Negative Emotions in the Reception of Fictional Narratives

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Katja Mellmann · Ralf Schneider · Rüdiger Zymner

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Karl Eibl† · Manfred Engel · Rüdiger Zymner

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Márta Horváth, Gábor Simon (Eds.)

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A Cognitive Approach

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Negative Emotions in the Reception of Fictional Narratives
An Introduction

Márta Horváth, Gábor Simon

An important aspect of narrative coherence is emotional understanding. The sequence of events completes an emotional cadence in the audience, which makes narratives meaningful for him (Vermeule 2011). In this regard, negative emotions have an outstanding role. Based on general emotion theories, positive emotions create a tendency towards actions that approach, while negative emotions encourage distancing and avoiding (Norris et al. 2010). However, such theories do not appear useful for aesthetic reception, because as research shows aesthetic objects eliciting negative emotions considerably attract recipients and increase the intensity of the aesthetic experience. In the latter event, it seems, negative emotions interweave with pleasure; moreover, they can become the source of pleasure. According to certain psychological explanations, negative emotions play an outstanding role in three domains of our cognitive system: attention, memory and emotion (Rozin and Royzman 2001). As art aims to affect exactly the same domains, experiencing negative emotions and aesthetic reception overlap one another to some extent.

In this regard, artistic forms based on storytelling, i.e., novels, dramas, movies and narrative poetry, are of special interest, since a huge part of these works of art represents human conflict, which elicits negative emotions in the recipient. In these cases, negative emotions are linked with positive aesthetic evaluation (liking) and positive aesthetic emotions (pleasure or excitement). Therefore, some theories assume a twofold behavioral reaction and speak of a distancing-embracing effect of negative emotions in art reception (Menninghaus et al. 2017). According to this conception, an aesthetic environment has a specific modifying effect on negative emotions. On the one hand, they establish a certain psychological distance between the recipients and their negative emotions related to the artwork, as the recipients know precisely that they are not confronted with reality but with a fictive story. On the other hand, the effects of negative emotions can be kept under control by recipients, as they are able to regulate themselves and decide whether they want to continue the reading/watching process or interrupt the emotionally burdensome activity. All this creates enough distance between the recipients and their emotions to avoid discouraging recipients; moreover, the recipients seek to encounter them in

their aesthetic experiences over and over. Consequently, the following questions can be raised: why are negative emotions so attractive in the realm of aesthetics, and how can they draw the recipient into an aesthetic experience?

Furthermore, certain mediator emotions are responsible for modifying negative emotions into pleasure, too (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 9-13). Such mediator emotions are feelings of suspense or being moved: for example, feeling suspense makes horror stories enjoyable in spite of the fear experienced, and being moved makes sad stories attractive. In other words, the positive aesthetic effect of negative emotional experiences can be explained by both the specific cognitive context of the work of art and the mediating role of other emotional processes accompanying reception. From these follows another question: how can we model the process of aesthetic response to that which elicits negative emotions in artwork?

A further theoretical issue concerning the unfoldment of negative emotions during the aesthetic experience is the intersubjectivity of these processes. The question is whether there is any difference between undergoing the emotions elicited by the artwork and processing the characters' emotions depicted in it. The traditional approach emphasizes the metarepresentational capacity of the human mind (see Goldman 2006 for a general summary). Put another way, mindreading involves the processing of others' mental states (or, more precisely, of the external signs evoked by these states) and the internal (meta)representation of them, i.e., the imitation of emotions in our own mind. However, simulation-based models (Goldman 2006) and the theories of direct perception (e.g., the Person Model Theory, Newen 2018) reject the representational redescription of the perceived emotion, highlighting the intersubjective resonance of the same emotional state. In line with the latter approaches, our theory of mind capacity (i.e., recognizing and attributing mental states to other minds) relies on simulating the perceived emotion as well as the actively participating in it. Thus, we can reformulate the question above as follows: how do represented and triggered negative emotions contribute to aesthetic experience?

The present volume seeks answers to these questions, discussing the role of negative emotions in the reception of fictional narratives. We focus on the basic emotions, such as fear, anger, sadness and disgust, since they show lower cultural diversity than complex, higher-level emotions (e.g., schadenfreude or revengefulness) do. The general aim of the studies is to investigate the relationship between certain genres and negative emotions, exploring the role of negative emotions in guiding the reader's attention or in poetic justice.

Although our goal is to provide the reader with a general overview of the topic, two restrictions need to be explicated here. The present volume cannot

be considered a monographic summary of how negative emotions contribute to the pleasure of art; it is rather a collection of essays as case studies. As a consequence, the studies do not confine their scope to only one theoretical model of emotions: there is a significant overlap between them in their definitions of the core terms, but there is also some theoretical divergence in how they approach and model negative emotions. As an example, the notion of empathy has either a broader or a narrower interpretation in the volume depending on the theoretical foundation of the chapters: it is conceived either as a conscious sharing in a character's emotional state or as a (more direct) participation in the emotional experience unfolding in the character. Since there are slightly different psychological models serving as the backgrounds of the individual studies, the volume does not offer a unified theoretical framework for further research. However, it opens up new directions and paves the way for a new synthesis in the field.

The other reflection concerns the diversity of the volume regarding the analysed artworks and genres. The aim of the editors was to demonstrate the productivity of the central question (the role of negative emotions in the reception of fictional narratives) in approaching literary texts and directing readers' attention to a novel aspect of their reception. Moreover, non-literal cultural products are also represented in the collection: (horror) movies and computer games enrich its cultural scope. Finally, there are studies that constitute theoretical and/or methodological innovations in the field, either using new methods of analysis or adapting existing models to novel data. It is, however, common to the studies that the authors are not interested in the elaboration of new interpretations: they rather seek explanations for the composition, poetic, and linguistic formation of artworks from the perspective of eliciting and exploiting negative feelings.

The first section of the volume is concerned primarily with fear and its effects on the process of reading, watching a movie and/or playing computer games. **András Bálint Kovács** investigates the dynamic unfoldment of fear while experiencing horror movies, which he calls "the roller-coaster of fear." The main question of his study concerns the paradox of fear: why are horror films so popular even though they function to evoke fear? The answer of the paper is twofold: it argues that, on the one hand, feeling fear is not an exclusively negative experience, since there is also enjoyment in fearful entertainment due to neural processes. On the other hand, fear is not a constant element of horror films: short stressful episodes are followed by sequences of relaxation, and this composition makes it possible for the recipient to regain her/his calmness. Based on these findings the study refines our view on the complexities of fear generation and its consequences in the course of watching horror movies.

Moving on from films to literature, **Márta Horváth** argues that the emotional impact of literary narratives cannot be treated as a homogeneous phenomenon, as felt and perceived emotions, i.e., the reactions triggered by the artwork and those experienced by the characters and described by the narrator, have to be distinguished. Whereas the former is defined as an emotional program run by the reader's mind, the latter belongs to the realm of cognitive empathy and is based on our capacity of mindreading. Through an analysis of Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum," Horváth demonstrates which narrative techniques are suitable for evoking the reader's emotions and which ones activate his mindreading-ability. The analysis also demonstrates that Poe's gothic stories can be seen as psychological horror, which does not seek to elicit a primal sense of fear in the reader but to illuminate the consciousness of the person experiencing the fear.

Addressing a third medium, **Judit Szabó** investigates horror survival games, which are designed to evoke states of fear by limiting agency and defensive options. Her essay asks how players deal with their fear and stress, and which (individual and other) factors have an influence on their gaming experience in different game modes (in a first-person perspective and in virtual reality). The investigation focuses on the elements of gameplay and narrative forms that make it possible to experience increasing intensities of stress and balance the states of anxiety during the game. Her paper examines the interplay of two emotional processes in the genre of survival horror games: controlling the game and playing according to the rules (gameplay emotions), and identifying with the avatar's perspective of action in the game world (diegetic emotions). She concludes that agency is not necessarily adversely affected by difficult and fear-inducing game mechanics or even by failed attempts.

Finally, a more abstract but equally interesting type of fear is thematized in the paper of **Csenge Aradi**, namely death anxiety. This study focuses on the conceptualization of DEATH in La Rochefoucauld's writings using the framework of Cognitive Metaphor Theory. Consequently, the investigation extends potential of a cognitive poetic approach to explain negative emotions to the early modern period of European thinking, highlighting the rich conceptual structure with which La Rochefoucauld describes our attitude towards the event of death. The analysis explores how vision metaphors are tightly related to different perspectives on death and the way the different metaphors motivate divergent behavioral patterns and emotional experiences related to death.

The second section turns to another negative emotion, dealing with disgust and its effects on the process of reading or watching a movie. In his study, **Gábor Simon** utilizes the most recent approach, the situated models of emotions, which argues for either a multi-level model of consciousness or a plural

epistemological strategy relying on direct perception. To test this thesis, he first performs a corpus-assisted investigation of the representation of disgust in Hungarian and then analyses the results of a questionnaire that tests whether sentences with different representational foci are evaluated differently by native speakers of Hungarian. According to the results of his survey, an internal focus is considered more intensive, which he attributes to its verbal elaboration of emotion. His test also verifies the plurality thesis of epistemological strategies, unlike the hypothesis that holds that there are two separate processing systems.

Erzsébet Szabó's essay examines Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis). The analysis explores negative emotions, primarily fear, disgust, and anger, which are depicted by the text as well as are created by the text in the reader. After introducing these three emotion programs, the essay describes the reactions of Gregor's family, after which it explains the emotional effect on the reader that is supported by the text. The analysis puts forward the claim that the emotions described and the emotions evoked in the reader follow opposite trajectories: as the family members demonstrate physical disgust towards Gregor, the text's strategies aim to create moral disgust in the reader.

In his paper, **Daniel Kulle** explores what possibilities a film can offer its viewers to relate to the diegetic pain of a character. He asks how a viewer can deal with a direct representation of pain and how a film can control this relationship with aesthetic and dramaturgical means. He defines pain as a complex phenomenon having a cognitive, a perceptive and an affective side, as well as a vegetative, a motoric and a communicative aspect in which bodily postures, gestures and facial expressions signal the experience of pain outwards, inviting bystanders to react empathically to an individual's pain. He provides an overview of the richness of viewers reactions to pain, such as intentional compassion-with, empathic feeling-with, disgust and repulsion.

Zsófia Domsa approaches negative emotions from a methodological perspective and explores how texts from a culture distant in time and space can be brought closer to the contemporary reader. She examines the emotional impact Icelandic sagas can have on today's reader. The challenge the study addresses is that, although the sagas present a series of tragic events, losses and bloody battles, their depiction does not support empathic reactions on the part of the reader, as they give virtually no insight into the thoughts and emotions of the characters. The study discusses the tools that cognitive didactics offers to reveal the hidden emotional schemata of the sagas.

In the third section of the volume the authors concentrate on non-basic negative emotions, such as narrative tension and moral judgements, or dissociation. In her second paper, **Judit Szabó** discusses how moral cognition and

negative emotions are closely linked in the film *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* by Yorgos Lanthimos. The vantage point of the argumentation is the narrative model of the tragic dilemma, in which a tension unfolds between moral judgements (knowing what is good or bad) and moral behavior (deciding and acting in a good way). The main thesis of the study is that literary and popular fictions that present tragic aporia engage the recipient not only in intuitive judgements but also in a higher-level form of moral cognition based on various calculations. In this respect, these tragic fictions initiate the reconstruction of the recipient's own moral principles. Moreover, and this is the other major contribution of the paper to the central topic of the present volume, the empathy of the recipient induces stress and negative emotions in dilemmatic situations, which motivates a multiperspective assessment of them and thus of the complex processes of moral reasoning. The author demonstrates this thesis with an analysis of Lanthimos' film using film theory, directing attention to the narrative and visual techniques that enhance moral cognition and emotional participation in the dilemma.

Finally, **Lilla Farmasi** provides a cognitive narratological analysis of Haruki Murakami's short story "Sleep". According to her thesis, disnarration is one of the main organizing principles of the story, which is not only present on the level of the story but can also be instrumental in understanding the way the short story's storytelling techniques operate. She investigates how disnarration, omission and negation increase the complexity of the narrative by generating alternative events and uncertainty in the reader's interpretation and how they are interrelated with the depicted negative emotions.

This volume primarily brings together contributions from the members of the *Cognitive Poetics Research Group* in Hungary. The research group was founded in 2014 at the Institute of German Philology of the University of Szeged and includes among its members colleagues working in universities across the country and representing different areas of the humanities, such as cognitive narratology, cognitive poetics, film theory, psychology and so on. The aim of the group is to bring together researchers working in the broader field of cognitive poetics in Hungary, to make international studies using this theoretical approach accessible and more visible to literary scholars in the country and to adopt these results in novel research projects. This volume presents the latest findings of the research group on the role of negative emotions in the reception of fictional narratives. We are also honoured by the contribution of Austrian director, author, teacher and film scholar Daniel Kulle to the volume.

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