

Cognitive Science of Pleasure
(Fall, 2016: Psychology 421/ 621, Cognitive Science 421)

Special topic for 2016:
STORIES AND OTHER IMAGINARY PLEASURES

Time and place

Monday, 1:30 – 3:20, place TBA

Instructor

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Summary

Some pleasures are easy to explain—there is no mystery why we often enjoy sex, eating, drinking, relaxing, playing with our children, socializing with our friends, and crushing our enemies. But we spend hours each day on a far more mysterious pursuit. We indulge in pleasures of the imagination, immersing ourselves in other worlds—both those of our own creation, as when we daydream and fantasize, and those created by others, as with novels, movies, video games, and television. Why does this give us so much pleasure?

Other (related) puzzles include: Why do we respond emotionally to the plight of characters—from Anna Karenina to Skylar White—who we know don't really exist? Why are we so often drawn to stories that make us scream, or sob, or gag? How can we still feel suspense when watching a movie for the second time? How does our morality change when we immerse ourselves in fiction?

The goal of this seminar is to solve these mysteries. In the course of doing so (or trying to do so), we will explore some of the most exciting contemporary research and theorizing in psychology, philosophy, literary criticism, neuroscience, and related disciplines.

Prerequisites

This course is for advanced undergraduates and graduate students. All participants—both undergraduate and graduate—should have taken Introduction to Psychology and/or Introduction to Cognitive Science (or their equivalents) and a further background in these disciplines would be a plus. Note that a strong foundation in literature, film studies, or philosophy (especially aesthetics) can make up for less of a psych/cognitive science background.

This course will be capped, and so permission of instructor is required (see below). There is a fair amount of reading for the course (more than I usually assign) and if you take the course, you are expected to do it all.

Selection Process

If there are more students who want to take the course than we have room for, we will do the following: If you are interested in attending the seminar, you must attend the first class (Friday, September 2) and then contact me before 9 PM that evening with a short email (a) describing your background and (b) explaining why you are interested in taking the course. You do not need to be a Psychology or Cognitive Science major to take this course. I will select a total of 18 students (in part using a random lottery method), and will contact students about whether they are admitted by Saturday evening.

Evaluation and Seminar Style

Weekly comments (40%). Prior to each class, participants will submit a 300-400 word comment about the readings. This comment will be a response to a question raised in the previous class, and should be sent to me by email (no attachments, please). It is due by Saturday at 10 PM. Your comments will demonstrate to me that you have done the readings, and, more important, will help structure the discussion we have during class. These comments are required for every class except for the first one and the last one. You are allowed to skip one reading response without penalty.

Final project/presentation (30%). I am flexible about the nature of this project—it might be an experimental report, a theoretical discussion, a grant proposal, or a review of a series of books. I will provide more details about this later in the course. Please note that collaborative work is encouraged, and the final project can be done by 1-4 seminar participants. The final class will be devoted to

presentations of these in-progress projects.

Participation (30%). Seminar participants are expected to ... participate. In order to get a good grade in this course, you need to participate in the discussion every time we meet. Participants should also be aware that I intend to ask them for their opinions and arguments. I may ask a specific individual to expand on a point made in the comment that he or she sent in, for instance. I'll note also that I expect participant's contributions in class to reflect a careful reading of the assigned materials. (As Wittgenstein was reputed to have said: No tourists!)

All of this might be a factor when deciding whether or not to take this course.

Academic Honesty

Here goes. This looks like boilerplate, but I really mean it. For the written assignments, any use of words or ideas from other sources—including online sources such as wikipedia—has to be explicitly and clearly acknowledged. For a short but useful discussion, see:

<http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/>

If you have any questions about proper citation practice, please talk to me ahead of time. Any case of suspected cheating will be referred to the Executive Committee of Yale College. The consequences can be severe, including suspension. In my experience, many episodes of cheating are due to stress and panic. If you find yourself in a difficult situation, there are always better options than cheating.

Readings

Chapters, journal articles, book excerpts and other sources will be made available online.

Dinner at my house

Sometime early in the semester, we'll have a (fully optional) dinner at my house where seminar participants will get a chance to talk in a more informal setting. Details to follow

Tentative Schedule

This schedule of topics and readings is certain to change, but this will provide a sense of what I hope to cover. The readings for the two “TBA” weeks at the end will be added based on student interest, and might also be used up if we need more than one week to get through a certain topic.

Please note Yale’s quirky schedule for the start of the Fall; This class will meet on Friday, September 2, but not on Monday, September 5 (Labor Day). Then we meet every Monday.

Friday, September 2: Introduction to the course (no readings)

September 12: Why do we like stories?

Tooby John & Cosmides Leda (2001) Does beauty build adapted minds? Toward an evolutionary theory of aesthetics, fiction and the arts. *SubStance*

Vermeule, Blakey (2006) Gossip and Literary Narrative. *Philosophy and Literature*,

Pinker, Steven (2007) Toward a consilient study of literature. *Philosophy and Literature*

Mar, Raymond A., and Keith Oatley (2008) The function of fiction is the abstraction and simulation of social experience. *Perspectives on psychological science*

Bloom, Paul. (2012) Who Cares about the Evolution of Stories? *Critical Inquiry*

Sept 19: Do stories make us better?

Posner, Richard (1997) Against ethical criticism. *Philosophy and Literature*

Nussbaum, Martha (1998) Exactly and responsibly: A defense of ethical criticism. *Philosophy and Literature*

Gottschall, Jonathan (2008) Why fiction is good for you. *Boston Globe Ideas*
[google title and author to find online]

Appel Markus (2008). Fictional narratives cultivate just world beliefs. *Journal of Communications*

Zunshine, Lisa (2008) Theory of Mind and Fictions of Embodied Transparency. *Narrative*

Landy, Joshua (2015) Slight expectations: Literature in (a) crisis. Unpublished manuscript.

Oatley, Keith (2016) Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*.

September 26: Imaginary play in children

Skolnick, Deena and Bloom, Paul (2006) The intuitive cosmology of fictional worlds. In (Ed.) *The architecture of the imagination*

Gottschall, Jonathan (2012) *The Storytelling Animal* (excerpt)

Smith, Eric D., and Angeline S. Lillard. (2012) Play on: Retrospective reports of the persistence of pretend play into middle childhood. *Journal of Cognition and Development*

Weisberg, Deena (2016). How fictional worlds are created. *Philosophy Compass*.

October 3: Pretense and daydreaming in adults

Mason, Malia F., Michael I. Norton, John D. Van Horn, Daniel M. Wegner, Scott T. Grafton, and C. Neil Macrae (2007) Wandering minds: the default network and stimulus-independent thought. *Science*

Goldstein, Thalia R., and Paul Bloom (2011) The mind on stage: why cognitive scientists should study acting. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*

Mar, Raymond A., Malia F. Mason, and Aubrey Litvack (2012) How daydreaming relates to life satisfaction, loneliness, and social support: the importance of gender and daydream content." *Consciousness and Cognition*

Killingsworth, Matthew A., and Daniel T. Gilbert (2012) A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science*

Barnes, Jennifer (2015). Fanfiction as imaginary play: What fan-written stories can tell us about the cognitive science of fiction. *Poetics*

October 10: Is life a story?

Gerrig, Richard & Mumper, Micha (in press) How readers' lives affect narrative experiences.

Strawson, Galen (2015) I am not a story. *Aeon*
[google title and author to find online]

Beck, Julia (2015) Life's stories. *The Atlantic*
[google title and author to find online]

McAdams, Dan P. (2013) The psychological self as actor, agent, and author." *Perspectives on Psychological Science*

October 17: The paradox of fiction

Bloom, Paul (2010) *How Pleasure Works*. Chapters 6 and 7.

Green, Melanie C., Christopher Chatham, and Marc A. Sestir (2012) Emotion and transportation into fact and fiction. *Scientific study of literature*

Friend, Stacie (in press). Fiction and emotion.

Schneider, Steven. Paradox of fiction. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Gendler, Tamar (2008) Alief and Belief. *Journal of Philosophy*

October 24: The paradox of tragedy and horror

Gaut, Berys (1993) The Paradox of Horror. *British Journal of Aesthetics*

Carroll, Noël (1995) Enjoying Horror Fictions: A Reply to Gaut. *British Journal of Aesthetics*

Hoffner Cynthia and Levine Kenneth (2005) Enjoyment of mediated fright and violence: a meta-analysis. *Media Psychology*

Friend, Stacie (2007) The Pleasures of Documentary Tragedy, *British Journal of Aesthetics*

Smuts, Aaron (2009). Art and negative affect. *Philosophy Compass*

Bantinaki, Katerina (2012) The Paradox of Horror: Fear as a Positive Emotion. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

October 31: The paradox of suspense

Yanal, Robert (1996) The Paradox of Suspense. *British Journal of Aesthetics*

Carroll, Noel (1994) The paradox of junk fictions. *Philosophy and Literature*

Leavitt Jonathan and Christenfeld, Nicholas (2011) Story spoilers don't spoil stories. *Psychological Science*

Smuts, Aaron (2008) The Desire-Frustration Theory of Suspense. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

Mag Uidhir, Christy (2011) 'An Eliminativist Theory of Suspense,' *Philosophy and Literature*

November 7: Morality in fiction

Gendler, Tamar (2000) The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance. *The Journal of Philosophy*

Weatherson, Brian (2004). Morality, Fiction, and Possibility. *Philosophers' Imprint*

Miyazono, Kengo & Liao, Shen-yi (in press) The cognitive architecture of imaginative resistance

November 14 and 28: TBA

December 5: Class presentations