AN INTRODUCTION TO FAIRBAIRN'S PSYCHOLOGY OF DYNAMIC STRUCTURE

The Analysis of Cultural Objects

Graham S. Clarke

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About the author

Graham S. Clarke was born in Colchester, Essex, UK in 1942. He went with his family to Australia as "ten pound poms" in 1949, returning via the Suez Canal just before it was closed in 1956. He did a year at Sydney Technical High School (Australia) before going to Clacton County High School (UK) until 1961. Graham gained a BSc (Hons) in architecture at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL (1961–64). It was here that he attended a series of lectures by Richard Buckminster Fuller whose idea of comprehensive anticipatory design science prompted him to seek a career in computing. In 1967 he achieved an MSc in applications of computing at what was then the North London Polytechnic. He worked as a computing advisor at City University before starting a PhD in experimental psychology at Hatfield Polytechnic which he never completed. After working on a computer-based authoring system, he went to Chelmer Institute (now part of Anglia Ruskin University) before going to Essex University, Computer Science Department, as a computer officer in 1986. He was a founder member of the Intelligent Inhabited Building Group there until his retirement in 2007.

Having had a long-term interest in the "anti-psychiatry" movement headed by R. D. Laing and David Cooper and having attended the

Dialectics of Liberation conference at the Round House in Chalk Farm in 1967, while at Essex he took a part-time master's in psychoanalytic studies at the Tavistock (1995) and later a PhD in psychoanalytic studies at Essex University (2002). He published his first paper on psychoanalysis and film in *Free Associations* journal in 1994 and since then has published many more papers and articles, as well as five books.

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I would like to thank Kate Pearce, Sandra Davies, and Ross Clarke for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this book. I would like to thank Ross for helping to edit the whole book newly. All of its shortcomings are my responsibility.

I would like to give special thanks and love to Sandra for all of her care and support on a daily basis over the decades and the last year or so in particular without which I may have foundered.

Foreword

Ross Clarke

It's 1942, the world is at war and on a knife edge. On the ground—the battle for Stalingrad, in the skies—the Blitz, the battle for London, both at their height. In Poland the second camp at Auschwitz is under construction for the final solution, in America the Manhattan Project had just been launched. There are many films that recount this pivotal year from McQueen's *Blitz* and Nolan's *Oppenheimer* through to *Pearl Harbor* and *The Pianist*. Two of the essential films of the cinematic canon of sacrifice—*Casablanca* and *Bambi*—were released in American cinemas too. The year was a turning point for the world.

My father, Graham Stuart Clarke, the author of this book, was born into this world at war in Colchester, Essex where he still lives now, with his wife, best friend, and long-time reader Sandra some eighty-two years later.

Only one of the cultural objects mentioned in this book existed at that dark moment, the creator of which—Bronzino—was some 370 years dead. Sigmund Freud was recently buried in Hampstead, Dennis Potter, just seven, was deep in the Forest of Dean, Miyazaki, a baby—at one year old he had yet to see the bombed-out cities of Japan which would influence his work. June Kwan, mother of one half of the Daniels had not been born, but Ronald Fairbairn, the main subject of this book

and a member of the independent group that grew out of the death of Freud—neither of them followers of Anna Freud or Melanie Klein—was very much alive and working in Edinburgh on "The repression and the return of bad objects" (1943). This was the third of five key works in his oeuvre that he published before his death in 1964. Fairbairn was a man of the early twentieth century who helped define and refigure nascent psychoanalysis, particularly object relations theory.

Sometime soon after the war ended, Graham travelled with his family by boat for six weeks across the world to Australia. In Oz, Graham lived in the suburbs of Sydney for some seven years, returning to the UK as a barefoot runner known at his new school in Clacton-on-Sea as "Aussie" Clarke—a rebel without a cause that would later find one. This is also the school where he met my mother and the same school my sister and I later attended in the 1980s.

Graham has spent much of his life an intellectual polymath studying at UCL, Tavistock, Hatfield, and Essex, working at Marconi's—architect, systems analyst, agitator, intelligent buildings and early AI researcher, occasional published poet, playwright, artist, cineaste, and finally landing at Essex University where he devoted much of the second half of his life to championing and expanding upon the work of the aforementioned Ronald W. Fairbairn, a largely marginalised Scottish psychoanalyst.

Before this book, he has written and edited four other works on Fairbairn, organised a conference at the Freud Museum London on Fairbairn, as well as contributing numerous papers for the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* and other psychoanalytic journals. His recent chapter "A psychoanalytic approach to the singularity: Why we cannot do without auxiliary constructions", in *The Technological Singularity: Managing the Journey* edited by Victor Callaghan, James Miller, Roman Yampolskiy, and Stuart Armstrong (Springer Nature, 2017) is, in my opinion, the strongest argument for biology over technology, humanism, and a necessary riposte to the populist singularity imagined by the world's second most dangerous American, Elon Musk, and others in his google-ised billionaire entourage.

Graham has explained the world of cinema, art, and novels—cultural objects through the interpretation and redeployment of Fairbairn's object relations theory to some great effect—over this work. His first book was called *Personal Relations Theory: Fairbairn,*

Macmurray and Suttie (Routledge, 2006), which outside the cultural work summarises well the importance of Fairbairn to the interpersonal and the community at large, allowing us to be human, as well as to the internal object relations work.

This book represents a synthesis and engagement that one might describe by my father's standards as populist (but not in that way). Fairbairn's work is not easy, least of all for the son of a Fairbairnian. But it bears fruit over time and perseverance and has a lot to say about the internal and external struggles of our lives. It clearly remains a sadly neglected branch of thinking, partly due to geography and partly to complexity, I believe, among the psychoanalytic community then and today and deserves eloquent champions like my father.

It is eighty-two years since Graham was born and we all live in a completely different world from Spitfires, Camp coffee, early radar, and landlines—a world of iPhones, ChatGPT, exploding pagers, drone warfare, tactical nuclear weapons, neoliberalism, surveillance capitalism, social media, Putin, Trump, rolling news, and a rebirth of populism more commonly known in his birth year, 1942, as fascism. Such radical and increasingly rapid technological advances change the way we think but not the ideologies we fail each other by, so it seems.

All of this biographical detail is not just one of those things. That would be the point of Fairbairn's work. Of my father's work. To show us the connection between the things in our head—the relationship between cultural objects and our world and the way we see things, the way we relate.

The four pieces examined through Fairbairn's prism herein radically changed the way we see things—*The Singing Detective* feels like the Golden Age of Television long before *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, a radical piece of work that burst onto our screens in the UK in the mid-1980s at the height of Thatcherism. It catapulted its author, the acerbic genius Dennis Potter, to a status where he could sit and presciently tell the world as he died, "I call my cancer Rupert." Don't we all, these days.

Miyazaki's style and work was defined for the world by the success and legacy of his greatest film, *Spirited Away*, a complex and beautiful ode to childhood and the strange homes we find ourselves in.

Meanwhile the Daniels created a film for A24 that captured the zeitgeist as much as any twenty-first-century film had—critically and

commercially successful and an Oscar winner to boot, it continues to capture the current moment in both form, spectacle, and narrative.

To return to the biographical—the personal—it is fair to say that Graham is very much a child of the 1960s, a veteran of '68 Vietnam protests in Grosvenor Square and of CND and miners' marches in the '80s. I say this as someone who mourns the loss of his generation (the bizarrely named Silent Generation who had so much of interest to say). A generation of radical intellects from Derrida, Debord, Lyotard, and Foucault in France to Tony Benn and E. P. Thompson in the UK and Fred Jameson, Mike Davies, and Paul Auster in the US. All those greats are now sadly dead (Spivak and Butler survive them) and it is hard to see who follows behind.

My father forms part of this tradition—looking inwards to the object relations of Fairbairn and outwards to their cultural mirrors in Bronzino, Potter, Miyazaki, the Daniels, and beyond. My generation X, and those that follow the Zs, Millennials, and on, struggle to read or digest more than 140 characters. The big ideas are populist or conspiratorial. Theory is sidelined, and only the worst aspects of the grand narratives have returned.

The choice of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* is a stroke of genius as is the inclusion of the Daniels' SXSW talk about their "process" in creating a film so of its time—its title alone sums up the current problem and our fractured echo chamber nightmares. We live in multiplicity but are ill-equipped for it and OR goes a long way towards explaining the power of integration and wholeness.

Fairbairn's most famous quote—"it is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the devil"—describes the way in which a child can be tied to a bad object in order to survive. My grandfather Phil, his father, the sailor, like many parents, wanted a particular reflected glory from his son; he, orphaned by World War I, conservative at heart, was also a product of his time. Phil's grandfather was an Anglican minister and Phil somehow went to his grave still believing my dad, a devout atheist, would end up building churches.

Strangely, I think he was right.

Like the greats listed above, Graham, my father, constructs churches with extreme care and attention in our minds. This book represents a

significant continuation of that work—a steeple of some sort. Long may it abide.

I should add, finally—although he would not want me to.

Graham completed this book during chemotherapy and after a gruelling but successful twelve-hour operation for oesophageal cancer. I was reminded of his favourite playwright, Beckett, throughout this year-long trial by cancer and wondered if this might be my father's equivalent to *Krapp's Last Tape* …

I cannot however imagine my father, unsurprisingly angry at his fate, saying as Krapp does—"Perhaps my best years are gone … but I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire that's in me now."

Krapp is a lonely artist who has burnt bridges in life, but as the successful operation and treatment showed, my father is not. He was surrounded and supported throughout by Sandra, my sister, stepchildren, my cousins, grandchildren, and friends who buoyed him on otherwise lonely treacherous seas.

I went to visit him post-op—unsurprisingly weak, tired and hangdog, thin to the bones—but clearly grateful to be in this world. Dad spoke of the many nurses, doctors, specialists from all over the world who had tended to his needs during this ordeal and as he did, he began to cry. We as a family knew, along with our close-knit support, that the NHS, a great idea from the 1940s, had saved his life—extended it for some considerable time, we hope. This family of humans, a wider community of care of which Fairbairn writes so passionately while delving internally, was key to his life and ours.

Just last week Graham spoke of a new project—I for one look forward to reading it "with the fire that's (still) in him now".

In the meantime, this book might help explain the world we've always been in and the specifics of where we are now in 2025—another pivotal year it seems. Unsurprisingly, it is both edifying and difficult but worthwhile. I commend it to you as an acolyte of that great art form of the twentieth century—cinema—and as a student of the internal inconsistencies of what it is to be human in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Object relational approaches to cultural objects are quite rare as we shall see, and Fairbairnian object relations approaches to cultural objects are even rarer but the hope remains that they can generate more light than heat in this inflammatory world.

In an age of almost constant war, after a global pandemic, in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and with the immediate possibility of the return of Trump as the American president, we are all in need of some guidance as to how we might *understand* the social cultural world in preparation to *changing* it and avoiding the "true lies" of the totally spun world of contemporary political commentary.

In a recent book called *Shattered Nation* (2023) Danny Dorling illustrates in horrific detail the consequences of the move to neoliberalism for the United Kingdom, kick-started by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. He does however hold out the hope that something can be done to change things and it is this belief rather than succumbing to total pessimism in the light of the contemporary world that needs to be grasped and reinforced.

The last object in Pandora's box was Hope and, as Marcuse (1964) wrote, quoting Walter Benjamin ("At the beginning of the fascist era"), "It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us."

Or as Theognis of Megara said in the sixth century BC in oddly prescient words:

> Hope is the only good god remaining among mankind;
> the others have left and gone to Olympus.
> Trust, a mighty god has gone, Restraint has gone from men,
> and the Graces, my friend, have abandoned the earth.
> Men's judicial oaths are no longer to be trusted, nor does anyone
> revere the immortal gods; the race of pious men has perished and
> men no longer recognize the rules of conduct or acts of piety.

It has never been more important to us that we overcome the schizoid divisions in ourselves, our nations, and the world itself and find a way of going on together for the benefit of us all.

This is an attempt to carry on making sense of our puzzling world and its artefacts.

Fairbairn

This introduction to Fairbairn's object relations theory, his "psychology of dynamic structure", and some illustrations of how that theory might be used to analyse complex cultural objects has been thirty years in the making.

Fairbairn's theory is an original thoroughgoing object relations theory that is not as widely known as it might be, having been developed independently during the war years of the mid-twentieth century in Scotland, at a time when the London-centric Institute of Psychoanalysis was engaged in its own internal debates—the so-called "Controversial Discussions" (King & Steiner, 1991).

The following edited quotation from the Institute of Psychoanalysis' entry on Ronald Fairbairn illustrates the many ways in which Fairbairn's thought was influential and remains so, if still mainly unacknowledged.

> Fairbairn wrote two papers on art and creativity, inspired by Klein's account of innate destructive urges and their attendant desire for reparation and restitution. In turn, Fairbairn began to influence Klein's thinking and that of her colleagues.

His innovative, bold work in object relations paved the way for new theoretical and clinical approaches, though this contribution was perhaps not sufficiently recognised or acknowledged at the time. One of Fairbairn's major theoretical developments was his delineation of a psychological model of the mind, departing from Freud's biological theory, in which the central assumption was that the libido is fundamentally pleasure-seeking. Fairbairn asserted instead that what is primary in us all is our search for relationships, and that this is more urgent than the desire to gratify instincts. Fairbairn describes a model wherein the libido does not seek simply to discharge energy via use of an object, rather that it seeks the object in and for itself. In Fairbairn's thinking, instincts certainly exist and pleasure results from attaining a desired object, but pleasure is not the goal in itself. Therefore, the driving force in the human psyche is not in fact the pleasure principle, but a fundamental need to relate to and connect with other objects, i.e. other people. Fairbairn's emphasis on the centrality of relationships in the psyche was a great inspiration to John Bowlby and played a key role in the development of Bowlby's famous "attachment theory" … 1940 saw the completion of Fairbairn's first paper on this subject, "Schizoid Factors in the Personality", and was the beginning of an immensely innovative and creative period. It was this paper—in which Fairbairn coined the term "schizoid"—that would later inspire Klein to alter her "paranoid position" to "paranoid-schizoid position", and that would similarly have a considerable impact on Donald Winnicott's thinking about schizoid states. This paper also marked the beginning of Fairbairn's pioneering thinking about borderline states, and their origins in the "splitting" process, a defence against the pain of being rejected by insufficiently attentive parents. Fairbairn's conceptualisation of splitting was, and continues to be, a very influential contribution to psychoanalytic theory. He described the child splitting off the emotionally responsive side of his or her parents from the unresponsive side, thereby creating "good" and "bad" objects, and often also splitting the ego into "good" and "'bad", a process often leading to borderline states. His development of a quite new theoretical and clinical approach to borderline states remains very important in the psychological treatment of such patients today. (Burton, 2016)

More recently Ronald Britton, a doyen of the British Psychoanalytical Society, has written:

> When I began reviewing my ideas on the need to reconstruct the underlying metapsychological assumptions of psychoanalysis, I thought of myself as taking a new path, but soon found that I was stepping into the footsteps of an early pioneer, Ronald Fairbairn … Fairbairn tried to join in the famous Controversial Discussions between Klein's followers and those of Anna Freud (1941–1945), with a very brief statement of his theory in writing. It was concise, clear and enormously relevant to the discussions. It was ignored completely and his opinions subsequently were not taken up. (2021, pp. 2–3)

Britton in his book does make use of Fairbairn's work, in particular the idea of the "internal saboteur" and is also aware of and keen to acknowledge and include aspects of Fairbairn's object relations model of endopsychic structure. One of the more significant parts of Fairbairn's written contribution to the Controversial Discussions, delivered by Edward Glover, that Britton alludes to, was as follows. Fairbairn argued that the explanatory concept of "phantasy" had been rendered obsolete by the work of Klein and her followers and that the time was ripe for the replacement of

> the concept of "phantasy" by a concept of "inner reality" peopled by the Ego and its internal objects. These internal objects should be regarded as having an organised structure, an identity of their own, an endopsychic existence and an activity as real within the inner world as those of objects in the outer world. (King & Steiner, 1991, p. 294)

This is an essential element of his "psychology of dynamic structure" as will be explained later in Part I below.

In her most recent book Judith Butler (2020) reinforces the centrality of interdependency and interrelatedness that are the touchstone of Fairbairn's viewpoint.

> We can assert in a general way that social interdependency characterizes life, and then proceed to account for violence as an attack

> on that interdependency, an attack on persons, yes; but perhaps most fundamentally, it is an attack on "bonds". And yet, interdependency, though accounting for differentials of independence and dependence, implies social equality: each is dependent, or formed and sustained in relations of depending upon, and being depended upon. What each depends upon, and what depends upon each one, is varied, since it is not just other human lives, but other sensate creatures, environments, and infrastructures: we depend upon them, and they depend on us, in turn, to sustain a liveable world. (Butler, 2020, p. 16)
>
> To refer to equality in such a context is not to speak of an equality among all persons, if by "person" we mean a singular and distinct individual, gaining its definition by its boundary. Singularity and distinctness exist, as do boundaries, but they constitute differentiating characteristics of beings who are defined and sustained by virtue of their interrelationality [sic.]. Without that overarching sense of the interrelational, we take the bodily boundary to be the end rather than the threshold of the person, the site of passage and porosity, the evidence of an openness to alterity that is definitional of the body itself. (Ibid., p. 21)

The social

A perennial bone of contention within psychoanalytic studies has been the degree to which the social and the psychoanalytic interact and whether one or the other has priority. Having done a master's in psychoanalytic studies at the Tavistock the following attitudes have coloured my approach to Fairbairn and the social.

> This article is about the connections between the fields of sociology and psychoanalysis, as they have been present in the traditions of the Tavistock Clinic and Institute of Human Relations from their origins to the present day. It describes a "double dissonance" in this relationship, in that the Tavistock's commitment was never to psychoanalysis or to sociology, narrowly conceived. Its interest was in a broad conception of the social sciences, involving socio-psychological, socio-technical and ecological perspectives, and it developed a broader social engagement of psychoanalytic perspectives than that of a conventional psychoanalytic institute. (Rustin & Armstrong, 2019)

In a special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (*PCS*) devoted to psychoanalysis in cultural studies (Kramera & Viol, 2017) the editors cite a significant British contribution to the issue where:

> Michael Rustin argues that, while it is true that psychoanalytic ideas have played a significant role in the field of Cultural Studies, it is notable that these ideas mostly exclude contributions from the Kleinian, post-Kleinian and more broadly "object-relations" traditions that have been so highly influential in psychoanalytic clinical practice … This article also explores how far an approach to the representations of different kinds of "object-relations" in popular culture may be valuable in discriminating between those cultural artefacts which contribute positively to individual and social development, and those which are more destructive.

The cultural artefacts analysed and interpreted in the following pages contribute positively to individual and social development.

Neoliberalism

One of the most significant and deepest changes in the social over the past century that has had an impact across the world is the ongoing development of neoliberalism and the twin ideas of one's being the "entrepreneur of your self" (Foucault, 1966, p. 226) and "there is no such thing as society"—the individualist ideology of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan in the 1970s that valorised markets as a universal solution to all problems. These ideas are being contested by psychoanalytically oriented theorists both here and in the US.

> In the last three decades, neoliberalism has come to dominate most of the West, reshaping many institutions according to its ideological belief in markets as the optimal form of regulation of social and economic life. Whereas formerly market ideology was contested by collectivist ideas of the public good, at this point of its triumph there is little systemic opposition to it. Does psychoanalysis have distinctive insights to offer on neoliberalism, and if so, can they contribute to contesting its domination? (Rustin, 2014, p. 145)

In a section on the pathologies of neoliberalism Rustin says,

> What I am suggesting is that the denial of relational needs inherent in the ideology of neoliberalism and the all-pervasive market is a source of widespread anxiety and psychic pain, an invisible burden detracting from the benefits and opportunities which can arise from market competition. Whilst its most obvious bearers are those most disadvantaged in competitive environments, these are by no means its only victims. The expectation that the defended, narcissistic self which is shaped in this context will treat others primarily as means to its own ends, rather than objects of value in themselves, depletes the self as well as its objects. (Ibid., p. 155)

Lynn Layton, an analyst from the USA who has written extensively on the consequences of neoliberalism for psychoanalysis and society (Layton, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), comments that

> The ethos that global capitalism and both neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies have promoted since the late 1970s is an ethos of "save your own skin"; and I think we see this everywhere, from sadistic and humiliating reality TV shows where only one last "winner" survives, to the consulting room where … dependency is generally felt to be shameful, and interdependence is a concept few can acknowledge. (Layton, 2007)

In a similar vein Candida Yates suggests that

> In the past, theories of object relations psychoanalysis have been under-represented in the academic fields of media, film and cultural studies, which instead have tended to deploy the work of Freud and Lacan when looking at the relationships between culture and the unconscious … However, in recent years, the theories of D. W. Winnicott and psychoanalysts influenced by his work … have been taken up by psychoanalytic scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences … This development taps partly into current interests concerning the interactive relationship between affect and the materiality of objects and also the significance of maternal fantasy in shaping subjectivity in the creative movement between self and other. (Yates, 2018)

However, and despite his widely recognised importance to the development of the object relations approach to psychoanalysis, there have been few attempts to apply Fairbairn's object relations theory to cultural objects, one of the most recent being *The American Dream and American Cinema in the Age of Trump: From Object Relations to Social Relations* (2023) jointly authored with my son Ross.

Book outline

Part I introduces the reader to Fairbairn's unique understanding of endopsychic structure, supplemented with his relatively less known thought on the social and his theory of art and aesthetics.

Part II is the detailed application of this theory to a number of cultural objects:

a. An Italian mannerist painting in the National Gallery by Bronzino, *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, that has puzzled many art experts
b. A celebrated, groundbreaking TV series from the 1980s, *The Singing Detective* by Dennis Potter
c. A 2001 highly regarded Japanese animated film from Studio Ghibli, *Spirited Away* by Hayao Miyazaki, and
d. A multi-award winning 2022 independent film, *Everything Everywhere All at Once (EEAO)* by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert.

Part of the reason that these particular cultural objects have been chosen is because of their quality and complexity, and a belief that the application of Fairbairn's theory can make their, often difficult to understand, meaning more transparent. Further reasons for these choices is because all of these cultural objects have been, and are, highly successful exemplars of their type and time, and personally pleasurable to look at, watch, enjoy, and think about.

Part III reflects upon the cultural objects analysed and attempts to place them within the wider context of the world and the recent past we now inhabit and its current pressing crises that affect us all deeply and directly.