



Art and Negative Affect

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Abstract

Why do people seemingly want to be scared by movies and feel pity for fictional characters when they avoid situations in real life that arouse these same negative emotions? Although the domain of relevant artworks encompasses far more than just tragedy, the general problem is typically called the paradox of tragedy. The paradox boils down to a simple question: If people avoid pain then why do people want to experience art that is painful? I discuss six popular solutions to the paradox: conversion, control, compensatory, meta-response, catharsis, and rich experience theories.

Introduction

Few sane people spend their evenings rummaging through the biohazard boxes sitting outside doctor's offices to arouse heightened disgust, but a great deal of people go to horror movies where they will experience similar feelings.¹ None but the most twisted villains would spread false rumors about a friend's infidelity to feel sadness at the pointless breakup of their marriage, but people pack theaters to see melodramas that are designed to jerk tears from audiences via similar scenarios. No one, at least no one we would like to know, spends their lunch hour in the ER or their afternoons at funerals simply to get a chance to witness the heart-wrenching scene of premature death, but we buy books that arouse similar feelings.² It is clear that one could produce examples indefinitely. This reveals a pronounced, apparent dissimilarity between the types of experiences we seek out in our daily lives and those we pursue in response to artworks.

It certainly seems that people are far more willing to experience negative emotions in response to artworks than in their daily lives. This difference begs for an explanation. Why do people desire to see horror films or watch tragedies? More specifically, we might ask, why do people seemingly want to be scared by a movie or feel pity for a character when they avoid situations in real life that arouse the same emotions? This question is often referred to as the *paradox of tragedy*.

There are a variety of answers to the paradox in the philosophical literature. *Control* theorists argue that the putative painfulness of some artworks is mitigated by our ability to stop experiencing them at will

(Morreall). *Compensation* theorists typically argue that any painful reactions must be compensated for by other pleasures, either in the craft of the narrative (Hume) or in the awareness that we are sympathetic creatures responsive to the suffering of others (Feagin, 'Pleasures of Tragedy'). *Conversion* theorists argue that the overall experience of painful artworks is not one of pain but of pleasure, as the pain is converted into a larger, more pleasurable experience (Hume). *Power* theorists argue that we enjoy the feeling of power that arises from either the realization of the endurance of humanity (Price), or through the overcoming of our fear (Shaw, 'Power'). *Rich experience* theorists argue that there are many reasons why people do things other than to feel pleasure. The overall experience of painful art may be one of pain, but the experience can still be seen as valuable, and, as such, motivating (Smuts 2007, 'Painful').

This article will examine six solutions to the paradox of tragedy. But before looking at the solutions, we first need to clarify the nature of the problem.

What's the Paradox?

The paradox of tragedy is neither a paradox nor a single problem; rather, it is a diverse set of issues that are often referred to by the same name. The result is that one person's idea of just what the paradox of tragedy amounts to may vary significantly from some else's. For instance, one might think that tragedies invite audiences to feel pleasure in the suffering of others. This raises pressing moral questions, such as: Is it ethically suspect to take pleasure in the suffering of characters? Is it morally corrupting to watch tragedies? Hence, one may think that the paradox of tragedy is principally a moral problem. Although the moral issues are interesting, we will not be exploring them further, since the bulk of the literature is concerned with a far different question.

Most of the literature on the paradox of tragedy has been concerned with a motivational question: What motivates audiences to pursue artworks that arouse negative emotional responses? The problem is that the motivational question is seldom stated in the same way, and it is rarely shown to be a formal paradox. And depending on how one asks the question, different solutions drop out. As it is typically stated, the paradox of tragedy asks how it is possible for audiences to feel pleasure in response to the fictional portrayal of events in a tragedy. But this formulation of the issue begs a central question, namely, whether or not tragedies afford pleasurable experiences. And even if they do, there are certainly works in other genres, such as melodrama, that are not clear sources of audience pleasure. Surely, the lovelorn do not always, or even typically, listen to sad songs to feel better!

The motivational problem encompasses far more than mere tragedy. In fact, the breadth of negative emotional experiences to which audiences

willingly submit themselves is staggering. For example, the religious bio-pic *Passion of Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004), designed specifically to disgust and outrage viewers, became a box-office hit. This is not an isolated case. A tremendous amount of religious-themed art in the Western tradition seeks to provoke painful emotional reactions via depictions of the suffering of Christ and the martyrdom of saints.

Of course audience motivations for viewing religious works are complicated, but there are other clearer cases. For instance, melodramas have become an extremely popular genre of movies. A popular melodrama based on an Alice Munro story, *Away from Her* (Sarah Polley, 2006), features a couple torn apart by past infidelity, uncovered paradoxically by the loss of recent memories from Alzheimer's. After a month in the nursing home, Fiona falls in love with another resident and all but forgets her husband; audiences weep and weep. This is far from an isolated case. Another exemplary melodrama, *Plenty* (Schepisi, 1985) ends with a flashback scene, where on a good day in her youth, the main character projects forward saying that 'There will be days and days like this', but after two hours of watching the heroine go insane from boredom in a stultifying marriage, the audience knows better. For viewers susceptible to having their heart-strings pulled by a frequently visible hand, melodramas can elicit visceral sorrow.

Likewise, the horror genre primarily attempts to arouse a combination of two aversive responses, fear and disgust, yet many people routinely attend horror moves where such responses are almost guaranteed. Some works in the horror genre inspire dread and profound sadness. Nicolas Roeg's beautiful and profoundly depressing masterpiece *Don't Look Now* (1973) denies audiences and its main character hope that the universe is anything but indifferent. Conspiratorial fictions such as *The Parallax View* (Pakula, 1974) often leave audiences without clear explanations of the events other than that the world is a malevolent and corrupt place, where almost anyone could become an expendable tool of powerful interests. Melancholy music can arouse remorse at past wrongs or missed opportunities and painfully felt nostalgia, where listeners come to desire to return to previous times and suffer from the realization that this desire can never be satisfied.

When one looks beyond tragedy and notices the array of artworks that arouse negative emotions, the puzzle becomes more pronounced. In response to art people seem far more willing to experience emotions that we think of as negative. We describe an emotion as negative when it is typically accompanied by an aversive reaction – that is, we typically avoid situations that arouse the emotion. Such emotions are often described as having a negative affect; they feel bad. We might say that they have a negative hedonic tone.³ As such, the emotions themselves are thought to be the source of aversion. In some cases, such as those of profound sadness, we would go so far as to say that the emotions are painful.⁴ In

fact, the more general issue under consideration could be called the *paradox of painful art*. The paradox of painful art can be stated as follows:

1. People avoid things that provide painful experiences and only pursue things that provide pleasurable experiences.
2. People have painful experiences in response to putatively painful art (e.g., tragedies, melodramas, religious works, sad songs, and horror).
3. People pursue putatively painful art.

The paradox boils down to a simple question: If people avoid pain then why do people want to experience art that is painful?

Before discussing the details of the particular solutions to the paradox, it will be helpful to look a bit more carefully at each claim of the paradox. The third claim, that people pursue putatively painful art, is beyond reasonable doubt. It is clear that audiences are not typically forced to the movies against their will. There is no Hollywood secret police force gathering people from their homes, forcing them into buses, only to be made to sit in crowded theaters while eating buckets of popcorn. And it is clear that audiences know what they are getting into. Rare is it that people go to movies without first reading reviews, seeing a preview, or talking to friends. And theaters do not have to employ bait and switch tactics to get audiences to watch melodramas. There is no need to advertise a comedy to get audiences to buy tickets to a tear jerker. Hence, no one has taken issue with the third claim of the paradox: Audiences willingly seek out putatively painful art with largely accurate expectations about what they will experience.

In contrast, nearly every solution to the paradox has rejected the second claim, as I have formulated it – that people have painful experiences in response to putatively painful art. There are two broad options here. One might simply deny that putatively painful art provides any noteworthy painful experiences. Alternatively, one might deny that the experiences are on the whole painful. As we will see, conversion theories and control theories take the first option, whereas, most compensatory theories typically take the second, more popular route. Most, but not all, compensatory solutions to the paradox claim that there is hedonic compensation – that is, they admit that audiences feel pain in response to putatively painful art, but they claim that the artworks provide adequate compensation in the form of other pleasures.

The second claim of the paradox has been a popular target for a variety of reasons. First, if people do indeed feel pleasure in response to representations of the suffering of others, then a significant moral problem presents itself. Surely it is morally suspect to take pleasure in the suffering of others, and likewise, the representation of the suffering of others. This moral problem has motivated a search for alternate sources of pleasure, such as self-congratulatory meta-responses – we are pleased to be the kind of people that feel sorry for such suffering. Second, people have failed to adequately

consider the phenomenology of painful art experiences, phenomenology that provides a great deal of data in support of the second premise. This is likely the case because, third, an implicit assumption of a relatively strong form of motivational hedonism lies in the background, making it difficult to see that some artworks might not be on the whole pleasurable.

As to the first claim, my formulation of the paradox makes explicit the underlying assumption of motivational hedonism. The first claim is simply a statement of motivational, or psychological, hedonism – the theory that the sole source of motivation is pleasure and the avoidance of pain. And it is fairly easy to see that motivational hedonism is false. A soldier may throw himself on a grenade to save his friends, sacrificing his pleasure for the good of others. The morally motivated may pursue what they consider to be the right course of action instead of what would bring them the most pleasure. Similarly, one may occasionally promote the happiness of one's friend or lover at the expense of one's own pleasure. But not all ahedonic motivations are benevolent. As the existentialists take pains to note, one may sacrifice one's own happiness for the pursuit of a meaningful project, knowing that it will likely bring more frustration and less pleasure than going to the beach. Although pleasure undeniably plays a significant role, it is only one among many of our sources of motivation. Anyone who was motivated exclusively by the pursuit of pleasure would be a pathetic creature indeed, perhaps not fully human.

Since motivational hedonism is clearly false, the paradox of painful art quickly dissolves. A more plausible motivational theory, predominant motivational hedonism – the theory that people are predominantly motivated by the prospect of pleasure – does not create a paradox; but it does raise two important questions: the *motivational question* and the *difference question*. The *motivational question* asks: Why is it that people want to see putatively painful art? And, the *difference question* asks: Why are people more willing to experience painful affect in response to art than in their normal lives? What we informally call a 'paradox' is essentially just these two questions.

Although we do not have a formal paradox worth worrying about, we do have two very difficult questions. Although the difference question is addressed by some solutions such as the control theory, the bulk of the literature on the paradox of tragedy is concerned with answering the motivational question. I turn now to briefly survey some of the important answers.

Six Solutions to the Paradox

I CONVERSION THEORY

There are two variants of the conversion theory. The first type of conversion theory holds that painful emotions had in response to art are converted into pleasure through some more prominent emotion. The second variant

holds that the entire art-going experience, as a whole, feels pleasurable in retrospect, and, as such, the pain felt is more or less forgotten. As we shall see, the second position starts to veer off into the compensation theory. The first position is more popular, but the mechanism behind the conversion of pain into pleasure is often thought to be utterly mysterious.

In 'Of Tragedy', David Hume attempts to resolve the paradox of tragedy by a conversion theory. He bases his argument on the assumption that audiences do feel pleasure in response to tragedy. Hume argues that 'the same object of distress, which pleases in a tragedy, were it really set before us, would give the most unfeigned uneasiness' (218). Working with this assumption, he attempts to account for the possibility of having pleasure from what appear to be distressful emotions had in response to art. Hume's solution to the paradox is that the unpleasant emotions are 'converted' or 'transformed' into pleasure by the eloquence of a narrative. He thinks that the 'predominant emotion', beauty, alters the nature of the painful responses, such that the overall response becomes one of pleasure.

Hume fails to give a satisfying account of this process of conversion, and his view has been rightly criticized for leaving the basis of his explanation a mystery. However, at root, Hume's explanation is not altogether implausible. Any complex experience will be made up of disparate parts. In many experiences, especially those had from well-crafted narrative structures, there will be certain aspects that bring coherence and unification. Unifying elements are often what come to typify an experience for us, giving us a shorthand way to reflect on overall more complicated phenomena. Feelings of beauty had from narrative eloquence are often the predominant, unifying elements of art experiences, whereas, such feelings are typically absent from real-life experiences. Hence, the experience of a tragedy may be overall one of pleasure for reasons not available to non art experiences of tragic events.

This explanation is very close to a compensation theory, except that on the conversion account, the overall experience is treated as a complex whole without clearly discernible parts. The absence of a clear mechanism of conversion is not the primary weakness of Hume's theory, as most have supposed; rather, the theory does not mesh with how we describe our own art experiences. The central problem with the conversion theory, as I have presented it, is that it does not describe the way we typify our experiences of painful art. Reviewers and ordinary viewers often describe works as utterly depressing, heart-wrenching, terrifying, and disgusting. The distinguishing, or unifying element, is often not a beautifully crafted narrative, but the overall emotional affect, which is frequently painful. If the overall experience of an artwork is best described as painful, then the conversion theory is simply not applicable to that work.

Certainly, *Don't Look Now* contains a highly integrated narrative and beautiful compositions, but they serve a profoundly depressing purpose: We learn that the protagonist is indeed prescient, but this 'gift' only allows

him to foresee his own death, where his hope of reuniting with the ghost of his recently deceased daughter is dashed by the blade of a dwarf's carving knife. Although an exemplary horror movie, it does not provide a pleasurable experience. Not even close. Since there seem to be plenty of heart-wrenching, depressing, disgusting, terrifying, and dread-inspiring artworks, the conversion theory cannot serve as a general solution to the paradox of painful art.

II CONTROL THEORIES

Control theories attempt to answer the question of why it is that we seek out negative emotions from art when we avoid them in real life – that is, they focus on the difference question. John Morreall, a control theorist, argues that art experiences are far less painful than those had in real life, because in regards to art our powers of control are far greater than in real life. Specifically, our control over narratives comes from our choosing whether or not to have these responses and our ability to walk away if we cannot take it anymore.

Experiments on pain thresholds support this conjecture. When subjects are able to say when the pressure on their finger should stop, they can take far more than if the experimenter does not give them the option. Subjects also report feeling greater amounts of pain when they are unable to control the experiment. Likewise, we might argue that our experiences of art are less painful since we can usually control whether or not they happen or when they should stop. We can decide to leave a theater or put down a book whenever it gets to be too much to handle, and we are aware that we possess this power.

Robert Yanal criticizes control theories, arguing that according to the control account if a spectator is trapped in a theater then the fiction should seem more painful, however this clearly is not the case. Perhaps such a result would be absurd, but it does not damage the control theory. If the subject is strapped to a chair with their eyelids pried open, like Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971), they might feel more pain than a normal viewer, as the control theory predicts. If we are trapped in a theater this does not mean that we are unable to stop watching a movie, except in bizarre circumstances that would probably be extremely distressing.

Imagine taking a roller coaster ride at an amusement park. After the train pulls into the docking station, it immediately begins again, without letting anyone off. Over the loud speaker, you hear that something is wrong and the operators cannot stop the ride or, even worse, you discover that the ride has been taken over by a gang of sadists who say that they will release the passengers 'as soon as we feel like it and not a moment sooner'. After hearing such news, it is hard to image that the ride would remain very fun for much longer.

In *Man, Play, and Games*, Roger Caillois argues, convincingly, that play must be voluntary, that is one must be able to step out of the game whenever one wishes, or the activity will cease to be playful.⁵ Similarly, an effective horror motif is the doll that comes to life or the ventriloquist's dummy that gains control of its puppeteer. Such examples are instances of games that will not stop. In so far as experiencing a fiction is analogous to play, it suggests that the control we have over our fictional engagements makes them less painful, or at least that if we loose control the nature of the experience may become far more painful.

Although control theorists offer a partial explanation for why in response to art we are willing to experience emotional responses that we shun in real life (the difference question), they do not have a plausible answer for why we want to experience such emotions at all. Our experiences of negative emotions in response to fictional events may be less painful or more tolerable because we have some degree of control over their occurrence, but this does not mean that they are not painful at all. Perhaps the central insight of the control theory can help one develop an answer to the difference question, but, as to the basic motivational question, it is not illuminating.

The general problem is further amplified if we consider that our emotional responses to fictions are not completely, or even to a high degree, controllable. Although we decide to see a movie and can walk out of the theater whenever we wish, we cannot just decide to end our depression when we walk out of a melodrama, or to not feel tense and nervous after watching a horror movie. If we feel any pain at all, then the question why we desire such experiences, why we seek out painful art, is still open. The control theory can supplement a further account, but it cannot answer the motivational question on its own.

III COMPENSATION THEORIES

Unlike conversion theories, compensation theories acknowledge that we do experience pain in response to art. Most compensation theories offer particular accounts of why we choose to see a work in a particular genre when we know that it will arouse negative emotions. There are two general forms that a compensatory theory might take: hedonic and ahedonic. All compensation theories are of this structure: artworks in genre X provide compensatory values Y that outweigh any pain the artworks cause. The traditionally more popular hedonic form of the compensatory theory claims that the compensatory value Y is pleasure. That is, hedonic compensatory explanations argue that the best answer to the question 'why do we see works of genre X?' is that such works provide certain compensatory pleasures that audiences expect to be greater than any feelings of pain.

The central problem for hedonic compensatory theories is that they must provide a non-question-begging reason for us to think that the

pleasures had from works of a genre outweigh the pain. It will be instructive to briefly consider how hedonic compensatory theories attempt to account for the appeal of a particular genre, horror. Noël Carroll presents a hedonic compensatory theory of the appeal of horror, arguing that the reason why audiences seek out horror fictions, knowing full well that they will experience fear and disgust, is for the compensatory cognitive pleasures. Audiences, on Carroll's account, enjoy thinking about how one should go about confronting categorically interstitial monsters. The experience of horror is the 'price we are willing to pay' for the pleasures of discovery (186). This would explain why so many horror plots are structured in a four stage – onset, discovery, confirmation, confrontation – model. Carroll's explanation is intended to explain the appeal of narrative horror, but he also offers a similar curiosity-based account of non-narrative works of horrific art.

Although there are certainly forms of pleasure available from the discovery plot structure, some would argue that Carroll's explanation leaves too much out, namely, the pleasures of identification with monsters (Shaw, 'Humean Definition of Horror'). Daniel Shaw argues that horror fictions are often enjoyable because they allows audiences to both identify with a powerful monster as it dispatches the more annoying teenagers, and with the victims who often ultimately triumphant (Shaw 2001, 'Power'). Since the notion of character identification is suspect (Carroll; Gaut), we might want to revise the claim to state that audiences sympathize with or admire the monster. Shaw's principal example is Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs*, whose cunning and wit bring him into sympathy with the audience. Elsewhere, Shaw argues that typical monster movies can encourage similar responses from audiences enamored of a killer's immense powers of destruction (Shaw, 'Humean Definition of Horror').

Although Shaw's theory is intriguing and highlights an extremely important feature of the appeal of horror, it has yet to be worked out across a broad spectrum of the genre. But, yes, we can agree that some horror fictions are enjoyable because we like to see monsters vanquish their prey. Carroll's general reply to this line of argument (Hallie), is that it has only limited applicability (Carroll 167–8). Perhaps the ferocity of the zombies in *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) might arouse such reactions, but the slow masses of dumb walking corpses in *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968) certainly do not. In either case, the general compensatory solution cannot be hedonic, since the overall effect of many horror movies – again, take *Don't Look Now* – is not one of pleasure.

Most hedonic compensatory theories, of horror and painful art in general, assume a predominant hedonic theory of motivation and then try to point out which pleasure must be doing the work. And the hedonic assumption is not altogether unwarranted. It is reasonable to grant the compensation theorist the bootstrapping assumption that there is probably more pleasure involved than pain, so that they may engage in a search for

the pleasure involved. Then, if the compensatory theorist can give us a convincing account of the kind of pleasure involved, pleasure which is sufficient to offset the pain, the initial assumption is justified. However, to justify the hedonic assumption, we need a largely convincing story of how the pleasures could outweigh the pain. In comedy, any negative emotions we may feel are often offset by other pleasures. But the situation is not so clear when we look at melancholy music, melodrama, tragedy, or any of the other types of painful art.

The extreme ambiguity that plagues any comparison of pleasures and pains aggravates the problem for hedonic compensation theories. It is especially difficult to get a clear understanding of what it means for a pleasure to outweigh a pain in these contexts. Consider the case of horror: How many intellectual exploratory units does it take to equal a unit of fear or disgust? The compensatory theorist might argue that they are not committed to the notion that viewers make such calculations consciously. An unconscious hedonic calculation could take place based on our previous experiences with the genre. Further, the hedonic compensatory theorist need not be committed to the idea that we are always correct in our assessments; however, for the most part, the past experiences would have to be more pleasurable than painful, else audiences would gradually be turned off of the genre. Of course, meeting the burden of proof for the compensation theorists requires showing that audiences do report overall pleasurable experiences in genres and artworks to which they return. In the case of painful art, I doubt that this burden can be met. It does not accord with the phenomenology.

Although hedonic compensatory solutions are highly problematic, ahedonic variations are far more promising. Certainly, the ahedonic compensatory theorist argues, audiences seek some value from artworks. We do not merely seek out most tragedies, or even horror movies, for emotional responses. Although affect certainly plays a role, we also seek sources of value such as insight into the human condition or into ways of being in the world. Audiences are significantly motivated to pursue these kinds of values. Unfortunately, sometimes the insights, for example, are profoundly depressing. But if an artwork were nothing but depressing, no one would care to see it.

Again, this line of development is far more promising than the hedonic variant, but it rings false in an important way. It would be very odd to explain the source of value in, say a depressing work of art, as making up for the unfortunate sadness it causes. But this is what compensatory theories are committed to saying. Certainly, it would be plausible to say that the negative affect was instrumental to or even constitutive of, for instance, larger cognitive values. However, the compensatory theorists go beyond any such suggestion. They claim that the negative affect is a liability of the work, one that requires compensation. That is just what it means to compensate, or to make reparations – to offset a defect. You do

not have to make reparations for something desirable. But this does not accord with the way we talk about painful art. No, we celebrate powers of emotional devastation as virtues of works such as *Don't Look Now*.

IV META-RESPONSE THEORIES

Susan Feagin offers an intriguing compensatory solution to the paradox of tragedy. She argues that the reason people want to experience tragedy is because they take pleasure in the experience, or more exactly, they take pleasure in the reactions they have to such fictions. The pleasure is in the meta-response, the response we have to our direct responses to the fiction. The particular meta-response that she thinks we find pleasurable is something of a self-congratulatory feeling – we are glad that we are the kind of person that can feel pity at the suffering of others. We do not feel pleasure when Oedipus gauges out his eyes; no, we feel pity for Oedipus and are pleased that we are the kind of creature that is capable of such a response. The meta-response theory should be considered a species of the family of hedonic compensatory theories, because it holds that the pleasure had from our meta-responses compensates for any pain felt. But this compensatory theory fails to provide a general solution to the paradox of painful art, since, at best, it is only applicable to a limited set of exemplary artworks.

The meta-response theory is designed to handle fictions that are akin to tragedy; however, unsurprisingly, it does not cover horror cases such as the film *Cure* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 1997), where pity is not a major component of the response. 'Cure' is not sadistic, and it does arouse some pity, but this is not the predominant emotion, rather horror and dread are more prominent. It makes audiences fear the irrational impulses that can dominate our lives and blanket our will. In addition, installation works such as Paul McCarthy's 'Bossy Burger' do not arouse pity, but pure visceral disgust. Nevertheless, since the suffering of others is found in most of the painful artforms we are discussing, if Feagin is right, the meta-response theory will have broad explanatory scope.

However, the meta-response theory is also inadequate as a general explanation of the appeal of pity-arousing fiction in particular. Although important when they occur, the meta-responses Feagin describes are extremely uncommon. Indeed meta-responses are the most effective tools for arousing compassionate responses, but vicious, malevolent, and indifferent characters seldom prompt an awareness of one's own kinder, gentler nature. As such, I am hesitant to attribute the prideful meta-response to others, or myself except in very rare cases where an artwork is able to highlight the contrast between our pity and the callousness of others in the audience.

For example, *In the Company of Men* (Neil LaBute, 1997) is designed in such a way that the audience will be polarized from the beginning. In the film, the antagonist, Chad, devises a plot to devastate an attractive but

lonely deaf woman by inexplicably, abandoning her after leading her on for a couple of months. Throughout the film, Chad periodically tells sexist jokes, and frequently humiliates subordinates. Those who refuse to laugh at Chad's sexist jokes will sit in fear of the rest of the audience for the duration of the picture. Seemingly, those laughing are in danger of gradually being sucked into a sympathetic complicity with the evil Chad, whereas the rest of us may feel glad that we are the kind of people that can feel pity for the butt of Chad's cruel practical joke. *In the Company of Men* is brilliant for setting callous audience reactions in relief, thereby prompting such meta-responses as Feagin discusses.⁶ However, the ingenuity of this film is that it figures out a way to use humor to make the reactions of others salient (Smuts, 'Joke is the Thing'). The film would not be worth mentioning if it were not for the fact that the meta-responses it engenders are uncommon. As such, atypical meta-responses cannot account for why we generally want to see tragedies, much less other painful art.

Although it highlights prized examples of painful art, the meta-response theory seems to gain support from only a very limited pool of artworks and a small number of communal viewing experiences. Otherwise it has limited phenomenological support and cannot serve as a general explanation for the limited domain of tragedy, much less all painful art. As such, the meta-response theory has a limited application to the paradox of painful art.

V CATHARSIS

Since the most popular explanation (outside of philosophical aesthetics) of the appeal of painful art is that such works have a cathartic effect, one is forced to address the issue. In fact, one still finds contemporary philosophers, such as Colin McGinn, appealing to extremely crude versions of the theory. Rather than develop an interpretation of Aristotle's extremely cursory and maddeningly vague comments on catharsis, I will simply explain the two main types of theories and quickly note their problems.

Roughly, there are two general theories of catharsis, those that describe the process as one of purification and those that describe it as a form of purgation. First, the experience of feeling pity and fear for the reversal of a tragic hero might be said to be cathartic in the sense that it purifies these emotions. By purification, one might mean that the process immunizes or that it refines. Watching tragedies might be said to refine our emotions in the sense that it helps us understand their nature and trains us to direct them to the appropriate object in the appropriate intensity. Perhaps Aristotle had something similar in mind; in fact, the refinement version of catharsis would allow us to place him in dialogue with Plato's complaints about the dangers of arousing pity and fear, but it does not provide a solution to the paradox of painful art. It does not provide a satisfactory hedonic compensatory theory, since the pleasures of learning about what

it is like to feel pity and fear do not out way the typically painful affect of these emotions. The phenomenology simply does not support a hedonic compensatory solution. And neither does the theory provide an adequate ahedonic compensatory solution, at least not one that answers the motivational question. Assuming that we could make sense of the theory of emotional training, this would clearly be a valuable outcome of viewing tragedy, but this is not why audiences go to the theater. No one says, not even after a good amount of reflection, that they go to tragedies for emotional training. So, why should we think that this plays a prominent role in audience motivation?

Second, the purgation-style theory of catharsis holds that experiencing pity and fear in response to tragedies, for example, expels these emotions. Painful art helps drive out painful emotions in a flood of tears. We leave the theater feeling cleansed, flushed of negative affect by an emotional enema. Indeed, sometimes one might feel cleansed by painful art, but this response is far from ubiquitous. Often one leaves the theater weeping and depressed.

An additional problem is that it is not entirely clear what the supposed purgatory mechanism involves. Why would audiences go to artworks to have painful emotions aroused, simply to have them expelled? Why not stay home and avoid the pain altogether? Again, if one claims that the overall experience is pleasurable, then one owes us an explanation for the works that we do not describe as ultimately pleasurable – those where we sob in our seats as the credits roll by, but that we think of as good works of art, not failed vehicles of catharsis. Further, the purgation theory fails to account for cases where we seek out painful art in order to heighten painful emotional responses, not purge them. Some sufferers of lovesickness or a broken heart might try to expel sorrow by listening to sad songs, but the rest of us seem to desire to intensify our pain through music. We may have motivations beyond the pain, such as focusing our attention in a process of reflection, but these motives do not involve a desire for purgation. Rather, they require the opposite. So much for catharsis.^{7,8}

VI RICH EXPERIENCE [Sections boxed in red are optional]

Pleasure can only be part of the story for why people go to the movies, the theater, read novels, or listen to music. If pleasure were the sole motivating force, we could not explain the reason why, for instance, audiences choose to see movies in any one particular genre. Why horror? Why melodrama? Why suspense-thriller? These cannot have the same answer, since audiences show preferences; we do not simply flip a coin to decide what ticket to buy at the multiplex. Not just any type of movie will do on just any occasion. If all we really want from a movie is pleasure, then genre preferences could amount to nothing more than a hedonic

calculus. But our preferences appear to be grounded in a wide variety of factors. Hence, pleasure cannot be the entire explanation of viewer motivation.

My worry is not just that pleasure is not the entire story, but that pleasure plays only a bit part. Perhaps sometimes pleasure plays no role whatsoever. One might argue that movies offer multiple sources of pleasure, but if the goal is pleasure, what does the source matter?⁹ If it is the particular experience that we are after – that is, if it is the source of the pleasure that entices viewers – then it is not simply pleasure that viewers are after. They want the source – the experience.

So, what is it about the experience of putatively painful art that audiences desire? Near the beginning of Hume's essay 'Of Tragedy', he dismisses Dubos's 'relief from boredom' solution to the paradox. As Hume summarizes, Dubos's position is the theory that 'no matter what the passion is: Let it be disagreeable, afflicting, melancholy, disordered; it is still better than that insipid languor, which arises from perfect tranquility and repose.' As stated, this view is untenable; we seldom are willing to experience just anything to relieve ourselves from boredom. Nevertheless, Hume provides little in the way of a refutation of this view other than arguing that since we do feel pleasure from tragedies and we do not when confronted with similar events in our daily lives, Dubos has failed to account for the dissimilarity.

Dubos's explanation is incomplete, but not for the reasons Hume gives. Although Dubos does not explain the dissimilarity between the kinds of events we seek representations of and the kind of events we seek in real life, his account is significant in suggesting that we do desire painful emotions. Rather than countering this suggestion, Hume begs the question against Dubos, assuming that our response to tragedy and other painful art is predominantly one of pleasure. Indeed, almost all subsequent discussions of the paradox of tragedy make the same mistake. As noted earlier, part of the problem is due to a mixing of moral and motivational questions. The paradox of tragedy is driven by a need to provide a moral justification for the derivation of pleasure from the misfortune of the characters. This quest for moral justification has overshadowed the motivational question, leading commentators to assume that the pleasure we derive from tragedy must be the most significant motivational factor, since it is the most significant moral factor.

If we do not let the prominence of the role of pleasure in the moral question blind us to the full range of our reactions to painful art, something similar to Dubos's explanation becomes more attractive. If one briefly reflects on the phenomenology of painful art experiences and notices how common such experiences are, it becomes plausible that viewers desire painful emotional responses.¹⁰

In 1998, 'Saturday Night Live' featured a skit that portrayed the following scenario: A family sits down to dinner around a large table. A boy at the end of the table takes a sip of milk from

his glass and spits it out, saying 'Ugh! This is rotten'. The person to his left replies, 'Let me try', and has the same response. This repeats until everyone at the table has confirmed first-hand how bad the sour milk tastes. The skit is funny, not because it shows a particularly stupid family that would not take someone's word about the state of a glass of milk and thereby avoid a disgusting experience, but for exposing our desire for first hand, experiential knowledge of the world. If Dubos is right, if people do desire painful emotional responses, we also require answers to the motivational question and difference questions.

Dubos's relief from boredom explanation gives us a partial answer to the motivational question – why we might seek out such experiences, but it does not account for why we usually choose to have them in response to art. One suspects that the answer to the first question – why we desire such experiences at all – is more complicated than simply relief from boredom, and it may be easier to get at an explanation via the second question. The rich experience theorist proposes that the reason we usually seek out these experiences from art rather than real life, is prudence and sometimes cowardice. Art provides a certain degree of safety not present from situations that arouse extreme distress, disgust, anger, fear, horror, misery, paranoia, and a host of other responses. Simply put, most of these reactions cannot be had in real life without incurring significant risks to ourselves and to our loved ones, risks that we typically do not take because they far outweigh the rewards.

A painful art experience is largely more desirable and easier to have than the painful emotional, real-life experience. Also, as the control theory suggests, since we can usually control when such experiences take place and often have the power to walk away when they get to be too much, the pain involved usually does not pass a certain toleration threshold. The safety garnered from our powers of control over art experiences also allows for some reflection on the experiences themselves, which can provide certain cognitive pleasures as we learn about our emotional capacities. Further, our ability to endure certain emotional extremes can provide enjoyment from feelings of power that result from a certain kind of self-overcoming and from the awareness of our own capacities.

For many of us, our richest aesthetic experiences come from encounters with painful art, since one is seldom as fully engaged intellectually, perceptually, and affectively as when experiencing painful emotional responses in response to art. Few, if any, pleasurable experiences match the intensity of our reactions to painful art. Hence, it is not hard to see why, as Alan Goldman suggests, 'our involvement in such experiences is its own reward' (63).¹¹ Painful affect is typically constitutive of large sources of value; it needs no compensation or conversion. Hence, the rich experience theory could also be called the constitutive theory. Overall, the reasons why we desire painful experiences are multifaceted and complex, but why we would rather have them in response to art rather than real life is clear.

Short Biography

Aaron Smuts earned his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he also studied film. He works in a variety of areas in the philosophy of art and ethics, widely construed. Aaron is interested in horror, humor, pleasure, love, the philosophy of film, analytic existentialism, and well-being. He has written articles for *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *Asian Cinema Journal*, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, *Kinoeye*, *Film and Philosophy*, *Film-Philosophy*, the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *Philosophy and Literature*, and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. He is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Temple University.

Notes

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¹ Noel Carroll uses a similar example in his discussion of the paradox of horror.

² I am assuming that our emotional responses to fiction are genuine emotions. There is some controversy surrounding this claim. Kendall Walton, for instance, argues that we only experience quasi-emotions from fictions. But since the phenomenology of putative quasi-emotions and real emotions are highly similar, I will assume that audiences do not shed mere crocodile tears. Regardless, it is enough to get the paradox off the ground if we can agree that some audience responses to fiction are negative – unpleasant or even down-right painful.

³ C. D. Broad develops a sophisticated version of the hedonic tone theory of pleasure. But hedonic tone theories of pleasure have gone out of fashion. The 'heterogeneity problem' is thought to provide a decisive refutation of this general family of theories. See Alston and Feldman.

⁴ There is some debate as to whether non sensation-based pain should be thought of as literally or only metaphorically painful. One might propose that psychological pain be called suffering. The analog for pleasure would be to call psychological pleasure 'joy'. L. W. Sumner makes this distinction. But I do think that suffering and joy are apt descriptions of second order attitudes that one might hold towards their condition, but I cannot find a clear line between psychological and sensual pain and pleasure. Psychological pains typically feel bad, just as cuts and scrapes. And psychological pleasures often feel good, as does a sweet snack. This should be clear as long as one does not try to call all states where one is 'pleased that' such and such is the case pleasure. Clearly, most are not. I can be pleased that lots of things are the case without feeling any pleasure.

⁵ Cailliois argues that play must be free (or voluntary), separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and involve make-believe.

⁶ See Smuts for an examination of the use of sexist humor in LaBute's.

⁷ The general class of theories that I'm calling 'attitudinal theories of pleasure' is not to be confused with a notable member of the class, the Attitudinal Theory of Pleasure (ATP) offered by Fred Feldman.

⁸ On page 41, Brandt offers a more technical notion of pleasure in functionalist terms.

⁹ Plantinga ch. 2, throughout.

¹⁰ Stephen Davies develops a similar explanation for painful musical experience. Rather than try to account for why we are so constituted to desire painful affect, at least in response to art, he simply notes that this is just how we are.

¹¹ Goldman explicitly avoids tying his notion of aesthetic experience to pleasure. Following along the lines of Dewey, he adopts a view of aesthetic experience that involves a thorough exercise of our various capacities. Dewey's description of aesthetic experiences as involving 'doings and sufferings' is well-equipped to incorporate our experiences of painful art.

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