William R. Handley's Past President's Address

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An Anatomy of Feeling Western; or, The Good News about Estrangement

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Among the many reasons we have to thank Tara Penry in putting together this conference, not least is the rich theme she picked for it: “Feeling Western.”

Now, picking a conference theme is no small task, since a successful theme needs to do or be three things at once: it should not be too narrow a topic, since you want it to solicit a broad range of papers; it should somehow reflect the locale, even if only the West, without seeming parochial or boosterish; and it should be interesting and sound catchy but not cute. In that last respect, it’s quite different from picking a theme for a party. I don’t like theme parties—but I’ve never forgotten the name of a pro-Sandinista theme party in northern California in the mid-1980s: the “Contra-Contras Contra Costa County Costume Party.” For WLA conferences, by contrast, we wouldn’t want “Boozin’ near Bozeman,” “Lost in Los Angeles,” “Houston: Home to Halliburton,” “Lincoln: It’s Not Just a Car,” or, for next year, “In a Coma in Tacoma.” (Ann Putnam, by the way, has already picked a theme, and it fits all three criteria beautifully: “Edgewalking on the Western Rim.”) We can thank past presidents for sparing us those—and Tara for sparing us “Boise: It’s Not Just Oreida, It’s Spud-tastic!” Still, while we have been fortunate that our conference themes have satisfied the first two criteria I mentioned—not too narrow in topic while having broad regional flavor—we have been (how shall I put this) less frequently acquainted with themes that satisfy the last criterion, that it be interesting and sound catchy, maybe even memorable. Does anyone remember last year’s theme, which I picked? It was the somewhat ponderous “Cultures of Memory and Forgetting in the American West,” which, for one thing, was impractical when it came to printing it on conference paraphernalia—the tote bags, the folder, the program. (Did you notice there was no T-shirt last year? Who’d want to be caught wearing it?) Of course, I wanted the theme to be interesting—yet now, in the glinting light of Tara’s thematic gem, I see through to mine’s circularity, its shallowness: after all, isn’t every culture the sum of what is remembered and forgotten? Susan Kollin, in choosing her theme, avoided circularity: “Nature and Culture in the North American West,” which just about covers everything. Judy Temple gets kudos for being poetic in her choice of “The Land of Little Rain.” Granted, like Ann, she did not invent the phrase—but then, who would go to a conference called “Aridity” or “Hot and Dry”? Krista did a good job with the surfing metaphor—but the hotel wasn’t at the beach. It was in a mall. Still,
better “surfing the West” than “shopping the West.”

So, hats off to you, Tara, because you nailed it: “Feeling Western” focuses the mind while challenging one to think and go to work on the phrase: it is as complex as it is elegantly concise. And it has inspired me to address you today by addressing the theme.

What I find thought-provoking about “Feeling Western” is that it invokes the complicated relationships between personal and regional “identity” and the equally complicated relationships among art, politics, and feeling. After all, we feel with our own bodies, our own senses most immediately. When we feel others’ feelings (to the limited extent we can), it is because we understand what it is to feel—because of imagination. Art is one vital source for the imagination, and indeed the term aesthetic means “perceptible by the senses”: both sensuous and cognitive, it is feeling that is seen, heard, touched, etc; it is vision and sound that are felt. It is distance become nearness through the skin, the eye, the ear. It is what we know and recognize becoming something else as it crosses the threshold of perception, as it touches us.

“Feeling Western” also raises the familiar problem of what, if any, “identity” the West even has, and of course whether any other name better gets at what it is and has been. But by whatever name, the West (consider it a plural noun) has meaning only by virtue of feelings about it, not by virtue of its name. Calling up both our perception of the object and our feelings about it, “Feeling Western” nimbly invokes the problem of aesthetic judgment itself: of what part belongs to what whole within what governance of feeling and perspective. “Feeling Western” asks us which part of what whole we identify with or feel estranged from. In any case, it allows for no one’s “own private Idaho,” to borrow the title of Gus van Sant’s film, if only because someone else is also looking at it, whether with identification or estrangement—and because our own perspectives do not simply originate with ourselves. Subjective perception may be personal, but it is riddled through with innumerable social experiences that have shaped the cultures that in turn have shaped how we see. Because subjective perceptions are framed, in part, by what they exclude, they implicitly call up other perceptions, other ways of feeling.

And then there’s that singular gerund we cannot pin down, since our feelings are never singular or unequivocal—about anything. If I were to summon feelings about just two aspects of my so-called identity at different points in my life—“Mormon” and “gay”—they would run the gamut from the sublime to the ridiculous, from shame to eroticism, from anger to gratitude, from paranoia to love, from pride to embarrassment, from family feeling to alienation from family and much else besides—and that’s just with regard to what I recall about feeling “Mormon” before the age of 17! Indeed, like the phrase “feeling Mormon,” “feeling western” is a kind of question, or begs one: “do you feel western?” To which one might respond, “Am I supposed to?” Am I presumed to be a westerner if I feel western or have feelings about the West? And if I don’t have any particular feelings about the West, or altogether too many conflicting ones, do I belong here?

Imagine that uncanny middle ground between the known and the unknown, between a nameable, recognizable identity of any object (like the West) or of a subject (like ourselves) and a sense of how radically unfamiliar and
even unknowable anything is in its totality. In that middle ground, we are, on one hand, in a position like that of Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, aware that the signposts of opposed meanings tend to pull that middle ground out from under us or to leave us nearly paralyzed between them. But, also like Oedipa, we may be left to chart our own weaving trail in search of meaning until we discover meaning in the trail, as the pattern of meaning itself. Revelations of meaning may, on the other hand, “come crowding in exponentially,” as Pynchon writes of Oedipa, “as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into [it]” (81). From a symbol on a latrine wall, Oedipa had jotted in her memo book, “*Shall I project a world?* If not project then at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among constellations and trace out your Dragon, Whale, Southern Cross. Anything might help” (82).

Notice how at the moment of being most lost, Oedipa is asking if she may not be her best guide, but only in the creative process of designing recognizable patterns in unfamiliar places. Though she risks “getting lost in this” infinity of significance and insignificance, she has, it turns out, nothing to lose—and an understanding of what has been lost to history to be gained (95). The “act of metaphor” by which patterns will be made is “a thrust at truth and a lie, depending on where you were: inside, safe, or outside, lost. Oedipa did not know where she was” (129). But we recognize where she is, because we’re in the same thicket at this point in the novel: in the excluded middle between opposite meanings, between patterns traced and patterns smashed, between everything and nothing: the place where meaning happens.

Recognition and estrangement have their pleasures, including the “high magic,” as Pynchon calls it, of surprise, when they endlessly oscillate between each other (129). The bliss of surprise, what I call the good news about estrangement, comes at a cost: you have to be both knowing, able to recognize; and naïve, open to strangeness. But surprise can also come in the form of the shock of bad news you are not prepared for. A safer route is available, to be sure: make sure you are prepared for bad news, every sort of it, so that nothing bad comes as a surprise.[1] The safer route also comes at a cost: your perceptions of the world will rarely surprise you if paranoia governs the structure of feeling, as it often does for Oedipa while executing the will of Pierce Inverarity’s tangled estate. Just because Oedipa is paranoid does not mean that the Trystero does not exist or that she does not have enemies. But to borrow a reversal from Eve Sokofsky Sedgwick in her 2003 book *Touching Feeling*, even if the Trystero exists and Oedipa does have enemies, it does not mean Oedipa has to be paranoid.

Sedgwick’s book is in part an attempt to move beyond dualistic thinking to something more like a Buddhist position. As one of the originators of queer theory, Sedgwick looks back on some of the ur-texts and assumptions that made queer theory possible, especially the work of Foucault—and before his, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx. The distinguishing characteristic of these foundational thinkers, she quotes Paul Ricoeur in his discussion of the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” “is the general hypothesis concerning both the process of false consciousness and the method of deciphering. The two go together, since the man of suspicion carries out in reverse the work of falsification of the man of guile” (124, 125). Sedgwick writes, “The man of suspicion
double-bluffing the man of guile: in the hands of thinkers after Freud, paranoia has by now candidly become less a diagnosis than a prescription. In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systematic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive, pious, or complaisant” (125–26). Given her work on homophobia, she has no wish to return to the use of the word 
*paranoid* as “a pathologizing diagnosis,” she writes, “but it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds” (126). She goes on to remind us that Freud traced paranoia to the repression of specifically same-sex desire. In the 1970s, this formulation was extended in the following way: If paranoia reflects the repression of same-sex desire, then it is “a uniquely privileged site for illuminating not homosexuality itself, as in the Freudian tradition, but rather precisely the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it. What is illuminated by an understanding of paranoia is not how homosexuality works, but how homophobia and heterosexism work—in short, if one understands these oppressions to be systemic, how the world works” (126). (Thus we can understand the totalizing paranoia in James Dobson’s comment that gay marriage would—and I quote—“destroy the earth.”)

This is Sedgwick’s question: how did paranoia, which was by the 1980s a privileged object of antihomophobic theory, “spread so quickly from that status to being its own uniquely sanctioned methodology?” Her answer lies in the property of paranoid feeling itself, which makes it contagious: “paranoia is drawn toward and tends to construct symmetrical relations, in particular, symmetrical epistemologies” (126). Her main reasons for questioning paranoid practices are “other than the possibility that their suspicions can be delusions or simply wrong. Concomitantly, some of the main reasons for practicing paranoid strategies may be other than the possibility that they offer unique access to true knowledge. They represent a way, among other ways, of seeking, finding and organizing knowledge. Paranoia knows some things well and others poorly” (130). Sedgwick then proceeds to outline paranoia’s characteristics: that it is anticipatory; that it is reflexive and mimetic; that it is a strong theory; that it is a theory of negative affects; and that it places its faith in exposure. Of paranoia’s anticipatory imperative, Sedgwick writes, “There must be no bad surprises, and indeed, the aversion to surprise seems to be what cements the intimacy between paranoia and knowledge per se” (130). This is what in part makes paranoia a theory of negative affects, although paranoid practices routinely disavow multiple or conflicting affective motives, as if ambiguous, complex feeling undermined truth. To the extent that affect plays a role in literary and cultural theory in general, she notes,

A disturbingly large amount of theory seems explicitly to undertake the proliferation of only one affect, or maybe two, of whatever kind—whether ecstasy, sublimity, self-shattering, *jouissance*, suspicion, abjection, knowingness, horror, grim satisfaction, or righteous indignation. It’s like the old joke: “Comes the revolution, comrade, everyone gets to eat roast beef every day.” “But Comrade, I don’t like roast beef.” “Comes the revolution, Comrade, you’ll like roast beef.” Comes the revolution, Comrade, you’ll be tickled pink by those deconstructive jokes; you’ll faint from ennui every minute you’re not smashing the state apparatus; you’ll definitely want hot sex twenty to thirty times a day. You’ll be mournful and militant. You’ll never want to tell
In keeping with her non-dualistic approach, Sedgwick argues that while paranoid reading rejects naiveté as any source of knowledge, it also relies upon an infinite reservoir of naiveté in those “who make up the audience for these unveilings.” “How television-starved,” she asks, “would someone have to be to find it shocking that ideologies contradict themselves, that simulacra don’t have originals, or that gender representations are artificial?” Of course, some exposés, demystifications, she argues, do have great effectual force, often of an unanticipated kind, whereas many that “are just as true and convincing have none at all” (141). Hence the predictability of even some “radical” scholarship: some of it is no longer shocking, no longer revolutionary; the act of its articulation is directed not at the world or even the immediate audience in an effective way, so much as it directs us toward the speaker as the one who is supposed to know, who cannot be caught not knowing. Because such scholarship has identified literature as complicit in the mystifications of power, it turns its critique toward other cultural objects for analysis. But it is the novelty of what is being analyzed more often than the critique that may surprise, and perhaps pleasurably.

Pleasure brings me back to estrangement in its positive form: good surprises. In his 1917 essay “Art as Device,” the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky wrote that as perception “becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously—automatically.” As a result, life begins to fade “into nothingness. Automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.” In order to, as he puts it, “return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a feeling of things, based on vision and not only on recognition. In order to achieve this goal art relies upon two devices: ‘estranging’ things and complicating form, the latter making perception more difficult and laborious. The perceptual process in art is a purpose in itself and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of becoming; the outcome is quite unimportant” (qtd. in Ginzburg 8).

The historian Carlo Ginzburg writes about this aspect of art that allows us to see things we recognize as if for the first time (which is to say naively) in his essay “Making Things Strange: The Prehistory of a Literary Device.” He suggests that, contra the formalists, this may not be the only, universal, or even most important device of art. Ginzburg proceeds to restore aesthetic estrangement to its literary and historical origins, to estrange it from its Russian formalist context, through a deviously winding path too intricate to retrace here. Suffice it to say that it originates in the seventeenth century by means of supposed translations of Marcus Aurelius’s Stoic philosophy—some genuine, some fabricated—which influenced how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critics of Spanish and French imperialism such as Montaigne and Voltaire applied Stoicism’s sense of philosophical and aesthetic estrangement to European accounts of encounters with indigenous peoples in the Americas and in Africa. Born of cross-cultural encounter, aesthetic estrangement produced estranging rhetoric about native peoples; but among critics of European denigration of “savages,” the aesthetic device of estrangement had a powerful political use by making the conventions of European culture and society look not just strange but savage themselves. (Montaigne’s “Of Cannibals,” for example, indicts European practices of
torture and capital punishment as more barbaric than cannibalism—because a man is “eaten” alive rather than when dead.)

The history of New World conquest, I should note, is also the ground upon which Pynchon so intricately weaves his tale of paranoid readings and aesthetic puzzles in 1960s Los Angeles: back to Columbus and beyond, in a tangled history of capitalism and imperial conquest and dispossession that is continuous with the dispossession of the Californios after the American war against Mexico and the annexation of California in 1848, the discovery of gold in 1849, and California statehood in 1850. (Those numbers—48, 49, 50—are part of his artistic and historical puzzle.) Conquest was itself anticipatory and paranoid: and it sowed the seeds for the same in many of those who opposed it.

Whether or not we know how to read them, we live in a world of histories out of which identities are made to matter, identities that govern thought and perception and that call us, that situate us. We are continually asked to feel—to want to feel (sometimes not knowing the difference)—this or that identity, whether to create, to commune, to join, to root for, to vote, to act, to buy, to oppose, to fight, and even to kill. Whether we answer or resist this or that call to identification, for this or that social, cultural, economic, or political aim, so much of our accession to or resistant action against a call to identification depends upon the deadening or quickening of perception and feeling, of recognition or estrangement. Just think today about the political uses of fear and paranoia, which narrows the mind and exiles other feelings that might better serve even the same political end, whether rightly or wrongly. Consider the related political uses of shame and of humiliation—and then consider how manifestly much more complex they become within a work of literary art. Reading multiple characters in a novel, we perceive beside and between those who are represented as feeling subjects. Understood as a perceptual or affective position, beside is not, however, a settled or unambiguous one. Its affective relations are not (as Eve Sedgwick argues they are not) egalitarian or pacific. Instead, “Beside permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking,” such as “the law of the excluded middle” (8). It is in this sense that we can say that art multiplies the self, in that middle ground between discrete positions or affects.

Consider two scenes in Brokeback Mountain in which shame, humiliation, and paranoia are not easily identifiable as discrete feelings and are right beside bliss, and in which the simultaneous nearness and distance between the audience and all of the characters in the picture make it almost impossible to “identify” our own position in relation to the characters’ identities. The first is atop Brokeback Mountain, as Jack and Ennis fall deeper into their idyll together. Suddenly our vantage point on them is far away, atop another hill, as they play around in seeming freedom. And then we discern that we are looking through binoculars, through someone else’s eyes. When we then see the face of their employer, Joe Aguirre, from the other side of the view as he lowers the binoculars, we might feel afraid, paranoid, or ashamed: afraid for them, afraid of Aguirre; ashamed under that judgmental gaze; paranoid about what they don’t yet know—and implicitly, we may perhaps feel ashamed in being implicated in the position of surveillance, suddenly away and estranged from the characters we had been until then fairly close to. Unsettlingly, the viewer occupies both positions: of the one who is
looking and of those being looked at. It is not a choice for us to make, however, since the aesthetic choice has already been made: we are beside all points of view, included in the picture as the middle ground between them.

The second scene is when Jack and Ennis greet each other for the first time in four years after that summer, their bliss and passion almost uncontainable as our perspective is that of the close-up—until, that is, we are abruptly in the position of Alma, Ennis’s wife, who has accidentally seen them. Then we see the look on her face that expresses a flood of almost unnamable feeling, except that we know her feelings have almost nothing in common with the feelings felt at that moment by Jack and Ennis. I have heard Annie Proulx say that she found it disturbing to hear audience members laugh at that moment. Her implication seemed to be that laughter expressed both an indifference to Alma’s shock and a belittling of Jack and Ennis’s passion.

_Brokeback Mountain_ has other instances in which “an artifact … has been intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception,” as Shklovsky describes artistic phenomena (qtd. in Ginzburg 9). This was clearly the intention of the filmmakers, because these scenes do not exist in the story and they concern the two most national of national holidays, Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July, in the most nationally familiar of film genres, the Western. What makes these iconic scenes—the Thanksgiving table, the fireworks display—removed from automatic perception is the estranging presence of same-sex desire (in the persons of Ennis and Jack) in these normative situations. Unlike the other characters, but like the audience, Jack and Ennis know who “really” knows and who doesn’t know about them in these familiar settings. Through this estrangement of the nationally familiar, does the film masculinize and Americanize homosexuality, or does it queer the Western and the nation it often stands in for? Do we have to choose?

Another dilemma of interpretation in the film concerns Jack Twist’s death: was it the tire iron, or not? Was he killed for being queer, or was it a roadside accident? The film risked resolving the decided ambiguity of Annie Proulx’s story in this regard because of its use of what look like flashbacks (as opposed to what they could also be, flashes in Ennis’s mind). Many viewers resolve the ambiguity, as does Ennis in the story, and argue that he was killed. Others have put the question to Proulx for her to resolve, which she refuses to do. Ang Lee and Anne Hathaway (who plays Ennis’s widow, Lureen) agreed to keep secret their own interpretations. The decided ambiguity, I want to suggest, is not a question of whether Ennis is “merely” paranoid or whether the world is in fact that brutal. After, all, we do know that Ennis was made, by his father, to see the savagely murdered body of a homosexual man when he was a boy. Lesson learned: men who love men have violent enemies, and they may be their own fathers (Ennis suggests his father may have been the murderer). That knowledge, however, is of a kind different from the one Ennis experiences after he hears, in Proulx’s story, Lureen’s narrative of Jack’s death as an accident. As he is hearing it, he at first thinks, “No … they got him with the tire iron.” But then, as the “huge sadness of the northern plains rolled down on him,” “he didn’t know which way it was, the tire iron or a real accident, blood choking down Jack’s throat and nobody to turn him over. Under the wind drone he heard steel slamming off bone, the hollow chatter of a settling tire rim” (Proulx et al., 23). Notice how affect determines what can be known rather than the reverse: paranoia leads him at first to contradict the “knowledge” being passed on to him; but then, in the huge sadness of the personified wind, he
does not know one thing from another as true or false, and his senses settle briefly on the cruel indifference of an accident. It is only later that his aesthetic perception—his having turned wind into steel—becomes, via another memory, a form of traumatic knowledge, whose truth value lies in the real effects of actual trauma rather than in the unknowable, specific facts and circumstances of Jack’s death. He meets Jack’s father, who tells him that Jack was going to set up a ranch with another man after splitting with his wife. Immediately Proulx writes, “So now he knew it had been the tire iron” (25, emphasis added). The line subtilly recalls what Ennis had last said to Jack, regarding his sexual infidelities: “What I don’t know… all them things I don’t know could get you killed if I should come to know them” (21). Now he perceives an infidelity worse than Jack’s tricks in Mexico: the “knowledge” that he had been replaced in their dream of a ranch together. In both instances, feeling shapes but cannot govern the oscillation between knowing and not knowing which, like the question of “truth” and “falsehood,” is non-dualistic and intimately beside the emotional point.

Proulx’s “now he knew,” with its paranoia and humiliation, is knowledge more irrefutable, because felt, than any legal document or forensic investigation concerning Jack’s death could be to Ennis. But for us, it is ambiguous knowledge about the perceiving subject Ennis or the object of his perceptions, Jack—or both together. In the final dream Proulx gives us to know, a familiar everyday object from their happy idyll atop the mountain is made strange—and the feelings accompanying it, vastly different though they are, are fused together. In the dream, “The can of beans with the spoon handle jutting out and balanced on the log was there as well, in a cartoon shape and lurid colors that gave the dreams a flavor of comic obscenity. The spoon handle was the kind that could be used as a tire iron. And he would wake sometimes in grief, sometimes with the old sense of joy and release” (27-28). While the dream suggests the traumatic costs both of homophobia and the closet’s repression, the shock of the bad news about Jack’s death has also made Ennis, at least within the aesthetic transformation of the dreamwork, receptive to the good news of estrangement.

Brokeback Mountain was the most well-received and successful Western, of a non-formulaic sort, in many years. But there were two other non-formulaic “Westerns” that also appeared in 2005 that I want briefly to put alongside Brokeback Mountain, the question of feeling western, and both the good and the bad versions of estrangement. While admirers of Brokeback Mountain were appalled that Crash beat it for the Best Picture Oscar, to my mind the greater disappointment was that Terrence Mallick’s The New World was virtually ignored by so many critics and audiences. It was, in my view, not only the best “Western” of 2005—if I may stretch the genre to include colonial frontiers—but one of the finest American films of the past several years. What explains the oddity of my view—or rather, the oddity, in my view, of Crash’s ascendance and The New World’s disappearance? My view might strike some as odd because nothing would seem to be more un-interesting or un-original than a “historical” film that draws on one of the most well-worn, misused, and abusive myths in American history, that of Pocahontas and her supposed romance with John Smith. Moreover, the film’s title seems aligned with a European perspective. On the other extreme of the western genre’s historical and geographic range, we have a film that seems to be about contemporary race relations in Los Angeles—with some of the recognizable figures: vain and unfaithful politician, abusive white policemen, young African
American car thieves, etc. Yet both films, like *Brokeback Mountain*, aim to get us to see familiar icons and figures of the generic West with new eyes. The problem in *Crash* is that those new eyes are not meant to estrange our perceptions about race but to reassure us by implying how supposedly alike we all are and how we suffer equally from racial misperceptions. In this sense the film is ahistorical, as it blithely ignores those historic and economic forces behind racist perception and reduces racism to mere perception (even as it renders its Asian American characters as utterly foreign to this understanding and as modern-day slave traders). The dishonesty of the film’s vision is not just because racism is neither that simple nor merely subjective—reducible to being in a bad mood—or that easily overcome through Hollywood scenarios, but because rather than estrange the familiar, the film mystifies social reality.

Despite its calculated plot twists and manipulation of audience perception, the film is anything but a revelation or even a surprise. And this is where things get surprising: it is in a film that involves a colonial myth about a romance between an English captain and an Indian teenage girl—not in the contemporary L.A. ensemble film—that the good news about aesthetic estrangement is most available to perception.

Mallick’s film achieves artistic greatness (if I may, not so naively, use that phrase) not in spite of its “problematic” historical context but in part because of it, which is to say: because of how our eyes have habitually seen cultural images of this mythic moment. Only in the domain of habit can estrangement produce affective surprise. Mallick’s camera operates with something like naive but intense attention to Pocahontas, who is not named, including attention to her perceptions of the strangeness of English culture, as the pain and rapacity of ensuing history, with which any intelligent viewer would be somewhat familiar, works at the diachronic edge of the camera’s almost phenomenological presence. And in this sense, the film is historical in the manner that Carlo Ginzburg’s “prehistory” of the device of aesthetic estrangement is historical: it reaches back to a moment in colonialism when politics and aesthetic perception developed an uncanny relationship that, in a postcolonial context, is haunted by the sense of estrangement from a kind of wonder that may or may not have ever existed (pace F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Dutch sailors’ vision of the new world) but that we have become all too habituated to mistrust, as if naive aesthetic vision is inherently a form of false consciousness, of not knowing political or historical reality. Mallick’s camera manages to be both knowing and naive at once—to a profoundly moving degree.

There is a passage in Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that I have long been familiar with since a friend gave it to me at a traumatic moment, but which, in the context of thinking about feeling western, reads differently to me now. Father Vaillant says to Father Joseph:

> I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. … Miracles … seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always. (50)

Perception and feeling are made almost indistinguishable in this passage, which suggests that “reality” is
something both unknowable and yet perceptible in shinningly rare moments. I see now that Cather’s character is speaking her view about art. Art is the good news about estrangement from the habitual, one of the chief ways in which we can see things as if for the first time. We habitually come to WLA because the West is a term for a vast range of feelings about times and places and representations that still surprise us.

Allow me to end by describing the habit of WLA conference-going in an estranged manner (though far less artfully than, say, in one of his stories Tolstoy describes human beings from a horse’s perspective), as it might “really” seem from the point of view of some alien from outer space or anthropologist from a different culture or time:

Once during each earth-orbit of the sun, complex life forms gather from disparate places to move from one enclosure to another—within a large storage of enclosures called “convention hotels”—to listen to each other speak. Among these “conventions” are some that have no discernible purpose—economic, political, or religious. There are no rules or requirements about belonging in these groups who talk and write and discuss what others have written in various places and times. There is no manual or sacred text or powerful ruler. Among these types of gatherings that have no clear political, religious, or economic purpose, there is one that seems to differ from the others in two unexplained ways: (1) they usually gather in semi-arid or western regions in the northern western hemisphere; and (2) after they have moved among enclosures to hear each other speak, they dance.

That is not who you really are—but it is one way to describe how I see the WLA: through my affection.

Notes

1. Writing about 1960s paranoia in her essay “The White Album,” Joan Didion recalls, “I remember that no one was surprised” when she and others heard news of the murders at Sharon Tate Polanski’s home. That day, August 9, 1969, seemed to mark the end of the sixties because “the paranoia was fulfilled” (42, 47).

Works Cited