Between hope and fear: determining the dynamics of perceived suspense in literary classics

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The reception of narrative fiction is a highly emotional process (e.g., Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011). Plot suspense is assumed to be one of the most important components of narrative fiction that motivate recipients to follow fictional characters through their worlds (e.g., Gerrig, 1996; Knobloch, 2003; Mellmann, 2007; Zillmann, 2003). In a multi-methodological approach, we aimed at investigating (i) the dynamic development of narrative suspense in excerpts of literary classics from the 19th century and (ii) the interrelation between perceived suspense and a variety of other emotional and cognitive dimensions and readers’ dispositions presumably constituting literature reception.

First, for two texts, differing in suspense as judged by a large independent sample (N=176), we collected (a) data from questionnaires, indicating different affective and cognitive dimensions of receptive engagement, (b) continuous ratings of suspense during text reception from both experts and lay recipients, and (c) registration of pupil diameter as a physiological indicator of changes in emotional arousal and attention during reception over time. Data analyses confirmed differences between the two texts at different dimensions of receptive engagement. Further, the present results show that suspense can be described as a dynamic aspect during the reception of literary texts. Most importantly, we could demonstrate that these dynamics are reflected not only in suspense ratings, but also in pupillary responses, resulting in positive correlations between pupil diameter and ratings obtained from two independent samples. Furthermore, we found differences in the appraisal of literary excerpts at the level of continuous suspense ratings during the reception process and subsequent judgments using questionnaires. Therefore, our findings suggest that changes of the pupil diameter provide a reliable physiological indicator of suspense, which drives recipients’ attention and modulates their emotional engagement.

Second, based on structural equation modeling on questionnaire data, we will describe the interrelationship between different dimensions (latent factors) of literature reception, including suspense, emotional engagement, identification, reading pleasure, as well as cognitive dimensions like attention and cognitive effort, and its potential modulations by specific readers’ attitudes such as individual reading habits and empathy. Together, we hope that our study will be a step towards opening new avenues for research investigating receptive engagement in literary as well as non-fictional texts.