

Norman Holland's 'Meeting Movies' applied to Cameron Crowe's 'Elizabethtown'

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ABSTRACT

In Meeting Movies (2006) Norman Holland claims that by “meeting” the movies that we have formed an intimate connection with, we can meet ourselves. That is, have a more complete notion of our unique identity theme. The ability to understand one’s unique identity theme, a common topic in Holland’s work, has never been more relevant than it is today, with the borders between the real and the virtual, the concrete and abstract, even the rational and irrational becoming increasingly blurred. Holland’s theories will be examined against a background of scientific research currently being carried out in the areas of the neurobiology, neuroplasticity, cognition and neurocinematics. To conclude the paper, an application of Holland’s free associative method will be presented.

Holland began *Meeting Movies*, his only complete book dedicated to film analysis, by alluding to the role that movies had played in the lives of those who matured into adulthood during the twentieth century. This could be considered as an unusual tone for a scholar who had dedicated most of his academic effort to literary analysis but, as one progresses through this volume, one understands that Holland pursues much more than the sharing of academic achievements in this work; it could be argued that he is looking for a window that will allow his readers to understand what is happening in their minds when they connect with a film.

Holland wrote, “Growing up in the twentieth century, we have lived lives entwined with movies.” (Holland, 2006; 11) Contextualizing this statement, Holland explains the manner in which films and movie theatres were central to his own personal development and living experience (rather than his academic journey) thus preparing the reader for a work that will, in its own manner, prove to be quite private. Despite his lifelong interest in cinema, as already mentioned, most of Norman Holland’s academic work was based on an analysis of literary texts. However, in the 1990s, Holland started to present papers on film, including “Seeing Huston’s *Freud*” (1994), “8 1/2 and Me” (1996),

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and “Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*: One Viewer’s Viewing” (1996). These essays acted as precursors to Holland’s *Meeting Movies*, and all appeared as chapters in the ensuing book, albeit in an adapted form that encompassed Holland’s new, more personal analysis.

The quotations “Movies happen in us” and “As some literary critics say nowadays, we do not read the book, it reads us. I think that what they mean is, as we read something, be it a story, film, or play, we find feelings and thoughts within ourselves we would not otherwise have found” (Holland, 2006; 12) set the tone for *Meeting Movies*. Familiarity with Holland’s earlier work means that forceful declarations like those above are unsurprising, and could be seen as an extension of Holland’s vision of the fictional world offered both by films and books as transitional and transformational objects (Holland, 2000). However, I do believe that those assertions also illustrate that in *Meeting Movies*, Holland desires more than a simple transfer of a reader response technique to film analysis. He aspires to investigate the manner in which the narrative of the other, when told through film, can influence and develop the viewer’s individual narrative of self, especially when there is an intimate connection between film and viewer. As one progresses through Holland’s analysis of the eight films reviewed, from “Casablanca” to “Shakespeare in Love”, one sees Holland using free associative analysis to achieve just this knowledge of his own self narrative. His free associative film analysis also allows him to understand psychological blockages that formed over the years in his unconscious, because of his living experience.

As one travels through the chapters of *Meeting Movies*, Holland takes his reader on a journey of discovery into the author’s very inner being, and generously shares the advantages that this excursion brought to his own life. By providing an intimate account, supported by scientific expertise and academic training, he signposts a path that can be followed by others. He also convincingly illustrates how a more complete knowledge of this intimate connection between the viewer and the transitional object (the film he or she has connected with) can enhance the development of the individual mind.

As Holland’s association in *Meeting Movies* is always linked to specific film sequences, I believe it can be construed as a form of conditioned association as defined by Fromm (1955). Erich Fromm supported the concept of conditioning association to specific events and immediate stimuli, rather than using open-ended and general questions to illicit associative responses. He defended that, though conditioned association can be more disturbing to the patient during the immediate period of the consultation, it yields more constructive outcomes as it produces more direct and focused results. It also avoids the repetitive downward spirals that unconditioned free association sometimes provokes. Fromm even went so far as to claim that this type of conditioned association had been Freud’s true objective.

Holland discussed films that covered large extensions of his total living experience, from his teenage years in World War II America, through his twenties, thirties and later years. He referred to the fact that these “old friends” remained static (but not always), while other factors and relationships changed. He also demonstrated how unique identity themes can be fixed, while still allowing variations. This concept of a central unaltered identity theme is a principal feature of the body of Holland’s work. In *5 Reader’s Reading* (1975), he employed Lichtenstein’s identity theory as the foil against which he interpreted different readers’ divergent free associative responses to the same literary texts. According to Lichtenstein, identity themes do not change much throughout life, but the variations lived on those themes may vary widely because of different circumstances, like variations on a theme in a symphony. From this perspective, the course of peoples’ lives may change because of varying external realities, growth and experiences (for example they may marry, have children, stay single and childless, leave school without a high school diploma and work in a blue collar job all their lives or get a college education and have an international career), but the identity themes, or inner personality traits remain constant (Lichtenstein, 1961).

Throughout his work, Holland, like Lichtenstein, supported the notion that there are no good or bad identity themes and that they, of themselves, do not determine the outcome of the individual’s life. However, being aware of them and involving them in decision-making can play a vital role in the

individual's feeling of self-worth and self-appreciation. In *Meeting Movies*, Holland provided a path that can assist this process of increased self-awareness within the current social paradigm, where the boundaries between the real and the virtual are becoming increasingly blurred and it is more and more difficult to hear one's inner voice because of the constant external "noise" arising from the unremitting bombardment with varied and useless superficial facts. This is particularly relevant today, as even cursory research into mental health studies shows that young adults are becoming increasingly more susceptible to the global plague of depression. Despite increased efficiency in diagnosis and treatment, depression levels are growing exponentially worldwide. It is now the fourth leading cause of the global disease burden (Hyman, 2006) and in the 15 to 44 age category, it is the second most common cause of DALY (disability adjusted life years) worldwide, affecting 121 million people globally (WHO, 2008).

Meeting Movies had a three-fold appeal for me. Firstly, because Holland went beyond the imparting of a theoretical opinion and demonstrated the manner in which he adapted free association for his purpose, he provided a comprehensive model that can be easily followed. Secondly, Holland believed that film and literary analysis should use the whole mind, and not just be limited to the scope of the rational, hence his use of free association to tap into the unconscious as well as the cognisant. Thirdly, Holland extended conditioned association to the selection process for the films analysed. This meant that some of the films reviewed in *Meeting Movies* are not classics; a few are even, as Holland self-effacingly describes them, "just a bit of fluff". I really appreciated his defence of the idea that a movie does not have to be a great film, or a classic to be significant, it just needs to connect with a viewer and this connection will make it a work of magnitude for that person. I believe film, as a popular art form should be available for appreciation with little or no peer censorship. However, its stratification into different categories like classics, author films, cult film, independent films, even genre interferes with this fluidity.

In "The Mind and the Book" (2000), Holland had proposed that the role of literary criticism should not merely be to help the reader understand the literary work, but also the unique relationship that is created between the reader and the book, due not only to the literary object itself, but also to the innate nature of the reader's mind. When he described a book as both a transitional and transformational object, he indicated a strong belief in the dynamic and interactive nature of the physical brain and the fictional world provided by literature and later film. In *Meeting Movies*, Holland further extended that avenue of thought, indicating a sort of "plastic" interface between the reader's mind and the fictional world provided by a book or a film, especially when there is a certain synergy between the two. "As someone has remarked, that screen spread out in front of us in the darkened theatre with the audience shuffling and snuffling around us is really a layer of our own cortex. To meet a movie is to meet oneself, and that is what I am inviting you to do" (Holland, 2006; 14). Such statements demonstrate Holland's belief that when the unique relationship between film and viewer is understood, the viewer has not only an increased awareness of his own unique identity themes, but also can enter a process of change and development.

In *Changing Minds* (2004), after extended observation of scenarios where adults have changed their core opinions on issues central to their existence, Howard Gardner concluded that it is quite difficult for adults to do this. He points to seven levers that are normally involved in this process of transformation, the most important of which is "resonance". Resonance implies that the new idea harmonises with an internal desire that has been growing in the individual to change. The concept of resonance is echoed by Holland's suggestion that, conditioned association should be applied to films with which the viewer had formed a particular connection therefore, one could consider that a form of this resonance exists between the viewer and the ideas expressed in the film narrative he/she associated with. Within this context, the synergy between viewer and film narrative could imply a predisposition for change and/or provide a means to listen to an inner voice that had been silenced by external noise or social conventions.

My work with young people aged between eighteen and twenty-five was one of the reasons that Holland's suggestions – that any film can be significant as long as it connects with a viewer in an

intimate fashion and that meeting movies we meet ourselves – struck a chord with me. At the time my students were mostly undergraduate working in non-literary areas. However, over the years, I came to understand that films were very important to many of them, leading them to introspection and often re-evaluation of opinions. I also noticed, merely as a spectator, that, students who watched films regularly and had the habit of discussing them, appeared to have better coping skills and were less vulnerable to outside pressures than others who did not have this habit. Initially, I thought these students' inherent characters allowed them both to enjoy film and cope better with life. However, considering Holland's theories, that viewers could become more conscious of unique identity themes and adjust inappropriate opinions through increased awareness of interaction with films that had significance for them, I began to wonder if these students' involvement with film (though it could not be described as conditioned association as such) was allowing them to make life choices that were more appropriate for their individual personalities. I began to question also if these students' extended exposure to the fictional worlds that they connected with was not also increasing their coping skills in a generalised fashion and thus reducing anxiety levels.

The students normally watched a wide spectrum of films – some good, some bad, some indifferent – but there was always one or more films that brought a different sparkle or wistfulness to the eye, as well as an articulate expression of feelings and personal thought. I decided to carry out a cursory study in order to quantify, in some way, the interaction that was taking place between a "preferred film" and its viewer's state of mind. I asked students to write briefly on their feelings about a film that they had "connected" with. I had expected fairly general replies, but I was surprised to receive really personal answers like "it lets me breathe", "it made me change my point of view, and made me change my way of thinking", even "What I learnt from that movie was that when you have dreams you need to believe in them deeply and in yourself, you need to fight for what you want and for your life no matter how crazy it may seem". I realised at this stage that there was something quite profound going on in my students' minds when they connected with particular films.

The students' responses led me to consider the advantages of being able to capitalise on these rare thoughts and extend the feelings they carried beyond the immediate circumstance of watching or discussing the movies, one of Holland's aims in *Meeting Movies*. I considered that this transference could indeed enhance coping skills and reduce anxiety levels, two of the conditions vital to developing a healthy mind and making appropriate life choices.

The premise that mental health is dependent on an accurate perception of self is generally accepted by medical health experts, as illustrated by the favourable reception that Aaron Beck and his associates received when they proposed, in *The Cognitive Theory of Depression* (1979), that depression was caused by defective cognitive triads, that is, the individual's erroneous perspective of self, relationships with others and future prospects. The fact that this theory was founded on extensive clinical trials, carried out in various health care facilities over a number of years and supported by the Department of Psychiatry in the University of Pennsylvania, lent credibility to the whole project. The success of cognitive therapy for the treatment of depression focuses around a talking psychotherapy that concentrates on the counsellor confronting and correcting patients' flawed thought constructs related to their defective cognitive triad. I believe it is possible to consider that faulty cognitions regarding others and the future are laid down because patients have an inaccurate image of self.

Despite their differences, parallels can be seen between Holland's and Beck's work because both regard an awareness of the self as central to the health of the individual. While Beck works with the clinically depressed and concentrates on "cognitions of self" and his therapy revolves around a certain quantifying and appreciation of the characteristics and abilities of this self, Holland uses conditioned association to increase awareness of self. As already mentioned, in *5 Readers Reading* (1975) he adopted Heinz Lichtenstein's identity theory (1961) as the filter through which he understood and built psychological profiles for five readers' based on their readings of various literary texts.

However, though awareness of unique identity themes is a common factor in Holland's work, there is a definite progression in application of his techniques. *5 Readers Reading* is designed to exhibit a theory and requires a certain understanding of both Freud and Lichtenstein's work. *Know*

Thyself (Holland & Schwartz, 2008) illustrates the manner in which Holland and Schwartz working in cooperation with students in the classroom used associative literary criticism to produce psychological profiles. However, though *Meeting Movies* can be best understood if the reader has an awareness of Holland's previous work, it offers an intuitive and simple model that any reader can apply to film analysis.

In our current global environment, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to listen to one's own inner voice and have an accurate knowledge of self. Therefore, any process that assists self-discovery and development is very relevant today. Especially if this permits the individual to understand him/herself better, in a personal fashion, consolidating the value of individual thought and conviction, within an acceptable social consciousness. If one considers Beck's claims that depression is caused by inaccurate cognitions of self, relationships and the future, one could suggest that depressed individuals are unaware of their unique identity themes and as a consequence make life choices not aligned with these themes but according to acceptable generalised social patterns. These may not suit personal character traits. Perhaps Holland's approach could be adapted in some way to prevent high-risk groups from entering the downward spiral of depressive thought patterns.

With this notion in mind, I decided to put Holland's proposals into practise to try to meet a movie that I had connected with in order to extend and deepen the positive experience of watching favourite films beyond the actual viewing time frame. My associative choice fell to Cameron Crowe's *Elizabethtown* (2005). *Elizabethtown* did not begin as a favourite film of mine and it definitely fits into the category of "a bit of fluff". It was actually one of my teenage daughter's preferred movies, but as I watched it with her, I began to form a close synergy with that film.

Elizabethtown and I connected in two manners, and I was curious to determine the significance of these. First, the more I watched the film, the more the initial frames bothered me, so much so that I would arrange a distraction so that I would be doing something to divert my attention from the scenes. The other meaningful sequences for me showed the final cross-state road trip, which always left me with a sense of hopefulness and good will. In addition, I appreciated the film's humour, which prevented it from becoming merely moralistic. Finally, I was happy to review this film because I liked Holland's proposal that any film can be significant, as long as it is meaningful to one viewer.

Holland began his analysis of the films he met in *Meeting Movies* by reading background criticism on them. After studying and watching the films intellectually, he sat and re-imagined them letting his mind free associate in order to get beyond the intellectual experience of watching the film, thus tapping into the manner in which that particular movie affected his psyche. Holland recorded minutely the thoughts and associations re-living the film sequences provoked in his mind, thus unleashing the whole force of the mind.

As *Elizabethtown* is not a very well known film, I think it is appropriate at this point to explain it a little as Holland did with similar films. In a nutshell, it is a slice of life, a chapter of an ongoing book. No issues are resolved during the film and the principal character's physical life is very similar at the beginning and the end; however, he has changed his core attitudes and opinions and because of this is better able to deal with adverse situations. The film explores the importance of perspectives and personal relationships. It proposes that the concepts of success and failure are relative rather than absolute qualities, determined by personal and collective perspectives. It contrasts the interpersonal relationships associated with the corporate world and close knit family circles played out respectively against the backgrounds of life in urban and rural America.

The film begins with a large truck backing into a loading bay and, when the warehouse staff opens the back doors, the viewer just sees stacks of shrink-wrapped shoes on pallets stamped "RETURNED". One warehouse worker says to another, in a tone that leads one to understand that this is a recurring occurrence, "Welcome back boys".

The film tells the story of Drew (Orlando Bloom), a successful shoe designer moving up in the corporate world of Mercury Worldwide Shoes (some critics saw this company as modelled on Nike and Alec Baldwin's character Phil as a caricature of Phil Knight). The film begins with Drew's bubble of success bursting as his innovative sneaker, the Spasmatica, is being recalled from the market and

the company is set to lose nearly a billion dollars. Drew moves not from success to mere failure, but fiasco. After he is banished from the golden kingdom of Mercury Worldwide Shoes and dumped by his corporate girlfriend, he goes home to commit suicide. Shedding himself of the worldly goods provided by his success, he plans a designer death. However, after the first attempt fails, he is interrupted by his sister calling to let him know that their father (Mitch) has died and that he (Drew) will have to go back to Mitch's hometown to have the body cremated, because Drew is the responsible one.

This scene illustrates a characteristic of the film, Drew reacts to unfavourable incidents by playing the role he feels more appropriate for the situation. For example, in his suicide scene he plays the tragic hero. Drew's role-playing is interrupted by real life, in this case a real tragedy – his father's death. So Drew picks up a few spartan items of clothing and sets off for Elizabethtown, having received varied and detailed instructions from his mother, Holly (Susan Sarandon). On the night flight, where he is the lone passenger, Drew meets flight attendant Claire (Kirsten Dunst) and she engages him in conversation. The following morning after various detours and mishaps Drew finds Elizabethtown and a warm extended family that he had not really known before.

Over the next few days aided by Claire, he manages to take care of the burial and memorial arrangements and reconcile his mother and his father's extended family. More importantly, he also realises that there is more to life than work. As he gets involved in normal life, he realises that he has been living a shadow existence. However, still playing a role – the tragic hero he plans to kill himself when he returns home. It is only Claire's confrontation on this issue that shows him how shallow and full of stereotypes his whole approach to life has been since he joined Mercury Worldwide Shoes.

After the memorial service, Claire gives Drew a detailed roadmap to get home, complete with strategic stopping points and music, so that he will drive, rather than fly, cross-country from Kentucky to Oregon with Mitch's ashes. The road-trip gives Drew time and perspective to regain his life. He drops the masks he has worn, at different stages, throughout the film and embraces his emotions (both happy and sad), confronts his fears about his professional failure and personal shortcomings and decides to live. At the end of the film, Drew meets Claire in a crowded, bustling farmers' market, surrounded by people and movement. This place is a total contrast to the opening scenes that occurred in sterile corporate settings, where all human contact was sanitized and superficial.

I will concentrate my analysis on the two parts of the film that affected me most – the opening stills and the road trip. In *Meeting Movies*, Holland recorded his rational criticism in regular print and his *association in italics*. I will follow a similar procedure.

As already mentioned, the film begins with scenes related to the failure of the Spasmatica. The first thing that affected me was the sound of a truck reversing followed by scenes of a closed white truck backing into a loading bay. Thinking rationally, there is nothing ominous or eerie about this sequence, the only thing that is unusual is the occurrence of such an ordinary scene at this point in the film, *but for some reason this sequence made me feel uneasy and this feeling increased as the scene progressed, especially when the camera pulled back to show a warehouse full of pallets of returned shoes*. Why did I react like this? When I thought about it rationally, I judged my feelings to be completely out of proportion.

Associating with that scene, – *my mind flashed back to a summer (actually the summer of 2003). At the time my husband had a small business with the distribution rights for electronic/electrical goods. When things were starting to go really well, he received a batch of products that tested well but were in fact faulty. Over the following months, all these products were returned and I got to the stage that when I saw or heard a delivery van pull up in front of the warehouse, I would get a sinking sensation in my stomach and feel physically ill*. I realised that my reaction to the film sequence with the returned products was a reflection of this feeling. I thought I had forgotten about that summer, because thankfully we overcame the problem, but I had not, it was still buried in my unconscious, though it was not something I thought about in my day-to-day life.

The association helped me to understand that I had buried my reactions to that particular business problem and pasted over them rather than dealing with them directly and rationally. Armed

with the results of the association, I was able to look at my feelings directly, which then permitted me to eliminate residual and irrational concerns and misconstructions. Yes, it had been a difficult summer and the returned products had assumed a personal dimension for me, because for some unknown reason I assimilated their failure as a personal inadequacy. This gave me blatant evidence of one of my negative identity traits – assuming responsibility for everything that goes wrong. However, reviewing the situation from my present perspective, I could see that I had no responsibility and that I need to be careful about these self-blame tendencies. Also I appreciated that this situation had not affected our long-term stability; if anything, that summer demonstrated that most happenings (unless they are actually life threatening) no matter how dramatic they appear at the time, can be overcome if you keep a cool head. Curiously, after doing the association, I can now watch those scenes without qualms.

The second significant part of the film for me was the road-trip that Claire planned for Drew and his father's ashes. This carefully planned and laid out window in time and space offers Drew, who has been seriously considering suicide throughout most of the film, time to re-evaluate his life and determine how he is going to re-direct it. Even though nothing concrete is achieved or granted to Drew as he drives from state to state, the viewer sees him deciding to live, not play a role, (corporate executive, tragic hero, faithful son, mourning son, tragic lover) as he has done throughout most of the film. Because he has changed his perspective, though as yet he does not have the girl, a job, a planned future and only a rental car, one feels that Drew is on the right path to get his life back at last. As he chooses to enjoy the physical trip, he is also gaining strength to participate in the greater journey – life. Drew genuinely laughs, cries, faces failure by reading the slating magazine articles that had been written about his fiasco and himself, gets nostalgic and comes out in one piece at the end.

The music, the pit stops and lighting are wonderful *and the fake puppy dog smile* (that Drew always wore when he was playing a role) *is gone, banished forever (we hope) as Drew gets in touch with himself again, and I realise too why I enjoy these sequences – I too love the notion of the journey of life – and Drew's road trip and pit stops reminded me of the summer festivals and hitch-hiking trips of my teenage years and early twenties where I never knew who I would meet, but always met new and interesting people. The scenes reminded me that even as a middle-aged settled wife and mother I can still take time out to enjoy the trip that is life and these sequences are in tune with this aspect of my identity and remind me that I need to make time for the unexpected and go with the flow every now and then.* And in the end, Drew gets the girl, he still has the car (even if it's a rental), throws away the shoes, and though he does not have a job, a career or the trappings of wealth and success, he gets his life back.

Did I “meet myself” when I “met *Elizabethtown*” as Holland claimed would be possible? Yes I did, especially if we consider the claim that one of the central objectives in applying free association to literary criticism is “to build on the root meaning of education as a process of self discovery and development” (Schwartz & Holland; 2008, 90). Association helped me to eliminate a negative issue that had become “stuck” in my unconscious. I also learned about a negative aspect of my identity; my willingness or even eagerness to accept blame for situations that are not caused by me – and I understood that I need to be aware of this when evaluating my involvement in specific situations. It also helped me to understand that I should make time to “enjoy the journey of life”. I realised that I am not driven solely by a desire for success, though I enjoy achieving goals. I learned that I feel more comfortable in myself when I have time to appreciate where I am going and what I am learning and have time for solid human contacts. So, it is true to say, that meeting *Elizabethtown*, I met myself. I got a clearer view of my identity theme, which allowed me to understand my individual personality. As Holland wrote “Identity themes give us a way of understanding a whole character, (Holland, 1975; 111)”. I have tried to incorporate this knowledge in my decision making process since then.

Holland's reflections on the interaction of fictional worlds on the mind and brain, allowing the construction of new physical highways of thought, are echoed by many current scientific publications. In *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioural and Symbolic Variations in the History of Life* (2005), Jablonka and Lamb have affirmed that physical brains and cultures interact over time. In his work *The Music of Life – Biology Beyond the Genome* (2006), systems biologist

Dennis Noble has put forward very coherent proposals demonstrating the respective roles of internal environment and external stimuli on the reading of the genome and thus genetic expression. The psychiatrist Aaron Beck has also demonstrated that new thought constructs have to be repeated many times to allow these to take prominence over previously formed assembles (Beck, 1979).

Research being carried out in neurocinematics is also showing that film can affect brain structures in a very unique manner because of its dynamic and visual nature. On the one hand, Dubin (2009) has produced working models to illustrate the manner in which film can affect the working memory of viewers due to its very nature and Hasson et al (2008) have demonstrated how editing techniques used in modern commercial film production can captivate the viewer's physical brain more than film sequences that are presented without editing. On the other, it has been shown that for plastic change to occur in the brain, the individual must give total attention to the task at hand, a feature that is implicit in both watching a film and applying free association to it (Damasio, 1994; Doidge, 2007; Sapoksky, 2004).

Holland has long proposed that applying free association to film and literary analysis can allow the viewer/ reader to understand his/her own unique identity themes. I believe that this can offer a real advantage to today's society, where the dividing line between the real and imaginary is becoming increasingly blurred. Also, the technique explained in *Meeting Movies* does not require punitive methods or complicated technologies; in fact it is quite enjoyable and easy to apply. The potential rewards of applying his method – an expansion of the living experience and an increased awareness and recognition of unique identity themes are quite considerable and relevant within the context of current global health concerns. In addition, Holland's claims are becoming more and more plausible to the academic world because of recent findings in the hard sciences. Perhaps we should look more closely at his work to see if it could be used within our current social context to prevent depressive tendencies.

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