Reading Notes for “Empathy and (Film) Fiction” by Alex Neill

**1**

Neill’s main point vis-à-vis the current debates in aesthetics about how to explain emotional responses to fiction: that the debate treats all emotional responses “as monolithic” (JP: which apparently means that they are all accounted for by a single account [in Walton’s case, the focus is on feelings that are directed at ourselves, and Neill thinks that account of emotional responses to fiction fails to explain why we *feel for others* [the fictional protagonists]).

On other-focused emotional responses, two kinds:

*Sympathetic* (“I fear *for* you”)

*Empathetic* (“I fear *with* you”)

JP: no doubt this elaboration on the different kinds of emotional responses enriches the philosophy of aesthetic response.

Neill focuses on *Empathy* in an attempt to offer a satisfactory account that distinguishes it from *Sympathy* in our emotional responses to fiction.

First Pass: *sympathetic* ‘feeling *for* another’ “need not reflect what the other is feeling” nor “depend on whether the other is feeling anything at all.” [247Rm]

Whereas: This is not true for *empathetic* ‘feeling *with* another’. “I come to *share* his feelings, to feel *with* him”

Neill’s target: Wollheim and others who regard any account of emotional response to fiction that focuses on *empathy* as *to that degree a* ***mistaken account***.

What drives this view? **Answer**: children’s response to fiction films suggest *identification* that is not empathetic in character (their own emotional responses to what the character they identify with is experiencing is not tuned to what the character seems to feel [they get scared *for them* even when the character seems to be oblivious to the danger they face, for example]). [248Lm]

N. Carroll makes a similar point because often our response to the plight of a character is independent of how they are feeling (the happy girl descends the stairs into the basement in search of her lover, when we know that he is already dead and she is about to join him….we are not happy, but fearful for her!)

**2**

Neill concedes that some of our emotional responses to fictional characters in their fictional situations are not aptly captured by a theory that takes *empathy* as central. But he just thinks there are some fictional characters + their fictional situations (and our emotional responses to these) in which *empathy* ***is central***.

His pitch is supported by some evidence:

1. A widespread feature of accounts of emotional response to fictions involves ‘identification’ (the audience *identifies* with this or that character in the fiction), and often our general responsiveness to fiction is often thought to depend on **identification** with the characters in their fictional situations. [248Rm]

2. “[A] good many people claim that at the heart of their affective engagement with fiction is empathetic engagement.” [248Rb]

3. Film theorists appeal to psychoanalytical explanations of audience responses to film fictions involve appeals to identification as part of the precondition for what these psychoanalytically-inclined film theorists regard as a pathological process in which the ‘difference between self and other’ is being overridden/denied [249Lm]

4. Neill see that if the psychoanalytical film theorists are right, then engagement with fiction involves us in a “new version of one of the most ancient criticisms of storytelling: Plato’s charge that poetry ‘waters the passions,’ to the detriment of reason.” Philosophers of film should at least take note of this before dismissing *empathy* and *identification* as one kind of emotional audience response to fiction. [p249Lb]

5. In moral philosophy and psychology, ‘our capacity for empathetic response has often been mooted as the source of morality’ (suggesting to Neill that this is at least something worth considering given that *keeping separate* morals and empathetic emotion seemed to required **mooting**. [249Rt]

6. Many have thought that historical and social scientific explanation involves “seeing things from another’s point of view”, which Neill takes to be central to empathetic response.

7. Philosophers and psychologists recently “have been arguing that empathy is crucial to our ‘everyday’ ability to understand, explain and predict the behavior of those around us: that our ‘folk psychological’ attribution of mental states to others depends on empathetic understanding.”[249Rt/m]

8. Neill takes (6) and (7) as evidence that suggests it would “be at least somewhat *odd* to find that [empathy] is marginal or of little importance in our understanding of fiction”. [249Rm]

9. “It is often held that the value of fiction lies largely in what it can **contribute to the education of emotion.** {Aristotle takes it that our pleasure in *tragedy* to be a result of the arousal and subsequent *catharsis* of pity and fear that experience a *tragic play* provides.] [Also: George Eliot linked the value of her fictions to their ability to “arouse the ‘nobler emotions’ in her readers, in order that they should be better able to experience pity and sympathy in their everyday lives.”[249Rb/250Lt]

Neill concedes that sympathy can play a role in the ‘education of emotion’ (using the example of our natural emotional response to the central character in *Fitzcarraldo* which he takes to be a mixture of admiration and pity, both of which are *sympathetic emotional responses* to the movie, and which reflection on those sympathies reveals to us how our own emotions work) [250Lt/m]

But then he notes that our emotional response to *Don’t Look Now* is *grieving* ***with*** *the characters,* not grieving ***for*** them (that seems right to me). So empathy has a role in educating us about grief (in that example).

And finally:

10. “one of the most important ways in which we can gain new emotional experience is through empathetic response….in feeling *with* another….we may find ourselves feeling in ways that are not only new to us, but in ways that are in a sense *foreign* to us.”

ASK THE CLASS: Have any of them experienced this in their own lives?

**3**

Now Neill turns to offer some evidence in favor of his view that empathetic emotional responses are important contributors to audience emotional responses to fictions, evidence taken from some *actual film fictions*.

Cases:

Robert Wise’s *The Haunting*, the scene involving the knocking sound coming from the corridor outside the room where the characters were sleeping seems to generate *terror* that is partly a consequence of our empathetic awareness of *the characters’ terror*. [p251Lt/m] Central to this reaction is that we are viewing the situation from their point of view.

Roeg’s *Don’t Look Now* cannot, Neill thinks, be understood if we only react to the death of the child scene at the beginning of the film *sympathetically* since then the Julie Christie character’s engagement with the psychic sisters would not lead us to take that character’s evident belief that her dead child is present and attempting to warn her and her husband *seriously* enough to prepare us for the anticipatory shock when (spoiler alert) her husband is killed by a midget on those steps in Venice in the middle of a late evening some days later. If we fail to take events in this part of the film seriously from her point of view, we would not take the final events as we do (with horror that is partly based on her horror at the loss of her child).[pg251Rt/m]

**4**

Here Neill elaborates on what feelings of empathy involve.

1. Empathy is **not** ‘shared feelings’.

2. Rather, empathy requires that *your feeling* generate *my feeling*.

3. The empathy I feel is mediated by *a belief* I have, so “empathy is a cognitive state[:] it is essentially a matter of my holding second-order beliefs about your beliefs.”[pg252Lm]

JP: that means I feel anxiety *with you* if I believe that *you believe* you are going to flunk out of school, not only because I sense that you are anxious!

4. My feelings are not identical to those of the one I empathize with because *my anxiety felt on their behalf,* is based on my beliefs about *your beliefs,* whereas *their anxiety* is due to *their beliefs* that they are in danger of flunking out of school. (so the *affect* can be identical, and the difference is not affective, but *cognitive* [concerns the difference between the beliefs that support my anxiety vs. the beliefs that support theirs]). [pg252Lm/b]

5. This leads to a paradox in the case of empathic responses to fictional characters: **they DON’T HAVE BELIEFS!**

6. This can be overcome by replacing the cognitive role of my beliefs about their beliefs with my imagining what their beliefs, desires, etc., **might be**. [pg252Rm]

7. Neill rejects the position expressed in #6 here (Feagin’s solution to the paradox at #5). He thinks that what actually goes on is that in empathizing with another **we partly are understanding how things are with her** and this does not require that we **get their mental states right**, but rather, moreso “a matter of coming to know *what it is like* to have certain beliefs, desires, hopes, and doubts.”[pg253Lt]

**5**

Niell now digs deeper into these intuitions through the lens of Kundera’s *Unbearable Lightness of Being* and its theme concerning **compassion** (which Neill takes to be fundamentally the same as what he has been calling **empathy**).

Kundera: “This kind of compassion … […] signifies the maximal capacity of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy [my emphasis]”. [pg253Lm/b]