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Jérôme Pelletier

1. Introduction

The question left unanswered by many philosophers taking part in the discussion on our emotional responses to fictional content, whatever side they occupy in this rich discussion, is regarding the real impact of a fictional context on our emotional responses. This question is partly an empirical one and this might explain why most philosophers do not pay attention to it. It is partly a question about our actual emotional responses to fiction; a question that can be dealt with within a cognitive research, especially now that the study of emotions has expanded in cognitive psychology and neuroscience. As such, at least part of it is not a question for philosophers. Nonetheless the difficulty is that most philosophers take for granted in their philosophical discussion a specific answer to the empirical part of the question: either a positive answer or a negative one. Philosophers like Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) accept the view that our emotional responses to fiction and to nonfiction do not differ and that, as a consequence, a fictional context has no specific impact on our emotional responses, while philosophers inspired by Walton (1978) might accept the view that a fictional context does make a difference to our emotional responses. Here, philosophers face a situation where a philosophical question nests an empirical question. The philosophical question is, as Stock puts it, the “Classificatory question” of how to characterize our emotion-like responses to fiction in relation to ordinary emotional responses (2014). And the empirical question can be formulated in the following terms: “Are there differences between emotions felt in a fictional context and those felt in a non-fictional context?”

Most philosophers seem to disagree with this nesting claim. Often philosophers consider that philosophical functionalist arguments focusing on

the cognitive function of imagining-based emotions can be sufficient to type-identify emotional responses to fiction and to answer the Classificatory question. But if philosophers accept to recognize that the debate on the nature of emotions toward fictions nests an empirical question and that part of the philosophical discussion hangs on what is actually the case, some of the difficulties of the philosophical discussion may be overcome. This would require admitting that philosophy is not, in this domain, the exclusive owner of the object of its inquiry. Besides, once one admits that what is actually the case in this domain is not clear and needs to be discovered via empirical research, things look different. This is not to claim that an answer to the empirical question will deliver an answer to the philosophical question, the Classificatory question. Why? Clearly the classification's criteria needed to type-identify emotions will require a philosophical discussion. But at least an answer to the empirical question may impact the form of the philosophical discussion, the way it develops. Cognitive approaches of emotions toward fictions may help the philosopher to understand how or to what extent, maybe, one subpart of our emotional responses to fiction differs from the ordinary emotional responses while another subpart does not differ from the ordinary emotional responses. A neuroscientific study of our emotional responses to fiction may also help to understand how the constituting mechanisms of at least some emotional processes may differ from those of ordinary emotional processes. But once these empirical questions are answered, there remains plenty of room for the philosophical part of the discussion to flourish. Nesting an empirical question does not mean that a philosophical question would be reducible to its empirical part. This will be manifest in the following discussion.

2. Our emotional responses to fiction: From indirect to direct cognitive studies

Until recently the question of our emotional responses to fiction has not been directly addressed by cognitive psychologists. Two cognitive studies have just attempted to fill this gap (cf. Sennwald et al. 2018, Sperduti et al. 2016). These studies have been conducted by bi-disciplinary teams of philosophers and cognitive psychologists and at least one of them—the 2016 Sperduti et al. study—has been motivated and guided by philosophical questions. This is a new move for philosophers and for cognitive psychologists, a new move that has

two consequences. It will not be possible for philosophers wanting to bring in cognitive results in the philosophical discussion on emotion for fiction to ignore these new studies. It will help philosophers with an open mind for cognitive science to understand that the more a study is dedicated to directly investigating the philosophical problem at hand, the more it is justified to bring its results into the philosophical discussion.

Before these two recent studies, a few philosophers had attempted to find results in indirect cognitive studies of our emotional responses to fiction. “Indirect cognitive studies” are studies in which philosophers pick up some evidence they judge fit to support their philosophical hypothesis though these studies are, in the best cases, only peripherally related to the philosophical hypothesis under discussion. This way of using empirical evidence in philosophy, empirical evidence with no direct connection with the philosophical problem under discussion, is frequent and, in the end, damaging for the philosophical discussion. Besides, it presents a caricature of the philosophical project of getting out of the armchair.

Kathleen Stock (2014) has selected a number of philosophical approaches to our emotional responses to fiction that use, in my terminology, “indirect” cognitive studies to support their argument. What unifies these studies is that they constitute various attempts to record affective responses to imagining. The main result of these indirect studies is that there is a physiological similarity between imagining-based and belief-based emotional responses. One of these studies often quoted by philosophers is Lang et al. (1983). Lang’s studies (1977, 1979, Lang et al. 1983) were the first ones to empirically examine the capacity for mental imagery to evoke emotional response. Lang’s hypothesis is that perceptual-like representations, in the absence of sensory input of an emotionally charged stimulus (e.g., a spider), activate networks that overlap with those activated during actual experience of the stimulus in reality. Since these early studies, developments in brain imaging technology have enabled comparison of neural indices of emotion processing during mental imagery and during veridical perception of emotional stimuli. The main result of these studies is that activation of emotion-processing regions during veridical perception (the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex [mPFC], anterior cingulate cortex [ACC], amygdala and the insular cortex) is observed also during emotional mental imagery. For instance Kim et al. (2007) found comparable magnitudes of left hemisphere amygdala activity when subjects viewed emotional faces and when they generated mental imagery of such faces.

Have these researches on our emotional responses to mental imagery something relevant to say about our emotional responses to fiction? There are two ways of responding negatively to this question. First, by noticing that the main contrast in cognitive studies such as Lang et al. (1983) is between our emotional responses to representations by mental imagery and to verbal representations, a contrast that is entirely independent and orthogonal to the real/fictional contrast. If one wanted to insert in cognitive studies such as Lang et al. (1983) the real/fictional contrast in order to see whether a presentation of the stimuli in two conditions, either as fictional or as real, would modify how participants generate mental imagery and emotional responses in these two conditions, one would construct altogether different studies.

A second way of responding negatively is to underline what distinguishes the use of mental imagery in a fictional context, and its use out of a fictional context. As already said, mental imagery is used in the Lang studies out of a fictional context. When discussing Lang's conception of mental imagery as an "as-if-real" template, Ji et al. (2016) note that it parallels contemporary functional perspectives on mental imagery "which view mental imagery as a core component of the 'prospective brain,' which enables the simulation of hypothetical future events based on prior knowledge and memories of past experience for the purposes of prediction and planning" (2016: 2). In this functional perspective, mental imagery is said to enable the individual to not only "try out" alternative versions of what might happen but also to "try out" the emotional consequences of alternative courses of action (cf. Ji et al. 2016). The premise that would be necessary in order to be entitled to extend the results of Lang studies in the fictional domain is that mental imagery has the same function in prospection and in fiction. Though mental imagery may contribute to the representation of fictional objects and events, this contribution might be functionally divergent in fiction and in prospection and, due to this functional difference, might have a different impact on our emotional responses. As a matter of fact, this should prevent from applying results of studies of emotional responses to mental imagery, such as Lang's studies, to the fictional domain. In contrast to the "prospective brain," if one pretends just for the sake of the argument that there is such thing as a "fictional brain," this "fictional brain" would not be functionally dedicated to enabling the simulation of future events: its main functional characteristic—the cognitive function it implements—is that it enables a detachment from action systems. It seems that there is a consensus among philosophers about this functional specificity of fictional representations relative to real representations. If philosophers willing to import cognitive

results in the discussion on our emotional responses to fiction admit that there is a functional divergence of imagination and of mental imagery in prospection and in fiction—mental imagery in prospection being functionally correlated with action prediction and the latter being functionally detached from the action system—and if they admit also that there is a structural relation between the action and emotion systems (cf. Frijda 2004), these philosophers should feel reluctant to seek in studies such as Lang et al. (1983) some support to make their claims. In other words, the fact that mental images activate ordinary emotional responses in prospection, as shown by Lang's studies, does not show that mental images also activate ordinary emotions in response to fiction, for the reasons just given. The philosophical use of what I call "indirect" cognitive studies such as Lang's studies in the debate on emotions toward fictions is risky.

What I call "direct" cognitive comparative studies, such as Sennwald et al. (forthcoming) and Sperduti et al. (2016), that is, studies dedicated to examining the similarities and differences of emotional responses to fiction and to nonfiction, seem more apt to answer the empirical question nested in the philosophical discussion on emotions toward fictions. As the Sennwald et al. study is not yet published, the study by Sperduti et al. (2016) will be our focus.

3. The Sperduti et al. (2016) study

In this study, a number of short silent video clips (4–5 sec.) were presented to participants in two conditions: either as recordings of real scenes or as recordings of fictional scenes. A word cue (FICTION or REAL) indicated the intentional nature of the scenes depicted by the clips. The clips were extracted from fiction films, documentaries, and private amateur videos. They were carefully selected in order to be accepted by the participants as depicting either real or fictional events. This careful selection explains the artistic and aesthetic poverty of these clips. These clips were deprived of artistic qualities such as well-known actors, camera movements, montage, special lighting, and close-ups. No signpost of fictionality or of cinematographical innovations were allowed in the clips. This artistic poverty was the price to pay to guarantee that the same clips that were accepted by participants as depicting fictional events would be accepted by participants as depicting real events. Besides, these video clips showed either scenes without emotions, or scenes with positive emotions (kissing scenes, birthday scenes, etc.) or scenes with negative emotions (fight scenes, etc.). One could describe this study as one in which the intentional objects of the emotion

were changed while the material objects of the emotions, the images presented, were kept identical. Same images, same video clips, but different intentional objects: images were said to depict real objects and events in the real condition, via the presentation of the word cue REAL, and to depict fictional ones in the fictional condition, via the presentation of the word cue FICTIONAL.

There are philosophical objections to the use of such stimuli: one of these objections is that there is no fictionality without narrative (e.g., Currie 2008) and that clips were too short and possessed either no narrative or a minimal narrative and, the objection goes, could not be presented as being fictional. Another objection is that, by virtue of their short duration, the clips were not complex enough to motivate what Tan (1996: 85–120) and Silvia (2008) call “interest” or what others call “transportation into a narrative” (Gerrig 1993). The clips used in the experiment had no transportive quality. To these objections, let’s say that it was enough for the study’s hypothesis that subjects accepted to treat the stimuli as depicting real events in one condition, and fictional events in the other condition. The study did not include a hypothesis on the emotional impact of narrativity or of cinematographic inventions. And the subjects’ acceptance of the intentional nature (real or fictional) of the scenes shown on the screen was controlled and validated in the experiments conducted. According to the results of this validation study, the presentation of the word cue REAL or FICTIONAL was sufficient, despite the narrative poverty of the stimuli, to obtain the participants’ acceptance that the clips depicted fictional or real scenes. Besides, the attentional focus (which results from interest or transportation) was obtained via the lab control. The lab context, being one in which subjects were watching images on a screen, with no direct interaction with the scenes depicted by the images, was similar to a reading room or studio context.

Yet, these philosophical objections certainly highlight the limits of such a study; in particular we still need to find a way to measure the impact of narrativity or cinematographic inventions on the emotional experiences of film viewers in order to generalize the study’s results to the emotional experience of more ecological fictions. For example, narrative films (either fiction films or documentaries). It might be the case that the impact of narrativity and cinematographic inventions on emotional responses counterbalances the impact of fictionality on emotional responses. But these are different questions from the central question investigated in Sperduti et al. (2016), which is the question of the nature of the difference—if any—of our emotional responses toward clips presented, in two conditions, as depicting either real or fictional events. A study on the impact of narrativity and of cinematographic inventions

on viewers' emotional responses would require different hypotheses and altogether different protocols. Moreover, such a study should be neutral relative to the modal status (fictional or real) of the content narrated or displayed with cinematographic inventions. In Sperduti et al.'s protocol, fiction is opposed to reality as two modalities of the same nonnarrative contents: what is seen in the clip is either fictional or real, invented content or real content. But fiction is not opposed to reality at the level of contents: the exact same contents are presented in the two conditions. Finally these modalities (fictional or real) cannot be perceptually detected or inferred: they result only from the presentation of the word FICTION or REAL.

The Sperduti et al. study aims at testing two main hypotheses: (1) that emotional responses elicited by scenes will be less intense when these scenes are presented as fictional rather than real, and (2) that emotional responses will be more intense when scenes are associated to personal memories, regardless of the distinction of the fictional and real scenes. In order to test these hypotheses, the same video clips were presented twice. In the first phase of the experiment, after the word cue (FICTION or REAL) presentation, video clips were presented a first time. During the clips presentations, an objective measure of autonomic arousal, the electrodermal activity (EDA), was recorded. At the end of the first phase of the experiment, the same video clips were presented without any cue. This time, subjects were asked to rate each scene on a scale ranging from 0 to 7 on four features: the intensity of subjective felt emotion (0 = not intense, 7 = very intense), the valence of subjective felt emotion (0 = very negative, 7 = very positive), the degree of personal memory linked to the scene (0 = no memory, 7 = a very precise memory), and the nature of the scene (0 = real, 7 = fictional) that was used as a control for the experimental manipulation.

What are the study's results? Let's quote the authors of the study:

In agreement with our first hypothesis, the main findings of our work, confirmed by both repeated measure ANOVA and mixed-effects models, showed that in the fictional condition the emotional response was weaker than in the real condition. This effect was only evident for the subjective intensity and valence rating, and not for the physiological arousal. Moreover, this difference was more pronounced for negative emotions. Importantly, the effectiveness of our experimental manipulation was supported by the fact that participants subjectively rated as more fictional scenes that were presented as such, compared to those presented as real. In line with our second hypothesis, we found that scenes that elicited more personal memories were also scored more emotionally intense regardless of the condition. This effect seemed to be more robust for

positive material. Again, this result was only evident for the subjective report of emotional experience and not for the physiological arousal. (Sperduti et al. 2016: 57)

The main result of the study concerns negative emotions. It was found that, in the fiction condition, negative emotions are physiologically identical to emotions in the real condition but have attenuated subjective feelings relative to emotional responses in real condition. For positive emotions, the physiological activation remains the same in both conditions. Nonetheless, the subjective feelings in the fiction condition are attenuated relative to the real condition but this attenuation is less manifest than with negative emotions. It is only with negative emotional scenes that robust differences were recorded at the subjective level in the fiction condition relative to the real condition, while the corresponding physiological activations remained the same relative to the real condition. In other words, there is a kind of decoupling between the physiological arousal impact of the negative emotions and their phenomenological or subjective impact in the fiction condition. Finally, and this is the secondary result of the study, this decoupling of the physiological and the phenomenological is reduced when personal memories are elicited by the event shown in the fiction condition, this last effect being more robust with positive scenes than with negative ones. Let's see how to explain the study results.

4. Fiction as one variable of implicit emotion regulation

Sperduti et al. (2016) explain the study's main result—the attenuation of subjective negative feelings in the fiction condition—as the outcome of a process that enables the viewer of the clips in the fiction condition to control his/her negative subjective emotional experiences. On the basis of the secondary result of the study that highlights the impact of personal memories in the reduction of the decoupling of the physiological and the phenomenological aspects of the emotional responses, the authors suggest that the phenomenological attenuation of the viewer's negative emotional response in the fiction condition is the output of an emotional regulation strategy. Let's quote the study's authors:

We suggest that when confronted with fiction some kind of implicit emotion regulation, resulting by cognitive change due to knowledge of the fictional nature of the stimulus, would take place resulting in a weaker subjective emotional response. (Sperduti et al. 2016: 58)

The authors suggest that the cognitive change results from the initial appraisal by the viewer of the scenes as fictional. One hypothesis that is mentioned by the authors of the study is that this initial appraisal of fictionality triggers a psychological distancing with the scenes. This hypothesis is supported by the secondary result of this study. This secondary result allows us to identify a determinant of emotional responses to fiction and to real scenes, a variable whose effects go in the opposite direction compared to the down-emotional regulation associated with the first variable, the appraisal of scenes as real or fictional.

The study's secondary result is that scenes—presented either as fictional or as real—which elicit personal memories were judged more emotionally intense by the participants. The authors describe this phenomenon as an instance of emotion up-regulation and suggest that the personal memories associated with the scenes activate self-referential processes in the viewer's mind that amplify their emotional responses even to scenes appraised as fictional (Sperduti et al. 2016: 58). Since, according to the authors, this secondary effect of emotion up-regulation results from scenes (real or fictional) that remind the viewer of personal memories or, in other words, from scenes that resonate personally for the viewer, one understands why fictional scenes, that is, scenes to which the viewer feels psychologically distant, have an opposite effect on the viewer's emotional responses. Instead of talking of the opposite effects of these variables—the fictional variable and the personal relevance variable—one may talk of complementary variables.

Apparently, the fictional variable plays a cognitive role in the emotional response and draws, according to Sperduti et al. (forthcoming) on working-memory resources.¹ The reference to working-memory resources in the Sperduti et al. (forthcoming) study suggests a way of understanding, if one accepts to apply the study's results to our emotional responses to more ecological stimuli than the stimuli used in the study, that is, fictional movies, how a fiction viewer keeps in mind the information about the fictional nature of the movie he or she is watching. And this way of understanding how this information is kept in mind seems to fit the viewer's cognitive phenomenology. Following this path, one may speculate that the spectator "keeps in mind" the information that the scene is fictional in his or her working memory, an information the presence of which in the spectator's mind implicitly elicits a distancing with the negative events and a reduction of their emotional impact on the spectator's feelings. As with most information being kept in working memory, the fiction viewer finds in his working memory a way of representing the fictionality of the scenes shown without continually

reminding himself or herself that he or she is watching a fictional movie. Still keeping in working memory this information, he or she is apparently never unaware that he or she is watching a fictional movie. One may surmise that the down-regulation of the negative emotions in response to moving scenes in fiction feeds back into keeping active the representation of the fictionality of the scenes in working memory. The suggestion is that the process of controlling or down-regulating the feeling part of the negative emotions, a process initiated by a cognitive appraisal of the fictionality of the moving scenes and associated with a control of the motivational aspect of the emotional experience,² would in turn reinforce a distanced attitude to the events shown and an updating of the representation of the fictionality of the scenes in working memory.

As noted above, the main result of the 2016 Sperduti et al. study is that, in the fiction condition, negative emotions are physiologically identical to emotions in the real condition but have attenuated subjective feelings relative to emotional responses in real condition. This decoupling manifest in the Sperduti et al. study of the physiological arousal impact of negative emotions on the subject and of its phenomenological impact is not limited to a fiction context. This decoupling apparently occurs in other contexts of emotional regulation, contexts where one may find an inhibition of the experience of an emotion without a decrease in physiological arousal.³ One hypothesis to explain this decoupling phenomenon in the fictional context is that, keeping in mind the representation of the fictional nature of the scene, the fiction viewer would partially discount the physiological activation as being the unique source of information about the emotional content of the moving scene, the other source of information being the fictional representation kept in mind. This partial physiological discounting may explain why the physiological activation has a nonstandard and minimal influence on the viewer while still enabling the viewer to be aroused by the emotional scenes and to focus on the scenes.

A consequence of this decoupling phenomenon is that the physiological activation, the arousal, in response to the moving scenes, which seems discounted by the fiction viewer, remains usable to enrich other emotions the fiction viewer may experience. The first candidates here are aesthetic or art emotions. The moving scenes, which in fiction elicit negative emotions such as fear, anger, or distress with attenuated feelings relative to their presentation as real, may elicit also, for some reasons, aesthetic appreciation. One may then surmise that the physiological activation that the fiction viewer discounts may reinforce or enrich, give more arousal, to his or her aesthetic emotions in response to the artistry of the scenes. Let's call this hypothesis the "diversion hypothesis." Aesthetic

emotions often have low degrees of physiological activation, in comparison to emotions like fear, anger, or distress. But according to the diversion hypothesis, in fiction aesthetic emotions may see their physiological activation slightly augmented via a diversion of the physiological activation of the nonaesthetic emotional negative response toward positive or negative aesthetic emotions for the scenes. According to the diversion hypothesis, fiction would be a context in which the physiological activation corresponding to negative emotions could be recycled or used for an aesthetic benefit, to augment either positive or negative aesthetic emotions for the scenes. One characteristic of fiction is that it allows a wider range of emotions than nonfiction. As Currie notes, amusement may be an appropriate response to murder in fiction while not being appropriate for nonfiction (cf. Currie 2014: 160). If one considers that amusement is an aesthetic emotion, the diversion hypothesis aims at explaining how it is possible to feel sadness in response to a fictional murder while at the same time being intensely amused by it.

5. Quasi-emotion?

Almost a century after Meinong (1902/1977), Walton (1978) brings into the philosophical discussion on emotions toward fictions the term “quasi-emotions.” The prefix “quasi” appears first in Walton (1978) as a modifier of the sensations that Walton attributes to Charles watching a horror movie about a terrible green slime. Let’s quote Walton: “His muscles are tensed, he clutches his chair, his pulse quickens, his adrenalin flows. Let us call this physiological/psychological state “quasi-fear” (1978: 6).” If I understand Walton well, part of what is described as sensations corresponds to what, in the Sperduti et al. (2016) study, is understood as the physiological activation. And the data of the Sperduti et al.’s study shows that the physiological activation remains at the same level in fiction and in nonfiction. So, the Sperduti et al. study sees no reason to describe the physiological activation with the “quasi” vocabulary. At this stage, there is no more than a superficial terminological difference between Walton and the Sperduti et al. study, since Walton’s descriptions of Charles’s tensed muscles and of the quickening of his pulse fit well with the Sperduti et al. (2016) data. Then, in a footnote, Walton suggests that we should understand “‘quasi-fear’ as referring only to the more psychological aspects of Charles’s condition: the feelings or sensations that go with increased adrenalin, faster pulsed rate, muscular tension, etc.” (1978: n. 9, p. 13). It seems then that Walton agrees with the Sperduti et al.

(2016) study in dissociating the physiological and the feeling impact on Charles “The purely physiological aspects of quasi-fear, such as the increase of adrenalin in the blood, which Charles could ascertain only by clinical tests, are not part of what makes it make-believe that he is afraid” (n. 9, p. 13). Of course, Walton’s use of the “make-believe” vocabulary is not part of the Sperduti et al. study. Still, for Walton, in line with the Sperduti et al. (2016) study, only the feelings are said to be modified by the fictionality of the moving scenes.

But beyond this line, Walton (1978) and Sperduti et al. (2016) follow different paths. First, Walton describes the feelings modification in terms of make-believe modification, this move being based on a philosophical theory about the generation of make-believe truths by representational works of art. Sperduti et al. (2016) describe the feeling modification on the basis of experimental results in terms of down-regulating feelings (for negative feelings) and, on that basis, some hypotheses on the nature of our engagement with fiction are proposed. Sperduti et al. (2016)’s study does not use the quasi-vocabulary and the authors do not attempt to answer the Classificatory question, only the empirical question that is nested into the Classificatory question. Still I suggest that the Sperduti et al.’s study constitutes grounds to speak of quasi-emotions toward fiction, but with a different meaning from Walton.

Charles’s feelings are states of quasi-fear because these feelings are understood, by Walton, as being taken into a game of make-believe that Charles plays with the images on screen and with his feelings and sensations. When the slime raises its head, Charles grips his chair, and as a result, make-believe truths are generated (*de re*) about Charles: it is make-believe of Charles that he is threatened: “it is ... the fact that he feels his heart pounding, his muscles tensed, etc., which makes it make-believe that he is afraid” (13). According to Walton, Charles does not experience feelings of fear but quasi-fear feelings, of which it is true that make-believedly they are feelings of fear (1978: 22). Walton’s approach to the issue of our emotional responses to fictions is a typical case of a philosophical theoretical approach to the issue. Walton’s philosophical understanding of Charles’s emotions toward the fictional slime constitutes, for the author of “Fearing fictions,” a theoretical ground solid enough for describing Charles’s emotional experience in terms of quasi-fear feelings.

By contrast, a cognitive philosopher looking for experimental results to approach the issue of our emotional responses to fiction would find in the Sperduti et al. (2016) study a different way of bringing the quasi-vocabulary into the discussion. These experimental results point in an altogether different direction than Walton’s theoretical points. Sperduti et al. (2016) results are that


subjects to whom fiction clips depicting negative moving scenes are shown experience actual negative feelings. At both levels—the physiological level and the experience subjective level—all indicators testify the occurrence of true negative feelings in response to fiction. But these true negative feelings appearing to be, according to the experimental results, systematically down-regulated relative to nonfiction, the cognitive philosopher finds a ground for labeling emotions in fiction as quasi-emotions.

Beyond the deep disagreements of Walton (1978) and Sperduti et al. (2016), a philosopher may find either in a theoretical approach such as Walton's or in a cognitive approach such as the Sperduti et al. study an incentive for labeling our affective responses to fiction quasi-emotions. What both studies show is that emotions in response to fiction are artifacts of a game of make-believe one plays with the props and with oneself, for Walton, and artifacts of our regulatory processes, for Sperduti et al. (2016). Fiction constitutes, for the philosophical and for the cognitive studies, an incentive not to act on our emotions with a reason, the recognition that what we face is fiction and that there are no objects or scenes to which we respond emotionally. Beyond the disagreements of Walton (1978) and Sperduti et al. (2016), both studies suggest that quasi-emotions construed either as make-believe emotions for Walton or as regulated emotions for the authors of the Sperduti et al.'s study are veridical or true responses to the moving situations in fiction. Both the make-believe and the regulated emotions are our own genuine accomplishments, true outputs of our own doings.

6. The normal attitude toward fiction

Walton mentions that the quasi-emotion hypothesis “is part of the larger issue of how ‘remote’ fictional worlds are from the real world” (1978: 5). On this larger issue, one may again opt either for a theoretical–philosophical or for a cognitive/experimental–philosophical approach. Walton's theoretical approach of the issue leads him to defend what one may call the “intimate thesis”, that is, the claim that there is “a particularly intimate relation between the real world and fictional worlds” (1978: 21). By contrast, a cognitive philosopher will find in the Sperduti et al. (2016) study elements to defend “the distance thesis,” that is, to justify the claim that we observe fictional worlds from a distance.

Walton argues for the “intimate thesis” on the basis of his theory of make-believe truths and of linguistic evidence. Walton claims that Charles imagines

himself afraid of the slime, or that “Charles does recognize a make-believe world that he and the slime share” (1978: 19). Walton sees in the use of indexicals like “here,” which make implicit reference to the speaker, like in Charles’s frantic exclamation during the movie “Yikes, here it comes! Watch out!” another illustration of the fact that Charles takes it to be make-believe that the slime is headed toward him: “It shows that he regards himself as coexisting with the slime in a make-believe world” (19). Walton locates the difference between an actor on stage who “generates make-believe truths solely by his acting, by his behavior” (14) and whose actual emotional state may or may not be like fear (1978: 14), and Charles whose actual state of mind has a role in generating make-believe truths about himself. “Insofar as make-believe truths are generated by a spectator’s or reader’s state of mind, he is no mere ‘external observer’ of the fictional world” (1978: 21). Walton concludes: “We have a particularly intimate relation between the real world and fictional worlds.” (21) 

A cognitive philosopher might argue for the “distance thesis” on the basis of the Sperduti et al. (2016) study. The study’s authors suggest that the best explanation of the down-regulation of negative emotions in fiction is that we are less implicated with the moving scenes in fiction, more distant than with scenes in nonfiction. Not only we are external observers of fictional worlds, according to the author’s study, but we are also distant external observers of the fictional worlds. On that basis, a cognitive philosopher might defend the view that the normal attitude toward fiction is an augmentation of the psychological distance toward the fictional worlds relative to the normal attitude toward the real world. By doing so, this cognitive philosopher would go against what Walton describes as “the traditional ideas that the normal or desired attitude toward fiction involves a ‘suspension of disbelief’, or a ‘decrease of distance’” (Walton 1978: 23).

7. Our closeness to fiction and the value of fiction

Walton claims that his defense of what I have called the “intimate thesis” “enables us to comprehend our sense of closeness to fictions” and “to make progress on the fundamental question of why and how fiction is important” (1978: 24). Walton suggests that “much of the value of dreaming, fantasizing, and making-believe depends crucially on one’s thinking of oneself as belonging to a fictional world. It is chiefly by fictionally facing certain situations, engaging in certain activities, and having or expressing certain feelings, . . . , that a dreamer, fantasizer, or game

player comes to terms with his actual feelings—that he discovers them, learns to accept them, purges himself of them . . . People can be expected to derive similar benefits from novels, plays, and films only if it is fictional that they themselves exist and participate (if only as observers) in the events portrayed in the works” (1978: 24).

Is a cognitive philosopher defending the “distance thesis” on the basis of the Sperduti et al. (2016) study deprived of resources for comprehending our sense of closeness to fictions and the value of fiction? I believe not. But this will require from the cognitive philosopher to disentangle the fictional and artistic dimensions of our experience of representational works of art.

Walton constructs a global theory of our experience of representational works of art, a theory that aims to explain on a single basis our emotional responses to the fictional propositions established by, for example, the horror movie “(that make-believedly there is a green slime on the loose)” (1978: 18), our sense of closeness to the fictional world established by the movie and the value of this experience. All three dimensions of our interactions with fiction are explained, by Walton, in terms of our participation in games of make-believe with the artwork considered as prop and with ourselves. A cognitive philosopher may explain the nature of our emotional responses to the fictional propositions on the basis of the Sperduti et al. (2016) study. He or she will then defend a “distance thesis,” the view that our distance with the fictional worlds explains the down-regulation of negative emotions in fiction. But the “distance thesis” makes it difficult for the cognitive/experimental philosopher to explain what Walton describes as our sense of closeness to the fictional world established by a work of art without bringing a new parameter in the explanation. This is no real news since it has been already noticed above that the clips used in Sperduti et al. (2016), in virtue of their absence of artistic quality, that is, in virtue of their narrative poverty, were not complex enough to elicit what Tan (1996: 85–120) and (Silvia 2008) call “interest” or what others call “transportation into a narrative” (Gerrig 1993). And “interest” and “transportation into a narrative” are close cousins of what Walton describes as our sense of closeness with a fictional world. In other words, what is suggested here is that our sense of closeness with a fictional world, our capacity to immerse or to get absorbed into a fictional world, depend on the artistic and narrative qualities of the artwork. And these artistic and narrative qualities—which may be properties of artistic or narrative vehicles of fiction or of nonfiction—are liable to counterbalance the fiction parameter and explain that, in some cases, one experiences a sense of, maybe, “cognitive closeness” with a fictional world. Since the Sperduti et al. (2016)

study only tested the impact of fictionality on our emotional responses, not the emotional or psychological impact of artistic or narrative constructions, a cognitive/experimental philosopher must look in another direction, a direction different from the Sperduti et al. (2016) study, in order to make progress on this question. Reference has to be made by the experimental philosopher to other experimental studies, studies of the cognitive basis of our aesthetic attitude in response to artworks and to narratives.⁴

The fact that the Sperduti et al. (2016) data show that fiction triggers an implicit attitude of detachment or distance, not an attitude of psychological participation of the kind postulated by Walton in which the fiction viewer somehow “extends” himself or herself to the fiction level and ends up “on the same level” with fictions (1978: 23) does not exclude that the artistic properties of an artwork (fictional or nonfictional) trigger an attitude of psychological participation of the self-engagement kind. It may be the case that, contrary to a prevalent claim among aestheticians since Kant, what has been described in terms of detachment or distance is not the aesthetic attitude but the normal attitude toward fiction and that the aesthetic attitude should be described in opposite terms. The confusion in philosophy of these aspects of our psychological interaction with artworks depicting fictional scenes—a sense of distance and a sense of intimacy—is explainable insofar as so many artworks being vehicles of fictional content are the sources of aesthetic self-engaging attitudes embedded within or blended with distant or disengaged attitudes fit for fiction. In these circumstances, when artworks are vehicles of fictional content, one may surmise that a dual process—distancing and self-projection—would be at work. This dual-process hypothesis is compatible with the “diversion hypothesis” discussed above.

8. Conclusion

Philosophers, in the analytic tradition, have struggled with questions concerning the spectator’s or reader’s emotional reactions to fictional characters and events. The lesson of our discussion is that a cognitive/experimental approach of the question of the difference between fictional world emotions and actual world emotions, instead of ending the philosophical discussion, may guide the philosophical discussion in a new direction, toward an investigation of the interaction between fictional world emotions and aesthetic emotions. The philosophical “Classificatory question” has acquired a new dimension.

Notes

- 1 In Sperduti et al. (in press), the authors have developed the research of the 2016 study in what may be called, according to my proposal, an “indirect” cognitive study. As a matter of fact, the authors investigate in this study “directly” the contribution of different executive functions (updating, switching, and inhibition) in implicit emotional regulation and only “indirectly” the impact of fictional content on our emotional responses. In this study, emotionally negative fixed images were presented to participants preceded by short texts describing each image as either real or fictional. In line with the findings of Sperduti et al. (2016), the participants’ emotional responses to images displayed as fictional were rated as less intense relative to their presentation when the same images were displayed as real. Their first result is that the presentation of the images as fictional trigger implicit down-emotional regulation processes since no explicit emotional regulation requirement was asked of participants. On that basis, the authors insist on understanding the presentation of the images as fictional as a way of inducing implicit emotion regulation processes. Their second result is that these emotional processes of down-regulation are correlated with the participant’s updating performances, with their capacity to hold in working memory the fictional construal of the image content. Participants performing well in complex executive functions such as updating are, according to the study’s results, good modulators of their emotional responses to the negative images when they are displayed as fictional.
- 2 According to Lowe and Ziemke (2011: 17), “the feeling state has a fundamental role in regulating the action tendencies it represents (or comes to represent).”
- 3 Koole, in a review of the current research on the psychology of emotion regulation, notes that “cognitive reappraisal can inhibit the experience of unwanted emotions, although it does not consistently decrease psycho-physiological arousal” (2009: 23).
- 4 For an experimental study on the sense of intimacy in aesthetic experience, see e.g., Vessel, Starr, and Rubin (2013). For experimental works on self-projection narrative processing, see, e.g., Speer, Zacks, and Reynolds (2007), Hassabis and Maguire (2007), Buckner and Carroll (2007), and Yarkoni, Speer, and Zacks (2008).

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