Moments Apart

In 2010, Tom Brown and I published the collection *Film Moments*, which brought together thirty-eight writers, each offering a short chapter on a moment from a film of their choice. In the book, we acknowledged a debt owed to the work of V.F. Perkins, making specific reference to sections of his landmark work, *Film as Film* ([1972] 1993), which, to our mind, provided the exemplary evidence for ways in which claims for a film's achievement can be articulated through sustained and detailed scrutiny of particular moments ([1972] 1993: 2). We chose Perkins' reading of interrelated sequences from *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and we might equally have focussed on his essay, *Moments of Choice* (1981), which illustrates Perkins' characteristic precision as he weaves together an appreciation of small sections from different films to form a persuasive, overarching argument concerning the extent to which certain directors embrace the constraints and opportunities offered to them in order to harness the potential of those expressive elements at their disposal.

As editors, I don't recall our referring explicitly to Perkins' work when we invited chapter contributions, although we surely incorporated aspects of his critical standpoint into the requests and we certainly included a good number of scholars who were intimately acquainted with the importance of Perkins' writing. Nevertheless, without the investment ever being made overt, it is the case that many contributors followed a path similar to that set out meticulously by Perkins: using the moment as an opportunity to say something about the film as a whole and often constructing a case for that film's achievements based on their account of a single moment. This suited our aims, not only because we were so obviously sympathetic to those methods but also because we hoped the book might offer some guidance to film students who may be asked to write about a film in detail in a limited number of words and who might therefore be required to organise an argument around specific examples. Our contributors' dedication to this approach, though very welcome, nonetheless opens up some gaps that we never attempted to address in the book. By taking a single moment to illustrate something broader about a film, chapters in *Film Moments* implicitly create an organic relationship between the moment and the film, between the part and the whole. One consequence of this endeavour is that forms and degrees of disconnect between a moment and the film in which it occurs are left unattended to. The book therefore fails to consider what can be made of those moments that stand apart in films. It is this matter that I will spend a little time with for the rest of this essay.

The question of incongruous moments is in fact addressed by Perkins in his study of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1941). Reflecting on RKO's destructive treatment of Welles' film, Perkins focusses in on a close-up shot of Lucy (Anne Baxter) that the studio saw fit to insert once the director had completed his work, and which over-simplifies and disrupts a style of representation that had been developed with delicate care up to that point (1999: 60). Here, a conflict between ambition and interference creates a moment of disparity, serving to highlight the director's art and also certain industrial constraints within which he operated. Elsewhere, Andrew Britton finds Spencer Tracy's performance in the final scene of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*

(Stanley Kramer, 1967) to be at odds with the rest of the film precisely because he understands it to possess qualities that are otherwise lacking:

> Spencer Tracy's astonishing delivery [is] strikingly at variance with the cautious reformism to which the film portentously commits itself. In a film characterised by the turgid factitiousness of its dramatic effects – by a false and self-serving sincerity – the speech is remarkable for its enactment of genuine and substantially realised emotion. (Britton quoted in Clayton and Klevan 2011: 7)

Britton measures his evaluation of the scene against a judgement of the film as a whole, locating its strengths within a relationship of discrepancy rather than congruity. He is careful to avoid falling into the kind of claims sometimes offered casually in defences of films, whereby they are 'saved' by oneredeeming aspect or another. Indeed, the 'turgid factitiousness of [*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*'s] dramatic effects' is still in place and afforded perhaps greater emphasis due to Tracy's 'enactment of genuine and substantially realised emotion'.

I want to stay with this idea of ill-fitting moments in film, and pursue it in a little more detail. In particular, I am interested in a short sequence from the 1994 release *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell). The film (hereafter *Four Weddings*) is with some justification regarded as a success story for British cinema in the 1990s, finding audiences and critical approval on both sides of the Atlantic. The film contains a number of scenes that are structured for comedic effect and, indeed, it is perhaps an achievement of *Four Weddings* that this humour often covers a lack of dedication to any kind of believable reality. By this, I do not mean that the film fails on grounds of attempted *realism*, but rather that it makes limited efforts to persuade us that the individuals on screen have any existence outside of the set pieces in which they feature. In this way, the events of the film take place in a vacuum, with characters coming together apparently from nowhere and returning to nothingness. The task of believing in them as human beings is made difficult, therefore – a particular issue for a film that wants to convince us of the intimate, long-standing friendships that exist between its central characters. Andie MacDowell's performance in the film is often seen as a weak point and, certainly, she delivers most of her lines in a style reminiscent of a non-native speaker reciting sentences for the first time from a language tape tutorial. Nevertheless, it could conversely be argued that MacDowell's characterisation, hollow and thin as it may be, merely constitutes a more pronounced version of other similarly weightless characterisations in the film but without the equivalent easy humour to finesse its shortcomings. In this way, and from a certain perspective, we might conceivably view MacDowell's performance as a congruent element in the film rather than an aberration.

The claim that MacDowell's performance is consistent with the film's overall approach to its characterisation provides a counterpoint to this article's central interest in the idea of discordant moments. Pursuing that theme, I want to focus on a short sequence involving *Four Weddings*' main character, Charles (Hugh Grant), and his friend, Fiona (Kristin Scott Thomas). In the course of my discussion, I place emphasis upon the performance of Scott Thomas and, to a lesser degree, Grant, as means of drawing attention to aspects of quality and achievement within a specific scene. This approach is influenced by the closer attention that has been paid to performance in film studies and, particularly, the body of work that Andrew Klevan has developed as a leading voice in this area (2005; 2013). Klevan's critical notion of 'rapport' provides a strong guide. Klevan evaluates performance as 'an internal element of style in synthesis with other aspects of film style and explores the achievement of expressive rapport' (2005: i). This approach offers a useful framework for thinking about performance within isolated or incongruent moments precisely because Klevan invites and explores an intricate understanding of the expressive rapport between *internal* elements of style in synthesis. That rapport may not be of consistent quality across an entire film, and may be most strongly realised only in fleeting moments. Consequently, a performer's achievement, as one internal element in synthesis with others, may not be evenly weighted in the film as a whole. I take this to be the case in *Four Weddings*. The sequence I want to draw attention to takes place during the film's third wedding, at which the bride is Carrie (MacDowell), with whom Charles has fallen in love. He has just concluded a conversation with a former girlfriend, Henrietta (Anna Chancellor), when Fiona appears in a doorway behind him and enquires after her: 'How's duckface?' ('duckface' being the derogatory term Fiona reserves for Henrietta). As Scott Thomas delivers the line, she gently rotates a golden cigarette lighter in her fingers and taps it on the surface of a cigarette box she holds: a repeating gesture that reflects the idle playfulness behind her disdain for Henrietta. Charles turns around at the sound of Fiona's voice before facing away from her to say: 'Good form, actually. Not too mad.' Grant infuses this line with a tone of mock-politeness, picking up on Fiona's humorous contempt but in fact making it slightly crueller through the playacted propriety of Charles' response, whereas Fiona's enquiry was at least marked by its unfettered condescension. Equally, her line possesses the greater impact and precision through its sharp three-syllable structure, Scott Thomas managing to get force behind the 'duck' of 'duckface' to make it sound faintly obscene, whereas Charles' reply conforms to the dictates of social etiquette, Grant uttering his words indeterminately out to the room, rather than straight back towards Scott Thomas to engage with her teasing. Themes of directness and openness will come to define these characters in the exchanges that follow.

Charles' gazing out across the room is revealed to be purposeful monitoring as, seconds later, the arrival of the bride and groom is announced: Carrie and her new husband. As the couple take their places for the traditional first dance, guests make their way between Fiona and Charles. Fiona follows the stream, moving slowly across to stand behind Charles. From this position, she perches her chin lightly on his shoulder as he continues to stare out in blank adoration. Fiona lays a hand gently on his other shoulder, leaving it to rest for a moment and pressing into him a little closer before noticing that Charles has not reacted at all to this new intimacy.

Scott Thomas glances around the space before letting her gaze rest on Grant's turned-away face, delicately capturing her character's moment of realisation. We cut to a reverse shot of Carrie and her husband performing an awkward, joyless and unromantic Highland dance (he is a senior

politician of Scottish heritage) and then back to Charles and Fiona as she asks: 'You like this girl, don't you?' Scott Thomas allows a brief, grudging smile to form on her lips before letting it drop to deliver the line with flattened expression that conveys Fiona's sense of resigned inevitability: the question is a statement and hardly requires an answer. There is a trace of disappointment behind this resignation, a disappointment with Charles that we can understand and appreciate as we return to shots of Carrie's stilted, rigid and passionless performance of wedded bliss. Scott Thomas loads Fiona's subdued question with further urgent, unspoken questions: 'You like *this* girl? You like *this* girl so much you are not even aware that *I* am touching you *now*?'

But these questions remain unasked. Charles looks around briefly as Fiona speaks and then returns his gaze to Carrie, voicing his discomfort at watching the object of his affection marry someone else. Fiona remains still as he confesses, her face expressing her despondence as his words leave her lost, the display of emotion safe as she remains protected behind him: invisible. Once Charles has concluded, she winces slightly and turns away, walking to lean against the doorway behind him. After a second, he sees that she has moved and follows her, asking her whether she has 'identified a future partner for life yet'. He begins this question by calling her 'Fi-Fi,' an especially playful term that not only functions as an affectionate juvenile nickname but also reinforces their relationship as platonic to Charles, still defined by the names they have called each other for years. For him, their friendship is rooted in a shared past: innocent, benign and familiar. Fiona has taken out a cigarette and has it to her lips, raising it to the side of her mouth as she smirks at his question and then lighting it with a deft flick of her lighter. The smooth poise and sophistication of Scott Thomas' cigarette-lighting contradicts Charles' view of Fiona, emphasising that she is not a playmate but a complex, refined adult. Costuming helps to reinforce this notion, as Fiona's elegant black dress, gold bands and earrings contrast with Carrie's starchy, jewel-flecked wedding outfit and, before that, Henrietta's ostentatious Highland gown complete with vivid red sash and matching lipstick. In comparison to other adults in this scene, Fiona looks like a grown-up in control of her stylishness and her subtlety. Her elegance is lost on Charles, however, as he instinctively directs his attention back to Carrie while Fiona takes a drag on her cigarette and answers: 'No need really. The deed is done. I've been in love with the same bloke for ages.' As Scott Thomas delivers this line, she plucks a fragment of tobacco from her bottom lip and flicks it lightly away on the word 'ages'.

It is a small gesture but, combining with the lines she delivers here, one that comes to encapsulate the futility of the love that Fiona describes, as though she were already letting it drop before it had even been named.

Charles' interest is piqued and he turns back to her: 'Have you? Who's that?' Fiona's response to his question is elaborately formed. As he speaks, she looks out across the room, smiling and raising her eyebrows at an off-screen reveller. This grin develops into a slight laugh and she raises her shoulders minimally, using that motion to swing her head back towards Charlie, making him the recipient of the smile still held on her lips. She answers: 'You Charlie.'

Scott Thomas performs this series of movements fluently, combining them in a continuous flow.[1] At the same time, she builds delay into Fiona's reply, making clear that the character is postponing the moment of delivery and attempting to perform her answer with a show of ease and confidence. It is a poor performance. The smile is too rigidly fixed, the delay too deliberately weighted. Fiona reveals too clearly the effort involved in constructing the act of casualness, exposing the apprehension and nervousness that underpins the attempt. The confession is spoken in strained tones through the grin and, once it is disclosed, Scott Thomas lets her gaze drop marginally as her smile falters. The act cannot be sustained, and Fiona's immediate discomfort overtakes any image of happy nonchalance she might have wished to project.

Fiona's unease is intensified as we cut to a reverse close-up shot of Charles looking back at her, stunned and impassive. We might note Grant's restraint here in remaining still, not allowing a flicker of charm or empathy to soften the reality of Charles' inability to find any response to this display of human emotion. We return to Fiona in a mirrored reverse close-up and the shot is held for a number of seconds, extending the moment of her growing more self-conscious as no response is offered to her confession. Scott Thomas tilts her head upright and widens her eyes marginally to disclose Fiona's mild exasperation with her friend (a look that asks: 'aren't you going to say *something*?').

As with earlier movements, Scott Thomas uses this small motion in one direction to begin another as she tilts her head back to the side, using this as a leading force to propel her through the doorway and out of the frame.

The scene presents a moment of rare vulnerability for Fiona as she leaves herself open to Charles' blank response. Her muted frustration stems not from surprise that he is unable to offer a meaningful reaction but, rather, from disappointment that he has so accurately met her expectation of how this moment might play out. We are entitled to ask, given that we later discover Fiona's love for Charles has endured for many years, why she chooses this moment to declare her feelings at all, given that he has just confirmed his love so sincerely for someone else. This would seem the worst possible opportunity for Fiona, which might lead us to suggest that it was her intention to make the declaration without hope of reciprocation. From this perspective, we can understand her confession to Charles as a way of beginning to end her infatuation with him, rather than a means of striking up a romantic union. Her apprehension in declaring her love – the delay, the fixed smile, the attempted casualness – reveals her nervousness at finally reaching the point of confirming that it has no future, rather than the more conventional anxiety over whether or not these feelings will be rewarded. Fiona knows they will not. And, finally, Charles reveals his inability to receive the news of Fiona's desire with instinctive human empathy: he simply looks back at her without expression. Again, Fiona must have expected this from Charles, given his lack of awareness for her in the moments leading up to her confession: his blindness to her beauty, his instinctive prioritising of his infatuation with Carrie over her. Fiona knows she is in love with the wrong man. In revealing that love to him, she successfully places a boundary between them, closing off the possibility of a shared love forever. This notion continues as the rest of the scene plays out. Charles follows Fiona into a side-room and she stands away from him, first with her back turned and then side-on, her upheld cigarette-bearing hand forming a barrier, until she places her hands across the back of a sofa in front of her, creating a strong triangle shape with her arms that encloses her and excludes him. He is unable to breach this border, and she does not react to him even when he weakly attempts to offer comfort by belatedly placing his hand on hers.

Her words are now distanced and disengaged, even as she describes her passion to him. She jokes in clichés ('I knew from the first moment. Across a crowded room – a lawn, in fact'), she dismisses her feelings ('It doesn't matter. There's nothing either of us can do on this one'), and she lies about her pain ('Friends isn't bad, you know. Friends is quite something'). And Scott Thomas avoids eye contact with Grant now, allowing Fiona to withdraw into her own thoughts rather than place any further burden on Charles. Her posture, gestures, focus and vocal delivery convey the extent to which Fiona has already closed off these emotions to Charles.Even as she describes her infatuation, she puts it away in the past, marking it as futureless ('Just forget this business. It's not to be'). By speaking it aloud, she is saying goodbye to her love.

My contention is that Scott Thomas' performance of her character in these moments reveals levels of depth and complexity that reward further thought and consideration. Her expressive choices suggest a history and a psychology for Fiona that invites us to interpret and evaluate her actions. Grant, too, commits himself to a depiction of his character

that is not flattering, emphasising the point that Charles' general absent-mindedness has the potential to overlook or misread the thoughts, actions and emotions of others. The scene offers an expansion of the ways in which social awkwardness might be given meaning in the film, adding its potential to be painful and constraining alongside its capacity to be charming or quirky (as it is elsewhere in *Four Weddings*). The tone of the scene is quiet and subdued in contrast to the film as a whole. It lacks resolution and, indeed, Fiona's predicament would struggle to be adequately resolved in a story that is motivated so emphatically by the ultimate romantic union of Charles and Carrie. It is apt that it should take place 'to the side' of a main narrative event in the film and, indeed, Fiona's intimate and personal melancholy will almost immediately be swept away by the sudden death of another character (Gareth, played by Simon Callow) and the extended public show of mourning that follows. So, in many ways, the scene doesn't quite fit the contours of *Four Weddings* as a whole, possessing an understated dramatic tone and depth of characterisation not replicated in scenes elsewhere. I am not, however, proposing that the film is redeemed by this short sequence. Rather, I want to stay with the achievement of this moment *as a moment*. It is possibly representative of nothing other than itself. Taking that view necessarily means that my analysis of the moment is inherently limited and isolated, which runs against notions of criticism as a process of expansion that begins with the small and particular only to trace larger patterns, wider relationships. I think it unlikely that my understanding of the sequence would to lead to a fuller, more cohesive appreciation of *Four Weddings*. It may not help illuminate familiar overarching topics such as star performance in romantic comedy, British cinema in the 1990s, representations of social class or gender, for example. Should that curtail any admiration for the achievements I take to be represented in this moment? Should moments be discounted if they do not fit into larger coherent patterns? Inevitably, I am bound to say no but, in that answer, I am advocating a critical discussion based on more modest qualities like eloquence and economy, which can emerge so vividly and particularly in small moments. Put simply, I have tried to describe and detail some of the *work* that I take to be involved in creating the moment from *Four Weddings*. To return to some concerns in the work of V.F. Perkins', mentioned at the start of this essay, our appreciation of a film can be enriched when we are alert to the expressive choices that have been taken, moment by moment. The quality of those choices may not be consistent across an entire film and they may not offer thumbnail representations of larger themes that we might want to pursue across films more generally. Nevertheless, it seems unreasonable to simply let these moments go or to let our critical preoccupations blind us to their discrete merits. In some films, a distinguished moment might be all we have.

As editors putting together the collection *Film Moments*, Tom Brown and I enthusiastically welcomed opportunities for our contributors to use moments as a way of speaking about a film as a whole. (Indeed, these moments were used further to correspond with and represent yet larger definitions as we divided the book into sections on film criticism, history and theory.) An emphasis was therefore placed on the coherence and congruence of moments as they related to wider forms and structures. For obvious reasons, I would not want to discount the merits of that approach and I certainly welcome its continuation. However, by focussing for a while on moments that do not fit – that stand apart – we are reminded that this process of 'widening out' is not automatic and does not provide us with criteria against which the value of moments could always be judged. An attempt to develop any uniform approach to how moments in films can be handled and evaluated might easily risk the suggestion that all films merit the same levels of scrutiny because they exhibit equal capacities for balance, unity and coherence in their design and execution.[2] We would not struggle to reject such a notion, and it may be that these features can be found only within a moment, at a level that is especially particular and internalised. However, if we take those qualities to be at odds with the film as a whole, then a moment's achievements could in fact contribute to a wider pattern of imbalance, disunity and incoherence. It follows that a moment might be special, and remain special to us, without necessarily representing or encapsulating broader topics.

The temptation to use a moment as a means of articulating 'something bigger' may derive from a perception that we need to justify looking at moments in detail at all: that the small, the slight or the fleeting finds merit as a route to larger-scale forms and structures. However, I find the moment from *Four Weddings* to be useful in illustrating the benefits of staying with a moment to explore its internal relationships, its complexities, in a way that complements the precision and detail I take it to possess. But that undertaking is based equally on my feeling that the film as a whole does not stand up to equally close scrutiny. Had I wanted to make a case for *Four Weddings* exhibiting such qualities consistently, the discussion would have stalled. Alternatively, I might have overlooked this moment's merits in an effort to assert something general about the film (that its characterisations and interactions fail to convince) or misrepresented the film's shortcomings by using this moment as a measure (that all of its characterisations and interactions are equal to this sequence's accomplishments). We have options for the ways in which we decide to approach and evaluate film moments. However, as the *Four Weddings* example suggests, these choices are dictated by the nature of those moments and the films in which they occur, rather than by any overarching structure we might wish to impose upon them. Ultimately, this brings us to an idea of value that is shaped by the object of study, remaining flexible and responsive rather than rigid or unyielding.

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[1] Klevan's notion of 'fluency' is useful here: in an article, 'Living Meaning: The Fluency of Film Performance,' he 'celebrates the achievement of fluency by a selection of film performers and indicates the way in which, as each action flows fluidly in the next or as one move integrates with another, they make it difficult for us to isolate or crystallize meaning.' (2012: 35).

[2] These terms, 'balance, unity and coherence', derive directly from Perkins' *Film as Film* and underpin his reading of the sequence from *Psycho*, mentioned at the beginning of this article.