Introduction, Part V: Film and Emotion (by Jinhee Choi)

The Paradox of Fiction

Emotions directed *toward* fiction/film are puzzling to philosophers of film. They ask two questions:

1. How on earth do we emotionally engage with fictional characters we know do not exist?

2. Given that emotional involvement w/fictional characters, why do we keep consuming fiction

and watching films?

2a: Is this irrational?

Section V offers five essays: five ways to solve the paradox.

Carroll restricts “emotion proper” to “affective responses caused by cognitive states.”[213Lm]

His reason for this is to exclude emotions relevant to encounters with fiction that are either a) reflex responses (the startled state [jump scares seem to be a possible reason to not make this choice]) or b) emotions that may be *combined with cognitive states* (feeling sad while simultaneously thinking “I will never have a normal life”) but are not caused by those cognitive states.

JP: It is likely that Carroll make this restriction chiefly because emotions *caused by* encounters with fiction are the ones he is interested in.

Commonsense view of emotion: that it is *the opposite* of cognition states. Jinhee Choi seems to think that emotion *always* entails a corresponding cognitive state since emotion arises *as a* *reaction* to something that stands as its cause.

JP: This is the “cognitive theory of emotion” (jump/switch to chapter in Palgrave Handbook and the four empirical psychological theories of emotion)

Why choose this theory of emotion?

Because it helps to explain why we *emotionally engage with film/literary fiction*.

JP: The simplified view of the choice is that the film *causes* our emotions, and so **we are** *caught up in what causes* those emotions.

JP: The more-accurate view is that we develop a set of *categories of objects/situations* to which specific emotions correspond. Choi calls these **“emotive categories”**. Something taken to be *impure* arouses **disgust**. Something that *harms us* arouses **anger**; something that is *a sign of disloyalty* arouses **distaste**.

Upshot: this explains why we have emotional responses (and associated *engagement*) with a film because the situations and objects presented in the film **fall under “emotive categories”**. We respond to an object or situation presented in a fiction that in real life arouses, for example, **disgust** much the same way we do when we encounter it in real life.

JP: This theory depends on/entails that the experience of a fiction requires some sort of what I would call an immersion state in which the reader/viewer comes to experience the fiction in an “**as if real**” state (the viewer/reader is in a state that can be described as “suspension of disbelief” or “taking the fiction as real” state). The more effectively the mechanisms of the fiction **mimic real experiences** or engage our ability to **vividly imagine ourselves witnessing or being part of a situation**, the stronger this **taken-as-real** effect becomes.

Carroll thinks fiction-directed emotion only differs from everyday-life emotionin that the former film/fiction text is **prefocused** (i.e., it is deliberately designed to direct the viewer/reader toward certain objects/situations that, falling as they do under existing ‘emotive categories’, can be expected to predictably produce **specific emotions** that the writer/filmmaker wants the reader/viewer to have).

Key: whereas in everyday life, objects and events are *looser/less focused* on specific ‘emotive categories’, in a text-/film-fiction the objects and events are designed to target specific ‘emotive categories’ and thus produce more predictable (and *more intense?*) emotions of the appropriate kind.

Genres and Corresponding Emotions

One thing about *genres* of fiction is that they usually are designed to evoke specific emotions. For example, **horror** fiction produces **fear and/or disgust**; **melodramas** evoke **sadness or admiration**, **crime-thrillers** evoke **suspense**.

All these film theorists about emotion directed toward fiction are called **cognitivists**.

Cognitivists can be distinguished by a) what kind of cognitive mechanismis involved in fiction-directed emotion, and b) “how to classify fiction-directed emotion”.[214Lt/m]

Kendall Walton (“Fearing Fictions”): fiction-directed emotions are different from everyday emotions because a) fiction-directed emotions are not due to the viewer *believing that the causes of their emotions are really happening*, and b) they will not manifest behaviors they *would* manifest if the emotions evoked by the fiction were evoked by real-life objects/situations.

JP: This is a restriction on my point that for fiction-directed emotions to be aroused for the reader/viewer, the reader/viewer must **take-as-real IN SOME SENSE** what they read/see-hear in the fiction.

Walton says this is nothing more than “playing a game of make-believe with the fictional world.” [214Lm/b]

Walton doesn’t think ‘making-believe’ is the same as ‘suspension of belief’, nor the same as ‘suspension of half-belief’, nor ‘suspension of belief at a gut level.’ His reason is that suspension of belief, or half-belief, or gut-level belief entails that the viewer/reader has some uncertainty concerning whether the situation they are entertaining is real or not.

JP: But this doesn’t exclude suspension of **dis**belief since that is consistent with the very idea of a state of ‘make-believe’. You have to go some distance in the direction of treating-as-real what you are reading/viewing in order to achieve the state of “make-believing” something in a fiction. It is a sort of ‘half-in/half-out’ state of belief.

Alex Niell (“Empathy and [Film] Fiction”)and Berys Gaut (“Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film”): in these articles, the authors provide a different way of accounting for our emotional engagement with a film-fiction that relies less on states of ‘making-believe’ and more on **“placing ourselves in the fiction as one of the characters”**. This originally was a common approach taken by psychoanalytically-inclined film scholars.

JC makes the point that when children play “make-believe” they usually place themselves in the role of protagonist, whereas when adults engage with films, they do so **as onlookers**. This then raises a question not answered by Walton’s appeal to the ‘make-believe’ state to explain fiction-directed emotional states.

Upshot: Niell and Gaut are accounting for another aspect of that state in which we become capable of having *emotions* aroused by *fictionally-generated objects/situations*: **we imaginatively place ourselves as participants in the fictionally-generated situations**.

Technically, this ‘participation’ is by means of identification: “the viewer identifies with the camera, and then with characters.”(214Rm/b]

Carroll’s Objection: regards the appeal to ‘identification’ with suspicion since either it is too vague, or it is contradictory. That identification-taken-literally is a contradiction is obvious, at least because two distinct characters cannot literally **be in each other’s shoes** (Leibniz on identity that says two things that are discernibly different are therefore *not the same thing*), but also because no viewer *literally believes they are about to be eaten by a shark!* But if not taken literally, if identifying with a character is taken in the *less-than-literal-sense* (that the viewer ‘cares for’ or ‘has concern about’ a character), the view doesn’t explain the phenomenon it is attempting to explain (i.e., *how* does the viewer ‘care for’ or ‘have concern about’ the character. And more importantly, it doesn’t explain the fact that the viewer/reader doesn’t have the *same emotions* that the character has (because the viewer/reader *often knows things* that the character *doesn’t*).

Niell’s Reponse to Carroll’s Objection: sidestep the problems of ‘identification’ by using a subtype of identification: empathy. Empathetic engagement with a character avoids the problems with identification-engagement with the character: a) what the character feels *causes* what the viewer/reader feels (this avoids the ‘identity of indiscernibles’ problem) while b) providing an explanation for viewer emotions that makes sense of the fact that these emotions can be *distinct* from the emotions of the character (because they are metaphysically different: the character’s emotions are the *cause* of the viewer’s emotions, whereas the character’s emotions are not their own cause, but rather, are caused by the situation in which the character finds themselves).[215Lt/m]

Gaut’s difference: he separates himself from the psychoanalysts by regarding identification as not a one-for-one identification among identities (I-am-You), but rather, as an identification between the viewer and aspects of the character.

Gaut’s four aspects of a character: 1) perceptual, 2) affective, 3) motivational, and 4) epistemic.

(1) “To identify perceptually with a charadter is to imagine seeing from the character’s point of view”;

(2) “…to identify affectively … is to imagine feeling what the character feels”;

(3) “…to identify motivationally … is to imagine wanting what the character wants”;

(4) “to identify epistemically … is to imagine believing what the character believes”. [215LM/b]

Gaut’s view saves him from problems for the psychoanalytical approach to identification: a) point-of-view shots + ‘content shots’ [a shot of what the character sees] were the bearers/causes of identification, and this is not any longer necessary on Gaut’s account of identification-via-aspects-of-a-character. How? By offering more ways in which a single feature of the way the film is shot (point-of-view-shot or content-shot), he avoids the one-for-one implication, and problems thereof, with the psychoanalytical approach.

Gaut also departs from Niell’s appeal to empathy: Rather than using ways of identifying with others in real life (empathy or sympathy are the two obvious candidates), Gaut treats identification as an imaginative state: **imaginative projection**.

Upshot: this avoids a problem with the appeal to empathy: “both empathy and sympathy require the viewer’s *actual* feeling directed toward fictional characters in their situation.” But “[how is it] …possible to feel ‘actual emotions’ toward something fictional: fictional characters in fictional situations.” Gaut’s approach explains exactly how.

Niell’s approach seems to avoid the problem Gaut’s approach attempts to solve by noting that *real-world empathy,* i.e., actual empathy one person develops for another person’s situation, functions exactly as *fictional-world empathy* does for a reader/viewer who develops empathy for a fictional character: in both situations, the empathy is a consequence of the development of a “second level of assessment and engagement – boith cognitive and affective – for those who empathize; one feels the way he or she feels by reflecting on how the target person feels that way.”[215Rb]

From J. Prinz article “Affect and Motion Pictures” in the Palgrave Handbook

**Four Theories of Emotion**

1. James/Lange Theory: The **Embodiment Thesis**

Since for James & Lange, the causes of emotions lie in the body, James “defines emotions as perceptions of bodily changes” [my emphasis], and “Lange sometimes implies that emotions are constituted by visceral responses.

Evidential support:

a) emotion terms in nearly every language “make direct references to changes in organs” (muscles: ‘tense’; digestive: ‘queasy’; respiratory: ‘breathless’; circulatory: ‘pumped up’; thermoregulatory systems: ‘burning’, etc.).

b) “…a number of emotions are associated with distinctive bodily changes” and “many studies have shown that changing one’s bodily configuration (e.g., facial expressions, breathing, and posture) leads to recognizable changes in felt emotions”.

The James/Lange approach also makes a controversial claim: “…emotions can be elicited without any prior thought or judgment.”

This amounts to **non-cognitivism**.

Evidential support:

a) perceptual triggers of emotion that don’t involve any cognitive intervention between trigger and the emotion caused.

b) some emotions are instinctive and perceptual triggered (sexual attraction, wrath at snakes, and fear of precipices).

Objections to James/Lange Theory

Cannon: visceral changes are too slow to account for all emotional responses, and visceral changes (fever, chills) can occur *without attendent emotions* arising.

Some visceral changes can be shared across distinct emotions (indignation vs. anger)

Some emotions will be associated with many bodily patterns.

Result: some researchers conclude from the evidence against the James/Lange theory that while bodily states are *perhaps sufficient* for emotional states, they are **not necessary**.

**Main Candidates**

**Cognitivism**

Main evidential support: can account for fine-grained distinctions among emotions depending on whether the conditions that must be grasped through cognition in order to evoke emotional responses are simple (there is a volcano erupting nearby) or complex (climate change).

Main objections: a) too intellectually demanding, b) fail to handle non-cognitive emotional induction (emotional induction through music), c) underestimate the embodiment thesis.

**Two-Factor Accounts:** ‘emotions are states of arousal [which involve] a bodily state together with a conceptualization of that state’.

**Circumplex Theory**: ‘emotions are states of arousal that have a valence (low-to-high)

**Conceptual Act Theory**: ‘each emotion involves a conceptualization of bodily states that are highly varied, but neither necessary nor sufficient for emotions.’