Chapter 15: “Fearing Fictions” by Kendall Walton

**I**

The Paradox of Fiction is explained by others this way: “…real people can, and frequently do, have psychological attitudes toward merely fictional entities” and these can bring with them emotional responses, responses that would be more obviously appropriate if the events to which the viewer is responding with these attitudes **were really happening**.[234Lb/Rt]

Walton **rejects** the above explanation for the fact that “we often become ‘emotionally involved’” when reading novels or watching films. [234Rt]

Why is having the CORRECT explanation for emotional involvement in fictions IMPORT ANT?

Walton’s Answer: “It is crucially related to the basic question of why and how fiction is important [and] why we find it valuable …[and worthy] … of serious attention.”[234Rm]

**II**

Walton recognizes that we can, in real life develop propositional attitudes and emotional responses to things that do not exist so long as we believe they do/or believe they just might. But he doesn’t want to lean on that as a way to make sense of attitudes and emotional responses developed as we read a novel or watch a dramatic fiction on screen.

Imaginative Involvement Without Belief in the Imaginative Situation:

Walton needs to make a distinction between ‘quasi-fear’ and ‘actual fear’ to make this work.

First Step: ‘quasi-fear’ is **not fear** properly so-called. When Charles says he was “really terrified” watching the slime coming toward him onscreen, Walton wants to insist that this should not be taken literally. But then what does it mean?

Some Candidates:

1. Suspension of Disbelief: The fear is developed in a state where the capacity for disbelief is suspended somehow

2. Partition of the Viewer: One part of Charles believes the slime is coming at him, while another part doesn’t.

3. Half-Belief: Charles *almost* finds himself believing the slime is coming at him.

Walton considers each.

(2) and (3) are not convincing if ‘to half-believe’ means “to be not quite sure that it is true”, and if “to have one part believe and another part not believe” arises when one is “not quite sure that a certain belief is true”. Reason is that Charles *knows* the slime is not coming at him *really*. Evidence 1: he doesn’t warn his family, as he would do if he were *not quite sure a tsunami is heading for them back at the beachhouse*.

JP: Notice this is pursuant to an assumption that certain propositional attitudes (like the belief that maybe there is a slime coming at me) always lead to certain associated **actions**. But this seems to turn on another assumption: that all propositional attitudes are the same. But maybe Walton sees this and will work with it.

Evidence 2: His physiological and emotional response is *exactly as it would be* if he *were certain a tsunami was headed his way*, so the notion that he only *half-believes* in the approach of the slime is a nonstarter.

New alternative:

(4) The belief about the slime is a ‘gut belief’, not an ‘intellectual belief’.

Walton rejects (4) because gut beliefs in real life have attendant concrete actions (the person gut-afraid of flying avoids flying in every case where it is possible not to fly) or concrete *inclinations* to those actions. But Charles shows no concrete actions of inclinations to act that would go with a gut belief that the slime is coming at him.

Another alternative:

(5) The belief about slime is a result of a ‘momentary loss of one’s hold on reality’.

Walton rejects (5) the quasi-fear involved in Charles’ reaction to the slime is *not momentary* yet he nonetheless doesn’t do what a fear due to a *general* loss-of-one’s-hold-on-reality would do (e.g., what hallucinatory experiences can lead a person to do).

**III**

Walton turns to the notion of “fictional worlds” with corresponding “fictional truths”. These can be produced in one of two ways, Walton says:

(1) They can be generated by *imagining the world exists* and/or the associated *fictional truths* **are true**. (this need not be a result of a conscious act of imagination…often we imagine things spontaneously)

(2) They can be generated through any activity that involves “make-believe”. “Make-believe” truths and worlds are generated by the principles of the **particular game** of make-believe. This does not require that a game of make-believe be declared formally, nor does any such game require that the rules of the game are made explicit.

JP: Notice that all Walton’s examples of make-believe involve young children playing make-believe. This raises a question about the extent to which this avenue to *fictional worlds* and *fictional truths* is plausible for adults.

Walton now declares: “Representational works of art generate make-believe truths.” [238Lt]

**IV**

Walton now explains his view of Charles’ ‘quasi-fear’:

Charles is making-believe that the images on the screen are props in a game he is playing. He is *impersonating* (in a way roughly similar to the way an actor impersonates a fictional character in a play or movie);, but in this case he is *impersonating* ***himself***.

How Charles differs from an actor portraying Hamlet:

Charles *actually is afraid* (his pulse is elevated, muscles tense, etc.) rather than *pretending to be afraid*.

While the actor produces make-believe truths “solely through his acting”, Charles’ make-believe truths are more literally *adopted* through an agreement to treat the images and sounds being presented to him as props in a *game of make-believe* in which he responds **to** those props by developing make-believe beliefs that they support.

How Charles is the same as an actor portraying Hamlet:

Charles believes in the slime in much the same way the actor believes he is going through the situations that the character Hamlet is going through in the play as Shakespeare wrote it.

Upshot: the child engaged “undemonstratively” in a game of make-believe in which he imagines there is aw monster under the bed is the model Walton puts forward as what is going on for Charles when he becomes ‘quasi-afraid’ of the slime as it seems to approach and threaten him.

**V**

Here Walton defends the part of his account of Charles’ quasi-fear that seems to require that there are such things as ‘make-believe truths’, which he says requires “that the relevant principle of make-believe is accepted or recognized by someone, that someone understands it to be in force.” [l239Rb]

Evidence: the process of ‘immersing oneself in a film’ brings with it a **disposition** to treat the screen shots and sounds as *props* in a game of make-believe into which the viewer has willingly joined. This establishes, Walton thinks, that the principle of make-believe has been **entered into/adopted** implicitly (explicitly in the choice to watch the film, I would say). [240Lt]

Caveats Walton offers for this claim:

1. This is a *personal* disposition and adoption of the principle of make-believe. Others need not participate (we wander through the room where the home theater is active and we have a very different experience [“look at Charles freaking out!”]).

2. But there are *public dispositions and principles* of make-believe (conventions regarding going to a Shakespeare play at a theater in London that everyone adopts [\*\*but note: not everyone in a London theater where Hamlet is being performed **is thereby guaranteed to be engaged with the make-believe as conventionally the audience does!!** {cranky baby}]).

Walton combines the private and public dispositions associated with going to a theatrical presentation of Shakespeare’s Hamlet to account for Charles watching the movie and becoming quasi-afraid:

The public part involves the ‘props’ presented onscreen by the film; the personal part involves Charles playing along with the game of make-believe involved by adopting as statement of mind that comports with the principles of that game.

Walton makes an interesting point on page 241Lm: if you are playing a game of make-believe, you cannot do that successfully while *consciously saying to yourself “THIS IS ALL MAKE-BELIEVE!”* as that ruins the process essential to the game of make-believe (it is a psychological equivalent of movies where a character ‘breaks the fourth wall’).

**VI**

The account of ‘quasi-fear’ extrapolates to other psychological attitudes developed by viewers when watching films or readers reading novels: it accounts for ‘quasi-pity’ toward Willie Loman, ‘quasi-detestation’ of Iago, etc.

Walton: Willie Loman is ‘make-believedly an innocent victim of cruel circumstances’ and the viewer “quasi-detests Iago because he make-believedly deceived Othello about Desdemona”. [p242Lb]

Additional evidence in favor of Walton’s account of film-caused emotional responses; the effectiveness of *role-playing* in various kinds of therapy for psychological problems as well as in educational simulation games.

**VII**

Walton claims his theory offers a side benefit in that it affords a way to account for puzzles.

Puzzle One: involves the playgoer who hates happy endings because they are asinine and dull and so hopes that the play he is watching will end tragically, yet gets caught up in the story of the play and ends up sympathizing with the heroine and “wants her to escape” the danger that confronts her. The puzzle is that it seems that in fact the playgoer has two apparently conflicting desires, but he a) feels them simultaneously, and b) yet feels “no particular conflict between them”. Walton’s view of art-induced emotions is that they are only “make-believedly” felt, and hence, *nothing is really in conflict!* [pg244Lb/t]

Puzzle Two: Durability of emotional responses on repeated viewings of a film like a thriller: We can experience the same suspense we experienced the first time we watched a thriller, even though *we already know what is going to happen* and yet we have the same thrilling feeling of suspense as the first time we watched. It is precisely because being in the ‘make-believing’ state is partly a willing construction *of ours* that we can achieve it over and over (so long as the film retains the elements that make the make-believing state easy to fall into). [p244Rm/b]