Reading Films through Political Classics
Genres of Politics in Popular Cultures*

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ABSTRACT
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through Political
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This article argues that there is a need to study the political myths in popular genres without accepting the prejudicial supposition that they are popular falsehoods, romantic mistakes, or other species of political error to be overcome by academic analysis. The need is to approach them as cultural practices and political realities with varying dynamics in terms of truth and power. The method is to move back-and forth among contrasting genres, seeking to fathom their politics through myriad comparisons among their conventional characters, settings and events. The article means to pay homage to Arendt, not so much by addressing directly what she wrote, but rather by producing theory of her kind in tune with our times.

The mass-mediated, popular genres are our ways to theorize about post-modern and post-western politics. These genres are modes of practical action, because they remake the political myths we live every day. The theories articulated in popular genres are often as good or better than political theories in more scholarly form because they are more vivid in evoking present phenomena, past sources, and future prospects. They are better, too, because they can attain greater accuracy, insight, and effectiveness for politics in the everyday situations where most of us live the rest of our lives, political and otherwise.

Teaching theories of politics, I learned quickly to assign fiction and film to college students, who seldom have much experience with what we usually take as politics. My first thought was that the fiction and film would put the students vicariously into political situations and acquaint them with specifically political characters. This worked well enough, but relevant selections seemed exceedingly limited in number and quality. To complicate matters further, most of the fiction and film that interested me personally was not overtly political in any of the official senses. Yet my second idea was that this would engage students where they live, bringing out their own awareness of the unofficial but pervasive politics of everyday life, politics in which they participate first-hand. Still I was worried, however, for few of the assignments which worked the best were among the acknowledged classics of literature or cinema, which I knew to be taught on occasion by a scattering of my most creative colleagues around the world. Then my third recognition became that the conventions threaded throughout the popular genres of fiction and film I was teaching are modes of myth-making that encompass all cultures, high and low, to do practical theorizing about politics.

The students and I had been travelling territories where political theory is done for the democratic populations that practice it every-

day. We had been considering theories of genuine popular importance, not just treatises for scholars who often remain distanced incredibly from the daily activities of ordinary people. These moves took me to the post-modern politics of many popular genres. These are showing themselves to be beautifully instructive as exercises in doing theory and myth-making.

As a long-time fan of science fiction in particular, I advanced a claim in two courses some years ago to justify the classroom teaching of science fiction as political theory. I held that it is some of the best political theory going. It had been neglected by my colleagues in the academic field of political theory, I maintained, only because of genre considerations. For the most part, scholars of political theory simply have not recognized works of science fiction to be prospective works of political theory. In the few cases where a work's theoretical attention to politics is unmistakable even to scholars, they have been inclined to dismiss anything in the form of science fiction as narratival, popular, and thus beneath serious attention as theoretical argument. Presumably exceptions like George Orwell's *1984*, canonized for decades as a minor classic in the political theory of totalitarianism, merely prove the unreflective rule. Yet I was certain that the thoughtless dismissal of science fiction is a major mistake for political theory. Accordingly I began to think how to mount a persuasive argument to the contrary. Soon this led me to ponder more comprehensively how popular genres of fiction and film work as political theory in practice.

Gradually I realized that I could not understand the politics of science fiction or any other popular form without gaining a decent sense of how several of these genres operate politically. I needed to compare its conventions to the conventions of other popular forms of fiction and film. Eventually I pulled into the picture intimately related genres of television, radio, board and computer games, and the many other media of popular cultures in electronic societies. Along the way, I learned that a key to appreciating their politics is to respect them as vernacular forms of culture. Hence I learned how popular genres are our main modes of political myth-making in the nineteenth, twentieth, and prospectively the twenty-first century.

One of the comparisons developed for the genre of science fiction is the spy story; another is the western. All are proving helpful on how modern problematics of politics turn (during the last century and more) into post-modern challenges for politics.

Rational-choice and other formal theorists of politics take depth interviews, surveys, and thick institutional descriptions as behavioral information about legislators, lawmaking, and campaigning. Then they try to save the appearances, explaining how various details cohere into the patterns of politics that sustain themselves in practice. Here the approach is similar. As a theorist of politics in everyday life, I am turning to thick descriptions in novels, films, and so forth. My task is to explicate the patterns and consequences of politics that appear in our vernacular cultures. Increasingly these are post-modern cultures, though far from always in the ways that academicians have argued to this point.[1] The challenge for a political theorist is to trace the patterns and principles that configure what we do – and how we might do better.

Addressing some of the same problematics as formal theorists, yet with different principles about the dynamics of politics, I have been looking for materials with the same density of detail about the other arenas of action that come to the fore when my principles might be in play. What personal information and institutional accounts could provide the rich texture for analyzing the politics of Western civilization in general and the American versions in particular? What would tap the telling detail of myth-making crucial for post-modern politics in such contexts? What might trace the operation of political cognition and communication in the associative networks shared by ordinary people in our post-modern situations? An especially good set of answers came in the conventions of popular fiction and film, where the political myths of the times make some of their most significant appearances.

The need is to study the political myths in popular genres without accepting the prejudi-

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[1] The exploding literature on post-modern politics is far too ample to parse or even list here, but for starters see Eco 1984; Lyotard, 1984; Jencks 1986.

cial supposition that they are popular false-hoods, romantic mistakes, or other species of political error to be overcome by academic analysis (Nelson, 1989b). The need is to approach them as cultural practices and political realities with varying dynamics in the terms of truth and power. At first I turned to a few other genres which I knew at least a little: dystopias, fantasies, detective fiction. I read about them, and I read from them. I started to think about how each genre addresses various kinds of politics. The main issue in each case has been: what distinctive political worlds do the genres evoke? The project has moved less from one story to another, trying to contrast preoccupations and styles of individual writers, let alone their different products, than from one set of conventions to another. From the first, my working assumption has been that genres are different families of conventions.

Thus my method is to move back-and-forth among contrasting genres, seeking to fathom their politics through myriad comparisons among their conventional characters, settings, and events. As I do something with politics in detective tales, it teaches me something about westerns and about romances. As I learn about science fiction, it instructs me about the politics of horror fiction or fantasy. Writing as I go, some paragraphs on dystopias lead to paragraphs on road shows or buddy movies, then to remarks on legal thrillers, and so forth – as the comparative insights allow.

For years, I have been working on and off with Hannah Arendt's political theory. For me, she has been the most instructive political theorist of the twentieth century. So I love to learn from her writings and to argue with them in all manner of ways. My efforts also mean to pay homage to Arendt, not so much by addressing directly what she wrote, but rather by doing theory of her kind in tune with our times. The hope is that this characterizes the enterprises at hand.

The aspiration is to provide generic theories of western, modern, post-modern, and post-western politics – much as Arendt seems (to me) to have given a generic theory of dystopian politics as part of her analysis of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973). But what is a generic theory of politics? And how might we define a generic body of work, in principle or in the case of any particular genre? These are problems for any genre theorist. By extension, a telling issue is whether the project requires me to address specific works scattered chronologically throughout the history of any specific genre. The arguments, after all, present themselves as claims about the genre – rather than principally as interpretations of specific texts that embody generic conventions. Yet there is a pun in the aspiration, and it makes a difference that I do not aspire to treat the genre thoroughly in its own terms (as some film or literary theorists do). Rather I am interested in the intersection or interaction of popular genres with the takes on politics offered by canonical classics in political theory. Therefore I am simply trying to analyze *some* of what can be said in this connection. Principally my interest is in how popular genres articulate the self-transcending politics of the west.

An important part of this analysis is learning from subgenres, especially where they share territories or boundaries with subgenres in other genres. There is a good deal of political insight available from appreciating how the horse opera as a subgenre of westerns overlaps with the space opera as a subgenre of science fiction. Likewise it helps political analysis immensely to notice how recent westerns and science fictions, especially in film, are appropriating conventions from the popular genre of horror.

A last consideration is that I as political theorist am addressing genres that are defined independently of the analysis. The conventions studied here form genuinely popular genres, not scholarly categories or academically individuated types. Science fiction is not some collection of stories and films that I am putting together even as I promote arguments about the shared features. Instead I am attending as closely as I can to how science fictions and other genres at issue are constructed by their authors, directors, producers, actors, and popular audiences. The project is to learn from how westerns are marketed as popular literature in most bookstores and the book sections of discount houses. It is to build on how fantasies or romances are advertised as films for mass audiences. Thus the arguments to come are not the

products of an academic theorist who is defining the genre analytically, to serve an idiosyncratic agenda of personal scholarship. Rather they confront predefined genres and subgenres, with conventions independent of the political appreciation that they receive here. The political interests may be mine, though I hope they are yours as well, and I know that they are canonical. The popular genres are anybody's and everybody's these days.[2]

This way, I can speak to a topic that spans horror stories, tales of international intrigue, and the rest of the vernacular culture: popular myth-making within current politics. Hence the arguments I advance are contributions to some larger claims: that mass-mediated, popular genres are our ways to theorize about post-modern and post-western politics; that these genres are modes of practical action, because they remake the political myths we live every day; and that the theories articulated in popular genres are often as good or better than political theories in more scholarly forms. They are better because they are more vivid in evoking present phenomena, past sources, and future prospects. They are better, too, because they can attain greater accuracy, insight, and effectiveness for politics in the everyday situations where most of us ground the rest of our lives, political and otherwise. The canonical classics are far more varied in form than our curricula tend to notice. Later centuries are apt to take seriously the political theory that makes our political myths through popular genres. But let's steal a beat on them by starting now.

Argument Without Truth,
Revelation without Religion?
Arendt And Hobbes Make Contact

The stress on truth as the touchstone for argument is surprisingly modern. To people who know only modern science and epistemology, there would seem no credible alternative nor a need for one. Yet people who know inquiries

and arguments beyond modern civilization appreciate how much the attempt to turn to truth alone distinguishes societies since the Renaissance and the Reformation. And people who know the politics within actual sciences, no matter how modern (Nelson 1987), have reason to wonder at the exclusive privileging of truth as evidenced by modern technologies and criticized by modern logics. From its inceptions, the western civilization has known that the persuasive dynamics of argument in politics reach past truth in the narrow modern sense to credibility, plausibility, cultural figures, and personal experiences that elude the disciplines of modern evidence.

With a little help from Hannah Arendt, Thomas Hobbes, and Robert Zemeckis, let us consider the implications of electronic media for how arguments now might proceed without truth in its modern senses. In our postmodern times, arguments in politics and sciences may turn away from modern fact and logic toward virtual realities achievable by cybernetics coupled to advanced technologies of video and audio. Thus the argument at hand is that electronic politics often operate like virtual-reality sciences. They argue through political mythmaking that persuades less in the modes of modern truth than in the media of postmodern revelation.

From Manipulations to Myths?

The twentieth century's premier theorist of truth and politics may have been Hannah Arendt. She took the "Existenz Philosophie" of Martin Heidegger, her mentor, and made it politically sophisticated (1946). In fact, Arendt turned Heidegger's hostility to western metaphysics into a postmodern revival of the republican-rhetorical tradition of politics (Nelson 1983; 1990; 1993). This should make her especially interesting to people who care about the quality of political argument.

The goal was to purge politics of the metaphysical preoccupations that denigrate rhetoric and destroy action. To do so, Arendt summoned a "public space of appearance" (1958). There political argument proceeds without what Arendt could regard as "truth." Through the misfortune of following the modernism of Im-

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[2] Well, sort of – see Collins 1989. At least, these popular genres are nothing like mine alone.

manuel Kant in the matter, Arendt contended that both kinds of western truth – the analytic and the synthetic – coerce agreement. Accordingly western truth must pre-empt the freedom needed for public persuasion and political action (1968, pp. 227-264). Yet Arendt also traced the genius of political action to public speech. Only political rhetoric can provide the refinement and invention that enable humans to avoid raw force and devastating violence while creating virtuous power (1972, 103-198).

The quest for public argument without western truth led Arendt to terrible errors and provocative insights. Unconstrained by necessities of truth, Arendt maintained, lying is political action (1972, 1-47). Nonetheless lying corrodes the conditions of truth that Arendt conceded to be required for viable politics. Citizens must face hard facts to analyze soundly the challenges for public action (1975). In our times, the systematic lying of totalitarian ideology and propaganda (1973) plus the public relations and advertising in liberal societies are destroying the public spaces of appearance required for politics (1975). Yet the truth-seeking and truth-telling that could combat lying are supposed by Arendt to stay coercive and anti-political. Public action retains no way to save itself from lying. So Arendt suggested that a practice of argument-without-truth is the mark of true politics, but she portrayed such public argument and action as self-destructive.

Elsewhere I have explained how the modernist conceptions of truth that Arendt borrowed from Kant are inadequate, especially for political action and argument. I also have considered how ideas of analytic and synthetic truth trouble Arendt's theories and twentieth-century politics (Nelson 1978). Here I accentuate the positive, though, to explore how Arendt's writings can hint at non-metaphysical truths for our politics. These tie strongly to rhetorical ethos, pathos, and mythos; and they augment the logological bias of western truth with common-sense criteria for doing truth and beauty as well as performing goodness in politics.

From Truth to Tropes?

The tale begins with Heidegger's inspiration, Friedrich Nietzsche. He turned from the west's analytical and referential truth to rhetorical tropes (1972). For ancient Greeks, truth was the absence or removal of coverings that hide the beings beneath. Truth was *a-letheia*, dispelling the forgetfulness of reality. For western civilization, truth-seeking and truth-telling penetrate veils of illusion to display the realities behind. Truth un-covers. Truth dis-covers what appearances cloak. As Nietzsche knew, but westerners tend to forget, to re-veal realities is to re-veil them. Truths are always already rhetorical and symbolical. Truth-telling cannot prevent, diminish, or undo myths. Instead truth-telling re-tropalizes and re-mythifies (Hill 1986; Nelson 1998).

The modern west regards truth as an impersonal re-presentation between words (logic) or between words and the world (fact). Yet *truth* is from the Old English root for (good) faith. It restores talkers and doers to the picture, holding words and worlds together in responsible ways. It invokes their qualities of character, of ethos in the ancient sense. Pluralized, truths become different characters, poetic figures, telling tropes (Pollan 1991, 178-208). Paul wrote that "faith is the evidence of things unseen." But modernity treats "unseen evidence" as a contradiction in terms. Sciences evidence and communicate truth. Religions use revelation where available and faith where not.

Returning people to rhetorized truths, we speak of their opinions, perspectives, persuasions. Arendt emphasized judgment, performance, and story-telling instead of method, experiment, and model-building (1958). Fortunately her account of judgment (1978) draws from Kant's aesthetics, not his epistemologies. It stresses feelings, styles, and sensibilities that tap the republican-rhetorical tradition of the sensus communis to appreciate common sense as the shared understandings that are postmodern culture. This updates ancient ideas of cultivated pathos as sources for prudence and responsibility (1968).

Public story-telling complements the resources of ethos and pathos with mythos (Shklar 1977). Nietzsche termed this "monumental history" (1982). It re-veils actions so we learn from experience. After modern times, it stands to supplement re-lig-ion as the re-tying that enabled people to share meanings through liv-

ing cult-ures day by day, enacting repeatedly their rites and rituals. Modern cultures replace traditions with novelties. People do not return eternally through the same traces. Their experiences slide toward uniqueness. They cannot know another's revelation through insistently retracing its path, let alone listening to some speech. Instead they must communicate, re-presenting meanings across the abyss between individuals. By contrast, political mythmaking attempts a postmodern reveiling to eliminate gaps. It drapes meanings among us to (re)configure our lives. When Arendt and others made the mythos of totalitarianism (1973), they transformed settings for politics in the twentieth century (Nelson 1989a). So political mythmaking revives revelation in postmodern politics but in self-conscious, critical forms.

From Revelation to Communications?

Modern sciences and politics contrast truth to revelation. Has the west retreated from The Truth as formal logic or as empirical fact? Hardly. For moderns, truth is testable and communicable; revelation is unique and solitary. Truth is scientific or political, immanently and eminently useful for settling arguments. Revelation is religious and transcendental. As Thomas Hobbes complained, revelation exacerbates arguments into conflicts and feuds rather than resolving them (1651). You cannot know my revelation or vice versa, so we need another path to peace and prosperity. For our late-unto-post-modern times, revelation degenerates into supernatural disclosure. By the root from Old French, however, revelation makes visible or divulges by discourse. Divulging by discourse encourages postmodern rhetorics of in-form-ation (Nelson 1998, 124-126). These move into, circulate within, and form from the inside out. Making visible provokes modern epistemologies of e-vid-ence that come out of seeing (Nelson 1998, 123-124) – in electronic times, out of video (Nelson and Boynton 1997).

Hobbes had historical reasons to regard revelation as inadequate for grounding political argument. In the aftermath of the middle ages, ways of life pluralized, and religions pitted people against one another politically. Hobbes would have been happy enough to have re-

sources of myth for making peaceful communities. His story of individuals turning from State-of-Nature strife to contracting rationally for communities and sovereigns always made more political than philosophical sense. It requires trustworthy promises, yet Hobbes insisted that only sovereign enforcement of compliance could make oaths reliable among individuals. Hence Hobbes's solution to problems of anarchic war-of-all-against-all requires the prior existence of the modern governments that it is meant to create. Hobbes made the myth of rational individuals contracting to create sovereign governments; and he emphasized that the contracts are imaginary, hypothetical devices – rather than real, historical events. With words alone, this was the best that moderns like Hobbes could do.

With representation rather than revelation, this also was the most that moderns could imagine, both epistemically and politically. Moderns like Hobbes took revelations at best to be deep realities made directly, personally, immediately present. Such revelations are not re-presented, not merely communicated; they are experienced completely and intimately. They convince totally rather than persuade perspectively. In the best western tradition, modern revelations un-veil (not re-veil). Their pure realities not only transform, they transsubstantiate and indisputably – but merely individual by individual, one at a time. To configure communities, consequently, even modern revelations require communication across societies. And this provokes the characteristic tropes of modern politics: individuality, right, interest, rationality, representation, deterrence, contract, sovereignty, rule, maximization, and more (Nelson and Boynton 1997, 198-235; Nelson 1998, 99-204).

From Rule to Principles?

Modern governments rule. They make rules, then enforce compliance through individual incentives of reward and especially punishment. Fear is the primary device of modern states, which try to turn from revenge or retribution to deterrence. The modern maxim is don't get mad, don't get even, but get ahead (Matthews 1988, 107-116). Yet compliance depends on

rational calculation of individual interest, so compliance must be in everybody's interest – or disobedience and disorder might arise, indeed might reign. Modern states make citizens an offer they cannot refuse: comply or die, politically speaking. To paraphrase Hobbes, complete compliance requires a common power to keep them all in awe. This monopoly on the legitimate means of violence, as Max Weber termed it, is sovereignty: formally absolute authority for the state. Contract is how individuals create sovereignty, and representation is how they keep it responsive to their interests.

Arendt despised sovereignty as oxymoronic and anti-political, so she replaced it with publicity. Arendt rejected rule, force, and motive as coercive; so she celebrated the free aspirations and inspirations of principles (1968, 143-171). Arendt shared modern fears of revenge and feuding, but distrusted deterrence and reliance on instrumental rationality, so she promoted forgiveness (Arendt 1958, 212-219; Smith 1971; Wolf 1961). Arendt traced the lapse of religion, tradition, and authority as western grounds for politics, yet scorned the calculation and enforcement of contracts, so she mythified foundations (1963). Political foundations generate the repertoire of archetypal characters, settings, occurrences, and criteria that authorize public argument and narrative (Honig 1993). They shape the common sense of style that informs political judgment and action (Nelson 1990).

Arendt's foundations stem in modern conditions from revolutionary councils. These are small, intense publics of mutual participation in times of political urgency and personal peril. In antiquity, Arendtian foundations are legendary acts of heroes lost in the mists of history, except for the ensuing publics that monumentalize their deeds and keep their memories vital. Foundations ancient and modern involve something akin to sharing revelatory experiences to form a community. Their self-conscious mythmaking for public participation can exceed communication to create the shared styles and figures for political community. This just is the common sense crucial for politics according to Arendt. Thus foundations provide or provoke the tropes and principles for productive argument in public.

Yet as Bruno Bettelheim (Arendt's colleague at Chicago) observed, such contributions in our times have come to be complemented by motion pictures (1981). Film and television have become our prime mythmakers for politics. Moving pictures enable us to share experiences on the order of revelations. They can do so powerfully enough to generate or sustain communities. In our postmodern times, movies supplement the paradoxical logics of modern individuals supposedly contracting into self-abnegating communities out of self-interested rationalities. With Johnson and Shelley, our political myths imply poets to be the prime legislators of our worlds; and with Octavio Paz (1986), they find much of our poetry in motion pictures.

Filmmakers summon postmodern powers of argumentation greater than merely modern communication and representation. Movies approach virtual realities. They share experience with a persuasive intensity and detail more like traditional revelation than modern representation. Television and computers, too, exceed the political reach of modern communication.

The time has come to reconceive, refigure, remythify argument and action for politics that are less and less modern in form or content. Contract and representation are no longer our primary ambitions or experiences. Electronic media are moving our politics beyond contract toward virtual contacts. Let our concepts keep pace with our practices.

From Evidence to Experiences?

And let our theories catch up with moving pictures in revealing and probing their postmodern possibilities for political argument. Take the recent film *Contact* (1997). Based on Carl Sagan's novel (1985) and directed by Robert Zemeckis, it is an inspired sequel to his Academy-Award-winning *Forrest Gump* (1994). Elinor Arroway uses radio telescopes to search the stars for extraterrestrial intelligence. Her slogan at the wide array in New Mexico declares that "Astronomy is looking up." As in many movies, definition and enactment are one. The slogan, like the film, explores how seeing – as the source of modern evidence – is becoming augmented and transformed by electronic media.

Ellie comes across a stellar signal. She does her scientific and political best to turn it into a vehicle for making contact with alien beings. She encounters telling hindrance and help from late-modern states and religions, wormholes to the stars for a virtual-reality session with another species, then returns to Earth to learn that her trip has left no conventional evidence of itself. As a late-modern scientist, she concedes publicly that a silly conspiracy story, concocted by her chief inquisitor to explain away her incredible experiences, might be as plausible an argument as the truths she prosaically tells. Yet Ellie learns from the New-Age spiritualist she loves a postmodern lesson about the dependence of proof on faith. And with the aid of several sorts of moving pictures, she shares her experiences persuasively with the whole society. She persuades people through television in much the same way that this mythic film persuades us through its virtual contacts – with Ellie and what she encounters.

Contact approaches postmodern revelation differently than Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). Each Spielberg figure called to the alien landing on Earth is given a personal, private obsession – a merely modern revelation – though most learn through the mass media how to act on it. Each has the revelation, but few can share it effectively with others. The *Contact* challenge of truth met by Ellie and the movies is to provide others virtual contact with previously individual visions.

The daunting task of truth has been the territory of religions then sciences. The film insists with Ellie's lover that religions as well as sciences pursue truth, and both must realize that this is the pursuit of meaning. Ellie tells the aliens that other people need to see what she has, which is largely what the movie accomplishes for us. But often the modes of postmodern argument are roundabout in re-veiling our realities. Thus Ellie's videocamera records only static, we learn, even though there are eighteen hours of it to stand for what she experienced in vivid detail.

From Communication to Revelations?

In his usual semi-smart, ever-sneering mode,

the *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane inadvertently testifies to the importance in *Contact* of this postmodern problematic of political argument. With nary a note to acknowledge the film's turn from religion to science in grounding our politics, Lane scorns Arroway's attempt to communicate her experience of the wormhole excursion to the stars and her conversation with aliens.

By the time of Ellie's return, I was dreading what would come next. She becomes a Cassandra, poor thing, with only Palmer Joss having the courage to believe her story, but even worse is the awful manner in which she is compelled to tell it. "I was given a vision of the universe that tells us how tiny and insignificant and [rare and] precious we are," she explains at an official hearing. "In all our searching, the only thing that's made the emptiness bearable is each other." How a movie that began with the promise of such excitement can fritter itself away into these plaintive consolations, I have no idea. It's a kind of dumbing up, a desperately ill-advised ascent into musings that don't have the nerve to be openly religious; *Contact* is the antithesis of a picture like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which resolved itself into an array of luminous images that hinted at all manner of annunciation but wisely stayed free of any attempt to put such awe into words (Lane 1997, 82).

But Ellie isn't religious, even at the investigation hearing. Does Lane think that the trip should have converted her to open spirituality? It does not, nor should it. The Zemeckis film, like the Sagan book, argues that faith and meaning are not proprietary elements or requirements of religion alone. The film takes pains to show how science and everyday experience necessarily involve faith and sometimes flounder on the need to communicate personal experiences equivalent to revelations. Yet it also shows how postmodern politics can make virtual contact with others.

How could Lane miss the film's pointed, poignant irony of Ellie's inability to muster more than mundane words in this situation? In the midst of her space experience, Ellie exclaims that "They should have sent a poet!" She knows that her facility with words is categorically insufficient. The film is wise to insist that words

are bound to sound empty and platitudinous in such a situation. Mere words cannot stand up to the criticism of Arroway's own science, let alone to the cynicism of high-brow criticism. The film makes clear that Ellie herself knows this even as she speaks. Yet the powers of moving pictures and stereo sounds deliver Arroway's discovery, selection, preparation, launch, and appeal.

Lane complains that Ellie's character in *Contact* displays the same facial expressions – but lacks the professional intelligence and true grit of – Clarice Starling (also played by Jodie Foster) in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). "Ellie, by contrast, never seems like a pro at all. The Ripley of *Alien* would shake her off like moondust and leave her for dead" (Lanne 1997, 82). The film, however, presents Ellie as a modern scientist, not an FBI agent or action-adventure hero. Within her actual role, Ellie shows plenty of *The Right Stuff* (1979) that Lane implies her to lack.

Lane laments that the one decent irony in the film is when aliens play back Adolf Hitler's televised figure in their first communication to Earth: "this represents the final moment at which [Zemeckis's] movie makes contact with the forces of irony. From here on, naïveté rules" (Lanne 1997, 82). But this is the trouble of merely communicating a revelation or perhaps any other experience beyond the utterly mundane. It is why Hobbes could hold that revelation cannot ground modern politics. After the fantastic effort has seemed to fail, words cannot hope to rescue it. Yet words plus sounds and pictures can, as our politics now know.

Lane misses the communicative, politically revelatory power of the movies themselves. He writes that only Ellie's lover has the courage to believe her story. Within its own world, however, the movie surely shows otherwise, from masses to elites. The applause that I heard after several screenings of *Contact* implies the contrary about our world too. As Ellie emerges from the final hearing, she meets with popular acclaim, and the politicians support her further inquiries with an ample grant.

We have the simulation unto virtual reality of the alien encounter itself, available to us on film. Yet the public in the film does not. Why do those people believe Arroway's account? They have the televised reality of her ethos. Ellie's character on television is primarily what persuades people. They see and hear her under the supreme pressure of a temptation to pretend to a religious faith that she does not embrace, in order to take the trip to the stars that she has craved since childhood. People have seen Ellie stand firm for the truth as she knows it. People have experienced through television how she can be trusted to know what is happening and – in the best tradition of modern science – tell only what she knows through her experience, without self-serving invention or momentarily emotional embellishment. Can she be absolutely certain that she was not hoaxed? How could anyone in the wake of modern skepticism be certain in such circumstances? Conceding the possibility of a hoax, while denying it an endorsement, Ellie enhances her credibility in the second televised hearings. From these virtual experiences of Ellie's character, her viewers in the film come to trust her account of journeying to the stars for a virtual encounter with the aliens.

Ellie's ethos is the telling evidence. First it achieves vivid, credible reality for viewers in the televised hearings for selecting the astronauts. Then it culminates in Ellie's poised, quietly passionate, but still not the least poetic appearance before the second televised investigation into her mysterious trip. From the hundreds of millions of Chinese who believed that the American landing on the Moon was merely staged as a propaganda film, we know that eighteen hours of audio and video need not be compelling evidence of Arroway's wormhole journey to the stars. The film is its own demonstration of how special effects could fake the missing evidence for anybody outside the project – and perhaps for many people inside as well. No modern evidence need be decisive, infallible, or indefeasible.

Yet we must not fly to contrary errors of solipsism or cynicism. Evidence and argument are about probability, not certainty. Experience and revelation are about sharing senses of realities, not insuring truths of propositions. The contestability of evidence, argument, experience, revelation, communication, science, and every other device of learning by humans is not cause for corrosive doubt or epistemic despair. It is encouragement to face existence in many ways.

Ellie's testimony enables television viewers to sense her experience vicariously, through her own accounts and reactions. But it lets televiewers encounter her character personally, virtually, and convincingly. Thus technologies of virtual reality help us experience things in ways otherwise unavailable to us. Telescopes and electron microscopes do this; so do virtual-reality helmets and gloves. What they permit is not indirect observation so much as personal interaction by means beyond the ordinary. The "virtual" in "virtual reality" should not be taken to suggest "almost," "deficient," or "defective." The technologies of virtual reality instead amplify and multiply our modes of genuine, personal experience.

From Contract to Contacts?

In our times, television and film are the most widely practiced technologies of virtual experience. When *Contact* offers reaction shots of Ellie Arroway on her trip to the stars, the film could be said to let viewers experience it vicariously, through her experience. When *Contact* provides views and sounds of the trip to people in the theater, the film becomes a virtual experience of her wormhole excursion. The subjective camera in *Bob Roberts* (1992) gives a virtual experience of documentary coverage for a U.S. Senate campaign. The "Arkansas" dystopia spot from the George Bush campaign in 1992 presents viewers a virtual experience of the character of Bill Clinton as governor; it enables watchers to experience Clinton's political character by extraordinary means (Nelson and Boynton, 135-149). Thus the character of Arroway, her ethos as Ellie the scientist, is primarily what warrants her claims about the trip to people in her day. Within the film, her character becomes accessible to people by means of television. For viewers of the film, Ellie's ethos is amplified far beyond the hearings, and it becomes complemented by virtual (as well as vicarious) experiences of her trip. These mythic modes of experience are political revelations in common, empowering us all to share in the awe of Ellie's excellent adventure.

To drive this home, Zemeckis turned from early plans to have Linda Hunt play the female President envisioned by the Sagan novel. In-

stead he used the re-election of President Clinton and recontextualized clips from his press conference on the announced discovery of fossilized life from Mars to situate the film within the political world of its viewers. This device, too, highlights the film's case for the revelatory politics practiced everyday for us by the moving pictures and lifelike sounds of film and television. At the time of *Contact*'s release, this device out of *Forrest Gump* helped to situate viewers within the world of the film's events. Here, too, undiscerning reviewers seem mostly to have missed the virtual politics practiced by the film. But again the audiences who shared its viewing with me plainly appreciated the device for precisely its virtual-reality potential. Of course, people who do not spend their careers sneering at television, Hollywood, and politicians can be more open to the resulting revelations. These postmodern people also can be less obsessed with looking for the fine print, because contracts are no longer needed to regulate every aspect of a modern life unable to share experiences vividly and convincingly across distances among individuals.

Contact explores the postmodern politics beyond modern contract and communication. It appreciates that electronic media enable us to share something like revelations; and it emphasizes that these never transpire without veils of symbol, trope, and myth. We should follow its lead in learning how emerging politics take advantage of powers of persuasion more accessible and powerful than those available for modern individuals and sovereigns. As Arendt, Hobbes, and Spock might agree, that's how we postmoderns can live long and prosper.

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