all kinds of movies, regardless of their level of ambiguity. There seems to be no theoretical reason to expect issues of morality to affect appreciation and evaluation of technical elements. Within the kinds of comments that we also expect to appear in a website devoted to film are comments about entertainment value and aesthetic value of the film. It can be thought that judgments on whether a film is entertaining and/or has value as a piece of art might change depending on the level of moral ambiguity, since more ambiguity tends to make a movie more complex. I will explore this question checking whether there are differences in the way movies are evaluated in terms of entertainment and aesthetics. Of course, this requires coding of the valence of the comment, a variable that will be discussed later.

Finally there is the issue of people addressing their object in moral and emotional terms. Although for some studies these two variable could be considered part of "information," in this case we need to examine them separately. Therefore, I defined a moral dimension. Comments are considered to be about morality whenever they involve judgments, questions or reflections on whether an action is good or bad,

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[2] It may be necessary to note here that some of these categories are necessary not for theoretical reasons pertaining to this study, but to accomplish a coding scheme that is exhaustive. I am interested in moral thoughts, but since each thought has to be coded, I chose to have an inclusive system of coding that could provide more information than a simple scheme such as "moral/non moral". Including categories that have been identified in earlier research has this purpose.

approvable or reprehensible. We also include here references to interpersonal, legal or divine justice and possibility of punishments, as they are part of the realm of moral reflection, and are, as discussed by Kohlberg (1976) basic elements of the way in which people approach moral dilemmas. We also included as "moral" commentaries that refer to possibly problematic consequences of actions, since they carry an implicit moral element. For example, a comment like "the character abandoned the children in order to pursue a better job, which could lead to the kids becoming drug addicts", does not have an explicit moral reference, but in discussing a possible consequence, it implies a moral question or judgment. Therefore, we include these in the category of moral, as an indicator of thinking in moral terms.[3]

Of course, we expect comments on moral issues to be more frequent in morally ambiguous movies. The presence of ambiguity should leave an unresolved issue in the mind of the spectator, and we would expect this to show up in commentaries produced after the viewing. In terms of cognitive moral development, the reviewer may need to assimilate or accommodate the challenging content that morally ambiguous movies provide, and thus will require more thought. In terms of disposition theory of enjoyment, the reviewers may be troubled by the fact that they can't decide who is good and who is bad, leading, again, to more moral thought. Either way, this leads to the third hypothesis in the study:

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[3]This acts like the operational definition for "moral thoughts". The reader may have noted that there is no previous conceptual definition of "moral". Defining morality conceptually can be done simply (a dictionary definition) as *relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior and character*; or in a complex way by appealing to centuries of philosophical discussion. Our operational definition stems from the common sense dictionary meaning, and adds to it a series of considerations that have been shown to be pertinent to moral thought by moral psychology research, namely Kohlbergian theory. In general, for the purposes of detecting "moral thoughts", I think of *moral* as any notion that pertains to decision making about actions or people being right or wrong, good or bad.

H3: Comments involving morality will be significantly higher in morally ambiguous movies than in morally unambiguous movies or in not morally centered movies.

It may be necessary here to remind the reader that I also expect comments about the sender (object) to be higher in ambiguous movies, as people will look at elements beyond the plot for resolution of ambiguity within the plot. I expect this to happen particularly for moral comments. Thus, I elaborated a fourth prediction:

H4: For moral comments, comments whose object is the sender of the message will be more frequent in ambiguous movies than in unambiguous or non-morally centered films.

Emotion is coded as a separate dimension as well. Any comment regarding to emotions of the characters or the viewers is coded separately. Do I expect the number of emotion comments to be different for the different types of movies? It is hard to answer this question. Emotion is an important factor in making moral decisions and judgments, something that is becoming clearer ever since feminist scholars have emphasized the existence of an "ethics of care," showing the interconnection between attachment, empathy, interpersonal relations and moral judgments (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984). Following this rationale, I might expect ambiguous movies to spur more emotional comments, as viewers strive to deal with emotions as an answer to the moral questions that are left unanswered by the film. However, since emotion is also present as a response to most kinds of stories, it is hard, with a design like the one of this study, to attribute its emergence to issues of moral ambiguity. Moreover, I expect emotional references to appear in response to any kind of story, even if morality is not an issue at all. Thus, quantitative differences in terms of the number of comments are

not really expected. Maybe a qualitative analyses and exploration of the emotional comments for different types of films could shed some light on this issue.

Finally, I expect a set of comments on elements that are really not related to the movie or its context. These are coded as "unrelated," and include thoughts such as "I am writing this in my new laptop" or "I had just written a lengthier review and lost it, so this is brief and to the point".

Valence and Kind of Utterance

All comments that involve some kind of judgment will be coded for their valence, as positive or negative. This will allow me to explore some interesting questions, especially those regarding moral issues. Are moral comments for ambiguous films of a different valence than those for unambiguous or not-morally centered films? Are moral comments about the plot and characters different in valence to those about the sender of the message or the receivers? Are moral comments about the self different than those about others? An exploration of these questions requires a coding of valence. Of course, coding as positive or negative can only be done for comments that include some kind of judgment or evaluation. Comments that are just descriptive or neutral can not be coded for this, neither can questions.

We then code comments for what kind of utterance they are: statements and judgments or questions. This allows us to explore one last hypothesis regarding the types of movies. When moral comments appear for ambiguous movies, we expect them to be of a more interrogative nature. This would connect back to the original claim that movies may make us rethink our moral certainties.

H5: For moral comments, the frequency of comments that are of an interrogative nature will be higher for morally ambiguous movies than for unambiguous movies and non-morally centered films.

Methods

Sample and Corpus of Films

Source of the Data

The Internet Movie Database is a comprehensive online resource on film and television movies and series. It defines itself as a "huge collection of movie information", and its mission as "to provide useful and up to date movie information freely available online across as many platforms as possible". At the time this researcher started collecting data (August, 2004), the database held information for 408,981 movies, of which 299,378 were theatrically released films. Information about each title usually includes credits, production information, distribution information and technical information. The IMDb also provides user based summaries of the plots as well as a section for "user comments" in which users can review and comment on the films of their choice, and "message boards" in which users can engage in discussions about films. According to the site's description, it gathers information from both the film industry and anonymous visitors to the site, and dedicates 70 % of its working staff to check and organize the information.

The Internet Movie Database is a free resource for non-commercial use. IMDb recently launched a professional version of the website: IMDbPro. IMDbPro allows for more advanced searches as well as some information that is not available on the free version. Because of its advanced searching capabilities, this study is based on information gathered from IMDbPro, although the user comments to be analyzed can also be accessed through the public site IMDb.com.

Data Set

This study analyzes user comments for 14 award-winning movies released during 2003, originally produced in English, categorized as drama that received more than 50 user comments on the IMDb user comments section.

The internet movie database section for "user comments" is comprised of messages that any registered member of the IMDB Database can post online, and that can be accessed by any visitor to the website. The comments typically take the form of relatively informal reviews, in which people make a critical appraisal of the movie using their own criteria. The guidelines proposed by the website for user comments encourage people to comment on the "context and content" of the film and to expand and explain the reason for their judgments. Comments to be posted have a minimum extension of 10 lines of text, and a maximum of 1000 words. IMDb recommends a 200-500 word length. The guidelines for the "user comments" feature also recommend users abstain from making references to other comments on the section, to avoid "profanity and spiteful remarks", and to abstain from comments on issues that are not related to the movie itself. An overview of the posted comments shows that these guidelines are typically respected and/or that IMDb administrators typically delete comments that do not follow the guidelines.

The "user comments" section, from which our units for analysis come, presents the reviews of individual users for each particular movie. These reviews are presented chronologically, with the last comment that was posted appearing first. Each comment is headed by a summary line, provided by the user, which indicates a general summary of the appraisal; the user's tag name, and the date of the post. As it was explained, the comments section is not organized as a discussion between the users (IMDb provides this feature separately: a *message board*), so there are no threads or back and forth comments. An overall examination of the user comments section shows that it is highly unlikely that the same user posts more than once for the same movie and references to previous reviews, although present, are quite scarce. As this study attempts to examine individuals' reactions to a film, rather than the dynamics of film discussion, any reviews that are basically just an answer or reaction to a previous one

were disregarded as part of the universe of data. This guarantees some independence in the reviews to be analyzed; at least as much as can be expected from a kind of discourse that is clearly a public response to all sorts of messages: the movie itself, the media coverage of the movie, the opinions of friends, and the other reviews in the board. Although this context of interaction compromises the independence of each unit of observation to a degree, it is inevitable when dealing with units obtained from a natural environment.

The number of reviews for each movie varies considerably. For the sample of 14 movies to be analyzed in this study it ranges from 1396 reviews (for the movie *Lost in Translation*) to 152 reviews (for the movie *The Missing*). Most of the movies have between 300 and 700 reviews. The total universe of data for the 14 movies is of 6845 reviews. A detailed analysis of all the comments, although it might be considered desirable, goes beyond the practical limitations of this study. The analysis will be based on a randomly sampled set of 25 reviews from each movie, giving us a more manageable total of 350 reviews, and still allowing us to make some inferences about each movie, and to explore some comparisons between movies.

Because this study is interested in examining relatively thoughtful comments focused on the movie, we considered that it was necessary to exclude comments that were more focused on interaction within the website than in commenting on the film (there are some cases of these in the user comments section, although they are rare), mere flaming, and those in which a thoughtful process can't be observed because the comment itself is excessively brief. Thus, reviews presenting any of the following characteristics were excluded from the sample, and replaced with another randomly selected review.

1. Comments that are merely a response to others and provide no new information or analysis. (i.e.: "cuckoo, you really did not understand the film if you can say that")

2. Comments that just give a short, general evaluation of the movie. (i.e.: "this movie sucks", "I loved this movie")

3. Comments that do not constitute at least one grammatical sentence.

4. Comments that are just a brief insult towards the movie, the audience or the board users (These are usually deleted by the IMDb administrators, and none emerged from the initial sampling).

After eliminating these elements from the universe of comments for each movie, a proportion of the comments for each film was coded and analyzed.

Selection of Films

The corpus of films whose reviews will be analyzed was selected following the assumption that quality award winning films were more likely to present some moral complexity, as defined earlier, than, films that did not win awards. It can at least be safely said that movies that are paradigmatically "simple" in their moral exposition are unlikely to achieve nominations or wins in award categories, although it can occasionally happen.

A search for award-winning movies[4], released during 2003, originally produced in English and categorized as drama yields 26 films. Of these 26 films, only 14 had more than 50 user comments on the IMDb "user comments" section. Having 50 or more comments is used as a cutoff for both sampling reasons (we are sampling

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[4] Awards considered are: Oscars, Golden Globes, British Academy Awards, Emmys, European Film Awards, and Awards at the Cannes, Sundance, Venice, Slamdance, Toronto or Berlin Festivals.

a percentage of comments from the total for each movie, and a larger sample size would make such a sampling procedure more acceptable), but also because it would seem that a movie that has less than 50 comments (in fact, the first movie excluded for the sample had 17 user comments) does not have enough of an impact on the movie-goer / IMDb user audience to be of general interest to this study.

The fourteen movies had then to be categorized according to the pre-defined criteria to classify them as ambiguous, unambiguous or non-morally centered. The following table indicates both the criteria for this classification as well as the movies that were ascribed to each category. The numbers in parentheses indicate the criteria that the movie fulfills. Brief plot summaries for each movie can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1. Movie Categorization according to Moral Template

Moral Template	Criteria	Movies
	The movie does not clearly indicate who are to be considered "good" and "bad" characters. It does so by presenting one or more of the following characteristics: 1. Characters are good in some contexts and bad in other contexts. They perform good actions some times and bad actions others. It is hard for the viewer to make a judgment of the character as "good" or "bad". 2. Characters perform actions that are traditionally considered "bad", but the movie provides background about them that makes their actions understandable, redeems them of full responsibility by explaining emotional circumstances, and generates empathy or emotional connections to the character. It is hard for the viewer to generate a moral judgment. 3. The movie portrays the consequences of a character's questionable actions as having good effects on some people and bad effects on others. The action itself and the character become hard to judge.	1. Dogville (1,2) 2. The Life of David Gale (1) 3. House of Sand and Fog (1,3) 4. Monster (2) 5. Thirteen (2) 6. Twenty One Grams (1, 3)
Unambiguous	The movie clearly indicates who are to be considered "good" and "bad" characters within its context. It can be done by one or both of the following: 1. Characters are totally good or totally evil. 2. If a good character must engage in morally questionable actions (violence, breaking a law, lying) it is justified by a much larger moral violation by the "bad character".	1. Cold Mountain (2) 2. The Last Samurai (1,2) 3. The Missing (2) 4. Master and Commander (1,2) 5. Mystic River (1,2)
Not Morally Centered	The movie does not present moral conflicts central to the plot/characters. It focuses on relationships and emotional issues.	1. The Station Agent 2. Lost in Translation 3. Seabiscuit

Coding Scheme Development

A coding spreadsheet was developed to systematize the coding of the variable of interest for each sentence of the user's comments. The code sheet consisted of the following main categories: theme of appraisal, context reference, level of elaboration and valence of the comment. Each of these variables is defined in more detail below. Thus, the coding system required human coders to go through each of the units of analysis (each comment by each separate user) and determine, for each grammatical sentence, what object it refers to, what is the dimension of appraisal, what kind of utterance it is, and what is its evaluative valence. Because sentences were coded within a larger unit of text (each comment) coders were instructed to consider the whole comment as a context of reference to make coding decisions if the sentence by itself was ambiguous or unclear. For example, the sentence "The film was truly not what I expected from this director" does not allow a coder to determine whether this is a positive or negative judgment of the film. However, other sentences within the comment may make it clear that the reviewer thought this was a bad director whereas the film was good, thus allowing the coding the evaluative valence of that sentence as "positive". Likewise, coders could find that the reviewer thought the film was bad, whereas his/her previous judgment of the director was good. This would allow coding the sentence as "negative". The example shows how the use of the whole comment as a tool for disambiguation facilitates the coding of open text as such as these reviews.

In order to proceed with the use of the coding sheet, the corpus of comments had first to be unitized, by parsing the comments into the coding units. Coding units were defined broadly as any piece of text that could be easily rephrased as an independent main clause with both distinct subject and distinct predicate. Basically, this meant that some technically grammatical sentences, such as "the movie was boring, and the director did a horrible job in editing", were parsed into two coding

units, as they can be clearly reformulated as two main clauses which differ in both subject and predicate. (i.e., "the movie was boring", "the director did a horrible job in editing"). However, a sentence such as "The movie was boring and too long" was kept as just one sentence, because the predicate elements ("boring" and "too long") share the same subject ("the movie"). This was considered to be an instantiation of just one train of thought. Two coders (the author and an undergraduate collaborator) unitized a sample of 50 comments using this basic criterion, and reached an agreement of 92% in terms of unitization. This was considered to be a good level of agreement. The rest of the comments were then parsed and unitized by the main author in preparation for coding.

Procedure

The coders were trained on the use of the coding sheet and familiarized with the data set. In a pretest, the coders coded 52 reviews for one movie (a total of 505 coding units) and cross-coded them all. Intercoder reliability was calculated, using Cohen's kappa, for the four main variables. Cohen kappas at this first stage were at the 0.6 level for some variables, showing that some refinement was necessary in the coding categories.

A revision of contingency tables for each variable allowed us to identify some problematic categories within each variable. We faced the choice of collapsing some categories that were creating confusion or redefining and retraining the coders. Collapsing variables made no conceptual sense. For example, within the main theme of appraisal, the categories of "aesthetics" and "entertainment" were producing disagreement between the coders. Conceptually, however, these categories are distinct. Thus, we added some refinement to the definitions in the coding scheme, and retrained the coders through examples. In the case of another variable, Object of Comment, the need was detected to create a new category ("External World") for comments that

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were not in reference to the movie or its producers, but rather to external elements of the world at large. The final coding scheme with examples for each of the coding categories is attached at the end of this section.

After refining the coding scheme by adding these elements of precision and some new examples, the coders coded another sample of comments, this time increasing reliability. Final Cohen kappas for the four variables were: 0.65 for main dimension of appraisal (percent agreement, 73%), 0.62 for object of the comment (percent agreement , 72%) , 0.66 for kind of utterance (percent agreement 94%), and 0.72 for valence of the comment (percent agreement, 81%). The increase in reliability was not as big as we would have wanted. However, the achieved levels were considered acceptable considering that the reliability indicators for agreement beyond chance (Cohen's *kappa*) were within the range of 0.45 to 0.75, a range proposed to show "fair to good agreement beyond chance" (Neuendorf, 2002; Banerjee et al., 1999). It must be considered too that Cohen's *kappa* is an indicator of reliability that has been criticized for being overly conservative, particularly for the case of extreme distributions (Perrault & Leigh, 1989; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). This means that Cohen's kappa will underestimate reliability for variables in which one or two categories are much more frequent than the rest. This is the case for the distribution of the four variables used here. The values of *kappa* presented here are probably underestimating reliability.

Other content analysis experts demand more conservative reliability standards (Riffe, Lace & Fico, 1998; Krippendorff, 1980). Since we were not able to achieve these higher standards that require agreement levels above 0.75 or 0.80, we adhere to those authors' recommendation in warning that the conclusions of this study should be considered cautiously and in a tentative way. This, of course, is consistent with the nature of an initial study of this kind.

An analysis of the possible sources of disagreement between the two coders showed one distinct case of confusion between particular categories that may need more work in future studies. In the variable "dimension of appraisal", most of the disagreement seems to come from the confusion between the categories of "technical" and "information". A qualitative analysis of the problematic sentences showed that sometimes a coder would not see a "technical" element where another would. Mostly the sentences dealt with subtle discussion of stylistic aspects of the film. This aspect was dealt with in the re-training instance, but clearly with not enough success. If the scheme is to be used in the future, it may be necessary to include more examples and a decision making guide for examples of possibly confusing statements. In the case of the other variables, an examination of coder A * coder B tables did not show any pattern of confusion. The source of disagreement in these variables seemed to be random.

The coding scheme, as finally used in the study is presented in the following tables (2, 3, 4 and 5) indicating the criteria for coding, and representative examples for each category.

Table 2. Criteria to Code the Variable "Dimension of Appraisal"

Dimension	Criteria	Examples
Moral	-Explicit moral approval/disapproval of a character's actions, thoughts. -Questioning (explicit or implicit) of bases for a morally questionable action. -Consideration of practical and emotional consequences of morally questionable actions. -References to legality, legal responsibility, possible punishment by earthly or divine justice.	- "Her plan was brilliant but immoral", "murder is never the answer" -"She did not even know for sure if L. was guilty" -"Will she go to jail?", "I wonder if she'll feel remorse for what she has done"
Emotion	-Consideration of character's emotions -Expression of emotional reactions to the story -Expressions of empathy, sympathy, understanding. -Comments on the emotional impact of the film on the viewer, level of emotional involvement achieved. -Implied emotional reaction to the film.	-"She must have been really angry", "Why did she fear men so much?" -"I was sad when I heard of her father's death" -"Poor Emma, she's had a terrible life"
Aesthetic	-Comments on the overall quality of the film as a work of art. -Global appraisal of the film, in a way that explicitly considers artistic and/ or aesthetic value. -Comments on the value of the film beyond entertainment.	-"This is a masterpiece"
Technical	-Comments on craftsmanship of director, actors, cinematography. -Comments on particularities of style, author's choices, structure. -Comments on awards being deserved/undeserved. -Comments in reference to the movie, not the plot.	-"Benicio del Toro is superb as the Mexican cop." -"Soderbergh emphasized the differences between the two worlds with his use of lighting" -"The use of flashbacks was confusing", "The script did not help the storyline"

Table 2 (Continued)

Dimension	Criteria	Examples
Information	-Questions about story's background information -Comments on the plot, events, summaries. -Questions, hypotheses, theories about events past/future. -Comments about characters that do not fall into moral/emotional category -Comments that provide information external to the plot. -Informative comments about the reception of the film.	-"Where does this story take place?", "How old is Emma?", "Why was her father's surname different?" -"She slept with the man to have an alibi". -"I was wondering what the plan was" -"The budget of the film was cut, so they had to film in the US and not in Scotland". -"The film has done poorly in Europe, and will probably not reach other areas…"
Entertainment	-Explicit comments on the entertainment value of the movie -References to enjoyment, pleasure, displeasure, boredom. Comments that implicitly refer to this.	-"I enjoyed watching this film", "It's the most boring thing I've ever seen". -"This movie was so slow I thought it would suddenly stop still…"
Unrelated	-Comments that are completely unrelated to the movie or its producers. -Comments on other movies.	-"This message board is not working well"', "Oh, I got the first post for this movie", "I saw this one on my new DVD player".

Table 3. Criteria to Code the Variable "Object of Reference"

Object of Reference	Criteria	Examples
Narrative: Plot and Characters	-Refers to plot, characters of the movie.	-"I think the Mexican cop was really trying to do his best given the circumstances".
Extra-Narrative: Sender	-Refers to director, actors, producers, institutions. "Senders" of the movie. -Refers to the movies as a constructed message.	-"Matt Damon is not cut out to be an action hero." -"I cannot recommend a film in which the director seems to be endorsing rape."
Extra-Narrative: Receivers in general	Refers to how the movie has been received by the general public or a subset of the public.	-"It's no wonder that people hate this movie."
Extra-Narrative: Self	Refers to the commenter him/herself, or others associated to him/her and not the film.	-"I was in this situation once, and I can say that it was not so easy." -"The film reminded me of my sister, who once went through the exact same process".
External World	Refers to elements of the world, unrelated to movie content or people's reactions to the movies.	-"The death penalty should be abolished"

Table 4. Criteria for Coding the Variable "Valence".

Valence	Criteria	Examples
Neutral = 0	A clear opinion, but neutral in its valence.	-" This movie is the blockbuster of the year"
Positive = 1	A positive evaluation, opinion, judgment. Explicit or implied	-"This movie was great", "I liked the way in which he portrayed the female characters"
Negative = 2	A negative evaluation, opinion, judgment. Explicit or implied.	-"I don't think the film captures the real dynamics of drug dealing" -"It was boring"..
Does not apply = 3	Comments that are categorized in the "open" category would probably not be applicable for this dimension.	

Table 5. Criteria to code the Variable "Kind of Utterance"

Utterance	Criteria	Examples
Interrogative	-The comment brings up issues on which the commenter does not seem to have a clear cut opinion, judgment or interpretation. -Usually in the form of questions, or statements beginning with "I wonder", "I'm not sure if…" etc. -Comments that involve conditional statements (if…then…) and thoughtful appraisal of an issue without reaching an explicit or absolute conclusion, the comment considers several possibilities or alternatives.	-I wonder if the film would have worked better if it had good actors. -Will she go to jail? -Is the story trying to tell us that murder is acceptable under some conditions? -I wonder if they ended up together.
Declarative	-Explicit statements, that clearly show a defined opinion or judgment of the commenter. -It is evident to the coder what the commenter's stance is. -Statements that just establish a very clear cut fact.	-"Murder is never the answer", "this movie sucks", "Once again Hollywood tries to convince us that drug addicts are really good people.", "her plan was brilliant, but immoral".

Results

The presentation of the results involves two main elements. First, the main exploratory questions are answered: what do IMDb reviewers think about when they are writing reviews of a film online? Do they stick to talking about the movie plot or do they write mainly about the director and actors? Do they talk about themselves? Do they link the experience of the movie with the outer world? These questions are, to an extent, answered by looking at the variable "object of reference". Also, what do these reviewers consider when appraising the movie? Is it mostly about technical elements? How much do they generally dwell on emotion, morality and aesthetics? Are their comments positive or negative? These questions are answered by the variable "dimension of appraisal". Do the reviewers mostly make judgments and statements, or do they ask themselves questions? Do they tend to make positive statements or negative? The answer to these questions, presented in the first section, gives a broad picture of people's thoughts on film.

The second section focuses on moral ambiguity in movies. If a movie is morally ambiguous, will it generate more moral thoughts than if it is not? And, what kinds of moral thoughts will they be? Will they be mostly about the plot, or will they include moral discussion about the senders of the message (actors, producers) and even themselves? The answer to these kinds of questions provides a more detailed understanding of the way in which differences in moral ambiguity can affect people's thoughts and comments.

General Thoughts about Movies

Coding

For each of the 14 award-winning movies selected, 25 reviews were selected and content analyzed. Two of the 350 user comments were not used because they

belonged to reviewers that had another comment within the study. [5] In terms of coding units (referred to for the rest of this section as "thoughts"), the sample was of 5417 thoughts. Each of these 5417 thoughts was coded for four categorical variables: object of reference (plot, sender, receiver, self, external world), dimension of appraisal (morality, emotion, aesthetics, technical elements, information, entertainment, unrelated), kind of utterance (declarative statement or interrogative utterance) and valence (positive, negative, neutral).
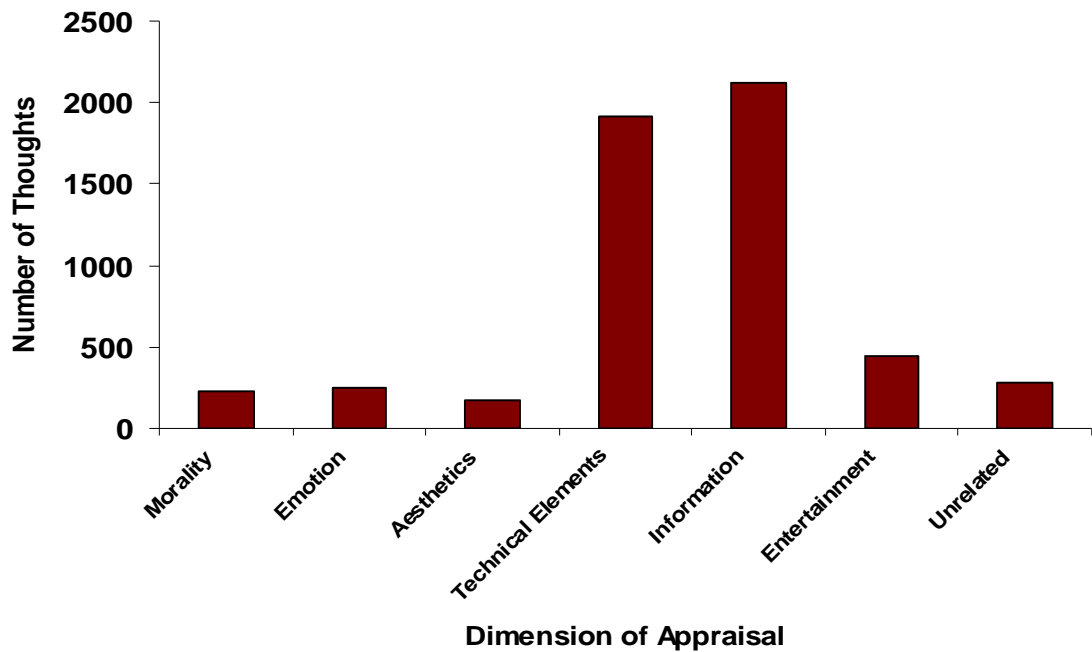
Dimension of Appraisal

A complete report of frequencies and percentages for each of the categories of this variable is presented in Figure 1. The analysis of the set of 5417 sentences shows that indeed, as predicted, a large part of the thoughts within the comments were descriptions of the plot or general information about movie production facts, the actors, directors, etc. These comments, categorized as "information" comprise 35.3% of all thoughts. However, the largest share of thoughts was on the topic of technical elements (lighting, quality of the acting, script, stylistic choices, etc.). These technical comments comprise 39.2 % of all thoughts. All the other dimensions appear in much lower percentages. Of particular interest, the percentage of moral thoughts is quite small (4.2 % of all thoughts), corresponding to 230 sentences dealing with moral issues.

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[5] Some users comments appear under a user name tag, and others in the form of an email-tag corresponding to the user name. After this problem was detected, all cases were checked, resulting in the loss of these two cases, to avoid having the same person as a reviewer of two different movies.

Figure 1. Number of Thoughts per Dimension of Appraisal (*N* = 5417)

Object of Reference

A complete report of frequencies and percentages for each of the categories of this variable is presented in Figure 2. The majority of the 5417 sentences were in reference to the sender of the message (this could refer to directors, producers and/or actors). They comprise 43.2% of the total. According to Wilson & Busselle's findings (2004) we would have expected most of the thoughts to be about the narrative (plot and characters), but in this sample, those thoughts are just the second most frequent, and comprise 31.9% of the comments. Thoughts about the self were 11.7%, thoughts about generalized receivers of the message (how "others" might perceive the film) were 8.8%, and thoughts about reality as external to the film were 4.2%.
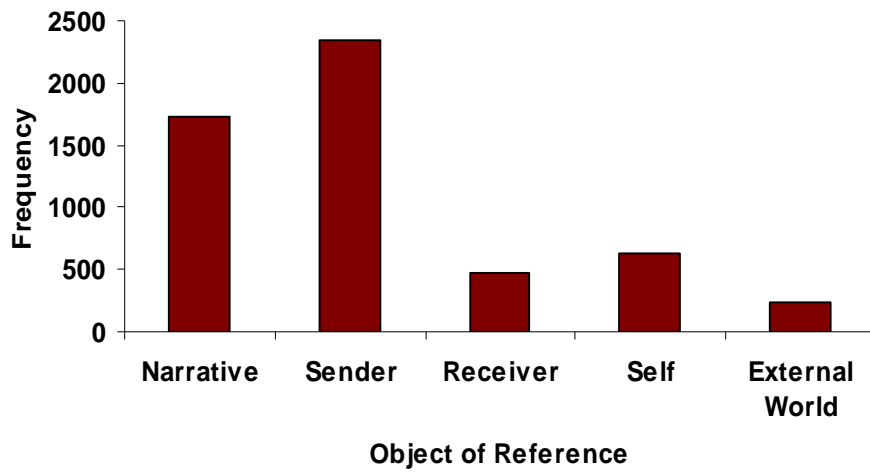
Figure 2. Number of Thoughts per Object of Reference. (*N* = 5417)

Kind of Utterance

A complete report of frequencies and percentages for each of the categories of this variable is presented in Figure 3. This variable examined whether the statement coded was a declarative statement (an assertion), as opposed to an interrogative utterance. 94.3% of the 5417 thoughts were declarative statements. Only 5.7% of the thoughts were interrogative utterances.

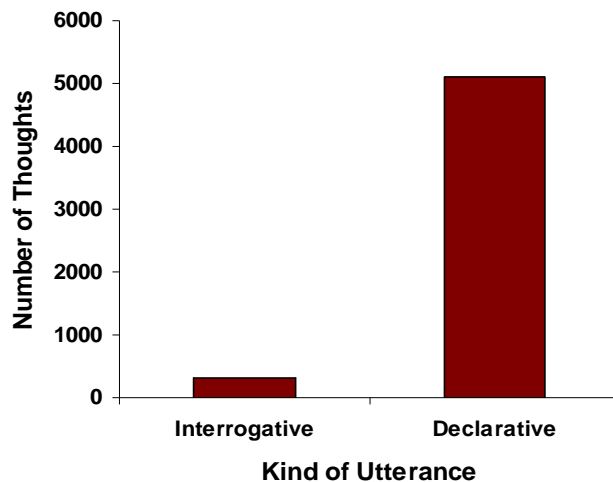**Figure 3. Number of Thoughts per Kind of Utterance (*N* = 5417)**

Valence

A complete report of frequencies and percentages for each of the categories of this variable is presented in Figure 4. Valence of the thought was coded as neutral, positive or negative. 43.4% of the 5417 thoughts were neutral, this is, they did not present evaluative valence either way, and can be considered as mostly descriptive. 29.1% of the thoughts were positive, meaning the thought involved some kind of favorable judgment. 21.8% of the thoughts were negative. The 5.6 % of thoughts that were of an interrogative nature were not coded for valence.
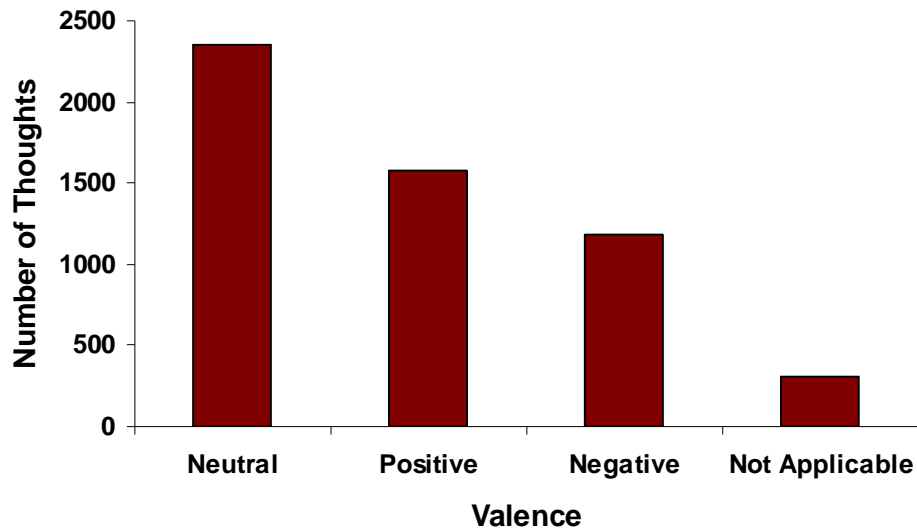
Figure 4. Number of Thoughts per Valence. (*N* = 5417)

Moral Thoughts

As was reported, thoughts about moral issues corresponded to 4.2% of all thoughts across different kinds of movies. Since the main focus of the study is an exploration of moral issues, this subset of thoughts merits a more detailed examination.

Most of the moral thoughts produced by the reviewers discussed moral elements of the plot and characters (49.1%, 113 thoughts). Reference to the creators of the movie was also important (30.4%, 70 thoughts), as reviewers comment on the role of actors, directors and producers. Moral comments that focused on the self, the perceived receivers and the external world were less frequent (7.4%, 3.5% and 9.6% respectively). A graphic representation of these results can be seen in Figure 5.
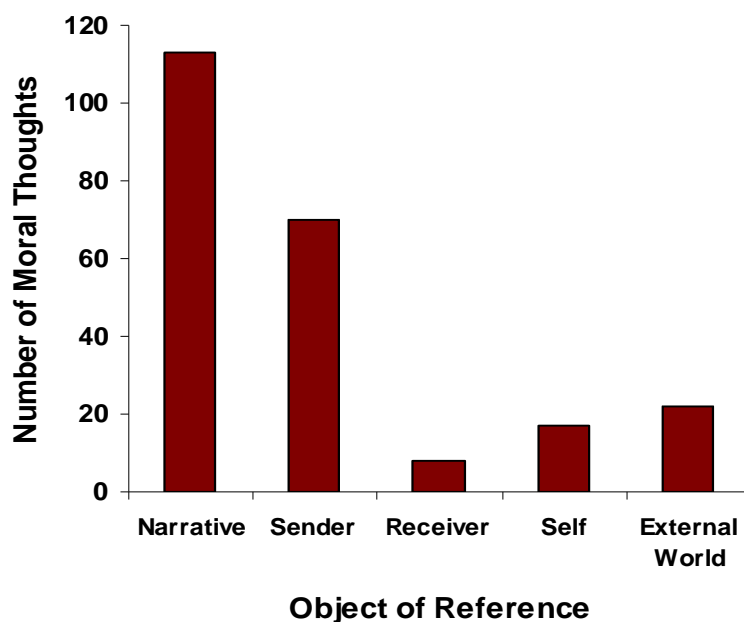
Figure 5. Number of Moral Thoughts per Object of Reference (*N* = 230)

Moral thoughts were almost all declarative statements (211, 91.7% of moral thoughts), whereas very few were interrogative (19, 8.3% of moral thoughts), see

Figure 6. In terms of valence, half of them were neutral, this is, they did not entail an evaluation (115, 50% of moral thoughts). 75 thoughts were negative evaluations (32.6% of moral thoughts) and 19 (8.3%) were positive. 19 thoughts that were interrogative were coded as "valence not applicable" (Figure 7).
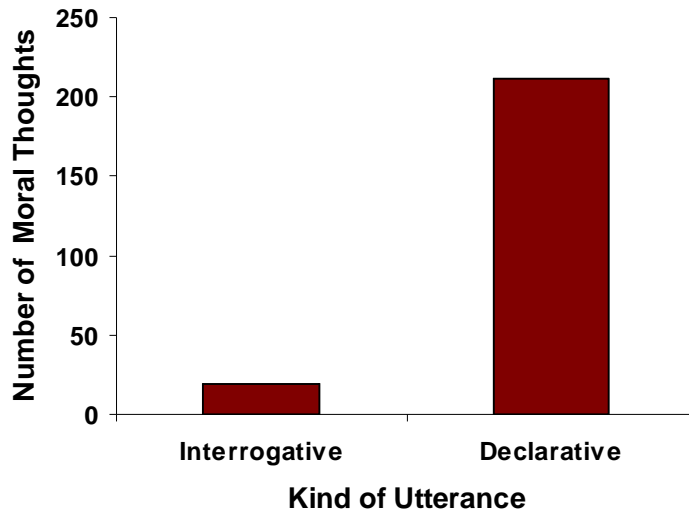
Figure 6. Moral thoughts per kind of utterance (*N* = 230)
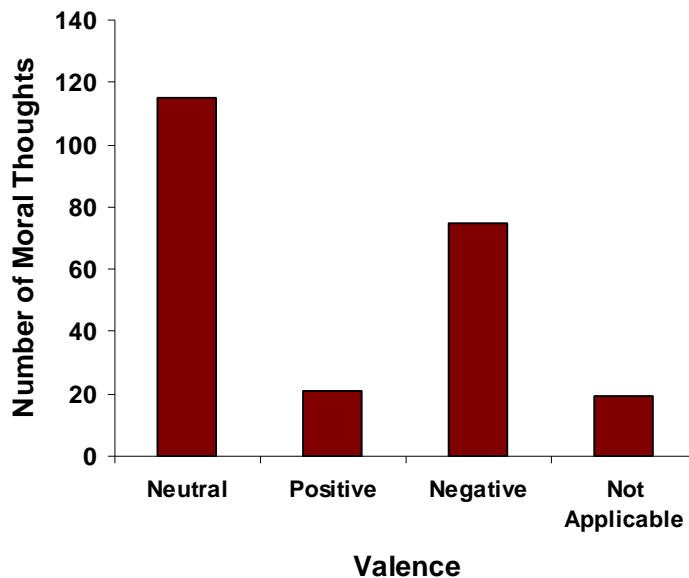
Figure 7. Number of Moral Thoughts per Valence (*N* = 230)

The general results just presented show that when people engage in reviewing a movie online they are mostly thinking in terms of declarative statements about the narrative and the producers of the message (actors and directors), and that they are discussing them mostly in terms of technical merit and providing descriptive information about them. The following section examines the issue of whether the level of moral ambiguity of a film (whether it is ambiguous, unambiguous, or does not deal with morality at all), can change this pattern of thinking. We examine whether morally ambiguous movies show a different pattern in terms of what people are thinking about when they comment film.

Particularly, through the testing of the hypotheses, we want to see whether they feel compelled to resolve or elaborate the problematic ambiguity. For example, do they resort to taking the director and producers more into consideration, in order to solve the ambiguity?

In order to test for our predictions about the influence of moral ambiguity properly, the initial categorical variables had to be modified in order to create variables specific to the categories that our hypotheses deal with. Thus, for example, the categorical variable "Dimension of Appraisal" originally has seven categories, but for our hypotheses we are mostly interested in one of them: the moral dimension. We need to have moral comments as a dependent variable that stands on its own, so that we can then see if level of ambiguity has an influence on it. The first step to do this was to create a "number of moral thoughts" variable, in which we calculated the number of moral thoughts present for each of the 3489 reviewers. It was expected that this would allow us to work with "moral thoughts" as a continuous variable. However,

the distribution of this variable (see Figure 8) indicated that it made more sense to treat it as a binary variable.[6]
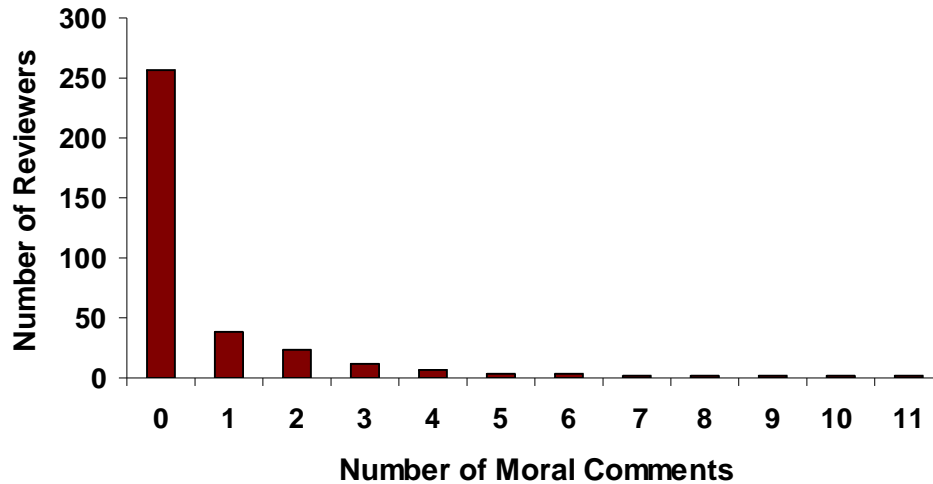
Figure 8. Number of moral thoughts per reviewer. (*N* = 348)

The study shows that there are 230 total moral thoughts. These 230 moral thoughts come from 91 reviewers that produced at least one of such thoughts. The distribution of moral thoughts per reviewer, as shown in Figure 8, allows for the creation of a binary variable "presence of moral thoughts", such that 91 reviewers had presence of moral thoughts and the remaining 257 did not.

A similar process went into creating binary variables for categories of interest in the variable "object of reference". The result was the creation of binary variables indicating whether people referred or not to the plot and characters (presence of narrative thoughts), the actors, directors and/or producers (presence of sender thoughts), the general audience (presence of receiver thoughts), themselves (presence

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[6] The distribution was such that more than 50% of the 348 reviewers had produced no moral thoughts, whereas there was a very small number of reviewers for each of the following number of moral thoughts produced.

of self thoughts), and the external world (presence of world thoughts). Thus, most of the analyses to be conducted will deal with these binary categorical variables.

Another important consideration, one can argue that different movies, with different levels of complexity, will produce comments of different lengths. This could be a problem if, for example, morally ambiguous movies produced longer comments, and thus more chances for moral comments to emerge. The analyses we conducted regarding length do not support such a claim. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to see if there were differences in length of the comment across the three levels of film ambiguity (ambiguous, unambiguous, non morally centered). The results show no significant difference, F $(1, 347) = 1.741, p = 0.177$. Thus, length of the review is not considered as an influential factor when conducting the hypotheses testing analyses that follow.

<p style="text-align:center;">*Hypothesis Testing*</p>

Object of reference, sender and receiver

The first two hypotheses were related to the object of reference being different for different levels of ambiguity. Do people talk about different things when commenting the different types of movies? The first hypothesis said that people would talk more about the directors, producers and actors ("sender") when the movie was ambiguous, as they would use this element, external to the plot, to elaborate the moral ambiguity or solve it. H1 predicted that sender thoughts would be more likely for morally ambiguous films than for the other two kinds of films. A 3 x 2 χ^2 test was run for the two categorical variables presence of sender thoughts (yes, no) x ambiguity of film (unambiguous, ambiguous, not morally centered). There were significant differences in presence of sender comments across the three levels of ambiguity, $= 27.870$ (2, N=348), p <0.01. The difference was between the non-morally centered movies and the morally centered movies. Presence of comments about the

sender was higher for both morally ambiguous and morally unambiguous movies, compared to non-morally centered movies. The hypothesis that people might refer to the sender as a contextual element to disambiguate problematic issues in ambiguous movies is not clearly supported by this finding. Since almost all reviewers of morally centered movies made comments about the sender subtle differences were hard to detect.

H2 was based on the same logic as H1, except that it was expected people would talk more about the general audience (receiver) when the film was ambiguous, to somewhat elaborate on the possible effects of that ambiguity on others: the general audience. Again a 2 x 3 χ^2 test was run for the categorical variables "presence of receiver thoughts" (yes/no) and ambiguity of film (unambiguous, ambiguous, non morally centered). The χ^2 test shows no significant differences across the three types of film: $\chi^2 = .347$ (2, $N = 348$), $p = .881$. The prediction that people would, in general, turn to thoughts outside the realm of the plot to deal with ambiguous moral elements in the film, is not supported.

Morality Thoughts

The next set of hypotheses deals with moral thoughts. As in the general results of the content analysis, moral thoughts seem to appear rarely within the set of comments. If it is rare that people think of moral issues in the first place, when do they do it? H3 proposed that these reviewers were more likely to have moral thoughts about the morally ambiguous movies.

This third hypothesis, that presence of thoughts dealing with morality will be more frequent in morally ambiguous movies, is supported by the data. The 2 x 3 χ^2 test of presence of moral thoughts (yes/no) and ambiguity of film (ambiguous, unambiguous, not morally centered) shows a significant difference in presence of

moral thoughts among the three levels of moral ambiguity: $\chi^2 = 41.214$ (2, $N = 348$), $p < 0.001$ (ambiguous, 43.6%; unambiguous, 12.8%; not morally centered, 13.5%). Further analyses show that the significance arises specifically from the presence of more moral thoughts about ambiguous films than about the other two categories, as shown in Figure 9. Statistical confirmation shows a significant difference in presence of moral thoughts between ambiguous and unambiguous films: $\chi^2 = 20.084$ (1, $n = 223$), $p < 0.001$ (ambiguous, 43.6%; unambiguous, 12.8%); as well as between ambiguous and non-morally centered films: $\chi^2 = 31.016$ (1, $n = 274$), $p < 0.001$ (ambiguous, 43.6%; not morally centered, 13.5%). There is no significant difference in presence of moral thoughts between unambiguous and not morally centered films: $\chi^2 = 0.021$ (1, $n = 199$), $p < 0.885$. Hypothesis 3 is supported.
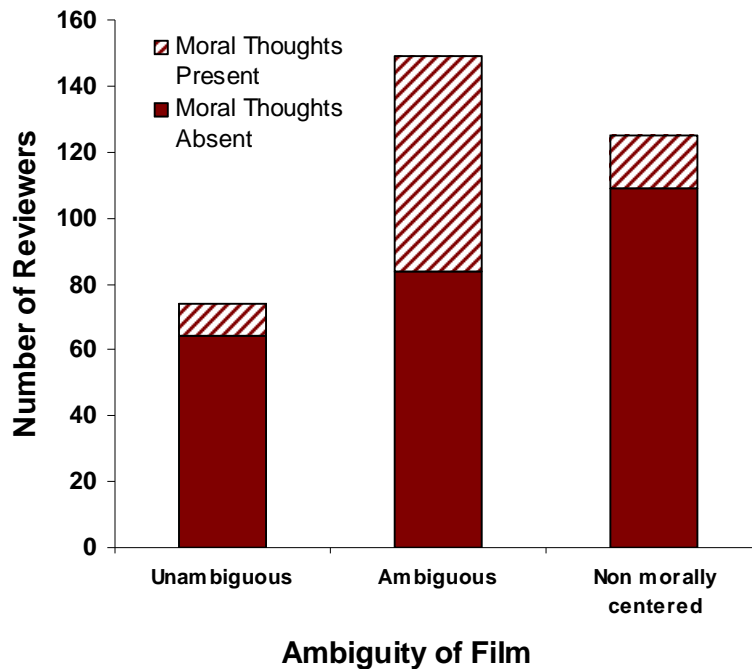
Figure 9. Presence or absence of moral thoughts, for unambiguous, ambiguous and non- morally centered movies. ($N = 348$)

The fourth hypothesis deals with the contingency between moral thoughts and thoughts about the sender. Hypothesis 2, that people would make more comments about senders, in general, when the movie was ambiguous, was not supported. However, there is a chance that this predicted effect is specific to moral thoughts. Thus, the fourth hypothesis stated that, for moral thoughts, the number of references to the sender will be greater in ambiguous movies than in unambiguous or non-morally centered movies. To test for this, a 2 (presence of sender reference: yes/no) x 3 (ambiguity of film: ambiguous, unambiguous, non morally centered) χ^2 test was conducted on the subset of 230 moral thoughts, testing whether the reference to the sender differed among the three types of movies. The results showed no significant differences between the ambiguity level groups: $\chi^2 = 3,421$ (2, $n = 230$), $p = .181$. Hypothesis 4 was not supported. Moral thoughts were not focused on the sender any more in the comments about ambiguous films than in any of the other kinds of films.

The final hypothesis, H5, was that for moral thoughts, the number of thoughts of an interrogative nature would be greater for morally ambiguous movies than for unambiguous movies and non-morally centered films. A 3x2 χ^2 test of kind of utterance (declarative/interrogative) and ambiguity of film (ambiguous/unambiguous/non morally centered) was run on the subset of 230 moral thoughts. The hypothesis was not confirmed by the results, as there was no significant difference in kind of utterance across the three levels of film ambiguity: $\chi^2 = .660$ (2, $n = 230$), $p = .719$. Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

Post Hoc Analyses

The hypotheses stating that there would be differences in moral thoughts depending of the level of moral ambiguity were not supported. Apparently, once moral thoughts emerge, they are similar regardless of the kind of movie. A qualitative

exploration of the moral thoughts indicated that most of them could be categorized as presenting one or more of the following characteristics:

a. They refer to the possibility of the movie having a negative impact on society' sense of morality.

b. They reflect on the movie's moral simplicity or moral complexity as an indicator of the movie's quality.

c. They refer to moral elements beyond the plot and characters.

This exploration also indicated that moral thoughts indicating a connection between moral issues in the movie and the reviewer's own moral beliefs or attitudes were scarce.

A post hoc content analysis of the 91 reviews that presented moral thoughts was conducted, in order to quantify these findings in the context of the complete review.

Each review was read in its entirety by a coder, who then determined whether or not the review presented the elements just described. Intercoder reliability was calculated using a subset of 25 reviews. The results confirmed the qualitative appraisal.

Of the 91 reviews, 48 showed a concern about negative effects on society or others (kappa = .54); 56 used the treatment of moral issues in the movie as a cue to determine its quality (kappa = .71), 61 made reference to moral issues beyond the plot (kappa = .78). In comparison, only 14 reviews reflected on the movies moral issue in relation to the self (kappa = .62).

As we will discuss, these results may have interesting implications for future research on morality and movie interpretation by viewers.

Discussion

The results of the study allow us to discuss, elaborate and expand previous knowledge about the role of moral thoughts in fictional narratives.

Reviewers were significantly more likely to include moral thoughts in their reviews when a movie is morally ambiguous than when it is morally unambiguous or non-morally centered. This result indicates that moral ambiguity in a film could increase people's tendency to think of moral issues in a conscious explicit way, as opposed to the implicit moral monitoring of narratives that has been described and explored in the entertainment literature so far, and that has focused uniquely on unambiguous narratives (Zillman, 1994; Raney et al., 2002).

These explicit moral thoughts are likely to play a different role in movie appreciation than the well studied implicit moral judgments. One question that this study asked is what exactly that role could be. When people think morally, are they thinking about their personal moral development or the impact of the moral message on others? Are they focusing on the plot or do they consider the sender of the message? Are they appraising their level of entertainment or the overall quality of the story? The following sections answer these questions by showing some of the functions that moral thoughts seemed to play in the reviews analyzed.

Who can be affected by moral issues in narratives?

The literature on the area of morality and narratives has assumed that narratives have an impact on viewers' individual moral development. Recent research in the area of moral psychology (Narvaez et al. 1996) shows certain limitations of this assumption, by showing evidence that the level of current moral development of an individual determines what he/she gets from a story, rather than the story providing a stepping stone for future development. The results of this study raise a different

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question; when reviewers consider moral issues in film, are they considering the moral effects on themselves, or on other possible viewers?

The finding that explicit moral thoughts are a small proportion of the total number of thoughts (4.2%) indicates that conscious concern with the moral element of a movie is not the main preoccupation of reviewers. More importantly, moral thoughts do not seem to be focused around self development, or the way in which the moral elements of the movie apply to daily life in the real world: moral thoughts that connect the movie with the self or the external world are, again, a minority (7.4% and 9.6% respectively, see Figure 7). The 230 moral comments were reexamined to see how many of them implied that the reviewer considered the movie as a stimulus for self development or change in moral views/schemas. We could define this kind of thoughts as thoughts that imply that the movie may change the viewer's moral persepectives, change their attitudes, broaden their consideration of a moral issue or make them reflect on their own moral behaviour. Comments such as the following four were considered to be examples of these:

> *Before seeing this I must confess, that yes, I did have a part of me that believed this penalty must be worthy of some criminals.* (Life of David Gale)

> *That more than anything is a testament to the conviction of his beliefs, a conviction that I know I don't have.* (Life of David Gale)

.   *I apologize to all who suffer dwarfism and am glad to have been humbled by the gentle and magnificent subtlety of "Station Agent".* (The Station Agent)

> *Ben Kingsley's tirade about Americans and their obsession with the trivial and their lack of steadfastness and principle ("with their small eyes they seek every*

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distraction") made shudders go up and down my spine. (House of Sand and

Fog)

There are only 10 comments (out of the total 230) that imply that the reviewer may be

affected personally by the moral issues brought up in film. Concern with personal

moral change or development seems to be a minor concern in these reviews. If

reviewers are not thinking of their own moral development, what are they thinking

about when they discuss morality?

An examination of the 230 moral comments indicates that at least 50 reflect

concern with the values of the movie, not in terms of being personally affected or

influenced, but implying a negative social effect. We could define these comments as

following a pattern in which concern about a possible negative effect on society is

implied. Some examples are:

If this movie had been cleaned up, it would be a great story for children as

well as adults but unfortunately it wasn't. (Seabiscuit)

It's a Hollywood liberal's dream film. (The Life of David Gale)

It gets to slam its own propaganda down your throat while attacking anything

and everything conservative. (The Life of David Gale)

Although examples such as these are not explicitly commenting on the effect of the

film on others, they clearly imply concern with the film as a moral message to society.

All such comments are negative. The reviewer rejects the moral message in the movie

(as interpreted by him/her) and dislikes the fact that it is out there. It appears that there

is an underlying concern that the message may have an effect on others, or may excessively influence a general climate of opinion: one that the reviewer opposes.

What does this imply for the direction of future research?

The concern with the effect of movies on others connects with a traditional concern of communication theories. For example, third-person effect (for a review, see Perloff, 2002); an effect by which people tend to perceive that negative media messages will affect others more than themselves. Recent research on third person effect posits that this perceived influence of media messages on others may be a "media effect" in and of itself, albeit an indirect one (Gunther & Storey, 2003; McLeod, Eveland & Nathanson, 1997). The effect would be to create, in the viewer (the reviewer in our case), the idea that there is a certain "climate of opinion" in the media; something that could later lead to the well described "Spiral of Silence" effect (Noelle-Neumann, 1977). One conclusion from this study, then, is that reviewers' moral thoughts are more likely to refer to the way in which a movie helps create a climate of disliked moral opinion, than to their own personal moral development. Moral thoughts, as they appear in the naturalistic setting of the IMDb, have a clear communication implication. Reviewers appear to think of moral issues in movies, mostly as a social message for a broad audience, and not as a tool for exploring their own moral choices.

If we are to continue examining the role that movies can play in personal moral development, this finding must be considered. This exploration on a naturalistic setting indicates that focusing exclusively on the content of a story (plot and characters) and on effects on individual thinking may not capture much of a viewer's thinking. Research on moral psychology and narratives might want to include the way in which movie viewers make judgments of the message as a social message. For example, one could speculate that to the extent that cognitive capacity is allocated to

making judgments about moral effects on others, capacity to reflect on moral issues as a tool for self-development would be lessened. If moral development research produces studies that do not account for the way in which the social context of the story is considered, they might be neglecting an element that appears to be predominant in the findings presented here.

The role of a movie as a social message that influences a moral climate of opinion may indicate that processing of moral content in fictional narratives follows principles of theories that have been formulated for a different realm of messages: persuasive messages, such as political propaganda and advertising. So far, communication theory has addressed fictional movies in terms of their entertainment value (Zillman, 1994, 2000). This study suggests that perhaps viewers think of fiction movies as messages that have persuasive elements, and are aware of their status as social messages. Future research in communication might want to explore this possibility further.

Importance of Moral Elements beyond the Plot

Most of the moral thoughts found were about the plot and characters of the film (49.1% of the 230 moral thoughts). Examples of these comments are:

> *The town's people, one by one, in a web of conniving lies, took advantage of her and her body, stripping away her dignity and pride* (Dogville)

> *Why didn't he take himself off the investigation when he learned that it was regarding his childhood friend?* (Mystic River)

However, there is also an important number of moral comments that refer to the senders of the message (70 comments, 30.4 % of the 230 moral thoughts). They

include thoughts about the actors, the directors or the producers, as is exemplified below:

> *Ugh! I used to think he was a real actor, but now he is just one more shill for the tobacco product-placement industry.* (21 grams)

> *Charlize Theron needs to rethink her values.* (Monster)

> *However, it appeared that either the author of the book or the screenwriter was so pleased with his work that he didn't want to see it end, because they are two totally superfluous scenes...which effect an unbelievable, depressing and unexpected "morality shift" in two of the major characters.* (Mystic River)

> *Nepotism always trumps talent in the film business.[7] (*Lost in Translation*)*

This is an interesting finding because, as we saw in the literature, research that includes the creator of the message and their role in moral processing is scarce. More attention needs to be given to this element, which appears saliently as an object of interest for our sample of reviewers. In the naturalistic setting we explore here, when reviewers have moral thoughts, these thoughts include judgments about the moral intentions of the sender, and judgments about these intentions. Reviewer's judgments of the sender's intentions may have a more important impact on the considerations they make about moral issues in the plot. The extreme case would be a reviewer completely disregarding the plot of the movie and its moral dilemmas because he

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[7] In reference to the director of the film, Sofia Coppola, daughter of the well known director Francis Ford Coppola.

decides that the director's agenda is dishonest. Research that examines such possibilities could be interesting.

Moral Complexity as a cue to evaluate film quality

Another finding is that reviewers refer to moral issues to judge the overall quality of the movie. This happens across movie types, such that some reviewers are appreciative of moral complexity when movies are ambiguous, and others criticize the moral Manichaeism of unambiguous movies. For example, reviewers will say things like:

> *One of this film's best strength is that both sides are represented evenhandedly, and neither one can be considered in the wrong.* (House of Sand and Fog)
> *The film cleverly tries, and in my opinion succeeds, to make a statement about the moralities and faults of corporal punishment.* (The Life of David Gale)
>
> *The good guys are so good, and the bad guys are so bad that the audience is left unconvinced.*(The Missing)

The examination of the 230 moral comments shows us that there at least 40 comments with implications of this kind, showing that moral complexity is used by the reviewers as a dimension to evaluate –as seen in the examples above, whether the movie is good or bad, effective or ineffective, realistic or unrealistic.

It is not surprising that moral evaluations play into reviewers' appraisal of the film. Such a relationship is at the core of Zillmann's disposition theory of entertainment (1994, 2000). According to Disposition Theory, people are constant moral monitors of stories: they automatically make moral judgments of the characters,

and enjoy the plot to the extent that good characters are rewarded and bad characters are punished. However, the exploration of how moral evaluations appear in this study gives us a much broader perspective than the one Disposition Theory offers at this time. Moral judgments made by these reviewers are not just about the plot of the story: they are about the story as a crafted message. Moral judgments do not only act as a way for people to like or dislike characters, like or dislike what happens to them, and then like or dislike the story's ending. Moral judgments also act as a way for people to decide if the creator of the message is a good storyteller, if the audience will be moved, and if they themselves find the story credible. Future research on narrative enjoyment should consider this finding. Including moral complexity as a variable that affects people's judgments of the story might help expand disposition theory considerably, filling some important gaps that it has, like its inability to explain people's liking of tragedy and stories with sad endings. The source of viewer's enjoyment of such films might come from an appreciation of complexity, even in the face of moral "unfairness" within the story.

Other results

It may be interesting to review some other results of this study, in the light of the conclusions above. Most of the hypotheses that were not supported by the data predicted that moral thoughts would be different depending on the level of moral ambiguity of the film. The results showed that there were no significant differences in the kinds of moral thoughts produced depending on the kind of movie. We could only find support for the hypothesis that morally ambiguous movies generate more moral thoughts. What can this mean? Apparently, once moral thoughts emerge, they take one of the forms described above, forms that are, as we saw, independent of the kind of film. It doesn't matter whether the movie is morally ambiguous or not: once the

reviewer decides to explicitly talk about morality, he or she will take one or more of the roads discussed above: comment on the moral social message, comment on the quality of the movie and, in general, address elements that go beyond the plot.

After seeing the form that moral thoughts take, the fact that the hypotheses were not supported makes complete sense. What was found examining the moral thoughts, is that when people address moral issues explicitly they are leaving the realm of the mere plot and addressing the context: social, artistic, persuasive. The categorization of movies as ambiguous or unambiguous depends exclusively on plot elements. It is logical that if thoughts are about elements beyond the plot, there will be no significant differences that depend on the kind of film.

At this point, three main conclusions of the study can be re-emphasized. First, research on moral issues and narratives must consider elements beyond the plot as a relevant variable. Secondly, research in moral issues and narratives would benefit from using morally ambiguous messages as material, because these kinds of narratives have been found in our study to be more likely to produce spontaneous explicit thoughts about moral issues. Finally, the assumption that stories have effects on individual viewers' moral development is questioned. If this happens, it may happen through the indirect effect of considering the morality of the social message, rather than the morality of the plot.

Disadvantages and Advantages of this Study

As is the case with any one particular study, and particularly with an exploratory study as this one, there are advantages and disadvantages to the design and the kind of information the findings provide.

Disadvantages

The findings of this study must be addressed and interpreted considering a number of relevant limitations. One main limitation has to do with the source of the data. The comments we analyze come from a particular website, the IMDb, which has specific characteristics. It is a website dedicated to film, and as such, it may over-represent comments on technical issues and issues about the world of film. The comments are also about a limited set of films, and the findings may be related with elements that are specific to this selection of movies. Finally, there is little that we know about the reviewers' individual characteristics; it is even hard to determine basics such as gender or age. For all these reasons, it would be interesting to replicate similar studies in different contexts, and with a different corpus of films.

A second disadvantage is that films were categorized as ambiguous, unambiguous or non-morally-centered by the author. Although the categorization is based on clear criteria, and makes theoretical sense, it would be good for future studies to count with several coders that could categorize the movies, so that variable "kind of film" had an assessment of reliability, making the study more methodologically sound.

It also must be made clear that the claims that are made regarding what people "think about" and "do not think about" regarding film are only applicable to what people think about consciously. There is no way this study can assess processes that people may be undergoing automatically or implicitly. Thus, for example, when we say that people do not seem to be using the movie as a tool for moral development, we can only mean that they are not doing it through conscious explicit thought. Although, to an extent, we believe that such conscious processing would be the best way to assess development of morality at high stages, there is really no way to know if such processes are not operating unconsciously.

Finally, it must be said that the small frequency of moral thoughts found made it hard to statistically analyze certain issues that could have been relevant.

Advantages

There are, also, important advantages to the study. Mostly, they refer to it being the initial step in a line of research that has not been properly addressed so far. The focus on morally complex issues in mediated messages such as film has been neglected in the communication literature to this point. This study, by exploring moral complexity in film and people's reactions to it, shows several areas, within the field of communication that this may be relevant to. The study also focuses on moral perception of adults, and on explicit conscious moral processes. Both these issues have not been addressed very much in the literature on communication, and, again, the findings indicate it is an area where more research is necessary.

An important advantage of the study is that it shows that study of moral issues need not be limited to studying the content of the message (the plot and characters). Clearly, within a natural context, people comment on messages as messages that were crafted and sent "by someone". Experimental research on morality and narratives has long been focusing exclusively on moral content (Krcmar & Cooke, 2001; Krcmar & Valkenburg, 1999; Narvaez, 1998, 2001; Narvaez, Gleason et al., 1999; Raney, 2002; Raney & Bryant, 2002; Zillmann, 1994; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975). This study shows that important elements of people's actual processing of stories are being neglected when considerations about the senders of a message are not taken into account in a research design. Of course, the finding mentioned above is thanks to the fact that this study was conducted in a naturalistic environment, and thus is extremely useful in telling us the kinds of things people do "in real life". This information is always important when later trying to design research to refine these findings.

Appendix

Plot Summaries for the Sample of Movies [8]

Plot Summaries for Ambiguous Films

Dogville

A woman on the run from the mob, Grace, is reluctantly accepted as a newcomer in a small and secluded Colorado town. Collectively, the town decides to give Grace a two week trial to prove to everyone that she is not bad, and can be trusted to stay in their town without disturbing their lifestyle. In order to gain the trust of the town, her job is to help each individual person with any help they may need.

The town people warm up to Grace and begin to depend on the services that she gives them. Grace is happy to be accepted, and for a while it seems that things are going perfectly.

A couple of times groups of men pretending to be the police come to the town asking for Grace. The town people realize that Grace needs their protection more than they thought. They decide to increase her work load and eventually Grace becomes a slave of labor (to the women of the town) and a whore (to the men of the town). Grace complies; she will do whatever she needs to stay in the "safety" of the town. After Grace is unfairly accused of stealing money from a resident, the town decides to turn Grace in, and collect the reward money that they are offered. Grace is turned in, but the men are not law enforcers, they are the mob leaders. Grace is in fact the daughter of the gangster who was searching for her; she had been trying to escape that life of crime.

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[8] The plot summaries are constructed from information on the IMDb, Amazon.com, ruinedendings.com and my own account of the films.

After a conversation with her father, in which they discuss her experience in the town, she decides to let him kill all the town's people and burn down Dogville. She realizes that Dogville took advantage of her frailty and kindness and does not want anyone to stumble upon the town and go through what she had to. She feels the world would be a better place if Dogville was destroyed.

Life of David Gale

Dr. David Gale, is accused of rape of a student and the murder of his friend, Constance Harroway. He is convicted and sentenced to death. While in death row, he contacts a reporter, Bitsey Bloom, and through a series of flashbacks and extra evidence tells his version of the facts. Bitsey puts the pieces together, and discovers how the events really occurred.

She gathers evidence that Constance's supposed murder was really a suicide staged to look like homicide. Constance (who suffered from severe leukemia), her boyfriend, and David Gale –all anti death penalty advocates-, stage the suicide to make it look like a murder, and plant evidence incriminating Gale. Gale is executed for a crime that he did not commit, giving proof that the death penalty can be used against innocent people. Everything is videotaped and provided to Bitsey so that she can later uncover the true story, and show this to the world.

House of Sand and Fog

Kate is a grieving divorcee whose house is put up for auction because of an administrative mistake. Severely depressed and thinking that she had taken care of the issue, she neglects to open the notices of auction and eviction. Behrani, has lost

everything he once owned when forced to flee his home country. As immigrants in America, he and his family find even greater financial hardship. All seems lost until Behrani finds a house up for auction at a very good price. After buying the house, he realizes he can sell it at a huge profit--the stepping-stone needed to give his family the life he felt they deserve. Meanwhile Kate, penniless and homeless, is forced to live out of her. She tortures herself seeing Behrani's family move in.

Several confrontations between the characters, each increasing in intensity, only serve to strengthen each character's resolve to retain what they feel is rightfully theirs. When circumstances finally bring Kate and Behrani under the same roof, Behrani is bullied at gun-point by Kate's boyfriend. He suddenly comes up with a solution which would benefit all people involved. Tragically, only moments before this peaceful resolution is agreed upon, Behrani's son wrestles the gun away from the Kate's boyfriend, beginning a struggle that results in his own death. In despair at the death of his son, Behrani goes home just to quietly poison his wife, and suffocate himself. Kate finds the two of them dead, beside each other on the bed.

Monster

The movie is based on the true story of Aileen Wuornos, one of America's first female serial killers. Wuornos had a difficult and cruel childhood plagued by abuse and drug use in Michigan. She became a prostitute by the age of thirteen. She eventually moved to Florida where she began earning a living as a highway prostitute servicing the desires of semi-truck drivers. The movie focuses on the nine month period between 1989 and 1990, during which Wuornos had a lesbian relationship with a woman named Selby. Wuornos tries to go clean and find a legal job, but finds it to be impossible, and is forced to go back to prostitution. An encounter with a client goes

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wrong when he becomes violent and murderous, and Wournos kills the man in self defense. After that, however, she begins murdering any client that she mistrusts. Then she takes their money and wallets, trying to buy a new life for herself and Selby.

Selby comes to realize that Aileen's murder spree is going out of control, and tries to stop her. Aileen does not stop. Selby makes a tough decision to cooperate with the police in getting Aileen arrested. She testifies in court against Aileen and Aileen is sentenced to death. Aileen and Selby never speak again.

Thirteen

Tracy, a thirteen-year-old girl, finds her relationship with her mother (Mel) becoming more and more difficult as she discovers drugs, sex, and petty crime in the company of her new best friend, the "cool" but troubled Evie.

At the edge of adolescence, Tracy is a smart straight-A student. However, we also see that she is emotionally troubled: she cuts herself often to alleviate her pain at being part of a broken home. She feels uncomfortable living in the same house with her mother's new boyfriend. When she decides to befriend Evie, the most popular and beautiful girl in school, she is led down a path of sex, drugs and petty crime. They steal money from purses and from stores in order to buy cool clothes and drugs. As Tracy transforms herself and her identity, her world becomes a boiling, emotional cauldron fueled by new tensions between her and her mother--as well as teachers and old friends. Evie, who also comes from a broken home, finds herself living at Tracy's and being adopted into the family. This creates more tension. Things become really complicated when Evie tries to attract Tracy's mother affection for herself, to the extent of betraying her friend. Evie tells Mel that it is Tracy that has led her into a life of sex, drugs and stealing.

Finally realizing that Evie is a backstabber, Mel kicks her out of the house. She goes to her daughter and finally acknowledges her pain, sees the scars in her arms, and seems to decide to focus more on her daughter. They fall asleep together.

21 grams

This is the story of three people: Paul Rivers, an ailing mathematician lovelessly married to an English emigré, Christina Peck, an upper-middle-class suburban housewife, happily married and mother of two little girls, and Jack Jordan, an ex-convict who is trying to reform himself through his Christian faith and. They are brought together by a terrible accident that will change their lives. Christina's husband and her two girls are killed when Jack's truck runs them over. Paul's life is saved when he receives Christina's husband heart in a much needed transplant.

Paul tries to find out who he got the heart from, and traces Christina. He is attracted to her and initiates an affair, without telling her that he has her husband's heart. He then helps her to track the man that killed her family, and he promises to kill him for her. Jack, consumed by guilt, had turned himself in, gone to jail and served his sentence. When he is let out of jail he decides to abandon his family.

Christina wants Jack dead. When Paul finally confronts Jack, he lacks the strength to kill him. The struggle ends by having Paul mortally wounded by accident. The film ends with Paul dead, Jack going back to his family, and Christina pregnant with Paul's child.

Plot Summaries for Unambiguous Films

Master and Commander

During the Napoleonic Wars, a British frigate, the HMS Surprise, and a much larger French warship, the Acheron, with greater fire power, stalk each other off of the coast of South America. The Captain of the Surprise, Lucky Jack, as he is referred to by his crew, is well regarded by his men, who trust him implicitly, even after the first devastating battle and an apparent personal vendetta against the French captain. We get to know the life of the sailors and navy officers, as well as the one of the captain's friend on board; a surgeon and naturalist who balances the violence of his chosen life with the quiet demeanor of a scientist.

After the British leave the Galapagos, they sail to intercept the Acheron, which was spotted by the doctor when he was looking for specimens. Captain Aubrey devises a plan to disguise the Surprise as a whaling vessel and ambush the Acheron. This goes almost according to plan, and they capture the Acheron, although a number of the Surprise's crew are killed or seriously wounded. The captured Acheron, now commanded by one of the Surprise's officers, sets sail for an English port. Just as the Surprise is about to head back to the Galapagos so the doctor can find a specimen of a new bird species he discovered, the captain and the doctor realize that the French captain is still alive and aboard the Acheron with the other captives. The HMS Surprise turns around and escorts the Acheron to port, much to the dismay to the doctor. Science and friendship are sacrificed in order to pursue the goals of war.

The Last Samurai

In Japan, American Civil War veteran Captain Nathan Algren trains the Emperor's troops to use modern weapons as they prepare to defeat the last of the country's Samurai. But Algren's passion is swayed when he is captured by the samurai and learns about their traditions and code of honor.

Algren becomes part of the village he is being held hostage in and finds that his true warrior is becoming unleashed as he trains to become a Samurai with the very people he once called his enemies. Soon, the Japanese Imperial forces begin to search for the Samurai again, ready to begin a war with them that will soon determine the fate of Japanese traditions, and their lives. Algren joins the Samurai in the fight against the Japanese army (armed with rifles, cannons, etc). Following their honor code, all the Samurais die, except for Algren.

In the end, the emperor takes the side of Algren and the Samurai, and doesn't sign the trade agreement with the U.S. that was supposed to make Japan a modern nation. The emperor says that it is important for the people of Japan to not forget who they are. Algren leaves the military life, and joins life in the village where he came to know the Samurai.

Mystic River

Three childhood friends Jimmy Markum, Sean Devine and Dave Boyle reunite following the death of Jimmy's oldest daughter, Katie.

Sean is a police detective on the case, gathering difficult and disturbing evidence; he is also tasked with handling Jimmy's rage and need for retribution. As the investigation moves along, signs seem to point to Dave as a suspect. Jimmy, who has

become the leader of the neighborhood small scale mafia, decides to deal with Dave, and confronts him with his thugs. Dave tries to defend himself, confessing his real crime: he murdered a child molester. Jimmy refuses to believe this, and ends up killing Dave and throwing him to the river anyway. When Sean shows up the next day and reveals the identity of the real killers of Jimmy's daughter, Jimmy must confront his mistake and face Sean's judgment.

Cold Mountain

Inman and Ada are two people living in Cold Mountain, North Carolina, who fall in love. Just as they declare their love the Civil War breaks out and Inman has to go and join the fight. Eventually, however, he decides he can not stand the nonsense of war, so he deserts and begins the journey back to Ada, a long journey on which he meets a whole variety of people and gets almost killed numerous times. Meanwhile, Ada has nearly starved to death, but is saved when picturesque Ruby turns up to help her run the farm. Ada and Ruby also have to fight against the Home Guard, bullies who stayed behind from the war and spend their time bullying the local population, stealing their food, raping the lonely women, and even murdering people who shelter deserters.

Inman and Ada are finally reunited, but soon after Inman runs into the Home Guard and is shot, but not before killing the most vicious of the Home Guard officers as well. He dies tragically right in front of Ada, who later goes on to give birth to Inman's daughter. The final scene shows the survivors living peacefully and doing well.

The Missing

In 19th-century New Mexico, a father comes back home, hoping to reconcile with his adult daughter Maggie. Maggie is not sympathetic to his father's efforts to come back after abandoning her and her mother to live the life of an Indian. She tells him to leave them alone now: it is too late for forgiveness. However, that night Maggie's daughter is kidnapped by a group of Indians who will most probably sell her for prostitution. This forces father and estranged daughter to work together to get her back. The movie follows the pursuit of the kidnapped girls. In the final encounter, Maggie's father tackles the powerful Indian brujo just as he is about to shoot Maggie. The father and the Indian brujo fall off a cliff and die. After that, Maggie shoots another Indian and tells the rest to leave because their leader is dead. After a few minutes the Indians leave. The next day, Maggie goes home with her daughters and the other girls she saved from prostitution.

Plot Summaries for Non Morally Centered Movies

Seabiscuit

In the early 1930s, four disparate lives will come together to create one of racing history's greatest legends. Charles Howard, a self-made millionaire, copes with the accidental death of his young son by immersing himself in racing. He meets Tom Smith, a seemingly washed-up race horse trainer unable to adapt to a modern world. Nevertheless, Howard is impressed by Smith and his abilities, and he hires him as head trainer for his racing stable. While scouting for new horses, Smith spots Seabiscuit, a small, gangly colt who, despite being the grandson of the legendary champion, Man O' War, has descended to the lowest ranks of the claiming race circuit. But Smith sees potential in the horse and convinces Howard to buy him.

A defiant and temperamental Seabiscuit refuses to let anyone ride him until one day Red Pollard, a down-on-his-luck jockey, wanders into the Howard Stable. Like Smith, Red has a gift working with difficult horses. He and Seabiscuit immediately take to each other, and Smith hires him. Under Tom's training, Red and Seabiscuit begin winning races and breaking records, even as both horse and jockey struggle with career ending injuries. Seabiscuit and Red become national heroes to a Depression-weary America, by winning once and again against powerful adversaries, and against all odds.

Lost in Translation

Bob Harris is an American film actor, far past his prime. He visits Tokyo to appear in commercials, and he meets Charlotte, the young wife of a visiting photographer. Bored and weary, Bob and Charlotte make ideal if improbable travel companions. Scarlet is looking for "her place in life," and Bob is tolerating a mediocre stateside marriage. Both separately and together, they live the experience of the American in Tokyo. Bob and Charlotte suffer both confusion and hilarity due to the cultural and language differences between themselves and the Japanese. As the relationship between Bob and Charlotte deepens, they come to the realization that their visit to Japan, and their relationship, will soon end, as they go back to their "normal" lives.

The Station Agent

   Fin McBride, a loner with a passion for trains, inherits an abandoned train station in the middle of nowhere -- a place that suits him just fine because all he wants is to be alone. He is constantly worried that people cannot see through his dwarfism, so he tends to isolate himself. But that is not to be. Soon after moving in, he discovers his isolated depot is more like Grand Central Station. There is Olivia, a distracted and troubled artist, and Joe, a friendly Cuban with an insatiable hunger for conversation. With absolutely nothing in common, they find their isolated lives coming together in a friendship none of them could foresee.

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