Self-Reflection
Beyond Conventional Fiction Film Engagement

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Abstract

Idiosyncratic responses are more strictly personal responses to fiction film that vary across individual spectators. In philosophy of film, idiosyncratic responses are often deemed inappropriate, unwarranted and unintended by the film. One type of idiosyncratic response is when empathy with a character triggers the spectator to reflect on his own real-life issues. Self-reflection can be triggered by egoistic drift, where the spectator starts imagining himself in the character's shoes, by re-experiencing memories, or by unfamiliar experiences that draw the spectator's attention. Film may facilitate self-reflection by slowing down narrative development and making the narrative indeterminate. Such scenes do make idiosyncratic responses, such as self-reflection, appropriate and intended. Fiction film is a safe context for the spectator to reflect on personal issues, as it also affords him with distancing techniques if the reflection becomes too painful or unwanted. The fictional context further encourages self-reflection in response to empathy, as the spectator is relieved from real-life moral obligations to help the other.

Keywords: spectator engagement, fiction film, idiosyncratic responses, empathy

Introduction

When I tell people that I write about emotional engagement in fiction film, they often have one special story of film engagement that they would like to share with me. A friend told me about her engagement with *Big Fish* (Tim Burton 2003). In this film, Ed Bloom has always been a big liar in his son's eyes, never present in real life for his family, but always telling fantasy stories about a grand mythical reality in which he himself is always the hero. At Ed Bloom's deathbed, his son tries to come to terms with his resentment of his father. My friend told me that she felt deeply for the father. On reflection, my friend told me, she realized that her deep engagement with Ed, *feeling* his pain of having a son that does not respect him, came from her own dissatisfaction with where she was in life at that point. Being in a career transition, she realized that she in fact found it difficult to respect herself, given her unsuccessful career. She resented the fact that she could not show her own day dreaming success stories to her friends and relatives, and be judged by those instead of by her lack of real-life success. Seeing *Big Fish* initiated reflection on what was important to her and how she wanted to live her life. Even though she did not actually think that *Big Fish* would be equally engaging for all spectators, aspects of it were nevertheless very relevant to her.

My friend's emotional reactions are of a strictly personal nature, not specifically intended by the film, and presumably not shared with other spectators. Her response to the film was an *idiosyncratic response*. What does film theory have to say about such idiosyncratic responses? Not much, as we shall see. In the writings of philosopher Noël Carroll, for example,

> [imagining how we would act or feel] seems to me to be an inappropriate response to fiction, since the author generally does not intend that we *imagine* how we, as readers, feel. That may be to leave off paying attention to the story and instead to wander off into some fantasy (Carroll 1998a: 355, original emphasis).

In this way, current film theory deems idiosyncratic responses, such as my friend's experience with *Big Fish*, inappropriate, supposedly because the film narrative does not intend them, because they vary between different spectators, and because little can seemingly be said about them in general. It has proven to be difficult, however, to settle the question as to exactly what responses or imaginings are appropriate in relation to fiction: Kendall Walton discusses this as what games of make-believe are authorized by a fiction (Walton 1990), and Susan Feagin as what kind of responses are warranted by a fiction (Feagin 1996). Feagin states the problem in relation to her object of study, literature:

> [A]m I reacting negatively because I'm in a bad mood? With pleasure because I like cats and there is a cat in the story? With fear because I break out in a sweat at the mere thought of spiders? Are these appropriate responses nevertheless? Do they have anything to do with appreciating the work as literature? (Feagin 1996: 146)

In most people's intuition, imagining what you will make for dinner will probably not count as a warranted response, indeed not as engagement in the fiction film at all. Imagining about oneself, however, may sometimes not just be a distraction, but count as a response prompted by the film. In the present paper, I will argue that certain film techniques do make idiosyncratic responses appropriate and warranted. I shall argue that we can say something in general about idiosyncratic responses to fiction film. Building on existing theories and empirical findings on emotional engagement in fiction film and literature in general, I will concentrate on one type of idiosyncratic response previously not investigated in film theory: I will explore how empathy, defined as sharing aspects of a character's experience, may lead the spectator to reflect about himself.

Theoretical Background

Regarding emotional responses to fiction film, the most productive field is the loosely defined theoretical movement *cognitive film theory*. Cognitive film theory was formed by a group of philosophers, psychologists and film scholars as a reaction against structuralist psychoanalytic and linguistic film theory. Cognitive film theory is characterized by an orientation towards cognitive science and analytical philosophy for a theory that is "science oriented, committed to the power of argument, and focused on particular problems rather than on building a grand historical synthesis", in the words of one of its major contributors, philosopher Gregory Currie (2004: 156).

The emotional reactions that cognitive film theorists discuss are common to all spectators. This is quite clear in the writings of psychologist and film theorist Ed S. Tan, for example, when he states that

> we assume that the watching of a feature film is accompanied by homogeneous experiences, (i.e., that the experiences of various viewers are comparable), the reason being that the effects intended by the maker are operative in all viewers (Tan 1996: 154).

Tan's project, typical for the field, is to explain the "systematics of the emotions evoked by films" (ibid: 195). One basic assumption common to some of the most influential theorists in cognitive film theory seems to be that emotional reactions that are not determined by the film are not a relevant object of study: Individually different emotional reactions seem to lie beyond the scope of cognitive film theory. The research interest of cognitive film theory is in fictional or narrative emotions, as well as aesthetic emotions prompted by the film. Examples of aesthetic emotions are admiration and wonder at the excellence of the acting, film technique and other things to do with the film as artefact, an object made by someone (Tan 1996: 64-65). Fictional and aesthetic emotions are seen as conventional responses prompted by the film and more or less common to all spectators.

It is probable that there are conventional narrative and aesthetic emotions common to most spectators, and I will later explain why this is so. I will nevertheless also argue that cognitive film theory can, and should, say something about individually different emotional responses. The present paper will sketch topics for such a study. In order to do this, I shall use empirical research on emotional reactions that extend beyond conventional engagement. These empirical studies are mostly from the field of *reader response* research on literature. As a theoretical movement with varying directions of research, reader response theory shares with *reception analysis* in media studies a focus on how reading literature or watching media programmes is interactive, and how meaning is developed in interaction between reader and text. The reader is thus regarded as an active participant who uses the literary text performatively, and reception is thus expected to differ across individual spectators.

While cognitive film theory also sees the spectator as actively making sense of films, the emphasis is often on cognitive and emotional mechanisms that all spectators presumably share – or on the universal features of our cognitive and emotional make-up. Reader response research tends to put more focus on personal differences in reading, or on the cultural or ethnographic perspectives now dominating media reception analysis.[1] Thus, a typical reception analysis of film involves studying the social context of film viewing (e.g., Kuhn 2002) and the importance of cultural context for interpretation (e.g., Staiger 1992, 2000). It is beyond the scope of the present paper to give an overview of this field of research.[2] Though I shall use some research from media studies, the reader response studies of literature that I concentrate on have a more strictly individual focus on emotional engagement that serves my purpose well.

The present discussion stays within the scope of cognitive film theory's theoretical exploration of intersubjective conditions for film engagement. The viewers of fiction film I discuss here are a theoretical construct – referred to as *the spectator* – and not the empirically studied *audiences* of reception analysis. I shall argue that there is something

to be said in general about the structure of individually different emotional engagement in fiction film – our emotional make-up may make empathy turn to self-reflection. The specific emotional manifestations of this will vary between individuals, but the structure of the engagement will have something in common. It is this structure I will now explore theoretically. My investigation will not dwell on textual analysis of films, as my aim is to explore the intersubjective conditions of film engagement. Neither will my investigation lay claim to empirical findings – my efforts are to clarify the relation between empathy and self-reflection conceptually. Having said that, it is my hope and belief that this conceptual investigation will facilitate empirical research on actual audiences, which again could lead to modification of my theoretical suggestions.

Emotions in Fiction Film Engagement

A premise in the present exploration is that emotions are self-implicating. This is important in current cognitive science on emotions, and it is called the functional theory of emotions. An important proponent of this theory is psychologist Nico H. Frijda (1986, 1988). His theory has been influential in discussions of emotional reactions to film (Grodal 1997; Tan 1996) and to literature (Robinson 2005). Emotions are seen as functional for the individual because they serve as an automatic appraisal of a situation – an evaluation of the importance of a situation for the individual's wants, wishes, interests and goals. The emotions are automatic physiological responses to a situation that draw attention to how the situation is relevant to the individual's well-being. This can be more or less dependent on conscious evaluation. While Frijda stresses the subconscious appraisal of emotions, another influential psychologist, Richard S. Lazarus (1991), points to the way conscious evaluation also influences emotional experience. In any case, knowledge about a situation is not emotional before it touches upon personal well-being. Emotions show that I, subconsciously or consciously, have made an appraisal of a situation's relevance to me. I will thus not react emotionally to something that is of no relevance to me – or in other words, if I do react emotionally to something, it is because it is perceived as somehow relevant.[3]

At first glance, this does not seem to be true for emotional responses to fiction, as we do not inhabit the storyworld, and it is, after all, only fictional. What relevance do the characters' experiences have for us? In philosophy of fiction, this has been debated as the paradox of fiction – initiated by Colin Radford's conclusion that it is inconsistent of us to respond emotionally to events we know are not true (Radford 1975). Nevertheless, the emotions in relation to fiction do point to relevance to the spectator, and are no exception to the way emotions work in general. Conventionally, the relevance to the spectator is through sympathy and empathy with the characters in the fiction (cf. Tan 1996). Sympathy entails having the character's interests in mind, and seeing the character as having morally desirable traits (Murray Smith 1995: 188). I have sympathy with a character if I feel sorry when he is losing a fight, for example, because I want him to win. I see his interests as morally preferable. In sympathetic engagement, we can say that the relevance of my emotional reaction as a spectator is for me who has sympathy with the character's goals and desires. Furthermore, in a wider sense, all members of a moral community should be concerned to see the right sort of response to a particular kind of action or attitude. Moral evaluation in this way is a part of engagement in works

of fiction – the spectator may feel outrage when a fiction, in his view, does not express the right sort of moral attitude. Thus, fiction may be relevant to the spectator as part of a moral community. The spectator's moral feelings are activated, and he will want the right moral attitude to prevail.[4]

Empathy entails feeling aspects of what the character is experiencing; knowing that it is the character's experience I am feeling. I have empathy with a character if I feel his pain in the fight, and ascribe this feeling to him, to stay with the same example. It is empathy if I feel aspects of his frustration or his anger over losing the fight. Empathy can thus involve aspects of shared feeling with a character, while sympathy as feeling for a character entails a different emotional experience than the character's.[5] We can state this relevance as being to "me as the character" in empathic engagement. When feeling his painful experiences, empathy will make me perceive his pain as relevant to me as well. This is especially true if I also have sympathy for him; I can feel the pain of a moral main character I have sympathy with easier than with a terrible villain (see, e.g., Zillmann 1994). Thus, through empathic and sympathetic engagement in the fictional characters, the spectator will emote to their experiences because he has an interest in the characters' goals, desires and well-being. When engaging in the fictional world of the film, the spectator constructs a "we" in such a way that the character's well-being also becomes the spectator's concern. As with emotions in general, however, the self-implicating nature of empathy need not be conscious – it may in fact normally be outside my reflective awareness, influencing my concerns, interest and engagement nonetheless.

Emotional reactions are usually, at least in part, common to all spectators and can be said to be intended by the film when the spectator engages empathically and sympathetically in fiction film. These conventional, narrative emotions are cognitive film theory's main concern. Stories of social realism or naturalism (and the great majority of mainstream fiction film will fall into such a wide category) seek to tell stories of general human interest, and emotional themes that are relevant and recognizable to many. Humans react emotionally in a similar way to many situations: The clearer the impact and consequences of a situation are, the more similar humans will react. Severe loss and threat of death, for example, produce more uniform emotional reactions than do situations that are open to interpretation (Lazarus 1991: 19-20). Some of the emotional responses to films are so-called basic emotions (cf. Ekman 1982, 2003), that is, emotional reactions that are innate and universal. Some fear and startle responses to frightening films, as when the monster suddenly attacks in *Alien* (Ridley Scott 1979), for example, are most probably hardwired and common to all spectators. Lazarus (1991: 121ff) points out how there are some core relational themes even in more complex emotions: A specific relation between an individual and his environment characterizes each emotion. An individual will experience fear, for example, when faced with an "immediate, concrete, and overwhelming physical danger", while feeling anxiety when "facing uncertain, existential threat" (ibid: 122). Thus, as the emotional system is the same in all humans, and our individual experiences affect only parts of this system, some basic emotional responses to fiction film will probably be shared by most spectators within a given cultural context.

Nonetheless, through a network of associations and prior emotional experiences, the emotion system also becomes personalized.[6] While watching film, our personal, idiosyncratic emotional reactions will, in all probability, be activated just as easily as

shared emotional responses – it may just be more difficult to say something about them theoretically. Whether or not idiosyncratic responses are considered warranted responses to the fiction film, it is at least important to acknowledge the fact that such responses do occur. As all spectators have their specific, personalized emotional associations and reactions, idiosyncratic responses to fiction probably run alongside the shared ones. This may usually remain in the back of my mind, however. It may not draw my conscious attention – but merely be one part of the emotional resonance any given scene in a film creates in the spectator, perhaps merely giving the scene a stronger sense of relevance to the spectator.

Nevertheless, from time to time more strictly personal matters may complicate conventional fictional engagement. Spectators may have such strong and striking idiosyncratic responses to films that it draws their attention, such as my friend's experience with *Big Fish*. What is the difference between the emotional reactions brought about by sympathy and empathy in conventional narrative or fictional engagement, on the one hand, and those of a more personal nature, on the other? About this existing film theory has had little to say.

The answer may lie in the nature of conventional fictional engagement. Fictional engagement will be experienced, metaphorically speaking, as partially a transportation of the spectator to the narrative or fictional world (Gerrig 1993). Fictional engagement gives a feeling of being lost or absorbed; the spectator is fully concentrated on the events of the fiction, he may lose track of time and fail to notice events occurring around him (Green et al. 2004). Fictional engagement is thus enjoyable because the spectator is relieved of the stress and worries of everyday life, and given an opportunity to get away from self-focus. We can say that experiencing empathy and sympathy with characters in fiction conventionally is an enjoyable form of escapism for the spectator. Empathy and sympathy pull the spectator into fictional engagement by making the characters' concerns the spectator's concerns. This is not experienced as being as stressful as it would have been had the spectator been concerned about his own well-being directly.

Nevertheless, when the fiction film gets close to the spectator's real life, and awakens memories, associations or reflections of surprising and perhaps painful magnitude, this enjoyable state of fictional engagement may be disturbed momentarily or permanently. When surprising or disturbing emotional reactions trigger strong personal relevance, the enjoyable feeling of transportation that characterizes fiction film engagement may be disturbed. Awakening the relevance of particular real life situations will probably be experienced differently than the typical absorption of fictional engagement – there is now direct relevance to the spectator's own well-being, and not just indirectly through engagement in the characters' fates. In reflecting on his engagement both during and after the film viewing, the spectator will probably have a sense of whether his reactions are intended by, and consistent with, the fiction film, or of mere personal relevance. Arguably, at least reflective spectators will probably be able to separate emotional reactions that are conventional and those that are more individually relevant when the typical relaxing and effortless fiction film engagement is disturbed, as in the latter case. It is the kind of responses that trigger strong personal associations and relevance that is my concern here. I shall now make some suggestions as to how such strong personal engagement may occur.

Beyond Mere Fictional Engagement
Through Freshly Perceived Experiences

While engaging empathically, the spectator's own autobiographical memories may be actualized. Something in the character's experience may remind the spectator of something he once experienced. Using one's own memories to corroborate the character's experience is important in the empathic process (cf. Hoffman 2000: 47ff, see also Currie 1997: 74-75). Engaging in a story that is somewhat similar to my own, I may process my memories about my own story implicitly through my empathic engagement in the fictional character.[7]

If something in the empathic experience is perceived as especially important to the spectator personally, this may result in an emotional reaction in response to the empathic experience. For example, the spectator may consciously re-experience memories that were forgotten. A bodily or emotional experience the character has may be similar in some respects to the spectator's bodily or emotional memory of a past experience. Perhaps it is the narrative feeling that is similar – an emotional process that is common to the film sequence and the memory.[8] The similarity may re-awaken the old bodily and emotional feeling with unexpected force. This memory, re-experienced in the new context of the fictional narrative, is likely to trigger the spectator's attention and reflection.

The spectator may also experience something so bodily and emotionally new in empathic engagement that this in itself will draw attention. When engaging empathically, the spectator may learn what it is like to be in situations he has never experienced in real life, and probably never will – what it feels like to experience the beginning of a new ice age and that large parts of mankind have died, for example, or what it feels like to be able to fly, have superpowers and save the world, or to be a soldier in the trenches of the losing side of a war.[9] The emotional experience may in these cases be surprising and unfamiliar, and this may compel him to reflect.

In such ways, empathic engagement may strike the spectator as defamiliarizing or thought-provoking. In the case of re-evoked memories, the sensation of having the old bodily feeling in a new context may be thought-provoking: What was it I felt back then? Why did the film remind me of it – how did my experience resemble the character's? With new and unfamiliar experiences, the sensation of having felt bodily and emotionally something radically different from one's own everyday experiences may foster reflection: What did that really feel like? What consequences does this experience have for my evaluation of similar cases? Thus, in both cases, empathic engagement is productive in a way that may trigger reflection.

From Empathy to In-his-shoes Imagining

In conventional empathic engagement, I am using myself to understand how the fictional character feels. Furthermore, empathic engagement in a fictional character may also make the spectator start wondering how he would actually feel if he were in the character's shoes. This is a different kind of imaginative engagement: in *in-his-shoes imagining* the focus is on how one would feel in the other's shoes.[10] In psychology, this is called *egoistic drift* (Hoffmann 2000: 54ff).[11] Empathic engagement easily turns to in-his-shoes imagining about how I would feel if I were in the other's shoes. This may give stronger emotional engagement than "pure" empathic engagement because I am

imagining something about me directly – it activates an evaluation of the possible consequences for my own well-being. This is supported by experimental research showing that self-focused role-taking (in-his-shoes imagining) produces more distress than does other-focused role-taking (empathy) (Batson et al. 1997).

In reality, all empathic engagement probably does have elements of both types of imagining – or in other words, imaginative engagement with others probably entails intertwining bits of in-his-shoes imagining to fill out the empathic act. I may not be able to understand how you are feeling without also imagining how I would have felt in your shoes.

In real life, this could create problems – the tendency for empathy to change to imagining what I would feel in your situation may make me focus more on the possible implications for me than on the actual implications for you. In-his-shoes imagining may draw my focus away from you and towards myself. Hoffman points out that egoistic drift thus reveals the fragility of empathy (Hoffman 2000: 56). The affective reaction may make me lose my focus on the other, such as in empathy, and drift onto an egoistic concern about how stressful the empathic experience was for me. In general, personal distress due to empathic experience would perhaps be deemed childish in real life, as prior to empathic maturity children more easily lose focus on the suffering other and attract attention to their own empathically aroused distress.[12]

In relation to fiction, however, egoistic drift may be less problematic for reasons I shall return to later. One of Hoffman's examples of egoistic drift in adults is indeed a report about an experience with fiction film. An undergraduate reports from seeing the film *Steel Magnolias*:

> I was able to keep my composure until that last scene. As M'Lynn became hysterical (…) I began to remember witnessing the same actions… performed by my grandmother. I became hysterical. My focus was no longer on Shelby and M'Lynn [characters in the film] but rather on my grandmother. I remember how I felt after my aunt died leaving behind her two children. I felt the pain and depression all over again. My friends who were watching the movie with me assumed I was crying because of the movie but in actuality the tears were because of my own life (Hoffman 2000: 57).

Egoistic drift may cause the spectator to shift and adjust between fictional engagement and self-reflection – between himself and the character in his imaginative engagement. This will make him reflect both on what he and the character have in common and on how they differ. In this manner, a dialectic movement is triggered, and this may be experienced as transformative.[13] Our tendency towards egoistic drift may thus be of value in relation to fiction, just as it may be a problem for our empathic tendencies in real life. The reflection on fictional engagement might give rise to self-modifying feelings. Perhaps this process can be called catharsis. As Martha Nussbaum has pointed out (Nussbaum 1986: 388ff), *catharsis* of the emotional life of the spectator is not, as often misunderstood, a *purification* of emotions. Catharsis is rather a *clarification* of the spectator's emotional experience (see also Oatley 1994: 71). Thus, we can say that fiction can help the spectator clarify his emotional experiences by causing him to reflect on what caused the emotional reactions, why these reactions may have been particularly strong, what in his own life may trigger such a feeling of relevance, etc.

From Transportation to Transformation

I have suggested that an odd, unexpected or especially strong emotional experience with the fictional world may cause the spectator to relate to the film unconventionally. He will have more personal associations and engage in more effortful reflection on what in the film brought about the reaction. The spectator's conventional understanding has been challenged by his own emotional reactions. Regarding reading of literature, literary theorist David S. Miall and psychologist Don Kuiken, as well as psychologist Keith Oatley, have researched such a transition in the reader's engagement. A new affective context has arisen in such episodes of unexpected emotional experience. The defamiliarizing emotional episode makes it more likely that the spectator's engagement will become non-conventional and more personal. Strictly narrative or fictional emotions, used to understand the narrative, will now more likely motivate or trigger non-conventional associations and reflections. The transition from fictional engagement to self-reflection is characterized by a change from being *transported* into the fictional world to an experience of the fictional world also contributing to a potential *transformation* of the real self (e.g., Oatley 1994, 2002).

Empirical reader response research has shown that such episodes are characterized by slower reading. Miall and Kuiken found that the reader will read slower and with more insecurity as the unfamiliar in the emotional episode challenges his existing horizon of understanding of the text, its meaning and its relevance to him (Miall & Kuiken 2002: 224ff). More associations and more reflection demand more time than simple fictional engagement, as Oatley points out (Oatley 1994: 59). The spectator will engage more in trying to revise and reconstruct his own emotional experience than in straightforward fictional understanding of the text. Readers of literature slow down because self-reflective engagement demands more time. This may indicate that the engagement is becoming multi-levelled – perhaps the readers reflect upon personal matters in addition to exploring fictional (as well as aesthetic) issues. This is described as an *episode structure* in readers' engagement (Miall & Kuiken 2001).[14] This is a more demanding form of engagement, where the fiction is explored in episodic succession to real world memories and emotional consequences for the spectator.

Suggestions as to How Fiction Film Elicits Self-Reflection

Lacking equivalent empirical research on fiction film, it is not easy to predict how episodes of self-reflection will affect the spectator's engagement. Miall and Kuiken's research on literature shows that readers slow down in order to have time for more association and reflection. Film, however, moves on in time regardless of the spectator's activity. One might perhaps suggest that the medium of video allows more self-reflection as the spectator can stop the film to reflect, and resume when ready to engage fictionally. Breaking viewings into sessions may enable reflection in between viewings. This may be especially relevant in relation to epic films or TV-series, but also with ordinary feature films. It is nevertheless not my experience that spectators usually behave this way with fiction film, and I will restrict my discussion here to fiction film only.

If the spectator does not stop the film, and it moves on in time, episodes of self-reflection may make the spectator fall out of fictional engagement, at least momentarily, as he will probably, unless overwhelmed, only briefly reflect on the personal relevance

of the narrative, and then return to fictional engagement. While falling out of literary engagement means that you stop reading, or read more slowly, falling out of fictional engagement in film means that the spectator misses out on ongoing narrative developments. It also means that if the narrative development continues, the spectator must probably resume self-reflecting after the film viewing. Thus, let me first tentatively assume that the spectator of film might be expected to fall out of strict narrative engagement during such episodes, and that important parts of self-reflection must occur after the film viewing is over. Murray Smith introduces the term *retrospective empathy*, contrasting it with occurent empathy (Murray Smith 2006), to account for, amongst other things, the increasing tendency to consume fiction in a dispersed fashion. Independently of this, however, retrospective empathy may also occur after seeing fiction film in one continuous block, as the spectator reflects on the experience afterwards. Retrospective empathy could thus trigger self-reflection after the film viewing is over.

Nevertheless, one reason why spectators may not miss out on narrative development when experiencing idiosyncratic responses is that fiction films often give the spectator enough time at important points in the narrative to reflect and associate. Thus, while readers of literature make time themselves at important points in the narrative, filmic narratives often make time for the spectator. One can say that, in this way, some types of film and some types of film scenes do anticipate idiosyncratic responses, that is, responses that vary between spectators and are of a more personal nature. Self-reflection is prompted, authorized and warranted by the fiction film at important points in the narrative.

Film theorist Torben Kragh Grodal (2000) discusses how films may elicit subjective associations. He writes:

> The simplest way of evoking a subjective feeling is by showing images, which only elicit a very limited amount of propositions and which have no links to some concerns of some protagonists. The viewer will quickly make all the cued propositions, and if the sequence goes on beyond the time when all possibilities for making propositions are depleted, the mind will shift into a subjective mode (Grodal 2000: 90).

Thus, if a film sequence lasts longer than the spectator needs to draw the available or probable inferences required to anticipate action and emotional outcome for the characters, for example, the spectator will start making subjective associations to give the scene additional meaning. Hence, if film sequences do not offer something that can focus the spectator's attention in objective, narrative terms, the spectator will shift to an unfocused, associative mode. Subjective feelings are activated by unfocused associative procedures in order to make sense of the sequence by finding subjective meaning in it. Grodal thus argues that film scenes that block or impede conventional narrative understanding primarily elicit subjectivity in film. This is still not yet the same phenomenon as I have discussed as self-reflection – but starting to make personal associations may certainly trigger self-reflection, as I have described it.

Film theorist Barbara Klinger makes a related point to Grodal's in her discussion of *The Piano* (Jane Campion 1993) (Klinger 2006). She argues that art film typically contains what she calls *arresting images*, that is, images that occur

when a film stops to contemplate an exquisitely composed, significantly evoca-
tive and/or uncanny image. The forward motion of the narrative slows down or
temporarily halts, allowing this spectacle to capture fully our attention. (…) The
exact meaning of the arresting image is unclear; it is at once visually stirring and
interpretively opaque. (…) Just as it forestalls easy interpretation, its emotional
effects are both intricate and obscure (Klinger 2006: 24).

Arresting images do not merely entail slowing down of narrative development, but are
images deliberately indeterminate and incomplete in narrative meaning. Klinger argues
that arresting images activate the spectator's intertextual associations, and also, more
relevant to my concerns, the spectator's personal experience. In line with Grodal and
Klinger's argument, my first suggestion is that some form of narrative openness in fiction
film scenes may facilitate idiosyncratic responses such as self-reflection.

Arresting images as inscrutable immobilizations of narrative flow are most typical of
art films. Nonetheless, mainstream fiction film may also contain scenes that tend towards
the subjective-lyrical mode that Grodal discusses, and Klinger's arresting images. One
typical example of arresting images in mainstream films is perhaps what film theorist
Carl Plantinga calls *scenes of empathy* (Plantinga 1999). These are scenes, typically
towards the end of films, that dwell on a close-up of an emotional face. The spectator's
attention is focused on the character's experience. The scene is longer than necessary
merely to communicate the character's emotional state to the spectator. The scene of
empathy is intended to elicit an empathic response, argues Plantinga.

One can take this argument a step further and claim that scenes of empathy tend
towards making arresting images in mainstream film. The emotional face is dwelled
upon so as to maximize the spectator's emotional engagement, giving him time to make
further associations and reflections. Scenes of empathy give the spectator time for ego-
istic drift and self-reflection without falling out of narrative development, allowing for
a dialectic between empathy and in-his-shoes imagining. Although scenes of empathy in
mainstream film may not be characterized by interpretative ambiguity, the sheer length
of the scenes will often induce the spectator to turn to more subjective associations. My
second hypothesis is, thus, that giving the spectator enough time facilitates idiosyncratic
responses. Scenes that linger longer than narratively necessary, although not interpreta-
tively ambiguous, may facilitate idiosyncratic responses in the spectator.

A critic might at this point suggest that provocative scenes, such as many scenes in
horror films or unpleasant scenes, might be equally good candidates for facilitating self-
reflection as scenes that linger longer than narratively necessary. There are probably
many good candidates besides the ones mentioned. At this point, I have deliberately tried
to avoid the (difficult) question of what filmic content may facilitate self-reflection, and
merely make a point about filmic narration: Scenes that last longer than necessary to make
sense narratively, and/or that are interpretatively ambiguous, facilitate self-reflection, as
the spectator will be encouraged to find personal meaning in the scene depicted.

It is nevertheless tempting to add a third hypothesis concerning the content of the nar-
rative. As Currie points out, for example, a well-made narrative can encourage reflection
in ways other than real life can – talented filmmakers construct narratives to be instructive
for reflection (Currie 1998: 171). One could thus argue that films with a certain *complexity*
in narrative and characters are more likely to trigger self-reflection, as stereotype narratives

are less likely to induce the surprising, odd or unexpected feelings perhaps typical for triggering self-reflection. Existing empirical research, however, gives no clear backing for such a hypothesis. In her interviews of audiences, media theorist Birgitta Höijer (1998) found that the genre of 'social-realistic' fiction films in particular evokes personal memories and reflection. Thus, the closer films come to viewers' own lives, the more viewers use them for personal reflection. Perhaps *familiarity*, and not necessarily complexity, is the most effective elicitor of self-reflection. Then again, media theorist Ien Ang (1985) found in her research that even the glamorous and, for most spectators, far-fetched stories of soap operas have emotional realism for some groups of spectators. In this way, one could argue that *stereotyped* characters are most likely to trigger self-reflection in many spectators, as their experiences to some degree touch upon universal issues such as the mother-child relation, loss of loved ones, etc. The empirical research is ambiguous at this point, and I will make no further hypotheses concerning the contents of films and self-reflection.

Fictional Context as Coping Mechanism

To further characterize self-reflection in relation to fiction film, I shall now look at the differences its special context – *fiction* – makes for the spectator's engagement.

Several cognitive scientists have pointed out that people display varying ways of handling their own emotional responses. Most notably, Lazarus (1991) has for decades carried out influential research on how people have *coping mechanisms* that help deal with emotional reactions. A coping mechanism is a way to think about or otherwise handle the first automatic physiological appraisal or reaction. If I feel ashamed, I can blame someone else; if I feel scared of social situations, I can decide to avoid them in the future; if I am deeply disappointed with my friend's behaviour, I may stop thinking about her as a friend. Thus, by redefining how I think about something, I can handle my own emotional reaction.

This is an important addition to the functional theory of emotion: what Lazarus is pointing out is how the way we think about our own physiological affective reaction makes a difference for the emotional experience. Thus, in this way, emotions can be seen as processes through which automatic affective reactions trigger cognitive monitoring, which in turn changes the affective appraisal.[15]

Lazarus and colleagues have conducted research on such coping mechanisms in relation to film viewing (e.g., Lazarus & Alfert 1964). Lazarus showed subjects a film of a painful pubertal ceremony that involved making incisions in young boys' penises. By manipulating the film, Lazarus demonstrated how the subjects were able to modify their own emotional reaction while seeing this. That is, it was the researchers who gave these subjects various coping mechanisms, but it nevertheless shows that subjects are able to manage their emotional reactions when given appropriate techniques to do so. One such technique was a soundtrack with a voiceover telling the subjects that the ritual was actually enjoyable for the young boys. This moderated the response, as did a voiceover that intellectualized about the events in anthropological terms. This showed that the subjects were able to reappraise the situation when offered a coping mechanism by the film's voiceover.

Philosopher Jenefer Robinson (2005: 195ff) points out that the formal qualities of artwork, or in our context fiction film, may play the role of coping mechanisms in the

emotional interplay with the film. An important difference between having an emotional experience in real life and with film is that, while the subject must construct his own coping mechanisms in real life, film has formal devices that can act as ready-made coping mechanisms for the subject. The film spectator's responses are guided and managed through the film's form and structure. A typical coping mechanism that Robinson points to is the difference between story and plot, for example (Robinson 2005: 214): in order to deal with painful experiences, the film may wait until the proper moment to reveal past traumatic experiences. In *Capote* (Bennett Miller 2005), for example, flashbacks of a murder are shown late in the film, when the spectator ought to be able to focus intellectually on the protagonist Capote's question of why they did it. The late flashbacks of the murders occur in a narrative context where the spectator will be more able to avoid being merely overwhelmed by their brutality, but to be better able to reflect upon them. Thus, in fiction film, narrative techniques are used to allow the spectator to see traumatic events in flashback at appropriate times for coping with the narrative.

Another typical coping mechanism films often offer is that of comic relief (Robinson 2005: 226, see also Grodal 1997: 197ff). A typical example is perhaps *La Vita È Bella* (Roberto Benigni 1997), where the main character's humour is used to facilitate watching the cruelties of a Nazi death camp. Thus, Robinson points out that not only do people have their own coping mechanisms – fiction film in addition offers spectators coping mechanisms to deal with its content. The coping mechanisms Robinson discusses are in this way given by the films.

Yet Robinson somehow neglects the important coping mechanism that lies in the awareness of the fictional context alone.[16] Madelon Sprengnether writes her memoirs based on fiction films to which she had intense emotional reactions at important turning points in her own life. She thus investigates how fiction film can actualize memories and help the spectator work through loss, such as her own loss of her father at age nine. She writes that

> [w]hen bad things happened to me in real life, I didn't react. I seemed cool or indifferent. Yet in the dark and relative safety of the movie theatre, I would weep over fictional tragedies, over someone else's suffering. (Sprengnether 2002: 6)

> Crying at the movies, I have come to understand, was a way for me to begin to feel the pain of my father's death. The loss I could not acknowledge in my own life I could recognize and react to onscreen. It was as though the sadness I had buried when I was nine years old lay deep within my psyche, waiting for its shadow image to appear in the dreamlike space of the movie theatre (ibid: 11).

An essential and highly important difference between emotional responses in real life and in relation to fiction film is the "safety net" of the fictional context. Merely knowing that the emotional engagement is with something fictional may facilitate the spectator's courage to explore emotionally problematic issues. If the emotional engagement becomes too painful, the spectator may distance himself. Or, as Tan puts it, the stronger the emotional reactions, the more probable it is that the spectator will become aware that his own engagement is exactly in a fiction (Tan 1996: 65): In fictional contexts, the self-implicating effect of emotions can lead to awareness of the artificiality of the film, giving the spectator aesthetic distance from what caused the emotion.

Through empathy with fictional characters, the spectator may touch upon themes of personal relevance subconsciously or consciously. If the empathic experience attracts the subject's reflective consciousness, it may trigger self-reflection. The subject has the safety net of the fictional context if these reflections become too painful. The spectator can then distance himself from the similarity with the fictional characters, withdraw from personal reflection and focus on other aspects of the ongoing film – fictional or aesthetic issues. The egoistic drift of the empathic experience caused the spectator to reflect on himself, but the empathic experience also affords the spectator an easy way out of existentially threatening reflection. If the spectator's reflection becomes too painful, the spectator can always distance himself from it by focusing on the state of the character and not on himself. Thus the spectator can use a character's experience to reflect on similarities with his own life in a controlled fictional context that also gives him available distancing techniques if the reflection becomes too painful.

The Difference Between Empathy with Fictional Characters and Empathy in Real Life

Arguably, fiction film allows the spectator to use his empathic experience for self-reflection more easily than real life empathy. First, it has been pointed out that the spectator may feel empathy with characters in fiction film more easily than with real-life people. The reason for this is that it is less risky to involve oneself emotionally in another fictional human being than in real-life humans. Empathizing with real-life humans may entail a moral obligation to help them, if we understand that this is needed. Failing to help may lead to feelings of guilt.[17] In real life, we might feel the need to protect ourselves from this obligation to help by not allowing ourselves to empathize. Fiction, however, releases the spectator from the need to protect himself from this obligation to help, as fictional characters cannot be helped (see Keen 2007: 88,106-7; Tan 1996: 55, 76; see also Oatley 2002: 63-4).

Related to this, it may also be easier to empathize with characters in fiction film than with real-life peers because the film is a limited experience, where the spectator can foresee the length and intensity of his empathic involvement. The spectator does not risk an overwhelming empathic commitment in another person.[18]

Furthermore, it may be easier to empathize with characters in fiction than in other real-life humans, because fiction does not invoke any practical self-interests. The spectator is thus free to focus totally on the characters' interests (see Coplan 2006).

In addition to these suggestions as to why it is perceived as less risky to empathize with fictional characters, I argue that it is also easier to reflect on one's own empathic experience in relation to fiction. Why? In real life, there is a moral imperative to focus on the other's experience in empathy. Focusing or attracting attention to one's own empathic distress would be regarded as infantile and self-absorbed – if you are in pain and I empathize with you, it is not acceptable for me to draw your, or any bystander's, attention to how painful it is for me to feel your pain. With fiction, this is not so. I can very well focus on my own empathic distress and reflect on my own empathic experience. Furthermore, if I have a moral obligation to focus on the other and possibly help the other in experiences of real-life empathy, I may not have the capacity to reflect on these experiences. This looks very different with regard to fiction. In relation to fiction,

the lack of any moral obligation to the fictional character facilitates such reflection on the on-going empathic experience.

A psychologist I once met had her own story to share with me to illustrate this. Working with refugees, her therapy sessions entailed listening to stories about many traumatic experiences. She told me that after she had started this job, she had begun crying in excess in the cinema. All stories about loss or trauma, and not just stories about refugees, would break her down completely. Jokingly she added that her husband refused to accompany her to the cinema, as all the fun seemed to have gone out of it. It was certainly not difficult to see that she needed a place for her own reactions to the refugees' stories, as her role as psychologist demanded that she kept herself composed and let her patients be her emotional focus. Thus, for some spectators or in some periods of life, fiction film as a kind of "cleansing kit" or "try-out laboratory" for empathy may be at the very core of spectator engagement. In general, to the degree that reflection about one's own emotional reactions is central to emotional maturity, fiction film may play an important part in our emotional life.

The Kantian principle that one should never use other humans only as means to reach a target does not perhaps apply to fictional human beings, who can very well be, and usually are, used instrumentally for pleasure, entertainment and self-reflection. This difference between fictional and real-life contexts is also evident in the fact that the spectator of a tragic fiction film can both wish for the story to go well for the character, and at the same time also wish for the story to go badly because he wants to see a really tragic story. The first type of wish is what Currie calls character desires, and the second narrative desires (Currie 1999). In relation to tragedy, these two kinds of desire are usually opposed. The important point to keep in mind here is that it is only in fictional contexts that it is not only legitimate, but quite common, to have opposing character and narrative desires. In real life it would be immoral to have sympathy for someone yet want it to go badly for him because one is in the mood for, or in need of, a tragic story.[19] Thus, the quite common opposition between narrative and character desires in relation to fiction would be immoral in real life.

Empirical Research on Who Uses Fiction Film this Way

Is my anecdote about my friend's experience with *Big Fish* merely a unique example, making my theoretical suggestions in this paper superfluous for film theory? No. There is empirical research on literature to back my assumptions about the occurrence of self-reflection. This makes it likely that spectators reflect on themselves in response to fiction film as well. In the case of literature, between a quarter and a third of the readers in Miall and Kuiken's research show the typical personal, associative pattern of reading experience discussed here as self-reflection. Thus, it may be a particular reading strategy used only by some readers: Miall and Kuiken point to evidence that those readers who score high on scales of "empathic ability", "imagery vividness" and "insight" use literature this way (Miall & Kuiken 1995). In other words, readers that have a high ability to make characters "real", that have a high ability to make fantasy worlds vividly present, not only visually but also in feeling, sound and smell, and finally that use dreams or fantasy to reflect upon themselves, report using literature in this way.

There is much evidence that women report on experiencing empathy with characters more than men (de Wied et al. 1994) and use this for self-reflection more often than men: literary scholar Els Andringa (2004: 226ff) points to research showing not only that women tend to identify with characters more often than men do, but furthermore that they tend to experience a tighter connection between fiction and life in their reflections about these experiences (see also Harper & Porter 1996). Work by Charlton and colleagues (2004: 256) also supports this notion. Both these studies find that men may also use fiction to reflect on their own world, but more abstractly in the form of identifying with situations, and reflecting on the theme of the literature. On the other hand, these studies of gender differences ought to be read with caution, as William Ickes and colleges found that differences in empathic abilities between men and women only manifested when the subjects were aware that empathy was being tested (Ickes et al. 2000, Ickes 2003): They conclude that women may not have superior empathic abilities, but are simply more highly motivated to show empathic ability due to gender expectations. Women are *supposed* to be more empathic than men are. Therefore, what the research certainly makes a good case for is that women more often *report* these kinds of experiences with fiction than do men. One problem with reader response research manifests itself here: readers' own reports may not always be a reliable source of information.

Another possibility is that readers in particular life circumstances of loss might use this particular reading strategy. Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004) have empirical research supporting this: They found that the strategy of self-reflection when reading is used to digest a loss that occurred two to more years before (ibid: 195). Sprengnether's (2002) experience quoted above may be a good example.

In conclusion, it seems likely that some spectators have a disposition towards using fiction film for self-reflection, but that a specific need for working with a particular loss may cause larger groups of spectators to use fiction film in this way. It seems likely that larger groups of spectators may use film this way not only in relation to a loss they are consciously depressed about, but also in relation to a film that strikes them as emotionally relevant in a way they were perhaps not prepared for, or are aware of, as with our anecdotal example of a friend's experience of *Big Fish*. Perhaps the occasional fiction film experience of striking relevance to one's own emotional life may trigger this special form of engagement for large groups of spectators, but that it is typical only of a limited group. As studies are either few or equivocal (as in the question of women being more empathic than men), the question of who uses fiction film this way must still be left open and is in need of further empirical study.

Conclusion

When people choose to tell me stories about engagement in fiction film, it is often perceived personal relevance they talk about. I have had little to offer them in the form of explanation from film theory. Idiosyncratic response is often deemed inappropriate and unintended by the film. In the present paper, I have explored one type of idiosyncratic response, namely how empathy with characters can lead to self-reflection. This can explain, in part, my friend's experience with *Big Fish*. Perhaps the father's insistent celebration of the qualities of the imagination caused her to empathize with him because she is also a daydreamer. Ed's son does not respect him, however, and this probably

made my friend's feelings of inadequacy also terribly salient for her. Empathy with Ed fused with imagining being in Ed's shoes and led to self-reflection. I have argued that the fictional context is ideal for eliciting self-reflection, as the spectator has no moral obligation to focus on the character he is empathizing with. Furthermore, he has ready distancing techniques if the reflection is overwhelming. Fiction is thus far from mere lies, as the character Ed Bloom stubbornly claims; it may have an important emotional function for the spectator. Idiosyncratic responses may be central to this emotional function. I hope these theoretical suggestions will facilitate further empirical research on this important aspect of film engagement.[20]

Notes

1. For an expression of discontentment with Noël Carroll's philosophy of film in a similar vein, see Robinson (2005: 182ff). Robinson also points to reader-response theory as an important correction to philosophy of film at this point.
2. Robert Allen (1992) and Höijer (1998) supply overviews of the history of the field of reception analysis in media studies.
3. For a good overview of recent discussions about emotions in cognitive science, see Robinson (2005: 28ff).
4. See discussions on ethicism (e.g. Gaut 1998) and moralism (e.g. Carroll 1998b) in relation to works of art. Ethicism claims that ethical assessment of a work of art is a legitimate part of aesthetic evaluation, while moralism merely entails the weaker claim that we as spectators do assess works of arts morally, and that this is an important part of understanding and engaging in the artwork. The relevance to my discussion here is that both Gaut and Carroll point out that evaluating a character's moral traits is important for engagement in fiction.
5. For a discussion of how empathy is important for fiction film engagement, see Vaage (2007a, 2009).
6. See, e.g., Robinson (2005) and Greg Smith (2003) for accounts in cognitive psychology and cognitive film theory, respectively, emphasizing how the emotions are in part hardwired, but also influenced by cultural contexts and personal experiences.
7. This may not be consciously experienced, however. See Oatley & Gholamain (1997).
8. See again Lazarus (1991: 121ff) on the core relational themes of emotions.
9. On the "what it is like" experience, see Nagel (1974).
10. For a general philosophical discussion, see Goldie (2000: 178ff). See also Murray Smith (1995: 80). For a discussion on what degree of self-reference engagement in fictional characters entails, see Vaage (2005).
11. See also Goldman on *projection* (Goldman 2006: 164ff).
12. On the development of empathic distress, see Hoffman (2000: 63ff).
13. The parallel to how metaphors work has been pointed out, see Cohen (1999), Kuiken, Miall & Sikora (2004: 183ff) and Miall & Kuiken (2002: 230ff). The point is how metaphors of personal identification make what is unknown familiar by class inclusion or extension: By making me see the character's experience as relevant to something in my own life, I may come to a new understanding of my own situation as the character's experience works as a metaphor for my situation – revealing some similarities that perhaps challenge my previous understanding.
14. For a discussion of the episodic structure of engagement in fiction film, see Vaage (2007b & c).
15. See also Robinson (2005: 57ff).
16. Although she does discuss how the fictional context alters emotional responses elsewhere in her book (Robinson 2005: 143ff).
17. For detailed discussions of empathy and guilt, see Hoffmann (2000).
18. Hanich (forthcoming) points this out not in relation to empathy, but in relation to crying in the cinema. The emotional experience is "pre-packaged", as Hanich puts it.
19. A counterexample at this point would perhaps be gossip, where one could potentially, at the level of narrative, want it to go badly for someone one cares for in real life as well. Nevertheless, gossip of this kind is perhaps also considered immoral. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
20. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Ph.D. seminar at the University of Oslo 2006 and at the Norwegian Media Scholars conference in Lillehammer 2008. I am grateful to all the participants. Thanks also to Steffen Borge, Liv Hausken, David S. Miall and Murray Smith for comments on different drafts.

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