Rooting for the morally questionable protagonist

How Taxi Driver, Goodfellas and The Wolf of Wall Street create predominantly sympathetic allegiances for their morally questionable protagonists.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis was motivated by the apparent discrepancy between the theoretical claims that a character's morality determines the spectator's sympathy and the fact that spectators regularly find themselves sympathizing with immoral protagonists. This thesis therefore seeks to answer the question how a film creates and manages a positive attitude of the spectator towards a protagonist who has a questionable morality. To answer this, theories from film studies, which mostly focus on the film text, will be complemented with theories from communication studies, which are mostly based on spectator research. With the help of Murray Smith's structure of sympathy and Raney's additions to Dolf Zillmann's affective disposition theory I argue that a spectator usually forms an evaluation of a character rather quickly and actively looks for reasons to maintain their sympathetic or antipathetic allegiance. Analyses of the portrayal of the morally questionable protagonists of Taxi Driver, Goodfellas and The Wolf of Wall Street prove that films employ an array of strategies to foreground reasons to sympathize and to mute reasons the viewer may have to not sympathize. In doing this, they elicit the spectator's sympathies and create and maintain a long term allegiance for the protagonist, even when he is the morally questionable one.

Keywords: character engagement, structure of sympathy, recognition, alignment, allegiance, affective disposition theory, morality, morally questionable protagonist, Martin Scorsese.
INTRODUCTION

When Brooklyn gangster Henry Hill introduces his fellow wise guy Jimmy in *Goodfellas* (1990), he says: “Jimmy was the kind of guy that rooted for bad guys in the movies.” What he is saying with this is that Jimmy is a really tough guy. It is a wink at the spectator of *Goodfellas*, who may find himself rooting for Jimmy, who has just been established as a seriously dangerous man. Probably, what Hill means by ‘bad guys’ are the antagonists, the characters that hinder the protagonist’s journey. They do not necessarily have to be ‘bad’, though the antagonist classically is bad, of course. Yet what if the protagonist is a bad guy? We find ourselves rooting for the ‘bad’ protagonist all the time. Indeed, it is folk knowledge and common occurrence that spectators sympathize with gangsters in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), a killer in *Dexter* (2006-2013), violent meth producers in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and so on. Although these TV shows indeed seem to represent a new trend, elaborately covered by popular and scientific media alike\(^1\), the morally questionable protagonist has been here all along. The popularity and amount of classic gangster films, which usually have morally questionable protagonists, is proof enough. Yet actually, it is curious that people can be made to feel sympathy for characters who kill, steal or cheat their way through a film.

An apparent discrepancy is present in scientific studies on the spectator-character relationship as well. Many scholars, amongst which Dolf Zillmann and Murray Smith, relate sympathizing with a character to the spectator’s evaluation of the character’s morality. So, on the one hand theories about character engagement place emphasis on the spectator’s moral judgments, while on the other hand experience shows that spectators regularly and unproblematically sympathize with immoral or morally questionable protagonists. The question arises: how is the spectator stimulated to sympathize with an immoral protagonist when theory emphasizes the importance of a character’s morality?

In the first research on the topic of the spectator-character relationship, the term character identification turned out to be a common notion. Just like ‘rooting’ for a character, ‘identifying’ with a character is a commonly heard expression amongst film spectators. Nevertheless, the definition of the term ‘identification’ and how and when it occurs is difficult to grasp. As an alternative, Murray Smith formulated a theory to understand and analyse the processes a spectator goes through when sympathizing with a character. The occurrence in

\(^{1}\) Such as Brett Martin’s book about the complicated male protagonists in television series (Martin 2013), or an article on Psychology Today that wonders why the spectator enjoys the recent television series with antihero protagonists (Bender 2013).
which the spectator develops a strong, sympathetic attitude towards the character is called ‘allegiance’ (1995, 75). This is a response from the spectator that is elicited by the way the film presents the information about a character. So, ‘rooting’ for a character is one of the results of this occurrence. Thus, one can conclude that a film has the ability to stimulate the spectator to root for its protagonist, and apparently even the morally questionable one. Therefore, my thesis question is: how do films elicit and manage a spectator’s allegiance for a morally questionable protagonist?

To answer this question, this thesis will complement theories from film studies with theories from communication studies. In film studies, scholars engaged with the spectator-character relationship are interested in the way it is a co-product of film and spectator with a focus on the film text. Scholars in communication studies, in turn, have carried out empirical researches among spectators and formulated theories on the basis of the results. These help understand how a spectator evaluates characters. The two fields have studied the topic independently, but their theories have never been combined. This thesis will use them together, because combined they provide a more complete understanding of the processes involved when a spectator sympathizes with a (morally questionable) character.

This thesis consists of Two Parts. In Part One, I seek to discover what comes into play when a spectator sympathizes with a character. To answer this, I will draw from several sources in literature. In Part Two, I will use this theoretical framework to analyse three films by Martin Scorsese that have morally questionable protagonists. I aim to identify several means the films employ to stimulate allegiance for a morally questionable protagonist.

In the first chapter, I will more generally try to understand the spectator-character relationship and the process of engaging with a character. First, I will look into the spectator-character relationship as a concept: how have scholars previously approached and understood the occurrence. Thus I will be able to understand the field and to situate this thesis in the discussions. Against Cohen and Gaut, and in line with Carroll and Smith, I argue for dismissing the term ‘identification’ as a useful analytical tool for textual analysis. Instead, I combine Smith’s structure of sympathy with Arthur Raney’s additions to Dolf Zillmann’s affective disposition theory and claim that a spectator actively looks for reasons to maintain a developed allegiance.

Chapter Two is dedicated to understanding how a character’s morality plays a role in sympathizing with characters. To be able to know when a character can be considered morally questionable in the first place, I will first attempt to define what one can assume are commonly accepted moral standards. Then, I will outline mechanisms (that can be employed by films) that can influence the spectator’s evaluation of the character’s morality. One might argue that a spectator can also sympathize with a morally questionable protagonist precisely because he behaves immorally, yet I will argue that this is rarely the case.
As the first chapter argues that a spectator actively looks for reasons to maintain his\(^2\) sympathetic or antipathetic feelings, and the second chapter has outlined which mechanisms can influence the spectator in this search for reasons, the question remains: where from can the spectator draw reasons to sympathize with a character? In Chapter Three I will therefore outline factors in narrative and film style that a spectator may find to maintain his allegiance. They will not compose an exhaustive list but give a general idea about what kinds of aspects the spectator can find to feel sympathy for a character.

Then, in Part Two, to examine how films make use of everything described in Part One, I will analyse three films by Martin Scorsese that have morally questionable protagonists. To be clear, I do not aim to research whether the spectator is allied with the morally questionable protagonists of these films, as every spectator experience is different. I will be doing textual analysis to research how a film guides its spectators to sympathizing with its protagonist. I will look at the films' opening sequence and character exposition (which do not always go together) and analyse how the character is first portrayed in terms of narrative, such as dialogue and position to other characters, and film style, such as cinematography, mise-en-scène (including the physical appearance of the character), speech and music. Next, I will analyse what reasons the film provides for the spectator to maintain or challenge the first (positive) valence the spectator shaped of the character, and how some reasons are foregrounded while others are veiled so as to create a sympathetic allegiance.

In Chapter Four I will more elaborately argue why the protagonists in the three films are morally questionable and thus good objects for analysis. The first film, analysed in Chapter Five is *Taxi Driver* (1976), about a lonely, troubled New York City taxi driver who kills a robber and plots an attack on the president candidate, yet ends up saving a teenage prostitute. *Goodfellas* is a classic gangster drama about young Henry Hill's rise to being a successful mobster in Brooklyn, New York, which will be analysed in Chapter Six. Thirdly, in Chapter Seven, I will analyse *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), about Wall Street charlatan Jordan Belfort. He has his (illegal) way with money, takes every drug imaginable, and cheats on his wife with numerous prostitutes. The three films differ from each other in morality, setting and tone, thus composing a varied corpus from which I expect to find both differing and recurring ways for a film to elicit allegiance for a morally questionable protagonist. This will then explain how everyone can be the person who "roots for the bad guys".

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\(^2\) When I speak of characters and spectators, I refer to them as being male. I do not aim to claim things about male spectators and male characters only, nor am I unaware of the existence of female spectators or morally questionable female protagonists. I only do this because it would harm the readability of this thesis to refer to 'he/she' all the time. So when I speak of 'him' when talking about 'the spectator' or 'the character', I mean *any* spectator, male or female.
PART ONE

1. THE SPECTATOR-CHARACTER RELATIONSHIP

For the past twenty-five years or so, many scholars have taken it upon themselves to examine the spectator-character relationship. In everyday talk about films (and other narratives), people often say they ‘identified’ with a certain character, and ‘character identification’ has thus also become a common notion amongst scholars who tried to define the spectator-character relationship. Theorists studying film characters have dealt with identification in one way or another. In the first section of this chapter, I will very briefly outline the discussions about character identification to be able to understand the background of the conceptualization of the spectator-character relationship. Following Murray Smith, I will dismiss the term identification. Instead, the term engagement will be used to describe the processes involved in the spectator-character relationship in general. Also in line with Smith, I will use the three levels of the structure of sympathy. One of them, allegiance, refers to the spectator’s sympathetic attitude towards the character, which is directed by the text. In line with Plantinga I use the term ‘sympathy’ as a more short term instance of caring for a character, which aids in the creation and maintenance of allegiance. In the second section of this chapter, I will argue for Arthur Raney’s additions to Dolf Zillmann’s affective disposition theory, namely that the first valence of a character is dominant in the shaping of allegiances. I want to combine Raney’s theory with Smith’s structure of sympathy because it helps understand how the processes of recognition, alignment and allegiance function.

Terminology and theory: allegiance and sympathy

As described, I will start with briefly going into the discussion about character identification, because this term is often used as the theoretical term for the spectator-character relationship. As will soon become clear, it is not a useful term for approaching the relationship for analysis. Therefore, I will explain and use Smith’s structure of sympathy, with ‘allegiance’ as its most important component. Furthermore, I will explain sympathy as a more short-term positive feeling of the spectator about the character, another key concept in this thesis.
Noel Carroll is one of the scholars who attempt to define the term ‘identification’, and, as a consequence, he argues for rejecting this term. First of all, according to him, many seem to use the notion to describe a situation in which the spectator mistakenly believes that the character’s perspective is his own (1990, 89-90). Of course, this does not make sense, for a spectator very well knows he is watching a fiction with a protagonist different from himself, or he would find himself looking for knives when Scream’s (1996) Ghostface shows up on his television screen. Yet, as Carroll then argues, one also does not find his emotional state to be identical to that of the protagonist(s), as the spectator often knows more and/or different information than a character and thus has different thoughts and feelings (90). Yet, Carroll continues, if character identification can only apply to the spectator-character relationship when it means there is a “partial correspondence” between the emotional states of the spectator and the character, then why call the phenomenon ‘identification’ at all (92, emphasis added, AvdK)? For “sharing emotive responses” (93) is so vague it would also mean that a spectator would identify not only with a character, but also with every other spectator who, for example, cried at the same moment in the film. And the idea that the spectator has this response as a result of his identification with the character because he makes his/her interests his own, is dismissed as well, as this does not have necessarily to be the case (94).

Murray Smith also signals problems with the term. He distinguishes three definitions of the term identification with regard to characters: 1. the spectator mistakes himself for the central character, 2. the spectator imagines the events of the narrative from the perspective of the character, and 3. the spectator imagines himself in the exact situation of the character (1995, 80). The first explanation is the one dismissed by both Carroll, and Smith. Smith does not necessarily reject the other two, as they are types of imagining that might take place when dealing with fictions, but he does point to empirical problems. After all, a film rarely provides one character’s perspective only, and the spectator never only imagines his experience from the character’s point of view.

To deal with the problematic term of identification, Smith puts forward a useful system for breaking down and understanding the processes going on when a spectator engages with characters. This is the ‘structure of sympathy’, a system consisting of three different levels of engagement a spectator goes through when watching a film (illustrated in image 1 (1995, 105)). Smith also importantly emphasizes the co-operative activity of the spectator here. The three levels in the structure of sympathy “denote not just inert textual systems, but responses, neither solely in the text nor solely in the spectator” (1995, 82).
The first of the three levels is ‘recognition’, which is the spectator’s construction of a character. This is the most basic process, at which the spectator recognizes textual elements (such as images of a body, sounds of a voice and, at a more complex level, textually described traits) as a continuous character, with character traits and behaviour like real people (82). Also, a spectator is placed in a structure of ‘alignment’, depending on how much access he has to the aural and visual information the character perceives, and to what is going on inside the character. To better understand and analyse alignment, Smith breaks it down into two tools. The first is 'spatio-temporal attachment', the extent to which the narration is restricted to one character. Is the spectator taken to the same locations and events as the character, and does the spectator hear and see what the character hears and sees? The second part of Smith's alignment, is 'subjective access', the extent to which the subjectivity of the character is revealed (83). Does the spectator get to know what the character is feeling and thinking? Next to alignment, the spectator evaluates the character “on the basis of the values they embody, and hence form more-or-less sympathetic or more-or-less antipathetic ‘allegiances’ with them” (75, quotation marks added, AvdK). This is where a spectator shapes his opinion of a character based on a moral evaluation and where he possibly sympathizes with him/her (yet also possibly gets antipathetic feelings instead). So in summary, the difference between alignment and allegiance is that alignment can be seen as the narrative information a text provides the spectator with, while allegiance can be seen as the way the text directs the spectator’s evaluation of this information (1999, 220). Thus, in my analysis, I will look for the information the film presents the spectator, and most importantly how it presents this information to direct the spectator’s

Figure 1
allegiances. Because it seems that it is in the way the film presents the information, that the spectator is guided to sympathize with an otherwise morally questionable protagonist.

One might assume that a spectator automatically sympathizes with the protagonist, with whom the spectator is usually aligned, to watch the film the way the film is supposed to be watched. This is too simple, though. As Smith writes, it is not the fact that the spectator is aligned with a character that he evaluates and feels for a character, but it is what he learns about this character through that alignment (Smith 1999, 221). There are films that have the spectator aligned with an evil protagonist, yet do not elicit sympathetic allegiances with him. *Maniac* (1982), about a murdering rapist, is an example Smith gives (220). Yet, and Smith mentions this only marginally (1995, 188), the fact that by far most narratives elicit sympathy for the characters with whom the spectator is aligned, has the spectator expecting to sympathize with the protagonist and thus looking for reasons to feel that sympathy for the character(s) he is aligned with. It is important that, because the spectator is used to being stimulated to feel sympathetic towards the protagonist, with whom he is used to being aligned, the spectator will automatically look for reasons to sympathize with the protagonist, especially if there is only one protagonist.

The term sympathy is not clearly defined by Smith. And as Carl Plantinga notes (2010, 38), Smith’s theory is sometimes unclear about the distinction between sympathy and allegiance. Though sympathy is a possible part of a spectator’s allegiance with a character, the terms sympathy and allegiance seem to be used by Smith interchangeably, while he has explained how antipathy can also be part of an allegiance (1995, 75). In line with Plantinga, I define allegiance as the more long-term ‘pro’ attitude a spectator can have towards a character (2010, 36). Sympathy, in turn is a more short-term occurrence that can but does not have to be based on moral judgment. It both aids and results from allegiance. Plantinga argues that sympathy is granted to those that are in danger and need protection, or are treated unfairly (41). In this definition of Plantinga, sympathy is like pity. Though seeing a character in need often does lead to sympathy, I want to use a broader definition of sympathy that addresses the feeling of favour, support or loyalty; to care for a person or character. This might be triggered by a character’s poor situation, but does not necessarily have to be so. People also feel sympathies for and/or tend towards allegiance with characters who are a lot like them, for example. A spectator can find them resembling themselves on the basis of all kinds of factors, such as sex, race, physical appearance, hobbies, social status, family situation etcetera. On top of that, as Smith remarks as well (1999, 221), people also tend to feel sympathies for a character who has character traits or a way of life that they do not have, but desire to have. Obviously, this desire can be for all kinds of things, such as money, love, courage or freedom.
Sympathy is usually mentioned together with empathy and the two are often confused as well. As explained, sympathy is to feel for someone, to care for a person and have feelings when something happens to him that might be different from the feelings of the character, whereas empathy is to feel with someone, to have similar feelings to his. Smith places empathy next to his structure of sympathy, but argues that it works together rather than distinctly from it. He mentions different kinds of empathic reactions (1995, 102), that are rather involuntary responses like jumping up at a shock or getting a lump in one’s throat when someone is crying. These responses can aid in eliciting sympathy.

In this section, I have briefly shown that the term identification with regard to characters has not had a coherent definition throughout the different fields and studies. Because of this, and the fact that the term is not necessarily needed to be able speak of the spectator-character relationship, I will avoid it from here on. Smith’s approach to the spectator-character relationship with three levels of engagement is a much more useful tool to help analyse the different processes involved when spectators engage with a character. According to his structure of sympathy, a spectator constructs a character at the recognition and has a certain amount of subjective or spatio-temporal access as part of the alignment. On a third level, allegiance is the long-term ‘pro’ attitude of a spectator towards a character, which accounts for a spectator ‘rooting’ for a character. This allegiance, in turn, can be governed by sympathies: shorter term feelings of caring for a character that may not be based on morality at all. Furthermore, sympathizing with a character needs two players: the text (carefully constructed by the filmmaker) and the spectator (who brings along his personal taste and background knowledge on films and the world in general).

No second chance for a first impression?

As briefly established in the introduction of this chapter, there has been research about character engagement in the field of communication studies as well. Arthur Raney came up with a theory that is very helpful in combination with Smith’s structure of sympathy; it further details how the spectator goes through the three processes. In line with his theory, I argue in this section that the exposition of a character, or the recognition stage in Smith’s sense, influences our allegiances to a great extent. Furthermore, the spectator actively looks for reasons to maintain the first valence made during the recognition.

Raney’s theory builds on Dolf Zillmann’s affective disposition theory, which Zillmann formulated out of interest in spectators’ enjoyment of media. The theory has seen many slightly different alterations to apply to different media contents and signals that spectators are “untiring moral monitors” who judge every action of a character by its rightness or wrongness (Zillmann 2000, 54). Thus, they form affective dispositions that can change over the course of a
film, when new actions of a character get different verdicts than the ones he did before. The main objection for the affective disposition theory is that it suggests that we get an affective disposition (or sympathy) with characters that act in morally correct ways, and does not account for sympathies for characters who are morally questionable. Arthur Raney also locates this flaw. Therefore, Raney proposed two additions to the affective disposition theory, namely that “the initial formation of an affective disposition towards a character may at times actually precede specific moral evaluations of the character” (2004, 361). And, as a consequence, spectators interpret the character’s actions in line with that affective disposition to maintain the positive or negative attitude about him or her (361). In other words, sometimes the spectator has already shaped a valence of a character before he can evaluate him on moral grounds, and instead of evaluating each and every action, he is ready to explain morally ‘wrong’ actions of characters he sympathizes with, and dismiss neutral or morally ‘good’ actions of characters he has antipathies for.

The theory that the initial valence of a character is usually maintained has also been backed up by empirical research. Meir Sternberg has studied the exposition in fiction and calls this occurrence the primacy effect, in line with a psychological research about the enduring influence of first impressions (1978, 93). In this experiment, the participants read a story consisting of two parts about a fictitious character, “Jim”. In one half of the story, Jim behaves friendly and extrovert, and in the other half more introvert, unfriendly and shy. Some participants read a version of the story that had the friendly half first and the unfriendly half second, while others read the unfriendly half first and then the unfriendly one. Afterwards, the participants answered questions to compose a character sketch of Jim, and predicted his behaviour in particular given situations (93). In both cases, the first half was always taken to represent the ‘real’ Jim, while the second part was perceived as exceptional behaviour. This is called the primacy effect. Furthermore, the subjects failed to recognize the discrepancy between the two halves. They always justified Jim’s behaviour with arguments that were not necessarily explicit in the text, such as ”sometimes he needs solitude” or “he was tired, or had an unhappy day” (94). So, as Raney has claimed, it seems that a spectator shapes his mental image of a character at the first meeting with him, or rather, in Sternberg’s terms, during the character exposition. In film, this is the scene or sequence in which the film provides information that the spectator cannot do without. According to Sternberg, this includes a character’s “appearance, traits and habitual behaviour” (1978, 1). Of course, a spectator can also change his opinion of someone when new information becomes available. Yet the experiment goes to show how important the initial impression is: people easily explain or justify behaviour to match their initial valence. So it makes sense that a spectator does not judge every action of a character, as
Zillmann’s theory suggests, but rather looks for reasons to match the actions with his initial affective disposition.

In summary, with Raney’s additions to Zillmann’s affective disposition theory, backed up by Sternberg’s empirical evidence of the primacy effect, I claim that the initial valence of a character, which is shaped in the character exposition and can but does not have to precede moral judgment, is often maintained by the spectator. He actively looks for reasons to preserve the first evaluation, and is willing to explain or justify behaviour that does not match this evaluation. By combining this theory with Smith’s structure of sympathy, it is easier to understand the processes going on when ‘meeting’ a character. Smith’s idea of the spectator’s first recognition of a character can be understood as the moment in which the spectator starts to shape his initial valence, and possibly, in Smith’s words, (start the foundations for) an allegiance. The spectator then actively looks for reasons to back up this developing allegiance.
2. CHARACTER ENGAGEMENT AND MORALITY

Character engagement and morality are commonly accepted as related concepts. As I wrote in the previous chapter, Smith's allegiance is based on a moral evaluation of a character (1995, 188), for example, and Zillman's affective disposition theory also ascribes a big part of a spectator's sympathy for a character to a moral evaluation of his actions. Even though in the previous chapter I have also argued with Raney that a first valence can precede moral evaluation, moral evaluations are not dismissed entirely. In this chapter I will focus on the role of morality in character engagement. I will briefly attempt to define the term morality in the first section. What is commonly perceived as moral and immoral? As this depends on cultural values, it is hard to define. Yet, it is necessary to understand what is commonly perceived as moral before a character can be understood and argued to be morally questionable at all. In the second section, I will outline processes that can occur and play a role in how a spectator evaluates a character's morality. I will consider these processes 'mechanisms' that can determine how a spectator goes about in his search for reasons. The third section will be dedicated to tackling the argument that a spectator might simply sympathize with an immoral character precisely because he is immoral. If this would be the case, this thesis would be much less relevant, as it is based on the idea that a spectator gets allegiance with immoral characters despite their immorality. However, I will argue with help of Smith's concept of perverse allegiance that it hardly ever occurs that a spectator gets allegiance with an immoral character because of his immoral behaviour.

Morality: what is commonly perceived as moral and immoral?

To be able to distinguish a morally questionable protagonist from a 'hero' protagonist, it is necessary to explain what morality is and what is perceived as good and bad according to this morality. In other words: what is moral and immoral? These are concepts that are hard to define, for, as Smith writes, moral norms are tacitly accepted "default values" (1995, 213). As such, these values are not a particular set of rules to abide to. They are based on religion, culture and/or philosophy. Therefore, I can only try to define morals on the basis of the cultural values
of the western world, in which the chosen films, and probably most of their spectators are situated.

People do not have a sense of moral code from the day they were born. They ‘adopt’ and develop them as they grow up (Kohlberg 1981). The moral standards that people then follow (or at least understand), in turn, are determined by cultural values. As such, morality can have different resulting norms in different cultures. Bernard Gert has attempted to formulate rules that are tacitly present in common morality of the Western world, by asking himself for what kind of behaviour people know they need an excuse (2004, 20). The rules Gert distinguishes are: do not kill, do not cause pain, do not disable, do not deprive of freedom, do not deprive of pleasure, do not deceive, keep your promises, do not cheat, obey the law and do your duty. Indeed, these guidelines show a lot of similarities with the Bible’s Ten Commandments. Smith also acknowledges that Christian values have had a dominant influence on Western cultural values (1995, 213).

Immoral behaviour is any behaviour that violates these rules without sufficient justification (Gert 2004, 20). Gert adds that also attempts to violate any of these rules are immoral, even if the act does not succeed (21). Instead of immoral, one can also be amoral. This is the case when a person is unaware or indifferent towards a set of moral standards. So an amoral person would behave against moral standards, yet not be conscious of this.

**Mechanisms and strategies of character engagement**

With the help of Smith and Zillmann I have established that morality plays a role when evaluating and then sympathizing with characters. And in the previous section I briefly outlined what is usually considered as moral and immoral behaviour. So, if a character behaves against these usually accepted moral codes, how does a spectator sympathize with him? There can be several mechanisms at work in a film, that the film can use as ‘strategies’, that can influence how a spectator evaluates a character morally, sometimes enabling or aiding allegiance. This section will explain how a film’s moral structure, a spectator’s previous experience with immoral protagonists and moral disengagement cues can help in eliciting allegiance for morally questionable protagonists.

At the first formation of an allegiance of a character, usually during the character exposition, immoral behaviour does not necessarily lead to a negative valence: the spectator does not always evaluate fictional characters on the basis of real-world moral standards only, but also on a set of moral codes that the film provides. Smith calls this the moral structure of the film, which is responsible for presenting characters as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (1999, 220). So the spectator judges fictional characters not only by ‘normal’ morals, but also by the internal moral structure, the ‘system of values’, of the text. Thus, behaviour one would usually disapprove of in
real life can become preferable over that of other characters. Smith further explains that the system of values is part of a film’s co-text, the context within the text, which has its own values and beliefs to which the events of the narrative are set (194). Most of the times, the co-text is much like the world we live in. Then, the co-text does not need to be explicitly established, as the spectator shares the values it consists of. Sometimes, the story worlds of films have different values, also when, for example, real-world values have changed (think, for example, about Jud Süss (1940)). A film’s moral structure and system of values does not entirely erase the spectator’s sense of real-world morals though and can thus not be held solely responsible for why a spectator sympathizes with immoral protagonists. Therefore, it is still necessary to compare the moral structure to what one might expect to be commonly accepted real-world moral standards, to understand the morality of the character and the way that morality is presented.

Daniel Shafer and Arthur Raney have also looked for a film’s internal moral structure in communication studies, yet they approached it differently. Again going back to Zillmann’s affective disposition theory, they wanted to clarify how a spectator can enjoy antihero narratives, because (their definition of) the antihero is rather irreconcilable with this theory. The term antihero does not have one cohering definition, yet one recurring characteristic is that he has traits that oppose the ones of a traditional hero. The most important characteristic Shafer and Raney distinguish of the antihero, is that he is morally flawed (2012, 1029-30). Of the films in this thesis it is not always possible to speak of antiheroes. Nevertheless, the theory they formulated to clarify how a spectator sympathizes with an antihero is useful, because it suggests how spectators deal with the moral flaws of the protagonist. Though not backed up by empirical research, it is likely that spectators handle narratives with ‘regular’ morally questionable protagonists in a similar way.

Shafer and Raney refer to story schemata: a concept first used by Jean M. Mandler and Nancy S. Johnson for the internal representation of the building stones of a typical story that people use to understand and to recall a story (Mandler & Johnson 111). In other words, people come across stories that have very similar set ups and thus develop story schemata. When they read or hear a story, or watch a film, such a schema raises expectations for the development of the story. Shafer and Raney argue, in line with an earlier article of Raney’s, that a spectator can develop story schemata for antihero narratives and thus enjoy these narratives more or in different ways (Shafer & Raney 1028). Furthermore, their questionnaire research returned that viewers familiar with antihero narratives, and thus better developed story schemata for these, were able to separate moral judgments of the characters from their sympathizing with them (1042). In other words: they morally disengaged and found other reasons to sympathize with a character.
This disengagement, as Shafer and Raney write, can be stimulated by disengagement cues: reasons that justify the morally questionable actions or behaviour of the antihero (1039). The before mentioned motivation behind an action can be considered as such a disengagement cue, and a very important one. When Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) takes a turn towards the ‘bad’ to pay for his treatment and support his family, the spectator ‘turns off’ the moral judgment because White has such a relatable and ‘justified’ reason to start making meth. Another reason or justification could be that a character represents a morally preferable set of traits in relation to other characters within the story (Smith 1995, 188). This is the case when a film contains what Smith calls graduated moral structure, in which the characters can be located anywhere between the good and the evil (207). This occurrence is also effectively called “Black and Grey morality” in the TV Tropes wiki. Contrary to a “Black and White morality”, that conforms to a structure in which the hero is basically flawless and the antagonist purely evil (“Black and White Morality” 2014), in the black and grey moral orientation there is no flawless or essentially ‘good’ character, but solely characters that are different levels of ‘bad’ (“Black and Gray Morality” 2014). Being surrounded by ‘black’ moralities, can be a disengagement cue for the protagonist with the ‘grey’ morality: he is not that bad. Shafer and Raney’s disengagement cues are actually a way to establish a moral structure different from the real-world morality.

I have shown that a character’s immoral behaviour is not always judged to be so when we evaluate a character. A film’s internal moral structure can guide a spectator into what is right and wrong in the film’s co-text. Usually though, this co-text is very similar to the context of the spectator. Shafer and Raney have shown that a spectator familiar with antihero narratives is willing to morally disengage and look for different reasons to sympathize with a character. It is probable that spectators also handle ‘regular’ morally questionable protagonist this way when they have previous experience with morally flawed protagonists. The reasons that a spectator instead looks for may be found in other character traits, talents or, as I will argue in the next chapter, in the way the character is represented by the different aspects of a film’s style.

**Perverse allegiance: why we rarely sympathize with a killer because he kills**

One might object to the described mechanisms: they give explanations for the fact that a spectator can have allegiance with a character *despite* his immoral behaviour, yet, one might argue that it is also possible that a spectator actually has allegiance with a character *because* of his unfavourable behaviour. Do human beings sometimes not simply enjoy the forbidden? Indeed, if spectators have allegiance with immoral protagonists *because* they are immoral, the thesis question becomes much less relevant. Yet, in this section I argue with help from Smith that this is hardly ever the case. If a spectator has sympathy for a character *because* of his
immoral behaviour at all, it is usually because the character is mostly 'good' too, like in the case of Wolfenstein and Leites’ concepts of good-bad characters.

Smith has also thought about this instance of sympathizing with the immoral. He therefore figured that there can be cases of perverse allegiances. By perverse, he means a “deliberate violation of moral precepts” (1999, 217). Smith distinguishes between first-order perversity, in which case someone enjoys something that is morally or socially proscribed, and second-order perversity, in which case someone enjoys something because it is morally or socially proscribed (219). It is the second one that would be referred to when arguing that the spectator might sympathize with a character because of his or her immoral behaviour. Yet, as Smith argues, these instances of perverse allegiances are rather rare and usually used only temporarily (222). It often comes down to a “knowing, self-conscious, imaginative play with the morally undesirable in the domain of fiction” (225). As an example for an immoral character a spectator might sympathize with, Smith describes Hannibal Lecter of The Silence of the Lambs (1991): he is not only a dangerous psychopath, but also an intelligent, charismatic gentleman. Thus, the spectator may find himself getting an allegiance with him. Yet, as Smith argues as well, if the spectator does feel sympathies for him, it is not because he is a psychopath, but rather because he also happens to have other nice qualities. So in Hannibal Lecter's case it is largely unlikely that the spectator feels sympathy for him as a perversity: any allegiance is despite his criminal and psychopathic characteristics.

This combination of nice character traits combined with unacceptable behaviour is why Smith argues Hannibal Lecter can be considered an attractive-bad character, in line with Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites (Smith 1999: 227). Wolfenstein and Leites discuss 'good-bad' characters in Hollywood films of the late 1940s. These are characters that initially appear corrupt or 'evil' yet turn out to be essentially 'good'. In the case of the 'good-bad girl', the woman is 'bad' because of her explicit sexuality, yet ultimately turns out to be just as 'good' and marriable as the regular nice girls. The 'good-bad' man is typically 'bad' because of his tendency to be violent (1950, 18). According to Wolfenstein and Leites, the good-bad character structure fascinates the spectator by having him experience the “suggested immoral wish-fulfilments” without feeling guilt. The spectator gets to experience immoral things he might want to do vicariously, yet does not have to feel guilty about it, because the characters “have not done anything” write Wolfenstein and Leites (300). They mean that often, characters in these films were falsely accused, but also that sometimes the characters were redeemed by all kinds of positive factors. Murray Smith adds that characters “have not done anything” in the sense that the deeds of these characters are fictional: they do not exist and their wrongdoings did not actually happen. The spectator is thus able to indulge in forbidden, immoral things (both because or despite the fact that they are immoral), while ultimately “being reassured that we,
like the ‘good-bad’ characters, are attractive and morally worthy” (1999: 224). And this, in turn, raises a sort of moral disengagement in the spectator: he can enjoy immoral behaviour because the moral standards of the film and the immoral behaviour do not apply to him. The “good-bad” character is thus an easy way to ‘play’ with forbidden desires. Because these characters are essentially good, even though some of their behaviour might be bad, the spectator does not have to worry about indulging in their ‘badness’: essentially, he is good too.

However, the pleasure of the good-bad character is there by virtue of the good, the return to cultural standards in the end. It is only because of the presence of the ‘good’ that the spectator gets to enjoy the ‘bad’. So even if we could call it a perverse allegiance when a spectator is allied with the character who, for example, kills the annoyingly correct police officer (which would be considered immoral, yet might be something someone fantasizes about), it is only so because of the fact that this killing character is redeemable by other factors. Thus, considering the distinction between the long-term allegiance and the short-term sympathy, it would be more correct to speak of a perverse sympathy. A real perverse allegiance rarely exists and might only happen in the case of an actually immoral spectator. Rather, perverse sympathies can occur, but they are aided by redeemable factors or a return to cultural standards in the end.

In this chapter, I have first tried to define the term ‘morality’ and what is usually considered as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ behaviour in Western society: one should do his duty and not harm others in any way. Also, a film’s moral structure can determine whether immoral behaviour is actually considered as immoral. And with help from Shafer and Raney I claimed that a spectator can look for reasons other than those that have to do with morality, when he recognizes schemata for morally questionable protagonists. And, finally, I argued how it is unlikely that a spectator sympathizes with a character because of his immoral behaviour, as someone might use as an argument to explain a spectator's sympathy for immoral characters. Actual perverse allegiances are probably for the spectator who himself maintains a questionable morality. The occurrence of perverse sympathies is more likely, but they still only function by virtue of redeemable factors.
3. REASONS TO SYMPATHIZE WITH A CHARACTER

I have established that a spectator looks for reasons to form and maintain a sympathetic or antipathetic allegiance with a character. Then, I have explained several mechanisms that can be at work in a film that can influence the spectator’s search for reasons. Now the following question needs to be answered: where from can the spectator draw these reasons? There are numerous factors that can play a part here. First, I will outline more specifically elements in the narrative in which a spectator can find reasons to maintain his allegiance. This includes a character’s behaviour, which is important for evaluating him positively or negatively, a character’s function in the story and his position in relation to other characters. In the second section, I will distinguish elements in film style, such as mise-en-scène and cinematography. Of course, the outlined elements and possible reasons to sympathize with a character are never as independent as they are presented here, since in practice they work together, carefully orchestrated by the filmmaker. Moreover, all of the above work together with the spectator’s background knowledge. Furthermore, this chapter does not provide an exhaustive list, but is meant to give an impression of the variety of film style factors that have the ability to influence the spectator’s sympathies.

Friendly to dogs: reasons in narrative

With regard to narrative, there are several elements from which a spectator can draw reasons to sympathize with a character. First of all, a character’s behaviour or attitude is essential for the spectator’s evaluation of him. In the first section of the previous chapter I explained what is generally considered as moral and immoral in Western moral standards. With regard to ‘bad’ and ‘good’ behaviour of characters in film, Cynthia Hoffner and Joanne Cantor do not speak of morality, but of social desirability and favourable and unfavourable behaviour (1991, 64). They quote empirical studies that show that social acts such as being generous, helpful and polite lead to identification as a good person, whereas harming other people, gambling, drinking and starting fights are all acts that lead to an identification as a ‘bad’ person (70-71). Motivation also plays a big part here: when aggressive behaviour occurs as self-defence or is considered socially acceptable (for example when arresting a criminal) it is considered justified (71-72). Yet, as
Sternberg has shown, the spectator is able to look for justifications like these himself, even when they are not in the film text, when he has sympathy for the character. Carroll adds that the behaviour of a major character towards minor characters can improve our impression of them (qtd. in Smith 1995, 190), especially when those characters have our sympathies. Smith explains this more specifically and writes that “thoughtful, generous, solicitous behaviour on the part of characters towards physically and socially weaker characters elicits a positive evaluation”. Indeed, when someone behaves badly towards elderly or children, he can count on strong disapproval. Same goes for the behaviour towards domestic pets (1995, 190). So characters being nice and helpful to the less fortunate are expected to be nice, socially desirable people, and the spectator can take this as a reason to sympathize with a character.

The interaction between characters works in other ways too. Instead of a protagonist behaving nicely towards physically and socially weaker characters, sympathetic supporting characters behaving nicely towards the (immoral) protagonist also elicits the spectator’s sympathies for the protagonist. Physically or socially weaker supporting characters, such as elderly, handicapped or children, elicit the spectator’s sympathy more easily. Imagine a murderer who is taken under the wings of an old Mother Theresa type of character. This woman (an easily recognizable character type) elicits the spectator’s sympathy easily, and thus, the murderer seems a lot more sympathetic too. Because if that woman recognizes a good heart in him, he probably essentially is a good man. Smith turns to Hannibal Lecter again to illustrate this, arguing that something of Clarice Starling’s goodness “rubs off” on Lecter (Smith 1999, 226). After all, she is an intelligent, caring woman and she sees something trustworthy or acceptable in Lecter, which helps the spectator see that too, even if he principally did not. Naturally, the spectator often does not go through this whole thought process: it works more automatically. So sympathetic supporting characters can make the immoral or unlikable protagonist look more sympathetic. Yet ‘bad’ supporting characters can have this effect too. When they are more immoral than the protagonist, they can make him look less immoral. When the protagonist has an affair, but his friend has an affair with two women, or impregnates his mistress or hits his wife, the ‘simple’ affair of the protagonist becomes relatively acceptable. This supporting character then establishes the earlier explained black and grey morality, making the protagonist seem not that bad.

Another narrative factor is a character’s personality traits. Because to be immoral does not necessarily mean to be unsympathetic. Besides the moral valence a character’s behaviour gets, a character might have character traits or talents that will have us sympathize with him. As Gaut writes: a character “may be witty, physically attractive, interestingly complex, and so forth” (1999, 211). Bransford writes about the redeemability meter on his blog on novel writing (2009). A character might have enough charisma, that when one detracts his immoral
actions/behaviour, there is still enough left to have one sympathize with him. And in film, one might argue, there are even more ways to present a character's charisma. First of all, the spectator gets to see him (as opposed to characters in novels), and through editing and cinematography, there are many options in how the or she is represented.

Another way of eliciting the spectator's sympathy in narrative is by putting the character in a vulnerable position. I have explained that a feeling of pity is not synonymous to sympathy. But Plantinga is right in concluding that pity is usually accompanied by sympathy. When someone is in need, in danger, hurt or treated unfairly, the spectator's pity is invoked and he feels concern and care for that person, he has sympathy. In film, seeing a character in a situation like that can thus be a reason for a spectator to feel sympathy and/or maintain his allegiance.

In this section, with help from Hoffner and Cantor and Smith, I have outlined various from which a spectator can draw reasons to sympathize with a character. In essence, behaviour that is social towards others is considered as ‘right’ behaviour. Especially behaviour towards the physically or mentally weaker, such as children, elderly and pets, are a flagpole for spectators to evaluate a character as moral or immoral. Supporting characters can also influence this evaluation: they might be more immoral, making the protagonist relatively moral; or they might be more sympathetic than the protagonist and (partially) trust him nevertheless, making him look more sympathetic too. And finally, seeing a character in need or being unfairly treated can also be a reason for a spectator to sympathize with him or her. Depending on the mechanisms explained in the previous chapter, these factors can be reasons for a spectator to feel sympathy for a character and, as a consequence, develop and/or maintain allegiance.

Neat haircut: reasons in film style

Besides a character's behaviour, and the way the narrative portrays this, the film style can also provide reasons for a spectator to sympathize with a character. In this section, reasons the spectators can find in mise-en-scène, cinematography and editing to feel for a character are outlined. First of all, often, when we get to know a character, his physical characteristics, which are part of the mise-en-scène, are the first thing we can easily evaluate. Hoffner and Cantor wrote about a broad selection of observable features of a character, which they took from numerous empirical studies. Some of these focussed on interpersonal impressions, rather than impressions of media or fictional characters (1991, 64). Naturally, there are important differences between these two, yet the results are useful because they point towards the wide range of observable features that can influence the spectator's evaluation of a character. Physically attractive people, for example, are perceived to have more socially desirable personality traits than unattractive ones (66). Body types also raise a lot of associations in
people: muscular people are perceived as strong, and more likely to be leaders, whereas overweight people are perceived as lazier yet more warm-hearted (67). The manner of dress can tell a spectator something about the character’s occupation (when wearing a uniform) and social status (rich/poor). Yet also more implicit associations with clothing were found: glasses were perceived as connoting intelligence and heroes are usually clean and well-dressed (68). Next to all these parts of the physical appearance, Hoffner and Cantor write about speech characteristics, which are also part of the character’s body. Pitch variation, volume and accent, but also linguistic variables such as sentence length, use of polite words and phrases and grammatical errors, all have an effect on the listener and thus viewer (68-69).

The actor who plays the character can also influence the spectator’s allegiance in other ways than his appearance or voice, namely because of the background knowledge the spectator has of him or her. When the actor is a star with charisma, it can make us have a more positive evaluation of the character he plays. This was even more so the case in the classical film, where actors were more often typecasted. Thus, a certain actor immediately activated schemata in the spectator, of a character with a certain set of character traits (Smith 1995, 119). Nowadays, some actors are still typecast but usually actors have a less clearly set out set of character traits than before. The image a spectator has of an actor can be caused by the previous roles he has played, but also by a positive image of his real life person.

A film’s cinematography and editing have a lot of control on how things are shown and can thus also aid in providing reasons for spectators. Gaut writes for example that even though the point-of-view shot is said to help understand a character from the inside, or aligns the spectator with them in Smith’s words, a shot of the reaction of that character says a lot more about what the character is going through (1999, 210). Yet, as Carroll argues, the POV-shot and the character reaction shot (or what Branigan calls the “point/glance” shot and the “point/object” shot (1984, 103)) intensify each other. The reaction shot shows the spectator roughly which emotion the character is feeling. When the POV shot follows, we look for whatever in that shot was the cause for that emotion. At the same time, the POV shot that shows the object or cause of emotion, deepens and clarifies the emotion we saw on the character’s face (Carroll, 135-136). Another way cinematography can influence the spectator’s sympathy is by the position of the camera: when a character is always from below, he probably looks more authoritarian than sympathetic for example.

In this chapter I concluded Part One by describing elements from which spectators can draw reasons to sympathize and/or maintain their allegiance. First I described some narrative elements, such as a character’s behaviour towards supporting characters and his other attractive traits. I have also described a selection of reasons in film style for a character to
sympathize with a character. The physical characteristics of a character, such as his clothes, posture and hair, as well as his voice and manner of speech, already give the spectator a lot of cues for evaluation. Part of this is determined by the choice for the actor/actress who will play the character. This actor also brings along previous films and sometimes even a personal attitude the spectator might have background knowledge of, influencing the spectator’s allegiances. In summary, reasons for a spectator to sympathize with a character can be found both in the film’s narrative, and in the film’s style.
PART TWO

4. SCORSESE AND THE MORALLY QUESTIONABLE

The films I will analyse in this second part of the thesis are chosen from Martin Scorsese's oeuvre. His films are usually set in New York, often have characters of Italian origin, and often contain scenes with long steadicam or tracking takes. Yet most importantly, the protagonists have more often than not been involved in killing men, hitting women, stealing money and/or cheating on their girlfriends or wives. Apart from their morally questionable behaviour, Scorsese's protagonists also often show character traits that contrast with the ones of the traditional hero protagonist: they can be self-destructive like Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull* (1980), mentally disturbed like Teddy Daniels in *Shutter Island* (2010) or socially awkward and obsessive like Rupert Pupkin in *King of Comedy* (1983). Both the protagonists' 'wrong' actions and their questionable personalities make Scorsese's films a suitable object to analyse to understand how a film can guide a spectator's allegiance towards a morally questionable main character. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the films chosen from Scorsese's oeuvre for this thesis are *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Goodfellas* (1990) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). These films are different from each other in several ways, composing a diverse corpus in which I seek to discover the various ways a film can elicit sympathies and manage allegiances. First I will argue why the protagonists of these three films can be considered immoral or, at the least, morally questionable. Then I will explain how I will proceed in the analysis of the three films.

The first film to be analysed in Chapter Five, *Taxi Driver*, revolves around an antihero who is morally questionable and can even be considered amoral: Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) judges everyone by some kind of moral standards, yet they are his moral standards. These are slightly different from the ones one can assume as being accepted by most people. He is an antihero because he has various character traits that oppose the ones of a hero: he is socially incapable, he seems to be a racist and he is a loner. Though often called a classic antihero by popular culture, Bickle is also recognized as a "bad guy". AFI's list of *100 Greatest Villains and*
Heroes, for example, places him 30th on the villains list\(^3\) ("AFI’s 100 Years" 2003). This ambiguity further establishes Bickle’s status as an antihero.

Bickle proves to be morally flawed multiple times. He plans to kill president candidate Charles Palantine and is shown buying weapons and working out in preparation. By most moral standards, killing, and thus wanting to and preparing for killing someone, is wrong. It can be redeemed if the killer has a justifiable reason to do so, yet Bickle does not: he does not have a personal objection against Palantine, nor does he disapprove of his political position. Another moment in which Bickle proves to be amoral, is when he ‘happens’ to kill a man when he is getting groceries and the shop is being robbed. Indeed, Bickle shows little worry or remorse for shooting the robber, possibly because the man is black, as he is a racist too. On the day of the planned attack on Palantine, Bickle is recognized by one of Palantine’s security guards and runs. Instead, he goes to a brothel of a recently befriended teenage prostitute and shoots her pimp and two other men who were at the scene. He survives and is celebrated as a hero, yet the spectator knows that if it were not for the security guard who recognized him at the Palantine event, Bickle might have killed Palantine instead. So his actions only turned out to be morally redeemable by chance, but his plans and motivations were morally wrong.

Henry Hill (Ray Liotta), the main character in Goodfellas, which will be analysed in Chapter Six, is a gangster, which almost automatically comes with questionable morality. As a kid, he already did small jobs for the gangsters in his neighbourhood. Thus, Hill grows up to be a respected member of the gangster family. Though the killing is always carried out by other members of the gang and not Hill himself, he helps bury the bodies, and does not speak of the murders to other people, protecting the killers. He is involved in a lot of crimes, such as blowing up places, carrying out heists and dealing drugs. He is also unfaithful to his wife, with more than one woman. Those are all harmful acts that can thus be considered immoral and undesirable.

Contrary to Bickle and Hill, the protagonist of The Wolf of Wall Street, Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio), does not kill or beat people up. Yet he is definitely an immoral person. With his own stock broking company he gains a lot of money over the backs of both the rich and the poor. He cheats on his wife with prostitutes, takes drugs daily, lies to everyone, tries to bribe the FBI agent who is after him and then turns his friends in when he gets caught in the end. Belfort may not kill anyone, but he does everything else considered immoral, and he does not seem to be worried doing it. Moreover, he hurts a lot more people with his actions than Bickle and Hill did. And, when it comes to black and grey morality, it seems like Belfort is the black:

\(^3\) AFI defines a villain as a character whose “wickedness of mind, selfishness of character and will to power are sometimes masked by beauty and nobility”. Furthermore, the villain is ultimately tragic ("AFI’S 100 Years“ 2003).
there is not another, 'worse' character who makes him look less immoral. Also, his motivations make him less redeemable than those of Bickle and Hill: his only goal seems to become rich.

_The Wolf of Wall Street_ has been the cause of a lot of controversy, because the film mostly revolves around good things that come from his immoral behaviour⁴. As one annoyed spectator puts it: “500 pairs of tits, 1000 lines of coke, countless pills. Three hours of watching a terrible prick” (Hanzo53 2014). At the same time, others sympathized with the character and praised DiCaprio’s performance. As one reviewer wrote: “I rooted for him during the entire movie, even though he is depicted as the biggest scoundrel ever” (Simões 2014). This shows the film is a perfect argument for how spectators play an active role in watching a film and finding reasons to feel sympathy or antipathy for the protagonist. It seems like Scorsese hit the thin line here, between giving just enough reasons to sympathize with Belfort and not giving enough reasons to sympathize with him. This makes _The Wolf of Wall Street_ an all the more interesting object to analyse.

Revolving around a morally questionable antihero, gangster and Wall Street criminal, the three films offer three different kinds of problematic moralities. Furthermore, the protagonists do not only have differing moral stances, but their personalities also contain different character traits that influence the spectator’s sympathies for them. Where Bickle is socially lacking, Hill has seemingly effortless social interaction with everyone in his gangster world. Belfort, in his turn, is smooth too, but is also arrogant and loud. In conclusion, because of the different kinds of morality the protagonists present, their different sets of character traits and the differing environments the narratives are set in, the films will also have different ways of presenting the character’s questionable moralities to elicit sympathies and allegiance in the spectator. Thus they can help to understand how a film directs a spectator’s sympathies to create and maintain allegiance with a morally questionable protagonist.

To distinguish the ways the three films guide the spectator’s sympathies and allegiance, I will first look at the films’ opening sequence, that often but not always immediately contains the exposition of the character. The opening sequence of a film is important for the spectator’s recognition of a character, with possible first sympathies and antipathies for a character, but also for the spectator’s recognition of story schemata. After analysing what first sympathies and antipathies are elicited for the character in the opening sequence, I will research what reasons the rest of the film provides for maintaining or challenging the initial valence. More importantly, I will analyse how the films present these reasons. I will analyse the film text and not pay attention to the fact that a spectator might already have little or a lot of information about the

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⁴TV Tropes interestingly calls this the “Do Not Do This Cool Thing” Trope: when a film means to warn the spectator about something he should avoid, yet makes that thing look so appealing that the message is undermined (“Do Not Do This Cool Thing” 2014).
narrative of the character. I do take into account some background experience the spectator brings, such as schemata and background information (for example about New York City or about Wall Street bankers), because they are influences a film maker plays with and thus anticipates on when making the film. Furthermore, I will compare the three films with each other in the course of the analyses. Some strategies might be employed by multiple films while some might only be used by one.
5. **Taxi Driver:** redeeming pity

and reassurance

This chapter analyses how *Taxi Driver* creates allegiance for protagonist Bickle\(^5\), despite the morally questionable nature of his personality and actions. I will argue how the allegiance created for Bickle is founded mostly in the opening scene. Then, combined with the sympathy that is elicited from the spectator when he/she feel pity for his troubled mind and loneliness, and the factors that redeem Bickle’s most morally questionable behaviour, this allegiance is maintained. In the first section I will analyse how a first valence is created, to establish if the spectator is given a sympathetic start to keep looking for reasons to further form and maintain an allegiance. In the second section of this chapter, the portrayal of Bickle as a lonely, socially troubled man will be analysed as a way of eliciting pity from the spectator and thus providing reasons to maintain an allegiance. The third section argues how the moments in which the questionability of Bickle’s morality most evidently protrudes, and thus challenges the spectator’s allegiance, are compensated by factors for redeemability that reassure the spectator’s allegiance.

**Opening scene: recognizing troubled insomniac Travis Bickle**

In the opening scene of *Taxi Driver* the spectator is introduced to Bickle. Though, as I have argued, he will later on prove to be morally questionable, there are not many hints towards this at first. Rather, the spectator is given reasons to have a first sympathetic valence of the character, both in narration (dialogue), and film style (physical appearance, cinematography, editing). Yet, the spectator is also being warned for Bickle’s weaker characteristics both in personality and morality.

In film style, the opening scene provides cues about the personality of Bickle, both for sympathy and as a warning for his troubled mind. After the title sequence, Bickle (whose name is shown on the back of his army jacket) enters an office with a man behind a desk. His physical appearance already gives a few cues about the personality of the character. As Bickle enters and

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\(^5\) From here on, the protagonists of the three films will be referred to by their last name only. Supporting characters, of whom their last name is often unknown, will be referred to by their first name. The actors’ names will only be mentioned when I speak about the actor itself instead of the character.
turns to face the office man, the camera swerves so the character’s face is revealed, while the music leaps to a short climax. The dark leap of music sounds dangerous, and it foreshadows the dangerous, troubled side of Bickle: his eyes have a rather cold, hard look, with dark circles around them, and his eyebrows are in a frown. Then, the music fades and the man behind the desk asks why he wants the job. Bickle is shown again, this time in a medium shot from a lower standpoint and the spectator is given time to look at him and can find reasons to feel a little sympathy for him. The eyes have softened up and now he just looks down expectantly, and tired. He is rather young and actually reasonably handsome, with dark eyes and short, dark hair. He wears a lumberjack shirt and the before mentioned army jacket with his name on the back. He says he can’t sleep at night, to which the officer replies: “You know there’s porno theatres for that.” A small smile flushes over Bickle’s face when he says he has already tried that. The smile makes his face much more sympathetic. In his appearance, Bickle shows little reason to get antipathetic feelings. The only film style cue for a non-sympathetic side is in the combination of the quickly swerving camera and the accompanying dark sounding musical leap. His regular look, his reasonably handsome face and his grin could be reasons to sympathize with Bickle.

The first dialogue functions as character exposition and provides the spectator with more reasons to sympathize with Bickle. First of all, his voice is not really low or high pitched, and he speaks calmly and rather quietly. He is easily understandable yet he kind of drags his words from the one into the other, sometimes not enunciating clearly. This corresponds with his tired look, yet also gives him a laid back feel. Furthermore, it gives the impression he is not easily intimidated. The content of the dialogue also gives reasons to feel for and with Bickle. When the officer asks him if he is prepared to drive around the south Bronx and Harlem, the tougher neighbourhoods in New York City, Bickle answers: “Anytime, anywhere.” Bickle shows he is not easily intimidated and prepared to work hard, which are considered good qualities in a person. The spectator also learns Bickle was recently honourably discharged from the marines, which tells him he was a good soldier. The spectator’s background knowledge provides him with all kinds of abilities Bickle must therefore have: in addition to probably (as his comment on insomnia and his tired look make clear) traumatised, he must be disciplined, brave, hardworking, strong, in good physical condition, able to follow orders, work in a team. These are all rather positive character traits to have. Also, Bickle remarks his driving record is clean, and after a pause he adds with a daring grin: “just like my conscience.” Again, his smile makes his face look very sympathetic, boyish (Figure 2). Also, again, just like when he said he tried porno theatres, he shows that he has a sense of humour. Moreover, he makes jokes about himself, which can be considered an attractive character trait.
Bickle's conversation partner is not that amused though and this hints towards Bickle's trouble with fitting in, which exposes a vulnerable side that addresses the spectator's compassion. This is aided by the cinematography. The man has been cynical from the beginning of the conversation, testing Bickle and looking for reasons not to hire him. When Bickle jokes about his conscience, the man fires up, assuring him that he has enough trouble with "guys like him". When Bickle apologizes for his joke, the camera moves up and closer, resulting in a medium close-up at eye level. Though the spectator can see closer to Bickle's face, and is thus invited to feel closer to him, as if he gets to see something that the officer does not, Bickle's eyes are now hardly visible to the spectator, because he is looking down at the man. It makes him more vulnerable (Figure 3), especially because he must admit he has not had much education: "Here and there, you know." The man looks up from his paper, upon which Bickle avoids his look and looks down at the desk instead. Apparently, Bickle has had an unstable past and he appears vulnerable.

With Bickle's disarming smile, touching vulnerability, willingness to work hard and time served with the marines, aided by cinematography, the spectator is given reasons to sympathize with Bickle. Yet, there has also been hinted towards his questionable morality and social shortcomings: by the dangerous music when he was first shown on screen, by the office man's initial response to him and the objection one might have for porn theatres. The foundation for a mildly sympathetic allegiance is created at the recognition, and the spectator has few reasons to look for reasons to feel antipathy for Bickle from here on. Yet, the character exposition is not entirely completed. The allegiance will only be elicited after more (visual or narrative) information is provided in which the spectator can find reasons for sympathy.

**God's lonely man: sympathy for Bickle's disturbed mind and vulnerability**

As the film develops, Bickle is increasingly presented as a troubled mind with social shortcomings. At first, as I will explain, this is not presented as a reason to sympathize with him, and, if anything, rather challenges the first valence. Later on, his social incapability and troubled,
lonely mind often result in a vulnerability that elicits pity. Thus, instead of judging his 'weirdness', the spectator is made to feel sorry for Bickle in these moments. As I wrote in the first section of Chapter One, pity often leads to sympathetic feelings, so Bickle's vulnerability is a reason for the spectator to sympathize with him and shape and maintain an allegiance. Both Bransford and Shafer and Raney have argued for redeemability (as a moral disengagement cue in Shafer and Raney) as a way of overshadowing or justifying the immoral or unlikable. Bickle's misconception of social code, loneliness and troubled mind are factors that can redeem his dangerous, unreliable and morally questionable side.

Bickle's disturbed mind and ambiguous morality are visible in almost every scene. In some moments, most notably the first times it becomes apparent, this does not necessarily result in vulnerability, and thus does not yet address the spectator's compassion. Bickle's messy house, for example, which is seen right after the opening scene, shows that his lifestyle diverts from what is usually considered as normal. The paint is peeling off the walls, the floor is covered in trash and the door is blocked from the inside by a long hook. Some of Bickle's first heard diary entries establish Bickle's abnormal stance on things. When he drives in his taxi, he says in voice-over: "All the animals come out at night. Whores, skunk-pusses, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies." In a point of view shot, we see these people on the sidewalk whom Bickle considers "sick, venal". He also speaks of "spooks", which determines he is racist. Bickle does take all of them everywhere in his taxi though, as it "does make no difference" to him. Would that not make him corrupt too? Yet he judges these people and says one day a real rain will wash them off the streets. As I said, his house and his hateful diary entries are not exactly reasons to sympathize with Bickle. If anything, they provide challenges to the first valence the spectator has from the opening scene, though not very strong ones.

In most of the moments Bickle's troubled mind, loneliness and social incapability are portrayed, these make him look vulnerable and elicit the spectator's sympathy. The voice-over is one way that establishes this: it gives the spectator subjective access to the protagonist and thus brings him closer to Bickle. Besides the moments in which Bickle's voice-over merely portrays his hatred of the people of the New York City night life, there are many moments in which his voice-over gives the spectator reason to sympathize with him by making his loneliness more tangible. When he says: "I am God's lonely man," he does this in a very obvious way. At another moment he says: "I believe that someone should become a person like other people." Apparently he does not consider himself a person, yet thinks he should be one; a vulnerable diary entry that makes him a pitiful character and appeals to the spectator's sympathies. The voice-over also brings out Bickle's trouble with social interaction and with fitting into the world in another way: by the contrast between how Bickle expresses himself in his diary and how Bickle expresses himself towards other characters. In the voice-over in which
he reads parts of his diary, he formulates carefully and eloquently, whereas in his real life conversations, he does not. In the dialogue with Palantine, for example, Bickle speaks and formulates repetitively and impulsively, he asks unusual questions and everything he says makes little sense. It is an illustration of the difference between who Bickle tries to be ("a person like other people"), and the inability to be this person, again making him pitiful.

Bickle's interaction with the supporting characters most obviously portrays his social shortcomings. When he visits an XX rated porn theatre and flirts with the girl behind the counter, it is the first really obvious moment his social inability and his not fitting in becomes evident. After all, flirting with a female employee while visiting a porn theatre is not common social code. And indeed, the girl rejects him entirely, barely even making eye contact to acknowledge him. He awkwardly keeps trying, telling her “he's not going to do anything”, but the girl calls the manager. In this scene, Bickle's social shortcomings make him look more vulnerable: he is just trying to be nice, but she does not even look him in the eyes. Though the reaction of the girl is not really a surprise, she is unnecessarily unkind to him. This can be a reason for the spectator to feel pity for Bickle, as he can see that he is trying and yet gets treated unkindly. Other supporting characters that bring out Bickle's social incapability are his co-workers. The communication with them is often distorted and one-sided; they have to repeat themselves and Bickle's answer often does not match the question. In the frame, Bickle is also separated from them: he sits at the far end of the table, while his co-workers sit together on the other side. The window behind them also has a big black line that separates him from the rest (Figure 4). And when they are talking, shown through shot reverse shots, Bickle is isolated in a frame, while the others are put together. The film style thus further emphasizes his social incapability.
Of all supporting characters, Betsy brings out Bickle's social awkwardness and resulting vulnerability most evidently. First, Betsy's acceptance of Bickle's invitation to drink coffee makes Bickle look more socially capable and sympathetic. As I explained in the first section of Chapter Three, a sympathetic supporting character can improve the spectator's sympathy for the protagonist. Betsy is portrayed as sympathetic: the playful conversations with her co-worker show her quick wit, she resembles an angel with her blonde hair and white dress and her knowledge about and interest in Palantine's political program show she is intelligent. When Bickle first approaches her, her sweetness 'rubs off' (Smith 1999, 226) on Bickle. Indeed, while Bickle's approach again showed his social awkwardness (he told her she looks unhappy and lonely), this is easily glossed over by the spectator because Betsy, who seems sympathetic, is visibly pleased with his attempt at flirting. This 'outweighing' of Betsy's kindness over Bickle's awkwardness is continued throughout their coffee date: Bickle creepily tells her he feels a connection between them, yet Betsy replies she feels it too. This changes when Bickle takes Betsy to a porn theatre on their first real date (again showing his misconception of common social code). She is shocked and embarrassed and wants nothing to do with him anymore, despite his phone calls. So at first, Betsy's kindness overshadowed Bickle's awkwardness. Yet this makes her attitude after the turning point all the more painful. And Bickle becomes all the more pitiful.

Furthermore, Bickle's pain from Betsy's attitude after the failed date is emphasized by the cinematography. He calls Betsy from a pay phone in a hallway. Bickle is only seen from the back and the spectator cannot see his face. Bickle does several attempts to convince Betsy to meet up with him again. The camera then moves away to the empty hallway, leaving Bickle off screen while his voice is still audible, as if the conversation is too painful to show on screen. It emphasizes Bickle's loneliness and pain, once again eliciting the spectator's pity and thus sympathy.

After the first predominantly sympathetic first valence that is created in the opening scene, as I have described in the previous section, the film mostly elicits sympathy and further shapes and maintains the spectator's allegiance by bringing out Bickle's social incapability and wish to "become a person". In other words, Bickle is presented as a vulnerable, willing but incapable man who elicits the spectator's pity and thus sympathy.

**Redeemability as reassurance after challenges for the allegiance**

Although Bickle's 'weirdness' is often accompanied by vulnerability, which elicits the spectator's sympathy, there are moments in which his disturbed mind might become too disturbing to have the spectator still maintain his allegiance. In this section, I will analyse how *Taxi Driver* presents the two acts that should indeed be challenges for the spectator's allegiance by their violation of
what can be assumed to be normally accepted moral standards: the preparations for an attack on Palantine and the seemingly easy killing of the shop robber. I will then argue that the spectator is urged to quickly redeem these acts, on the one hand by enclosing them with more moments of protruding vulnerability that redeem his actions and on the other hand by outweighing them with a moment that shows him in his most morally correct and sociable self, namely when he befriends Iris. Thus, the spectator’s allegiance is reassured after moments of doubt.

If the hints for Bickle’s disturbed mind that did not make him look vulnerable (the messy house and the hateful voice-over) described in the previous section were challenges for the spectator’s allegiance, then the moment Bickle starts to prepare for violence by buying guns and working out is definitely a challenge. And it is also a more morally charged one: whereas judging prostitutes because of their job is morally questionable, buying guns with the intention to use them is more obviously morally proscribed because he actually intends to harm someone. The preparations for an attack are rather disturbing. He tries several guns with a cold yet business-like expression on his face and ends up buying four: more than he needs to just protect himself when threatened. He practices shooting the guns, tapes a knife to his boot and fabricates a sliding device for his arm with which he can hide yet quickly pull his smallest gun. These preparations are no longer redeemable by the dangerous night life of New York City and could therefore form a challenge for the spectator’s allegiance.

Though the preparations indeed are disturbing, other reasons are provided for the spectator to maintain their allegiance. In a famous scene, Bickle is seen practicing pulling out his weapons, all of them attached to a different part of his body. He does not really look dangerous though, but more like a child who wants to be cool. First of all, he looks in the mirror while he practices, to see how he looks handling the guns. Second, he is not wearing a shirt, making him look more harmless. And then, he actually acts out a scene, delivering his famous “are you talking to me”-monologue. Here, he practices his toughness and intimidation, yet as a result he looks boyish. This boyish look makes the immoral act seem less dangerous and immoral and thus makes it easier for the spectator to maintain his allegiance.

Another important moment in the film that challenges the spectator’s allegiance in a more obvious way, is when Bickle buys some groceries in a night time supermarket. The shopkeeper behind the counter greets him by his first name: they know each other. Then, a black man with a gun threatens the shopkeeper and Bickle pulls out his gun and shoots the robber. One can argue for violence when threatened, but Bickle’s shooting of the robber is an impulsive overreaction and is morally questionable, especially because the spectator knows Bickle has a fear and/or hatred for black people. Furthermore, Bickle shows that he is not afraid
to use the guns. Even though he may have looked silly practicing in front of the mirror at home, he is serious.

Yet, this scene, in which Bickle’s questionable morality becomes visible, also offers redeemable factors. It illustrates the dangers and threats Bickle goes through with his night-time job in the more unsafe neighbourhoods of New York. This is further established by the shopkeeper’s response: he tells Bickle to go, takes the gun Bickle did not have a license for and promises to take care of it. He was earlier presented as sympathetic, and thus by taking Bickle’s side, in a way, he emphasizes the fact that they are victims: it is not only Bickle’s response take the law into his own hands, the man does the same thing, to survive in the night life of New York City.

Furthermore, the shooting scene, and also more elaborately scene the preparation sequence, are closely followed by scenes in which Bickle seems more vulnerable than ever, appealing to the spectator’s sympathies again. He watches a dance show on television with happy couples, clearly disturbed, which illustrates that he wants to be with someone too. When he drives by another one of Palantine’s public talks, in which the candidate speaks of ‘we’ in every sentence, Bickle is isolated from the crowds (that are addressed by Palantine’s ‘we’) in his car and even sent away by a police officer. In another scene that closely follows the shooting and offers redemption by emphasizing Bickle’s vulnerability, the voice-over reads the text Bickle wrote in a card to his parents. He lies to them and writes about the life he wishes he had: working for the government, making a lot of money and dating Betsy. When he ends with the words “love, Travis”, the card is shown, with the text “To a couple of good scouts” in goofy letters printed on the inside. The cheerful message and the goofy drawing of a man and woman in scouts outfits contrasts with the Bickle that is shown through earlier described subjective access and film style emphases. It again makes him vulnerable and pitiful, once again appealing to the spectator’s sympathy and redeeming his rather ‘easy’ shooting of the robber.

If Bickle’s vulnerability was not yet enough reassurance for the spectator’s allegiance after his two morally questionable acts (that themselves were already presented with redeemable reasons, namely Bickle’s status as a vulnerable victim), the scene with teenage prostitute Iris will. Bickle had once seen her before in his taxi yet did nothing when her pimp pulled her out of his car. Now, he looks her up and then convinces her to have breakfast with him, to try and convince her to stop prostituting herself. Not only is this the part of the story in which Bickle most evidently acts according to moral standards that one can assume to be commonly accepted, but he is also socially more capable than before. Both the equipping for violent acts that are more and more clearly directed towards Palantine, and the moral objections one might have for shooting the robber, are redeemed by his first act that is actually motivated by common moral standards: Bickle finds Iris to help her out of the prostitution. This
is the first morally proscribed act of Bickle and thus has a big impact. It reconfirms the spectator’s allegiance and tells him that Bickle must essentially be good indeed. It thus overshadows the questionability of his pro-violent behaviour.

In summary, the opening scene of *Taxi Driver* provides the foundation for a predominantly sympathetic allegiance for Bickle with the information provided by the dialogue and some small cues to be found in his physical appearance. The leap in music and the inhospitable attitude of the man in the office are small hints in the opening scene towards Bickle’s troubled mind and social incapability. In the second section I explained how these weaker character traits of Bickle protrude more and more as the film develops. Often though, they are presented in such a way that Bickle is portrayed as a vulnerable man, thus appealing to the spectator’s compassion and eliciting sympathy. Thus, allegiance with Bickle is created and maintained. This allegiance gets challenged, as I wrote in the final section of this chapter, when Bickle is seen preparing for an attack on Palantine and later kills a robber. These actions can be considered morally ‘wrong’ or questionable at the least, but are each redeemed, both by making him look vulnerable, pitiful and harmless, and by reassuring the allegiance after these scenes by showing a morally good deed: visiting Iris, while earlier in the film he did not act to save her.
6. **GOODFELLAS: HENRY HILL AS THE CHILD OF THE GANGSTER FAMILY**

*Goodfellas* is about a 'family' of gangsters who steal, kill and cheat on their wives, yet at the same time put their friends and family above anything (until a member violates their codes, that is). Hill, the protagonist, is presented as the 'child' of this family and thus elicits the spectator's allegiance. First, in the character exposition, when Hill actually *is* a child, allegiance is elicited from the spectator by his apparent innocence and relatable desire, as I will describe in the first section. Then, in the second section of this chapter, I will explain how this allegiance is then maintained by the fact that the rest of the film still feeds to this image of Hill as the 'innocent' of the family. He is never shown doing violent things and the other gangsters both make him look soft with their toughness and respectable with their care.

**Character exposition: recognizing mischievous Henry Hill**

In this section I will focus on the character exposition, which I take to be from the opening scene until the moment the narrative jumps a few years back and Hill is portrayed by an older actor (again, as this actor was also seen in the opening scene). It is here that the spectator learns the necessary information about the character: his motivation for becoming a gangster, his personality, his background and his entrance to the mob. It is in this exposition that allegiance for Hill is created. Already in the short opening scene, in which violence is almost immediately present, Hill is the grey against the black. Then, when his voice-over takes the spectator back in time, the innocent and boyish charm of the young Hill, both represented by narrative and film style, and the respect the boy gains from the impressive gangsters, elicit the spectator’s sympathy and thus allegiance.

The first scene of *Goodfellas* immediately establishes Hill’s relatively preferable morality. Three men are in a car at night when there is a thumping sound. The sound turns out to come from the trunk, in which a blood covered, supposedly killed man turns out to be alive. One of the men jabs the body with a big knife and another one fires a few shots at him with his gun. The driver, who merely stood there, silently looks up, and the frame freezes: this is the protagonist, Hill. In the first scene of the film he is presented as a gangster, yet he already is the preferable one to the more violent other two.
When the narrative jumps back in time, the first thing the spectator can easily evaluate is the boy's physical appearance, which right away gives reasons to sympathize with him. As briefly mentioned in the first section of Chapter Three, children, as more innocent and weaker human beings, elicit people's sympathies much easier. And Hill is aided by his innocent appearance, largely determined by his light, bright green eyes, which are the first thing the spectator gets to see after the jump in time. His face is appealing too, smooth-skinned, almost baby-faced, very symmetrical and with a disarming smile. He looks clean too, and his hair is neatly cut (Figure 5). When he moves, he runs happily, enthusiastically, bent forward and moving his arms in a boyish manner. As he himself illustrates: "I was the happiest kid in the world." In physical appearance, Hill already has many advantages to elicit the spectator's sympathy.

The exposition also provides subjective access to Hill, and thus provides the spectator with another reason to sympathize with Hill, namely his motivation for becoming a gangster, which he wanted since "as far back as he can remember". It is one that many spectators might be able to relate to. It is not necessarily because the gangsters can do anything they want, how pretty and expensive their clothes and cars are or how dangerous the gangsters can be, though these contribute to the attraction too (as becomes clear when shots of Hill watching the gangsters are intercut with POV close-ups of jewellery and hands with stacked dollar bills). Hill’s motivation is mostly the simple matter of wanting to be part of something, and to be somebody "in a neighbourhood of nobodies". And he does get accepted by the gang; they let him carry out small jobs. When he comes out of the courtroom after his first hearing, the men are all there and congratulate him for not telling on them. No wonder Hill says in voice-over: "It was there that I knew that I belonged." It is the same wish Taxi Driver's Bickle has; to belong. This wish elicits sympathies for both of them. Bickle does not belong, which addresses the spectator's sympathies because he seems to be in need, whereas Hill does belong, eliciting the spectator's sympathies because so many people seem to like him.
The overall feel of the exposition is happy too, which can appeal to the spectator’s mood and sympathy, because it glosses over immorality that one might expect to be a dark, night time thing. Almost everything takes place during daylight and on sunny days, resulting in saturated colours. The camera is constantly moving smoothly and steadily, emphasizing the fortune taking place in Hill’s life. The music that accompanies the images and Hill’s voice-over is cheerful, laid back at times. Three of the songs are from Italian singers, contributing to the Italian family feeling the men carry out. Furthermore, the music emphasizes the nostalgic feel the film presents. Of course, Henry Hill is nostalgic for this period of his life, as he was the “happiest kid in the world”, yet the nostalgia also appeals to the spectator, and not only to the ones that lived during the 50s and 60s. Furthermore, the music diminishes the immorality of the mob’s actions.

So in the opening sequence, in which Henry’s character exposition takes place, the spectator is given abundant reasons to sympathize with him: the boy looks innocent, moves in a boyish innocent way, has a relatable wish (namely to simply belong) and he has also won the respect and sympathies of a group of gangsters. Also, the film’s style highlights the fortune of these days: the colours are bright, the music is happy and the camera movements are smooth, appealing to the spectator’s mood and possibly sympathy for this delightful boy and group. Furthermore, it glosses over immorality, both with a happy and a comedy effect.

Further representation: Henry Hill as the grey amongst the black

The representation of Hill as an innocent boy is rather continued throughout the rest of the film. First of all, Hill is hardly shown actually doing immoral things, which makes them easier to overlook for the spectator. Second, Hill’s character benefits from the other ‘family’ members in two ways. Namely, the others come off as more immoral than Hill, because they are continuously more violent and impulsive, pushing Hill in a more favourable light for the spectator. Yet also, and quite contrasting to the previous point, the other mobsters create a warm ‘family above all’ feeling that Hill is included in, thus making him seem more sympathetic.

During the whole film, Hill does not kill. For a regular person, that is not exceptionally noteworthy, but for the mob Hill belongs too, it is quite extraordinary. He rarely does anything violent at all. Though there are many violent scenes, it is always someone else who actually carries out the acts. There is a chance Hill is violent off screen. The narrator, after all, is Hill himself (and, at times, Karen, but she probably does not know whether he killed anyone), and he may not be a trustworthy one. Yet, if they are not shown nor talked about, there is no impact of any violent acts on the spectator either. Same goes for the victims of the heists, thefts and blow-ups. The spectator is only shown the resulting money or goods, or the preparations, but never the damage or consequences. There is one moment in which Hill is shown being violent, but then he has a reason that justifies it: he beats up Karen’s neighbour because he sexually
harassed her. The hiding of or smuggling with immoral acts Hill is carrying out, makes it easier for the spectator to maintain his allegiance with him.

The fact that the supporting characters are elaborately shown carrying out violent acts, makes Hill look less immoral. The other mobsters provide the 'black' morality against which Hill seems 'grey'. Jimmy, for example, is presented as a really tough guy ("who rooted for the bad guys"). He is introduced as someone who was already arrested by the age of eleven, does not mind killing guys, "loves to steal", and is also a smooth-talking briber. Tommy, another one of the most prominent supporting characters from the mob, is exceptionally violent and dangerously impulsive. He shoots a 'made man' after he keeps making fun of him and randomly shoots a teenager in his foot when he agitates Tommy. His unpredictability is emphasized in a famous after dinner scene in a restaurant. Tommy tells a funny story (another strong suit of his) and while everyone is laughing abundantly, Hill remarks "You're really funny". Tommy turns serious and asks: "What do you mean I'm funny?" Everyone in the rest of the restaurant turns quiet. Hill starts to stutter and someone else at the table comes at his defence, but Tommy is not amused. The strong tension from this turn of Tommy's mood shows that everyone knows and fears how unpredictable he is. He turns out to be joking, and everyone starts laughing loudly again. Yet when another man asks Tommy to pay the bill, he gets agitated again, and hits him over the head with a bottle. So Tommy is both very violent and very unpredictable, even more so than Jimmy, thus providing the ultimate immorality of the film's moral structure, against which Hill does not seem that bad.

Even though Jimmy and Tommy are portrayed as more violent and more immoral, they also contribute to a warm family feeling. This 'rub's off' on Hill too. Jimmy functions as a father figure to him. The first time Hill is introduced to him, Jimmy immediately puts some money in his shirt pocket, like a father who secretly slides his son some extra pocket money. Later, after Hill has been arrested for the first time, Jimmy is the only one in the courtroom while the rest of the mob is waiting outside. When they come out, Jimmy presents Henry to them, holding on to his shoulders, as if it were his son. He then gives him some "graduation" money and congratulates him on doing the right thing: not telling on his friends. The way Jimmy treats Henry elicits the spectator's sympathy for Jimmy and, in turn, Hill seems more sympathetic as well. Even Tommy's character seems harmless at times. The most notable moment this happens is when the three of them have dinner at his mother's. She is adorably old and sweet, and insists on cooking them dinner, even though they only come by to pick up a shovel (to bury a body). Tommy and Jimmy thus both fit in a graduated moral structure in which Hill is 'not that bad', and at the same time, when it comes to family, they have their morals right, rubbing off this sympathy on Hill.
Not only Jimmy and Tommy contribute to this family feeling: the whole mob creates this atmosphere in which Hill is accepted, making him more sympathetic. The gangsters spend their holidays together with their wives and children, they eat together and take care of each other’s children. And when Karen is upset with Hill because he has been cheating on her, Jimmy and Tommy come over to Hill to convince him to patch things up with her again. A scene in which the family atmosphere is emphasized by mise-en-scène and cinematography, is just after Hill has introduced everyone to the spectator in voice-over. Everyone is seated on a long table at the bar and having dinner. The table cloth, the napkins and the table lamps are red, which creates a warm atmosphere. There is the sound of chatter and knives and forks, some people have finished eating and are smoking, while others are still eating, motioning with their fork to support the story they are just telling. The table is exceptionally narrow so everyone has to sit really close to each other (Figure 6). A shot later, the camera is positioned as a person at the table too, so that the spectator gets to be a part of the group too. Thus, the spectator gets to experience the family atmosphere almost as if he were a member himself. It is understandable why Hill gets the feeling to belong. Again, this makes the mob look more sympathetic and less immoral, which rubs off on Hill.

Presenting a person as someone who desperately wants to be part of a group of people, can easily result in the creation of a dorky character who wants to belong but never really does. But by no means is Hill presented like that. First of all, already as a child, he is “treated like an adult” (as he says in voice-over) and as explained, the men treat him in a respectful manner. And this is continued in his later life. The scene in which he takes Karen to “Copacabana”, the bar where the group usually hangs out, is a good example of when this is visible. Filmed through a long steadicam shot, Hill and Karen enter the bar and walk past numerous members of the mob who all greet the couple. Finally, they get seated at a table which is prepared for them specially, right in front of the stage where a band is performing. This demonstrates that everyone knows Hill and that he gets a good treatment, which shows he is respected. Thus, he is not portrayed as a
man who desperately wants to belong, but as a respected man, which once again enhances the effect the ‘family feeling’ has on the spectator’s sympathy.

The film also softens the immorality of the mob by adding comedic notes. The family feeling sometimes has such an effect too. When Karen (in one of her voice-over moments) explains the couple is now part of the group and expected to spend all their time with them, the film shows pictures of the gangsters in situations that are not usually associated with dangerous gangsters, such as by a swimming pool on holiday with swim suits and flowery shirts. The music also adds comedic notes, for example when Frank Sinatra’s cheerful “Somewhere Beyond the Sea” is heard while Hill and some fellow gangsters are cooking an Italian diner in prison (in itself already meant for comedic effect). By adding such comedic notes, the film glosses over some of the immorality of the mob, enhancing the warm atmosphere of the group, which rubs off on Hill. Thus, the comedy effects make it easier for the spectator to overlook immoral businesses and to give attention to reasons to sympathize with the morally questionable Hill.

In summary, Hill is presented as someone who has wanted and worked to belong to the gangster family from when he was an innocent looking boy. Then, it was a happy and easy life: bright colours, smooth camera movements and cheerful music emphasized this. Hill is never shown carrying out actually dirty work, such as killing and beating people up. The only scene in which he is shown as being violent is when he has a redeemable reason: someone else has harassed his girlfriend. The other gang members both shed him into a less immoral light and rub their sympathetic family attitude off on him. In Taxi Driver the opposite was the case: Bickle did not belong to a group that made him look more sympathetic, neither were there hardly supporting characters that made him look more moral. So where Bickle mostly suffered from the supporting characters in the film, Hill’s character benefits from most of the other characters. Only his wife highlights some of the bad in him, but by staying with him, supporting him and loving him, she also gives the spectator reasons to maintain their allegiance with the main character.
7. The Wolf of Wall Street: Jordan Belfort Sweet-Talks Us into It

For the third and last analysis, I will look at the ‘worst’ protagonist. I have already argued how Belfort surpasses the other two when it comes to immoral behaviour. But where Bickle and Hill still had some moral principles (like “working hard is good”, “child prostitution is bad”, “family is important”), it is hard to find any moral principle in Belfort. Contrary to Taxi Driver and especially Goodfellas, the opening sequence of The Wolf of Wall Street does not provide the spectator with a considerable amount of reasons to sympathize with main character Belfort either, as I will describe in the first section of this chapter. Actual sympathy for Belfort is only elicited when Belfort takes the spectator back to when he first came to Wall Street, which will be described in the second section. There, much like in the youth sequence of Hill in Goodfellas, the film presents a likable and not necessarily morally flawed protagonist. Furthermore, this sequence is portrayed as more dominant than the opening one. According to Raney’s theory the spectator would look for reasons to support his antipathy for Belfort after an initial predominantly immoral judgment. Nevertheless I would like to argue that even though the character is unacceptably immoral in the lion’s share of the film, and already excessively portrayed to be so in the opening sequence, the spectator is encouraged to keep looking for reasons to like him.

Character exposition: comically recognizing slick banker Jordan Belfort

The opening sequence of The Wolf of Wall Street (which I take to be from the beginning of the film until the narrative jumps back in time) introduces the spectator to Belfort, providing him with reasons to not sympathize with him or even feel antipathy for him. At the same time though, comedy effects, aided by music and Belfort’s voice-over, diminish the immorality of his actions, and DiCaprio’s charisma and the sympathy the spectator might have for this actor stimulate the spectator to keep looking for reasons to sympathize with Belfort.

The film starts with a contrast that immediately emphasizes the ‘wildness’ of Belfort’s life and his questionable morality. It opens with a commercial for Belfort’s company Stratton
Oakmont, which markets this brokerage house as a stable, strong, integer and trustworthy company, with a neat office and calmly smiling, hard-working employees. Then, in comedic contrast, while the commercial music still continues, the film cuts to a barbaric party going on in a different looking office. Several suited men with their jackets off are wildly cheering for a dwarf tossing competition. When the frame freezes, and Belfort introduces himself in voice-over, the spectator is urged to ascribe the savagery to him, as he was presented as the leader of the group (or pack, as the men resemble wild animals). The contrast between the commercial and this office shows the deceiving attitude of the company. Yet, at the same time, the comedy effect of the strong contrast already softens the severity of this deception. As if the film says: “Sure, this is abominable, but look how funny it is!”

Apart from the fact he is the instigator of this immoral, wild behaviour, Belfort’s physical appearance provides reasons for antipathy as well, partly because of the spectator’s background knowledge. He is wearing a light blue shirt with a white collar (visualizing his white-collar crimes) and a tie. He is a young man with a clean, shaved face and hair that is held back by wax: a typical office man. The spectator’s background knowledge on Wall Street and bankers (both from news or real life experience and from previous Wall Street films⁶) provides him with expectations that Belfort is unreliable and greedy. Though he is dressed neatly and in expensive looking clothes, he behaves in a wild way. He holds up a handful of dollar bills and yells: “Twenty-five grant for the first cocksucker to nail a bull’s-eye,” only to smack the dollar bills on the floor, clap his hands menacingly, stick a fist up the air and yells “Let’s go!” with a pugnacious expression on his face, only to toss another dwarf at the target. The frame freezes on the ferocious expression on Belfort’s face (Figure 7), both emphasizing the wildness of his character and creating a comedy effect as Belfort’s voice-over introduces himself with this image. Belfort’s richness, loudness and ferociousness, combined with the spectator’s background knowledge of

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⁶ Wall Street has been the decor for many films that not exactly highlighted the good qualities in Wall Street employees, such as Wall Street (1987), Boiler Room (2000), the rather recent documentary Inside Job (2010) and perhaps even American Psycho (2000).
Wall Street characters give the spectator reasons to not sympathize with him.

The first valence of Belfort is thus not quite positive, yet the comedy effects and the sympathy the spectator might have for the charismatic DiCaprio, urge the spectator to keep on looking for reasons to sympathize with Belfort. The next part of the opening sequence, in which Belfort tells the spectator what his life looks like, which is still part of the character exposition, continues the line of presenting a young, rich, slick, arrogant banker that has got it all, both emphasizing the excesses and again taking away the sharp edges with comedy. Belfort addresses the spectator directly now and he speaks loudly and self-righteously while looking into the camera. It is not necessarily the fact that he is rich, but the way he behaves about it that is reason for antipathy: nonchalant and arrogant. He snorts his coke with hundred-dollar bills and flies his helicopter in the backyard when he is too drugged to even speak. The camera follows him with smooth movements, keeping him as the centre of attention, emphasizing the smoothness and arrogance of Belfort’s character.

Thus, the opening sequence emphasizes on Belfort’s excessive lifestyle, his immoral attitude and behaviour and his flawed personality. The film’s style both contributed to establishing his self-centred and excessive life, and to comedic effects to soften the immorality of the events taking place on screen. While this is quite something to come back from, the spectator’s background knowledge of Leonardo DiCaprio, his charisma, and the fact that the spectator is used to being aligned and allied with the protagonist, the spectator is probably urged to keep looking for reasons to develop an allegiance with Belfort.

A younger Belfort: eliciting allegiance and cues for moral disengagement

In the sequence after the opening, the film takes the spectator back to Belfort’s life when he was a few years younger. I argue that this sequence is very important in eliciting sympathies and even an allegiance towards Belfort in three ways. First of all, it contrasts the arrogant, slick banker Belfort from the opening sequence with a younger, more humble and sincere Belfort. The spectator thus has (moral) reasons to sympathize with him after all, which is aided by the emphasis the film style places on this sequence compared to the first one. As mentioned, the spectator will probably still be looking for reasons for sympathy because of DiCaprio’s charisma and the fact that Belfort is the protagonist. Second, this sequence of a younger Belfort provides the most obvious cue for the spectator to let go of moral judgment. The spectator, along with Belfort, is introduced to the world of Wall Street, in which morality is not top priority. And third, the narrative dropped the spectator in a flash-forward and then showed a younger ‘better’ Belfort, thus activating story schemata in the spectator who then develops certain expectations about the development of the story: perhaps, Belfort might return to being the good person he seemed to be when he was younger.
On his first day on his new Wall Street job, Belfort’s physical appearance already gives reasons to sympathize with him. When he arrives to Wall Street, he is a regular, young man, with a tidy haircut, a neat (probably new) suit, and a take away coffee in his hand. His body language and the expression on his face emphasize how this younger Belfort is more insecure: his posture is not as straight, his eyebrows are raised in a frown and his eyes are looking up and around in a kind of skittish manner, checking out his new surroundings. This makes him more sympathetic both because he is more relatable and more pitiful: anxious to start the job that might be the way to his dreams. When he is introduced to the office space, his face has an enthusiastic expression, eager to start his new job. And when Belfort is having lunch with his boss Mark Hanna, Belfort’s humble posture portrays him as a subordinate who is eager to learn: again he sits slightly crouched, his face leans a little towards Hanna with raised eyebrows and a slightly uncomfortable yet polite smile and his arms are under the table (Figure 8). Hanna, in turn, takes a dominant position: he takes more space by moving back and forth, moving his arms and leaning towards Belfort. He speaks softer as well, not as loud as he was heard doing in the opening sequence. In the beginning of the conversation, he even has to cough to find his voice back. With these features of Belfort’s physical appearance, the spectator is given easily accessible reasons to sympathize with this humble looking, enthusiastic, modest yet eager Belfort.

The cinematography and mise-en-scène add to the humbleness of Belfort. The buildings he is surrounded by as he gets off the bus are shown as seen from the streets below: Belfort looks up to this place. He walks among the crowds on the sidewalk, filmed from a distance with strong depth of field, which emphasizes the fact that he is still part of the ‘regular’ ‘street-level’ run in the mill men in New York City. This makes him more relatable and thus more sympathetic as well.

Besides his looks and the way the film style portrays him, the young Belfort also gives the spectator various other reasons to sympathize with him. First of all, he rather welcomes the new world his job is in, even though his superior talks down to him and all he has to do is make
phone calls all day: this shows he is willing to start at the bottom and not afraid to get his hands dirty, which are good qualities to have. The spectator can also feel sympathy for Belfort in Plantinga's sense and feel sorry for him. He is treated unfairly by his superior who yells at him and calls him "lower than pond scum". Furthermore, Belfort has bad luck: on his first day on his dream job, he loses it because it is Black Monday and the market crashes. In summary, Belfort is portrayed with some good qualities, which spectators can relate to much more easily than the billionaire he is later. Furthermore, he possibly also elicits the spectator's pity, which then causes sympathy.

Young Belfort is married to a different wife than in the opening sequence, namely Theresa, who has a positive effect on the character of Belfort, providing plenty of reasons to sympathize with him. First of all, she makes a sympathetic impression herself, with her big brown eyes and woolly pink sweater. Because Belfort is out of a job again, Theresa offers to pawn her engagement ring; she does not want him to take a job he does not enjoy and become miserable. She is willing to do this for the both of them, which shows she is sweet and caring. She then takes the newspaper and finds him an ad for a stock broking job he himself did not see before, showing she is clever too. Her goodness 'rubs off' on Belfort just like Betsy rubbed off on Bickle in Taxi Driver. Furthermore, Belfort's attitude and behaviour towards her provide reasons to sympathize with him as well. He takes her hands and reassures her she is not going to have to pawn her ring. He speaks softly, and leans in with a reassuring expression on his face. Furthermore, Belfort is wearing a sweater that is just as woolly as Theresa's, and the couple looks genuinely happy and homey, in a middle class home. The supporting character of Theresa and the scene she is presented in thus most notably contribute to portraying a different Belfort, providing a fair amount of reasons for the spectator to sympathize with him.

These scenes that portray a humbler Belfort are also presented by the film style as more serious and thus more important in contrast with the opening sequence. As a result, the spectator is stimulated to perceive this portrayal of Belfort's character as dominant and can thus create an allegiance on the basis of this more sympathetic Belfort. As described before, the first part is presented by Belfort's voice-over and accompanied by comedic music. The editing is fast and Belfort is shown doing funny things in a matter-of-factly manner, such as tossing his full glass of juice away before getting into his limousine. Much like in Goodfellas, the resulting comedic effect mutes the severity of some of the events happening, such as the dwarf tossing in the office while the client is led to believe Stratton Oakmont is a neat office. In contrast, the second part, that portrays young Belfort, is presented in a more intimate way. Belfort's voice-over narration stops to make place for the first actual dialogues of the film. Where Belfort was first mostly shown in long shots as part of his big, luxurious environments of his home and in his office, the camera is now mostly capturing Belfort and the other characters in medium shots,
that are longer in time than the quick editing in the opening sequence. Also, while Belfort’s rich life is shown with very bright, saturated colours, the colour scheme of the younger life is simpler and a little faded, which not only obviously emphasizes the contrast in lifestyle, but also makes the younger Belfort more ‘real’ as opposed to the excesses the film showed before. Thus, the difference in tone, pace and cinematography presents the second part as much more serious and thus ‘realistic’, urging the spectator to favour this part as the ‘real’ Belfort.

Besides introducing the spectator to a much more likable and moral Belfort and presenting this in a more dominant way in contrast to the opening sequence, the sequence of the younger Belfort also provides the spectator with moral disengagement cues. It does this in the conversation with Mark Hanna, by whom Belfort is asked to have lunch on his first day. In this conversation, both Belfort and the spectator are introduced to the lifestyle that, according to Hanna, is part of the job. First of all, the slightly crazy looking manager explains Belfort he should “fuck the clients”, and only worry about putting meat on his own table: the clients are addicts to whom they merely supply. When Hanna snorts some cocaine at the lunch table, Belfort asks how he is still able to do his job when taking drugs. Hanna answers: “How the fuck else would you do this job? Cocaine and hookers my friend.” He also informs Belfort he “jerks off at least twice a day”, to deal with all the digits. Apparently, to survive at Wall Street, one has to masturbate, do drugs and most of all get filthy rich on commission. And most importantly, apparently, one has to let go of morals. So for Belfort to become successful, he must do the exact same thing. Thus, the spectator is shown how it all began for Belfort. And, importantly, this is how the film invites the spectator to also morally disengage: to survive Wall Street.

The third way in which *The Wolf of Wall Street* gives reasons for the spectator to sympathize with Belfort in the sequence of the younger Belfort, is in the way the narrative unfolds, namely starting *in medias res*. As I have written, the spectator uses schemata to develop story expectations. *The Wolf of Wall Street* gives the spectator reasons to expect a ‘return’ to Belfort’s morality when he was younger. First of all, the spectator is given reason to understand the beginning of the narrative as *in medias res*: there is no establishment with use of establishing shots for example, the spectator enters the office in the middle of dwarf tossing action. It is a situation of which the spectator does not know how the characters got there, or how it will conclude. For this reason, the spectator recognizes this event is not the beginning of the fabula, nor the ending, and that the narrative starts in medias res. As a consequence, the spectator refers to a story schema of beginning, middle and end, which often entails an exposition, a disrupting problem and an ending that contains a resolution to the problem (Bordwell & Thompson 2008, 49). So, when the narrative starts in medias res, the spectator knows that the action or current situation, in this case the dwarf tossing, and also, more elaborately seen, the “wolf” exposition, will not be the “final” situation at the end of the fabula (and narrative).
Indeed, the ending of the fabula will have a return to a stable situation or a return to cultural norms. In this sense, it is reasonable to suspect a spectator might develop expectations that the current situation of “wolf” Belfort could return to the loyal, polite Belfort he was when he was at the beginning of the fabula.

In this section I have argued how the younger Belfort sequence presents a much more sympathetic Belfort by portraying him as less immoral and more relatable. Furthermore, this portrayal of Belfort is presented as more serious compared to the opening sequence of ‘wolf’ Belfort by slowing down the pace, making the colours more realistic and having the camera closer to the protagonist. As a result, the sympathetic Belfort becomes more dominant than the comedic ‘wolf’ Belfort, eliciting the spectator’s sympathies after all and possibly creating allegiance. Furthermore, by giving moral disengagement cues the spectator is stimulated to look for other reasons than moral ones to sympathize with Belfort. And, finally, by beginning with a flash-forward, the film hints at a “promise of moral improvement” in Plantinga’s terms (2010, 43), that can contribute to an allegiance with Belfort.

Supporting characters, relatability, desirability and perversity

Besides the character exposition, and the young Belfort who elicits a spectator’s allegiance because he is a better version of Belfort that he might one day return to, there are some other, more marginal ways the film elicits sympathies to maintain an allegiance, that I will address in this section. First of all, the supporting characters, though many of them are probably morally questionable themselves, not only accept him, but almost adore him. Second, Belfort’s dream (especially when he is younger) and ‘opponent’ are relatable for many spectators. And Belfort succeeds, so the desirability of his life and abilities can be a reason for a spectator to sympathize too: as I have established in the first section of Chapter One, people sometimes sympathize with someone because they desire to be like him or have the same things. As a part of that, a spectator might develop perverse sympathies for Belfort’s immoral actions.

Where the responses of the supporting characters in Taxi Driver mostly hinted towards Bickle’s troubled and misplaced person, and the supporting characters in Goodfellas both made Hill seem less immoral and more sympathetic, the supporting characters in The Wolf of Wall Street make Belfort seem like a good manager, a good friend and a good son. His employees cheer for him regardless of whatever he says in his speeches and everyone wants to work for him, both men and women. As described in the previous section, Belfort’s first wife also had a positive effect on him, until he cheats on her and she leaves him. It is one of the few times the spectator is actually confronted with the harm Belfort does: all his other ‘victims’ are rarely shown. The voices of his costumers on the phone are heard, but no one is seen being in trouble after losing money: so the only way these ‘supporting characters’ (stretching the term as they
are not once visible on screen) are present, is when they are thanking Belfort for the sale, over the phone. These victims are one of the most important reasons to consider Belfort immoral at all, yet they are never present and thus Belfort’s actions seem less immoral. Also, he must be a terrible father: he is almost always out and/or taking a lot of drugs. Yet, his children are hardly ever shown either, so the harm he has on them is invisible. So by simply not showing the harm Belfort does, the film makes it easier for the spectator to overlook the immorality and sever consequences of his actions, and focus on the sympathetic reasons to maintain their allegiance.

Another reason to sympathize with Belfort is his relatable dream and contender. Belfort is a character who, however immoral he is, is outsmarting a faceless contender that many spectators can feel like being up against too: the financial system. Not a real case of black and grey morality, yet ‘the system’ as the opponent is definitely an easier relatable to opponent than the individual man. For the spectator, this can be a reason to sympathize with Belfort as he may feel a desire to be able to do outsmart the financial system as well, the Wall Street companies that are dominating the financial world. So here, while Belfort is not the grey against the black, he is the smarter against the bad. And this can be something the spectator can desire, or, at least, have respect for. Furthermore, Belfort gets to live by a limitless lifestyle, which the spectator gets to experience vicariously. Belfort is an immoral version of the American Dream: he wants to be a millionaire, so he starts a company of three desks in a garage on Long Island, ending up with a billion dollar company, with a huge group of employees that worship him like a messiah, while eating his cake and having it too with a beautiful ex-model wife and an endless number of prostitutes. The wish to be rich and have it all must certainly be relatable.

Another desirable feature of the character of Belfort is that he is successful and talented. As I wrote in the first section of Chapter One, backed up by Smith, a spectator is also able to sympathize with a character because he has something he desire to have as well. And Belfort has an admirable talent: he is really good at selling. When he calls his first costumer at the Long Island stockbroking company, he easily talks the man into buying a thousand dollars’ worth of penny stocks (at fifty percent commission). His flair is also shown when he is teaching his employees how to sell to the rich, “the Moby Dicks”, by having a speaker phone conversation with a man as an example to show them how it is done. He sweet-talks the man into spending ten thousand dollars. Thus, Belfort is good with words, which in itself already is an admirable talent, and it also brings him success and money: who would not want that?

In the third section of Chapter Two, I wrote how a spectator does not have perverse allegiances unless he is immoral himself. Yet, a spectator can have perverse sympathies, and The Wolf of Wall Street portrays some forbidden desires a spectator might have. Outsmarting the law is an immorality, yet one might enjoy doing this vicariously through Belfort and feel sympathy for him because of it. Other forbidden desires Belfort carries out could be doing all
kinds of drugs, cheating on one’s wife with beautiful women and having an excessive party in the office. Thus, the forbidden desires that Belfort so carelessly carries out, can be a reason for a spectator to feel sympathy for him.

In this chapter I have argued that the allegiance for Belfort is mostly elicited during the sequence of his younger years, and the way this is contrasted against the flash-forward of his ‘wolf’ years. While the opening sequence used comedy effects to mute the immorality of Belfort’s behaviour, the ‘young Belfort’ sequence has the spectator sympathize with him because of his better personality. Furthermore, the seriousness of this sequence caused by film style stimulates the spectator to pay attention and take this sequence and this Belfort as the ‘real’ one. For the rest of the film, it is mostly by the foregrounding of some of the sympathetic reasons by means of film style and narrative, such as the approval of his personality by supporting characters or the comparison of him with them, and the overshadowing of antipathetic reasons, mostly by hiding the harm he does to his customers and the laughing about the moral flaws he has, that the film creates a (mild) allegiance. Furthermore, the spectator might feel some perverse sympathies for Belfort’s immoral actions that might represent some of the spectator’s forbidden desires.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has set out to answer the following question: how do films elicit and manage a spectator’s allegiance for a morally questionable protagonist? This question arose because Zillmann and Smith agree on the notion that a spectator’s sympathy for a character depends on how he evaluates the character’s morality, yet spectator’s feel sympathy for immoral characters too. With theories of both film studies and communication studies, and analyses of Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver, Goodfellas* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*, this thesis has shown that there are various ways both in narrative and film style in which a film can elicit a spectator’s allegiance for a morally questionable protagonist.

I started this thesis by going into the concepts of the spectator-character relationship. First, I briefly outlined the discussions about ‘character identification’, which is a common term used to describe the relationship. Yet as the definition is problematic and the term not really useful in analysis, I chose to follow Smith and approach the spectator-character relationship as a process consisting of recognition, alignment (subjective and spatio-temporal) and allegiance. The occurrence of allegiance, as the level in which the spectator develops a sympathetic stance towards the character, was the focus of my research question. Following Plantinga, I then distinguished between long term sympathetic allegiance and shorter term sympathies. Sympathies can both result in allegiance and result from allegiance. Then, I complemented Smith’s theory with Raney’s addition to Zillmann’s affective disposition theory. This lead to the theory that a spectator does not morally evaluate each and every action of a character, but actively searches for reasons to uphold their allegiance with a character.

Then, to understand when a character can be considered morally questionable at all, I attempted to define the terms moral and immoral as one can assume they are commonly perceived. The bottom line I concluded is that one’s acts should not harm others. Or, as a renowned saying states: do not do to others that you would not want them to do to you. Thus, it includes, amongst others, killing, stealing, cheating and physically or mentally hurting. By these moral standards, I argued, the protagonists of the three films I analysed can be regarded as morally questionable. *Taxi Driver*’s Bickle starts to fantasize about killing people, and ends up killing four men that were not necessarily a danger to him. Hill in *Goodfellas* is a mobster who is involved in several heists and killings, cheats on his wife and steals money and goods. Belfort, the protagonist of *The Wolf of Wall Street*, takes a lot of money from people, moves it around in
illegal ways, orders prostitutes to the office all the time, cheats on his wife with several prostitutes and is an absent father to his children. So while these protagonists are all different, they are all morally questionable.

To understand how a spectator proceeds to sympathize with morally questionable protagonists, I described mechanisms that can be at work in a film that can influence a spectator's evaluation of the character's (im)morality. First of all, as Smith writes, a film's moral structure can influence how (im)moral an act seems, by outlining a moral standard possibly different than that of the real world. Furthermore, Shafer and Raney show how previous experience with antihero narratives helps spectators to sympathize with morally questionable protagonists, because they recognize an antihero schema and know to look for reasons other than those to do with morality. Films initiate this by giving moral disengagement cues, for example in the form of justification for morally questionable actions. In the second chapter I also tackled the counterargument that a spectator might simply sympathize with a character because he is immoral (which Smith calls a perverse allegiance). Unless in the case of a morally questionable spectator, it is unlikely a character sympathizes with a protagonist because he acts in morally incorrect ways. Instead, there might be cases of shorter term perverse sympathies, yet even these exist by virtue of redeemable factors and are thus not as perverse as they may sound.

The outlined mechanisms can influence a spectator's search for reasons to maintain his allegiance. These reasons can be found both in the narrative and in the film style. In narrative, I distinguished a character's behaviour, his relation to other characters and appreciated personality traits he might have. In film style, I distinguished a character's physical characteristics, the actor's charisma (and the spectator's background knowledge of him) and factors in editing and cinematography.

The analyses of the three films have shown similarities and differences between the ways they elicit allegiance from the spectator for their protagonist. For example, not every opening sequence and character exposition creates sympathy, like would have been easiest according to Raney's theory: after all, a spectator usually maintains his initial valence. *Goodfellas* presents Hill in his younger years as a happy, innocent, enthusiastic kid, that just wants to belong in a group; a relatable wish. This is easy to maintain by the spectator in the rest of the film. Bickle's character exposition also presents him as predominantly sympathetic man, with small hints towards his loneliness, unreliability and social inabilities. Later these personality flaws, as one might call them, become more and more prominent, but they still elicit the spectator's sympathies by speaking to his compassion. Of the three films, *The Wolf of Wall Street* is the one that has the least sympathetic opening sequence and character exposition. It overcomes this by portraying the immoral behaviour with comedic effects, and then introduces
a younger Belfort with which the spectator sympathizes more easily, and presents this younger Belfort in a much more serious manner so that the spectator focuses on this better version of Belfort.

The comedic effects are a strategy employed both by *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Goodfellas*. Goodfellas mainly adds comedic notes by showing the gangsters in situations that do not fit the ‘dangerous gangster’ stereotype, such as cooking a big dinner and wearing flowery shirts and swim suits. This softens up or even covers up the immorality of the gangsters, making it easier for the spectator to maintain his allegiance. *The Wolf of Wall Street* adds comedy by exaggerating the excessive lifestyle of Belfort, hinting that it should not be taken so seriously. Furthermore, both films add music to sometimes gloss over immoral acts or to ridicule the characters. This also makes them look less immoral, making it easier for the spectator to maintain his allegiance.

A difference between the films is in how they show the immoral behaviour of their characters. Bickle’s violent acts are brutally shown, yet they are redeemable because they occurred on moral grounds: he kills a robber, thus saving a shopkeeper, and he kills three men in Iris’s brothel to save her (though it is questionable whether she wanted to be saved and is probably severely traumatized after the attack). The brutal portrayal of these violent acts does not provide a reason for the spectator to maintain his/her allegiance. It is the redeemability of the acts that does this. Though *Goodfellas* shows violence, Hill is rarely shown doing something actually ‘bad’, making it easier for the spectator to maintain his or her allegiance. By contrast, Belfort is shown doing immoral things, but we hardly see the catastrophic impact they have on people, making the actions seem less immoral. Furthermore, often the immoral acts are softened up by comedy effects in music or dialogue, focusing on the comedy of the situations instead of the severity. Thus, the immorality of Belfort’s actions is reduced, making it easier for the spectator to maintain his/her allegiance. So each of the three films had their own way of showing the morally questionable behaviour of the protagonists, and each of them had different ways of covering them up, or (in the case of *Taxi Driver*) to balance them out with redeemable factors.

*Goodfellas* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* both start the narrative with a flash-forward, or in medias res, which aided the elicitation of allegiance as well. This way, the younger, ‘better’ and less immoral versions of the characters make it easier for the spectator to believe in an ‘essential’ better and less immoral Hill and Belfort. Furthermore, in classical storytelling, the ending is much more likely to resemble the beginning (by a return to the initial norms) than to the situation as it is in medias res. Therefore, the spectator has reason to expect that the protagonists will morally improve, aiding the creation of allegiance.
All three films give moral disengagement cues. *Taxi Driver* provides these in the more obvious way as Shafer and Raney meant them: as reasons for justification. After all, Bickle only killed people who were breaking the law themselves. Furthermore, he feels lonely, left out and threatened, which makes him behave that way. *Goodfellas* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* provided the spectator with different moral disengagement cues, namely by establishing a moral structure different than the one commonly accepted in the real world. In the world of *Goodfellas*, what makes a man a good person is not turning in his friends, and being generous with money. In the world of *Wall Street*, one is a good stocks broker when he disregards the client’s interest, masturbates, does drugs and has sex with prostitutes. With these cues, the spectator is urged to look for different reasons to sympathize with the characters than moral ones.

In summary, by combining theories from film studies and communication studies, and using them to analyse Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*, *Goodfellas* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*, this thesis has shown that there are numerous ways in which a film can elicit sympathies and allegiance from the spectator for a morally questionable protagonist. Furthermore, by foregrounding reasons to sympathize and muting or veiling reasons for getting antipathetic feelings, the films can aid the spectator into maintaining this allegiance, possibly resulting in the spectator ‘rooting’ for the morally questionable protagonist.
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Figures


Figure 2. Still from Taxi Driver. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures, 1976: [00:03:59].

Figure 3. Still from Taxi Driver. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures, 1976: [00:04:42].

Figure 4. Still from Taxi Driver. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Columbia Pictures, 1976: [00:16:18].

Figure 5. Still from Goodfellas. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Warner bros, 1990: [00:05:26].

Figure 6. Still from Goodfellas. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Warner bros, 1990: [00:18:03].

Figure 7. Still from The Wolf of Wall Street. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Paramount Pictures, 2013: [00:01:40].

Figure 8. Still from The Wolf of Wall Street. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Paramount Pictures, 2013: [00:09:44].