

‘One Must Know How to Dance’:

Vicki Baum’s *Menschen im Hotel* (1929), Edmund Goulding’s *Grand Hotel* (1932),
and a Choreography of Social Responses

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Introduction

Kringelein, the most energetic and excited character of Vicki Baum’s mosaically-constructed 1929 novel *Grand Hotel* (*Menschen im Hotel*), wants to spend his last moments living like his boss does. A small-town bookkeeper with only weeks left to live, he goes to Berlin to stay at its most famous hotel. Everything is new to him, from the barstools to the way in which people talk. But, ‘he [...] devoured it all’ (Baum [1929] 2016: 13). The first person he meets in the hotel, at the bar next to the dancefloor, is Dr. Otternschlag, whose distinctive feature is a *gueule cassée*, or what the doctor himself calls his ‘souvenir from Flanders’ (ibid.: 5). The doctor, depressed by the war, but not without some hope that he might be re-animated by one person or another, reflects on life: ‘one must know how to dance’ (ibid.: 44).

The doctor’s instruction is not merely a reference to sex but also comes to stand in for larger issues of social interaction in Baum’s text, particularly when it comes to the certainties and uncertainties of how to act and react socially. That Kringelein does not know the choreography mirrors his larger uncertainties about how to behave in the hotel – how to dress, how to sit, how to talk to someone – suggesting that Baum’s interest in choreography, the *learned* aspects of interaction, extends to life. The novel explores the ways in which life, like dance, can be understood to be highly choreographed, filled with moments of social know-how, even as that choreography is starting to unravel, as it was in 1920s Berlin. The

hotel in the Weimar Republic, as a place where people of different social classes, cultural backgrounds, and ways of life come together, is a place where interaction often fails to go smoothly and needs to be renegotiated. Dance and cultural change are indeed linked prominently in one of the main characters – the Russian ballerina Grusinskaya (who was modelled on Anna Pavlova) – as her strict classical choreographies clash with the new interests of the German public in expressive and revue dances. Dance and choreography become metaphors in Baum's novel for larger questions of the social negotiation of tradition with the new, or the remnants of the Habsburg empire within the new-found freedoms of the Weimar Republic.

In its attention to the body in interaction, Baum's text aligns with paradigm-shifting discussions of human interaction in the cognitive sciences today, in which intersubjectivity is understood in pragmatic terms, focusing on such (often pre-reflective) aspects as skill, habit, coordination, and dynamic coupling (e.g. Gallagher 2005; Fuchs and De Jaegher 2009; Gallagher 2017; Gallagher 2020). According to such approaches, we understand the other person, in the first place, as a dynamic *affordance* for our actions in specific pragmatic, social, and normative contexts, just as we are affordances to theirs (see also Kiverstein 2015). Reading *Grand Hotel* in dialogue with such approaches brings into relief the many moments of pre-reflective, often positive, responses that interactions in the novel afford and elicit. Dr. Otternschlag, for example, extends, without first noticing it, his 'cold fingers' towards Kringelein, whose 'high, charming' voice he finds 'human, resonant, inquiring, tentative'; but the doctor withdraws his hand as soon as he notices it reaching out (Baum [1929] 2016: 41). Such moments of connection between people – often nourishing ones – complicate readings of the novel, and of German modernist literature more broadly, which emphasize the 'invisible walls' that 'modern times has erected [...] between people' (Matthias 2006: 177).

Yet, Baum's novel not only *illustrates* contemporary considerations in the cognitive sciences about human interaction but also bring depth to these discussions by grounding them in our basic need for human sociality. In her attention to our need for warmth, a need that entangles physicality with sociality, she suggests ways in which other people are fundamental affordances to how we organize ourselves. Social interaction as it is constructed in the text is not only one of the ways in which our bodies have learned to regulate warmth (and stress) through other bodies. Baum's attention to choreography, that is, the *learned* ways in which often move with, toward, and around other people (as opposed to the improvised aspects of interaction), also suggests that the affordance of warmth offered by the other person is predicated on cultural familiarity as well, in turn, indicating that cultural proximity can be as important to warmth as physical proximity is. The choreography of mutually attuned responses sustaining the main love story of the novel, predicated as that choreography is on a shared culture, shows the function of the other person's familiar responses (and larger social roles) in making interactions warm. Particular interactions afford and elicit particular responses and roles to its participants – the doctor, for example, takes on his learned caring role in his interaction with the ailing Kringelein – and, importantly, these elicited roles and responses matter to us. Thus, the kind of thick description offered by Baum's novel importantly attends us to the existential implications of questions of human interaction (see also Naomi Rokoitz' contribution to this issue exploring 'neuroexistentialism' through literature¹).

The novel's attention to, especially the learned, responses and roles elicited in interaction also raise questions about literature itself as an affordance in adaptation. The transatlantic adaptation of the novel to Edmund Goulding's film

Grand Hotel (1932) opens up a space, in part two of this article, from which to draw parallels between the affordances of another person as portrayed in the novel, and the affordances of Baum's text drawn out by the Hollywood culture of the time. The film, as the result of the interaction between Baum's text and the MGM film studio, including its most famous star Greta Garbo, shows how this culture ultimately gives shape to a somewhat peculiar reading of both the novel and Garbo herself. This example of transatlantic adaptation not only shows the often-surprising ways in which literature itself serves as an affordance 'in the wild', but also a direct way in which literature and film have shaped our understanding of another person.

Part I.I: Affording and Eliciting Pre-reflective Social Responses

The interaction that I want to discuss in detail in this first part is the one between Gaigern and the famous ballerina Grusinskaya. The two characters have in common that they are both representatives of a now-defunct old-world order: she is a famous ballerina struggling to maintain an audience in light of new developments in dance; he is a bankrupt aristocrat in a newly democratic society. The two meet unexpectedly in Grusinskaya's hotel room. Gaigern, having broken into her hotel room, is stuck, her pearls in his pocket, on her balcony. In a modern twist, the electric lighting, which has been blinding everyone's view of the hotel's façade, has stopped working. Gaigern can no longer climb back to his own room. Grusinskaya, meanwhile, is at her wit's end, has left her performance early, and has cancelled her attendance at a party at the French ambassador's house later in the evening. She thus enters the room earlier than Gaigern expected, while he is still stranded on her balcony.

Their interaction starts as he is watching her from the balcony, transfixed by her search for warmth which elicits immediate responses in him. In the hotel room, Grusinskaya is looking with horror in the mirror at a reflection of her face; she considers herself old, ugly, and flabby. Her cold attitude towards her reflection is mirrored in her own shivering and the cold overhead lighting that she turns on to find warmth, but which brings no such thing. Impatiently, she takes off the costume in which she fled the theatre, and, naked but for her tights, presses herself against the radiator. Baum writes: ‘She scarcely thought at all as she did so. She only desired warmth’ ([1929] 2016: 103). Her cold, rational attitude toward her own face is thus reflected in the physical feeling of coldness. The immediate and frantic search for a source of warmth shows how this feeling of coldness takes over and elicits an immediate response.

Gaigern’s response to this scene is as corporeal and immediate as Grusinskaya’s search for warmth. Her beautiful and delicate body is almost irrelevant to Gaigern. What affects him is her helplessness, her shaking, and her desperate confusion and misery. Although he is a criminal, ‘crook’, Baum writes, he is still far from being ‘inhuman’ (ibid.: 104). His humanity manifests itself, unknown to him, in his body: ‘unconsciously Gaigern, between the curtains, showed pity and admiration in his face’ (ibid.: 103). His attention now distracted, he physically forgets his job and the pearls; he lets go of them and takes his hands out of his pockets. Instead of holding on to the pearls, his body wants to support her:

He felt in his hands and in his arms a compelling desire to support this poor lonely woman, to take her away and console her—to do anything to put a stop to that terrible shuddering and almost crazed, despairing whispering. (ibid.: 104)

Gaigern is thus animated for the better. His cynical attitude changes to one of care in a pre-reflective corporeal response. Counter to his negative project, then, his embodied attitude is changed by this woman's naked, vulnerable body. The response that her comportment in this moment not only affords but elicits is one of care and support.

The term 'affordance' has gained theoretical currency in especially the last decade or so in discussions in the cognitive sciences and is useful for our discussion here. First coined by James J. Gibson (1986) in the field of ecological psychology to describe the ways in which animals perceive their environments in terms of possibilities for action (depending on the abilities of their bodies), the term 'affordances' has since been further developed to think about human cognition/animation and how it is situated, entangled even, in its environment (see e.g. Rietveld and Kiverstein 2014). 'Affordances' here phenomenologically describe the possibilities for action of a given environment for a person or a group of people. The critical term 'solicitation' describes an affordance as it stands out to us in a given context given our 'interests, preferences, and needs', that is, 'concerns' (ibid.: 341). A glass of water affords drinking to those of us who can hold a glass but solicits the choreography that it takes to grasp the glass and bring it to our mouth usually only when we are thirsty (ibid.). While the term 'affordance' was initially used particularly to describe the way in which we understand the material world, it is often used also for the ways in which we understand other people.

As Shaun Gallagher, for example, argues, we do not just take other people's meaningful comportment disinterestedly either (Gallagher 2017: 77ff.). We do not just *read* other people's comportments, we are engaged with other people in an unfolding pragmatic process, other people's actions matter to us, they are

affordances for our own comportments, for further action. ‘I see the other’s actions as an affordance for my own possible responsive action (which may be very different from hers); I see the other’s action as inter-actionable or as calling forth a response on my part’ (Gallagher 2017: 80). Baum’s novel, and the scene between Grusinskaya and Gaigern in particular, allows us to explore the entangled roles of biology (part I.II) and culture (part I.III) in choreographing, structuring, this pragmatic process of interaction.

Part I.II: The Neural Shortcuts to Social Warmth

In Baum’s emphasis on warmth she evokes one of the fundamental ways in which other people matter to us, namely as parts of our thermoregulatory system, a system now believed to be underpinned by neural shortcuts. Baum repeatedly uses the word ‘warmth’ for positive encounters in the novel, a use which intimates the continuity between physical and emotional feeling as well as the pre-reflective ways in which humans can respond to other people. We have already seen that when Gaigern is spying on Grusinskaya from the balcony, she is looking for physical warmth: in the lighting, from the radiator, the scalding hot water, and the tea. But she is also said to miss the warmth of people, and Baum explicitly links the two. Thinking about the people in her entourage, Grusinskaya states: ‘Old Pimenov. Old Witte. Old Suzette and not another soul, never any warmth. You held your hands to hotel radiators and that was all’ (Baum [1929] 2016: 109). She thus links sources of emotional warmth from other people with the physical warmth generated by a radiator. Baum does the same when Grusinskaya finds Gaigern on her balcony: ‘the air was cold and she felt at once that the man beside her on the little balcony radiated warmth’ (ibid.: 108). The warmth Grusinskaya is looking for is thus not merely either a physical or an emotional warmth, but rather both at the

same time. Baum clearly entangles the emotional life in the physical life of the body. This entanglement also emphasises that Gaigern's immediate, gallant response is not something that Grusinskaya registers first, or something that, in any case, can be held off. In Baum's phenomenologically attentive account, warmth is something that assails Grusinskaya. The warmth seems to be something in which she immediately shares. The scene thus presents us with a positive, affective-kinetic dynamic between the two characters. She looks for affective and corporeal warmth. He responds, in turn, 'automatically' with a gallant gesture. And she, again, responds to his warm comportment towards her positively, as well.

We can take this reading of their dynamic further, however, through approaches to human warmth in the cognitive sciences. Physical warmth is an important part of humans' fundamental responses to each other. Our endothermic regulation, the way in which the human body regulates its temperature, is one way in which the body is thought to incorporate parts of its environment into its system. India Morrison, who has worked extensively on human touch in the cognitive sciences, hypothesises that human touch (she focuses on being touched) may be an important part of the human system to ensure that a source of warmth is close by (2016). She traces this in humans and mammals, as well as other animals. She argues that over time the neural paths of the sensation of touch and the ensuing feeling of warmth may have come to be connected, by which touch eventually became related to warmth. 'This possibility also', she writes, 'carries an important implication that such temporal and contextual shorthand may manifest in regulatory neural *shortcuts* in which "warm and close" states can be instigated by social touch alone, rather than requiring a cycle of behaviorally-mediated physical warmth restoration following actual temperature decreases' (ibid.: 349). But this

connection is not just ‘encoded’, as per Cecilia Heyes metaphor (Heyes 2018), in our brains, but also in our socio-cultural environment. As Hans Rocha IJzerman writes, ‘it appears that the biological links between physical temperature and psychological temperature become activated only if we have experienced early in life that physical warmth and caring for others go hand in hand—and if we are securely attached’ (IJzerman 2021: 15).² In other words, being close to someone may immediately give us a feeling of warmth regardless of whether that person is actually making us warmer. Indeed, as Hans Rocha IJzerman writes, even positive *virtual* social encounters can make one not only *feel* warmer but actually raise our body temperature (IJzerman et al. 2012; see also IJzerman 2021: 9).³

Thermoregulation is one way in which Morrison suggests that ‘social attachment represents a form of flexible, context-dependent physiological regulation’ (2016: 355). Other people, in other words, are already taken as part of our basic regulatory system. Baum’s portrayal of Grusinskaya and Gaigern’s interaction thus hints at a more fundamental role of others. They are not only there to interact with, to elicit certain responses we may like or not, but also to fulfil one of the most fundamental parts of human existence, namely providing us with ways of regulating our warmth. They are, in effect, already part of our core system of regulating heat. The interaction between Gruninskaya and Gaigern in this cold hotel room is thus in important ways already choreographed (though be it in very broad strokes) by neural shortcuts that entangle a need for warmth with a need for companionship. In other words, Gaigern’s proximity provides a direct solution to Grusinskaya feeling cold, whether he actually brings heat or not. The cold situation with a warm Gaigern in it, drives Grusinskaya into his arms.

But a lack of warmth is not the only problem Grusinskaya seems to be having that drives her interaction with Gaigern: she is also clearly stressed. Social touch, as indicating the presence of others, is not only a part of thermoregulation, but also of stress regulation. Morrison argues that social touch ‘can “buffer” disadvantageous physiological effects of potentially inefficient and maladaptive responses [to stressors]’ (Morrison 2016: 344). Stress responses are usually adaptive, only used when necessary and returning to normal states quickly when not needed. In this respect, these responses have what scientists call an ‘efficiency zone’, within which the benefits outweigh the costs (ibid.: 346). A ‘buffer’, per Morrison’s definition, is ‘*any mechanism or process that mitigates, attenuates, offsets, or prevents energy efficiency losses among regulatory systems, while remaining adequately responsive to external challenges*’ (ibid.: 348; emphasis original). Social proximity is, Morrison suggests, exactly such a mechanism for our stress-response system. Social touch, as the knowledge that others are near, regulates the stress system; it aids in the ‘manifestation of adaptive responses to stress challenges’ (ibid.: 357). It does so in part by stimulating oxytocin and opioid release, leading, amongst other things, to hedonic feelings, mild painkilling, and to ‘fine-tuned context-sensitivity’ (ibid.: 352). In short, ‘stress or anxiety could trigger a motivation to *seek* proximity in order to dampen [stress-response systems]’ arousal, just as being cold can drive behavior to huddle close to others in order to restore warmth’ (ibid.: 351).

Reading Grusinskaya’s ‘automatic’ responses after her clearly stress-induced episode in these terms, suggest the subpersonal processes (themselves ‘learned’ neural connections derived from experience) at work for her need for thermo- and stress regulation that have already choreographed (in very broad strokes) her responses to the emotional warmth she reads in Gaigern. He can thus

be read as a completion of her ‘system’ (and *vice versa*). That means that Grusinskaya might not be fully conscious of what drives her to him or be able to control her initial response, but she can feel the results and she can stop her responses in their tracks should she want to. But as the text also shows, such a movement toward thermo- and stress regulation via the other, rooted in what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone has called the ‘affective-kinetic dynamics’ of the body, is not blind (2011: 454). It is mediated also by a culturally choreographed interaction.

Part I.III: A Cultural Choreography of Familiar Movements

Their immediate, embodied responses to each other, elicited in Grusinskaya it seems by biological mechanisms for thermo- and stress regulation, are further underpinned by a cultural familiarity between them. Their pull on each other also rests on a recognition of their own past lives in the other’s movements and responses. Grusinskaya, when she first meets Gaigern, recognises something in his comportment from her past. When she catches him on the balcony, he makes the excuse that he was there because he is an admirer. This takes her back to an earlier episode in her life and career. While she was staying as a young dancer in a castle per the Grand Duke Sergei’s invitation, a young officer had, like Gaigern now, sneaked into her room.⁴ ‘She remembered his eyes and one or two kisses too’ (Baum [1929] 2016: 108). This young officer had soon afterwards been killed in a suspicious hunting accident (prefiguring Gaigern’s demise at the end of the novel). It is in that moment of memory/recognition that she realises her loneliness and that she feels Gaigern’s warmth.

In Gaigern, too, there seems to arise a feeling of recognition when Grusinskaya calls him ‘Du – Mensch’. After consoling her when she is crying over

her loneliness, these ‘endearments’ strike him; the words ‘hit his heart (ibid.: 110).⁵ Baum writes that Gaigern ‘heard an echo in his soul as though from his childhood, from a world he had left behind’ (ibid.: 110). Even if he wishes to close himself off from this feeling by having a cigarette, the word clearly elicits a side of him – indeed, as the word ‘world’ suggests, an entire situation – that previously remained hidden.

Their partner’s immediate responses that remind them of their previous lives is couched by Baum in the fact that they recognise each other’s backgrounds as familiar. This familiarity is gradually embedded in the novel through moments that suggest a shared bodily repertoire of movement before they even meet. The encounter between Gaigern and Grusinskaya starts, at least for the reader, before they meet in moments in which their comportments match. They both perform difficult balancing acts. While Grusinskaya is in full control of her own body on stage, balancing on her pointe shoes, Gaigern is performing equally difficult physical movements climbing along the façade of the hotel to try and steal her jewels. They both talk to their own bodies and do so in similar ways, praising their bodies and scolding them. They are both observed (almost) naked: Grusinskaya is observed by Gaigern, as we have seen, walking around in her hotel room with initially only her stockings on and then fully naked; Gaigern is observed by his chauffeur with only his socks on. Thus, when Gaigern reflects on why Grusinskaya appeals to all his best instincts he thinks: ‘his own existence, always trembling on the edge of a precipice, taught him to understand hers’ (ibid.: 131). Gaigern recognises her existence as similar to his. It is not a revelation, something new, that he finds in her, but rather a familiarity. The physical imagery of the balancing act that alludes to their earlier acts couches this familiarity in a shared bodily

practice. The recognition thus seems to be also a kinesic recognition; her emotions are recognised as an affective-kinetic dynamic.

If we return to Gallagher's account of interaction, we can find a congruent account of shared movement. Current empirical research in the cognitive sciences is very interested in mimicry. In recent years, ample evidence has been gathered in the cognitive sciences, that humans automatically and unconsciously mimic other people (e.g. Meltzoff and Moore 1994; Gallagher and Meltzoff 1996). We copy facial expressions, postures, movements, and voice, and do so unconsciously. Such copying is mediated, it is now believed, by so-called mirror neurons, neurons that fire significantly when we perform a specific object-oriented action *as well as* when we watch someone else perform that action. In other words, other people always already move us in some way. The mirror neurons are a sign that we share in another person's comportment.⁶ But why do we mimic? Importantly for our present discussion, Gallagher has suggested that the mirror neuron system might exist exactly for aiding our interaction with other people. In line with suggestions made by Newman-Norlund and colleagues (2007), he argues that instead of that the activation of mirror neurons prepares us for matching another person's action, it might attune us to their gestures in order to be able to smoothly come up with congruent responses (2017: 77). He thus argues that mimicry aids the way in which we perceive others' meaningful actions in the world as affordances for our own responses to, or interaction with, these gestures (2017: 78). With Gallagher's understanding of mimicry, then, Baum's text suggests how culture as a shared choreography may further interaction in a similar way to mimicry and mirror neurons.

What I want to suggest about the shared bodies of Grusinskaya and Gaigern, then, is that their matched actions not anticipate the intimacy and gestures that are

to come when they meet, but also that it shows that they are especially well prepared to respond reciprocally and dynamically to one another. One might say that they are attuned to another, but that would overlook the fact that they have never met. Rather, I would argue, Baum shows how their interaction is also scaffolded by them being attuned to similar social environments, and similar people. The matched comportment comes from a similar background and education. They both represent a now-defunct, (Prussian) world order which is acted out physically: beautiful, elegant, and in full control of their bodies. He is an aristocrat with military training; she is a ballerina trained in Imperial Russia. This reading of control as a shared comportment is thematised later when Grusinskaya tells him that she belongs to a different century, and then states that her and the dancers were trained ‘like little soldiers’ under the Grand Duke of Russia (Baum [1929] 2016: 118). Indeed, when Grusinskaya first sees Gaigern on the balcony he bows to her; a sign, perhaps, of a shared culture. It is this cultural background, then – emphasised in their matched movements – that helps choreograph the fine-tuned, automatic physical responses they produce when they meet. The fact that it is the shared history that aids their helpful, if temporary, interaction is evident in their recurring comments about recognising something in each other, as well as in the fact that they embrace older ways of behaving.

What is important here is that what Gaigern and Grusinskaya recognise in one another is not so much a copy of their own comportment, but rather, they recognise the choreography, an affordance for their own inherited comportments to play out. Gaigern does not merely recognise Grusinskaya’s predicament but more importantly recognises, in his own responses to her, the responses his aristocratic upbringing has instilled in him. She, through him, recognises the choreography elicited around a loved, successful ballerina. Crucially – and unlike many a return

to family dynamics – they like their own responses in this interaction. It is not just that the elicited responses are old habits resurfacing, but these are roles in the choreography that they feel good about. In other words, they like what the other person affords and elicits: she wants to be an adored ballerina, he seems to want to be a gallant man rather than a criminal. That is exactly the choreography that emerges when they come together.

An attention to choreography is thus useful here not only because it is suggestive of the *learned* and habitual movements that our encounters with others can elicit, but also because it intimates that by responding in a certain way to other people, we take on a certain role (and neglect other responses/roles). If other people can be affordances, for example for thermo-regulation, they can still respond in a variety of ways, as well. There is always an uncertainty as to how the other person will further respond to our responses, but there is also always room for improvisation/adjustment should they not respond in the way in which we expected them to. They can take on the role we envision them taking on, as a whole or in part, or they cannot. Even if Gaigern is trying to steal her pearls, then, Grusinskaya's search for warmth in him is not blind. Gaigern's comportment, in the context of her search for warmth in a cold and unfamiliar hotel room, elicits movements in her from which she could have retreated, or which she could have changed or adapted, had Gaigern not responded in a culturally congruent, or emotionally satisfying, way, had he not performed the appropriate choreography. But he not only took on that role but was also happy to take it on and thus the choreography unfolded as it did.

What I am ultimately suggesting here, then, is that 'social warmth' is not just merely a learned and/or inherited link between being physically warm and being physically close to someone, but that such social warmth is also tied to

cultural proximity, that is, familiarity. Contrary, then, to assumptions in some studies in the cognitive sciences that attach objective qualities to social warmth (for example, in literary characters (Szymkow et al. 2013)), Baum's novel suggests that the very responses we find socially 'warm' might be learned as well.⁷ If communion takes on different choreographies, then social warmth may be assumed to read differently to different people as well.

Importantly, too, the meeting between Gaigern and Grusinskaya complicates readings of modernist literature, and this novel in particular, as articulating an 'existential homelessness' (Matthias 2006: 8).⁸ Gaigern explicitly calls this meeting a 'homecoming' (Baum [1929] 2016: 115). It is their mutual knowledge of the choreography, the fine-grained responses to one another – already announced in their shared movements – that provides them, even if only temporarily, a home away from home. The other's comportment affords and elicits, for them positive, habitual ways of responding and interacting. This home away from home is perhaps best expressed in Gaigern's repeated reference to growing up amongst gypsies (e.g. *ibid.*: 118). He feels most at home, it seems, with those who do not necessarily have a stable material environment. These automatic responses between Grusinskaya and Gaigern thus give us a version of home that is not focused on the material environment, a *place*, but rather on a familiar choreography emerging between two similarly situated people.

However, Baum's novel is not only interesting to a discussion of social interaction because it is attentive to social choreographies, but also because its transatlantic afterlife constitutes an example of both how literature affords a range of, often unexpected, responses, and how it may structure our understanding of other people. In the second part of this essay, therefore, I want to explore literature as an affordance by focusing on one aspect of what happened when Baum's story

crossed the Atlantic and, like Kringelein coming to the grand hotel, entered into and consequently adapted to a new cultural environment.

Part II: The Affordance of Edmund Goulding's Grand Hotel (1932)

Literature itself has many affordances, one of which may be to understand other people outside of the book. It may provide tools, concepts and/or narratives with which to understand other people (including, as Lisa Feldman Barrett has argued, their emotions (2017; see also Rokotnitz' contribution to this issue)). We find an interesting example of the affordance of literature for shaping interaction when we cross the Atlantic to the homonymous 1932 Hollywood adaptation of *Grand Hotel*. The film's afterlife provides a clear example of the ways in which the arts 'help' us interpret others, if not always correctly so. The movie, a big success both financially and critically – it won an Oscar for Best Picture – stars Greta Garbo as Grusinskaya, John Barrymore as Gaigern, alongside other stars of the time such as Lionel Barrymore and Joan Crawford. While the film largely follows the story of the novel, it does away with much of the characters' background as well as all action not taking place in the hotel. It also makes much of a friendship between Gaigern and Kringelein (played by the Barrymore brothers), a relationship that is much more fraught in the novel. The 1929 film would have later iterations in cinematic adaptations as well as in a successful 1989 Broadway musical production (nominated for a Tony-award for Best Musical).

But perhaps the film's most famous legacy is the sentence uttered by Garbo's Grusinskaya: 'I want to be alone.' It is this sentence which – ironically, given its reductive description of both Grusinskaya's needs and both the novel and film's interest in social interaction – would become not only one of the most famous lines in Hollywood history – the American Film Institute in 2005 listed it

as the 30th most important line in American film – but would also become intricately linked to Garbo’s persona.

Before the 1932 film was released, Garbo was already famous for supposedly being very reclusive and shy. As James Harvey observes, Garbo was ‘famously, even pathologically, shy’ and ‘only compounded the remove [between her and her fans] by refusing all publicity. Her celebrity became a kind of public privacy as a result’ (Harvey 2014: 3). Her film presence seemed to strengthen that distancing effect on screen: in her films she was elusive, understated, ambiguous, and transcendent. Roland Barthes wrote that Garbo’s face was like the ideal of human beauty rather than a particular instantiation of beauty (an example of the latter he found in Audrey Hepburn) (Barthes [1957] 1972: 56–57). Garbo is also understood to have portrayed mostly passive women; MGM’s producer Irving Thalberg famously said that Garbo’s characters should always be acted upon rather than acting decisively themselves (qtd. in Harvey 2014: 48). And there was a dramatic weight to her roles, too.⁹ Indeed, when Garbo finally took on a comedy in *Ninotchka* (Lubitsch 1939), it was one that played deliberately with her supposed humourlessness: its tagline was ‘Garbo Laughs’. All in all, Garbo had the reputation, both on and off the screen, as distant and mysterious, and both the character of Grusinskaya in *Grand Hotel* and the line she utters in the film, fits that image closely. ‘I want to be alone’ helped cement and reproduce that image.

The film *Grand Hotel* seems to play deliberately with this image of Garbo. Grusinskaya, the star ballerina who has had enough of her performances, mirrors both Garbo’s image as the reticent and reclusive star and the dramatic weight and profundity of her roles. Indeed, when Garbo first appears on screen in *Grand Hotel*, after a 20-minute build-up, it is, in Harvey’s words, ‘a moment so close to self-parody that it’s a shock’ (ibid.: 24):

Roused from her sleepless preperformance nap by her maid, she rises into a close-up, intoning the words: “I think, Suzette, I have never been so tired in my life.” It’s a glamour shot, as her close-ups usually are—artfully shadowed and molded and intense—but forbidding. It’s the familiar Garbo mask of tragedy—the arched brows, lined forehead, drooping eyelids, sagging mouth—but at such a Kabuki-like extreme of dejection and gloom that it’s startling, almost like a challenge, the exaggeration all but daring you to scoff or to pull away. (ibid.: 24–25)

Thus, as Harvey again points out, ‘where another studio might have given [Garbo] better pictures and directors [...], only MGM could give her a *Grand Hotel*’ in which she ‘both plays the legend and confirms it by her performance as Grusinskaya the prima ballerina, like her a great and famous single-named artist—who wants to be alone’ (ibid.: 24).

The phrase, which only appears once in the original novel as ‘Aber ich möchte allein sein’ (Baum [1929] 2019: 133)¹⁰, appears three times in the film. Was the line recognised by the MGM producers – more interested in making Garbo a legend than in giving her great films – as tying into Garbo’s celebrity persona and thus repeated thrice in the film? They certainly understood its value after the film, as Garbo was made to repeat variations on the line again and again in other films such *Ninotchka* as highlighted in that film’s trailer (the first thing she says in the trailer is ‘we want to be alone’) but *Grand Hotel*’s version of the line was the one that stuck.

Perhaps most important to the line’s success is its affordance outside the text: the line helps an audience understand – correctly or incorrectly – Garbo. If Garbo was otherworldly and weighty on screen and reclusive in real life, ‘I want to be alone’ made that distance graspable, that privacy public, in that it gave a public explanation to that privacy. Or, to put it in the language of affordances, it specified an otherwise underspecified star. That the phrase was fictional (and ambiguous)

did not seem to matter, perhaps exactly because the line played into her public persona so well. Moreover, the character she plays is itself so close to the Garbo persona: How could the line not rub off on the actress?

But what does this transatlantic adaptation to film and the line's success tell us about literature? Terence Cave, in his 2016 book on literature and cognition entitled *Thinking with Literature*, explores the usefulness of 'affordances' for literary studies. Cave sees 'thinking with literature' as a co-creative response in which literature is seen 'not as neutral text but as an animated affordance' (2016: 9). The text affords possible interpretations and uses, but does not determine them, each reader animates the texts in different ways, based on her situation, history, culture, goals, and preoccupations. Cave draws on the inherent openness, or underspecification, of the concept of affordances to emphasize the active space of creativity that is given to the reader. Affordances suggest, Cave writes, 'agency, intention, purpose' (ibid.: 51). The text's specification, that is, the way in which it is read, depends on its relevance in/to a specific person in a specific situation (ibid.: 51). We can see that interplay of openness of use and its specification clearly in the ways in which Baum's *Grand Hotel* is interpreted and re-interpreted over time in various media, and as it is used as a cinematic vehicle for Garbo's stardom, and, honed down to a single sentence, as a means of understanding the actress. In the interaction (represented by the film) between the novel on the one hand and the film studio's concern of creating celebrities on the other, both Garbo and the text become specified.

This is clearly an overspecified use of the novel. *Menschen im Hotel*, in crossing the Atlantic and many hands (between script writers, MGM executives, and the press) evolved into a motto for Garbo's private life: 'I want to be alone'. Like the difference between a Swiss army knife and a corkscrew, in this

‘evolution’ the sentence lost the complexity of the novel but gained one clear solicitation. A novel exploring the importance of human connections (however fleeting) is used to ascribe to someone the wish to be alone; a novel about human relationships has its seemingly richest afterlife in celebrity gossip. Cave’s use of ‘affordances’ for literature is thus useful because it helps us explore the novel in these ways as providing many different, often unexpected, uses, even outside the text itself. As Paul B. Armstrong writes, drawing on Cave’s discussion, ‘the storyworld that is configured by employing various techniques, conventions, and other narrative resources (the scaffold) then affords an open-ended, unpredictable history of responses by recipients who engage in activities of meaning making that it makes possible’ (2020:42). And looking at particular responses like the one highlighted by ‘I want to be alone’ is thus useful because it opens up the text in a new way. Indeed, it helps open up the text away from the ways in which literary critics often read them.

Affordances are, as Erik Rietveld and Julian Kiverstein have emphasised, often normative, that is, (over)specified by a given social context. They write: ‘exercising an ability can be better or worse, adequate or inadequate, correct or incorrect in the context of a particular situation, hence there is a *normative* dimension to the abilities for picking up affordances’ (2014: 326). Like the novel’s specification in the MGM studio’s concern over producing the biggest film stars, the same kind of specification seems to hold true for literature in the context of literature departments. Here, too, our understanding of what literary uses are worth studying is strongly guided by norms – see, for example, Rita Felski’s critique of such practices (Felski 2008; see also Morgan in this issue). If literature lends itself to practices ranging from the placing of tattoos (e.g. tennis player Stan Wawrinka’s use of Beckett’s text for an inspirational tattoo) to providing a concept to certain

moods or situations (e.g. the Kafkaesque), such affordances are often undervalued and overlooked in the learned context of academia. Even if literary critics usually attempt to open up the complexity of the text, find new affordances, these new affordances are often implicitly bounded by the ways in which we have learned to look at literary texts, that is, our own choreographies of literary study. It is thus also upon us as literary critics to take note of how literature is used ‘in the wild’, even if we think such uses do not do justice to the complexity of the text, or aren’t used properly. As Karolina Watroba has recently argued (2019), it is, amongst other places, in the study of adaptation broadly conceived, and, I add, thus also in the study of transatlantic culture, that we can start finding these more outside-the-box uses.

But, looking at the ‘uses’ of literature does not just tell us something about the literary texts. The affordances that are picked up in a given reading say as much about the subject as about the object, and, in literary studies, textual solicitations thus say as much about readers as it does about the text. The fact that the Weimar novel, interested in the social and economic relations of its characters, finds its US American fame in celebrity culture is suggestive of the concerns of the Hollywood culture in which this affordance of the novel was ‘picked up’. It brings into relief the MGM studio culture, which was as interested in the creation of stars as it was in the creation of good movies, as well as the public’s want/need to further specify one of its biggest, yet reclusive stars. Just as the interaction between Grusinskaya and Gaigern in the novel, and the meaning they take on for one another there, is a reflection both of their concerns in the moment and their *learned* responses, so the Hollywood/*Grand Hotel* combination brings into relief the habits and concerns of MGM and the wider public.

Ultimately, the example of Garbo and ‘I want to be alone’ is interesting not only because it shows a curious affordance of literature, but also a direct way in which a literary adaptation shaped the affordance of a person to the larger public, without her being able to do much about it. If ‘I want to be alone’ was a useful way of both marketing and understanding Garbo, it also trained our understanding of her into that one direction, to the extent that few articles about Garbo today make do without at least referring to that particular sentence. Her insistence later that she had never uttered the phrase about herself, did not matter.¹¹ The fact that this sentence, which is used more to describe Garbo than to describe the movie in which she uttered the words, is such an important part of American film history thus not only reveals the various affordances of a literary text depending on the differing contexts, but also how such texts may come to specify the ways in which we engage with others. Literature affords, indeed, uses that are ‘not at all self-evident’ (Cave 2016: 5).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to draw out the parallels between the specification of roles in contextual, social interaction that the novel attends us to and the affordances of the novel that were specified when it was adapted to film in the United States. If Gaigern and Grusinskaya take on long-forgotten roles when they meet each other in the context of the cold and unfamiliar hotel room, so Baum’s *Grand Hotel*, in the Hollywood context, afforded, and was given the role of, shaping Garbo’s stardom. The film, as representing the interaction between Baum’s text and Hollywood culture, became a star vehicle and ultimately was honed down to a simple tool for ‘understanding’ Garbo. In the process, then, Garbo’s elusive

persona was specified for the public and MGM further cemented its own role as a studio producing stars rather than good films.

Social roles, of course, matter to us. It mattered to Garbo, who was unhappy with the description of ‘I want to be alone’. And it matters to, to Baum’s fictional characters, who are happy they can take on their familiar and thus warm roles as revered star and courteous aristocrat. And, thus, interactions matter to us not just because they can be positive or negative, but also because they shape our own roles, roles that we can like or dislike. And so, as has been argued elsewhere by Shaun Gallagher, Ben Morgan, and Naomi Rokotnitz (2018), and again in this issue by Rokotnitz, the relational aspect of authenticity is important to how we can feel more like ourselves. Re-situating ourselves in different social contexts can make us feel more or less like authentic. In a similar way, exploring re-situated literature, in different readerships and contexts, for example in transatlantic and transmedia adaptation, and the responses elicited in these new constellations, allow us to see some of the manifold affordances that familiar texts have always already held to various audience. In the end, then, ‘one must know how to dance’, but, equally, learning new, or going back to old, choreographies – new ways of interacting as well as new ways of seeing literature – also helps us explore what matters and what mattered.

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¹ See also Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan's volume of essays on the existential questions raised by contemporary neuroscience (2018), to which two contributors to this special issue, Ben Morgan and Naomi Rokotnitz, have contributed together with Shaun Gallagher on what they call 'relational authenticity'.

² In her recent study, Cecilia Heyes (2018) has suggested that many of the mechanisms we previously believed to be cognitive instincts, that is, biology passed on through genes, may in fact be what she calls cognitive 'gadgets', encoded in culture and 'downloaded' by infants from that culture. Which suggests the possibility that the warmth/proximity connection in our brain may be experienced and learned from interaction with our caretakers rather than passed on (solely) through our genes. While with stable housing and central heating being available to many

people these days, the connection between other people's proximity and warmth might not be as instrumental as it once was, it is still a connection that we encounter repeatedly.

³ Another study by IJzerman and colleagues suggested that people reading about 'warmer' characters – described in the stories as caring, sensitive, loyal, and friendly – judged the temperature in the room they were in as warmer too (Szymkow et al. 2013; see also IJzerman 2021: 8).

⁴ It seems that Baum is deliberately referring to Grand Duke Sergei Mikhailovich (1869–1918), who famously had a long affair with the important ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska (1872–1971). Grusinskaya also mentions Kschessinska together with Kschessinska's rival Vera Trefilova (1875–1943), in a monologue about her life, as the dancers she learned from when she was little (2016: 119). I take the names of Kschessinska and Trefilova here as they are usually transcribed into English, not as they appear in either the original version of the novel or its English translation.

⁵ The word 'Mensch' is not usually used in German as an evaluative term. Baum might be using the word as the Yiddish 'Mentsch', 'Mensch', or 'Mensh' which also found its way into English in Jewish usage as 'a person of integrity or rectitude; a person who is morally just, honest, or honourable' (OED).

⁶ Cecilia Heyes (2018) has importantly argued that the discovery of the mirror neuron has only shifted the question from 'how do people imitate?' to 'how do mirror neurons imitate?'. Her answer is 'sociocultural experience', in other words, by learning with and through others.

⁷ It should be noted that while in the article by Szymkow and colleagues they propose objective 'warm' traits of people – they propose 'friendliness, helpfulness, kindness, and honesty' (2013: 168) – in their research they also asked for participants to rate the literary characters as to their warmth (ibid.: 170).

⁸ Although Bettina Matthias recognises that some modernist texts that she discusses – in *The Hotel as Setting in 20th-Century German and Austrian Literature* – respond more positively to modernity, they do so in her reading by freeing the individual from socio-cultural constraints rather than finding their way in them as I suggest (Matthias 2006: 8). For more on existential homelessness and modernity see, e.g., Adorno 2015.

⁹ Melvyn Douglas, alongside whom Garbo played in three films, would later observe that Garbo could infuse the most banal of lines with profundity (Harvey 2014: 23).

¹⁰ Considering the line's fame, it is a shame that the latest English translation of the novel, with revisions by Margot Bettauer Dembo on Basil Creighton's original 1930 translation, has the line as 'I *wish* to be alone' (Baum 2016: 113; emphasis added).

¹¹ This article, in emphasizing the interaction between literary text and MGM studio, may seem to veer close to what Betsy Erkkila describes, in an important essay on Garbo and film criticism, as 'the larger tendency in film theory and criticism to mask the creative power of the actress' (1985: 595). Yet, as Erkkila also makes clear in her essay, *Grand Hotel* was exactly one of the films in which Garbo had little creative power, as per her contract with MGM (1985: 602).