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THE PARADOX(ES) OF HORROR AND TRAGEDY

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will be devoted to the analysis of the paradoxes of tragedy and horror—which I shall take to be identical in the context of this thesis (the only important difference between the two being the place of disgust in the paradox of horror; but I won't deal with the very specific emotion of disgust here)—and of the various attempts to solve them.

Analysing these paradoxes will contribute to better understand the nature of emotions in general, and of negative emotions in particular. The concept of valence of emotions will then be central to this study, but also the question of the objects, the value and the rationality of emotions.

The analysis of fiction-directed emotions mostly is mainly done in the literature through the analysis of two different paradoxes: the paradox of fiction, and the paradox of tragedy and horror. The paradox of fiction is based on the following question: how can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina, Desdemona or any fictional character if we know that they are purely fictional and do not exist? And can our emotionally responses to what we know not to exist be appropriate or rational?

The paradoxes of horror and tragedy, as for them, presuppose that it can be rational or appropriate to be moved by fictions, but asks if, and how, it can be rational to intentionally expose ourselves, as we obviously do, to so-called “painful art” that will provoke apparently negative or painful emotions such as fear and sadness. Why choosing to do this if we can expose ourselves to fictions that will give rise to positive emotions such as amusement or joy? The paradox of horror asks more specifically if, and how, it can be rational to be attracted to fictions that present us with things we find repulsive and that, as a consequence, provoke disgust in us. As Clémot writes,

at first sight, it seems impossible to be attracted to what is repulsive, since we would not understand someone who would, for example, seek to see what he says he dislikes. Such behaviour would be seen [...] as irrational (Clémot 2011: 5).

I devoted my first Master thesis to the paradox of fiction in order to show how it is possible to be rationally moved by fictional states of affairs, and I shall devote this second Master thesis to the analysis of the paradoxes of tragedy and horror.

But before doing this let me briefly characterize what emotions are so as to show that it makes sense to describe emotional reactions and behaviours as rational or irrational, and

hence that the paradox of fiction and the paradoxes of horror or tragedy cannot be dismissed on the grounds that they are based on a meaningless idea.

It is commonly admitted that emotions are, as Julien Deonna, Christine Tappolet and Fabrice Teroni, write, “episodic psychological states, intentional and endowed with phenomenology”—that is, with a certain phenomenal or qualitative character: *what it is like* to be in the states in question. Even if the notion of emotion can also refer to more stable and durable psychological dispositions, “most contemporary philosophers and psychologists use the term 'emotion' to refer to episodes” (Deonna, Teroni, and Tappolet 2017).

If emotions—contrary to judgements, for example, but just as moods—have a qualitative dimension, they also possess an intentionality—contrary to moods, but just as judgments. It seems to be in virtue of their intentionality that emotions can be characterized as rational or irrational, justified or unjustified, appropriate or inappropriate. Their intentionality means that they are *directed to*, or *are about*, something; they have, contrary to moods for example, an *intentional* or *formal object*, with reference to which it is possible to assess the appropriateness of an emotion. For example, being afraid of something we take not to be dangerous seems to be inappropriate or irrational (Deonna, Teroni, Tappolet, and Konzelmann 2011). As Deonna, Tappolet and Teroni emphasize, because emotions are states endowed with intentionality, they have a representational content that can be evaluated in terms of truth or correctness, and then can be “either justified or unjustified”. Thus, emotions do not have “nothing to do with rationality” (Deonna 2011).

Let’s illustrate this by means of two examples: if I am as scared of an old, toothless, arthritic and apathetic dog that I perceive as such, my emotion of fear directed to it can be described as irrational and unjustified given the properties I attribute to the dog. Similarly, if, after I formed the belief that there is a bear in front of me, I realise that in fact it is just a tree that looks like a bear, but continue to experience the fear I had when I thought I was in presence of a bear, this emotion will be judged as irrational or inappropriate, given the new properties (being a tree, not a bear) of the intentional object of my emotion.

Judging these emotions to be so can then be interpreted as follows: emotions have an evaluative dimension—in our two examples, taking their intentional objects to be threatening—, and this evaluation may or may not be appropriate depending on the other

properties that we judge these objects to possess (Teroni 2019). This is why it can be argued that “an emotional response presupposes some beliefs (whether true or false) about that to which one responds” (Schaper 1978: 33); as Brock writes, “in order to have an emotional response towards someone or something, I must attribute certain properties to the object of my emotion that is, I must judge that it has those properties.”¹ (Brock 2006: 213).

An emotion can thus be appropriate or inappropriate given the content of the beliefs that determine its intentional object (and that are, in this sense, constitutive of it). Let’s note that an emotion can also be appropriate or inappropriate, justified or unjustified, rational or irrational, depending on whether these beliefs *themselves* are appropriate or inappropriate.

Let’s now come back to the paradoxes of horror and tragedy. What exactly is the problem with our attraction to so-called painful art?

Imagine that, one evening, Marie, comfortably sitting on her sofa, is watching a horror movie. She had been waiting for it for a long time. It is supposed to be “one of the most terrifying movies ever made”, an “incredible horrific experience”, the “tide of terror that swept America”. And, indeed, it is a *good* horror movie: the global atmosphere of the film often makes her anxious, and during the moments of anxiety she feels her muscles tighten, her heart speeds up; in addition, in front of disgusting scenes she hides her eyes, and during the most stressful moments she screams and jumps in fear. While watching this movie Marie is under stress, terrified, horrified, and, sometimes, disgusted. Now, this emotional state is the one she wanted to be in: she was waiting and hoping for these emotions, she had been seeking out for a long time an artwork likely to elicit such emotional reactions.

At the end of the movie, when Marie turns off the TV, she calls a friend and says to him: “I just saw this new horror movie. It was really awesome! So frightening, gloomy and stressful! You have to watch it, you will love it!”. So, how did Marie experience the movie? Given what she says to her friend, it seems like the emotions of fear, tension, anxiety and

¹ According to some authors, emotions not just involve beliefs, but also desires: “[b]esides an element of belief, any emotion contains an element of desire. To be moved emotionally is to be moved to action. I am moved by someone’s plight only if I want to help him” (Charlton 1984: 206). Berys Gaut also writes: “an emotion is a state that, characteristically can motivate actions: I run away because I am afraid, I help someone because I pity her, I strike someone because I am angry with him. There are, then, three main characteristic aspects to an emotion: the affective, the cognitive-evaluative, and the motivational” (Gaut, 2003: 16).

disgust she experienced were *pleasant* to her. But how is this *possible* if these emotions are *negative*, as they are generally claimed to be? And if these emotions are negative, how could it be *rational* for her to look for fictions she knows to be likely to elicit them? More specifically, how could they be pleasant to her if, generally, in her daily life, she does not want to experience such emotions, and does not take pleasure in having them? And how could it be rational to look for them in works of fiction if it would clearly be irrational for her to look for them in her ordinary life?

Imagine that, one evening, Marie, alone in her house, hears a weird noise. Where does this come from, she wonders? She walks in the direction of the sound, and hears it again and again, stronger and stronger. She then opens the door of her bedroom and sees a tall threatening shadow standing at the window. Marie seems to be exactly in the same emotional state as the state described above when she was watching the horror movie. But, this time, she absolutely does not want to be in this state. And this seems rational: it would undoubtedly be irrational for her to expect these emotions to arise, and to seek out real events that would be likely to elicit them. She is a rational human being: she was not waiting nor hoping for these emotions, nor looking for real events likely to elicit them. But why is this so if the emotional state in question is identical to the emotional state she is in when watching the movie? Why does Marie want to be exposed to fictional situations that will elicit emotions she absolutely does not want to experience in real life, so that she does not want to be exposed to real situations that will elicit them?

The infamous paradoxes of horror and tragedy arise precisely from this idea that, in real life, we usually want to avoid situations that give rise to negative emotions—such as fear, anger, sadness, pity, or even disgust—while “we seek out art that we know is likely to elicit such feelings. This is puzzling”.² It seems rational and easily understandable, on the contrary, to try to have “positive emotions”—such as joy, amusement, love, pride, admiration—, whether in real life or fiction (Smuts 2018).

These paradoxes are sometimes said to consist in two closely related but different questions:

1) the *motivational question* of why Marie wants to experience emotions that, being painful, ordinarily cause a state of aversion—in short, why does Marie want to be exposed

² M. Strohl also explains that the paradox “emerges from the appearance that (1) people ordinarily avoid painful emotions and (2) people actively seek out experiences of art that involve painful emotions” (Strohl 2019: 1).

to painful art? (Smuts 2014). This puzzle can be made even more striking by stating it in the form of a “differential question”, which asks: “why [is Marie] more willing to experience painful affect in response to art than in [her] normal [life]? [...] 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?” (Matravers 2014: 207; Smuts 2009: 39).

2) The question of *how* it is possible to experience emotions such as fear, sadness or pity without experiencing their ordinary painfulness. This question asks: what happens to Marie when she experiences these emotions when watching a movie? How to understand the “pleasure” she takes in having them? Is this pleasure mixed with pain? As Cain Todd asks:

Do we feel a tension between pleasure and pain when watching Othello or listening to Shostakovich’s Seventh Symphony? Do we oscillate between the two? Do we feel an overall complex but unitary mixed emotion constituted by, or perhaps emergent on, its contrary parts? Is the overall emotional experience that we feel a positive or a negative state? (Todd 2014: 225).

These two questions presuppose, however, that the emotions in question really are, at least partly, negative or painful. But this may be doubted, as Smuts’ final question in this quote suggests:

People seek and must therefore in some way positively value what appear to be the intrinsically painful experiences aroused by negative art. [...] But insofar as they are, indeed, bad, why seek them out at all? And however different in kind they may be, they remain negative; or do they? (Smuts 2009: 40).

It is then preferable to state the paradoxes of horror and tragedy in a more neutral way: how to explain the puzzling fact that we intentionally expose ourselves to fictional situations that we (rightly or falsely) take to be likely to elicit emotions, such as fear or sadness, that we usually do not want nor like to experience when they are elicited by non-fictional situations—which 1) contributes to explaining why we ordinarily classify these emotions as negative, and 2) usually leads us to avoid the non-fictional situations that we

(rightly or falsely) take to be likely to elicit them?³ The fact that our relation to fictions is fundamentally emotional makes it particularly important to answer this question.

In order to solve the paradoxes of horror and tragedy I shall challenge the concept of valence upon which these paradoxes are based (I). I shall show that we have good reasons to think that this idea of valence is inaccurate, and that it is just the conceptualisation of an unsupported misleading intuition. It follows from this that we have reasons to think that each type of emotions is not, intrinsically, whatever the context is, either negative or positive.

In part II, I shall explain why emotions such as fear, sadness or pity, which are supposed to be intrinsically negative, are not so because they are not unpleasant when fiction-directed while they are typically so when reality-directed. Before doing this, I shall examine different views advanced in literature to solve the paradoxes of horror and tragedy, and shall argue that all of them are deeply problematic.

Showing why supposedly negative fiction-directed emotions are not so in reality is not sufficient however to show that we are not irrational when exposing ourselves to fictions that are likely to elicit such emotions. Indeed, what needs to be explained is why we actively seek out these emotions, which requires showing that we can benefit from them, and not just showing why they are not unpleasant. This is what I shall endeavor to do in part III, thereby solving the paradoxes of horror and tragedy.

To conclude, I shall say a few words about disgust. I shall suggest that this emotion differs from all other so-called “negative emotions” by being the only one to be negative or unpleasant even fiction-directed. In other words, it seems to me that only disgust can be said to have a negative valence.

³ Let’s note that this formulation of the paradox of tragedy, by not asking “how it is possible for audiences to feel pleasure in response to the fictional portrayal of events in a tragedy”, does not beg “a central question, namely, whether or not tragedies afford pleasurable experiences.” (Smuts 2009: 40). Let’s also note that, stated in the way I just did, the paradox of tragedy is not reducible to the question of whether, or how, pain can sometimes be pleasant for the one who lives it. The formulation of the paradox I propose neither presupposes that the emotions in question are painful, nor that they are pleasant.

PART I

CHALLENGING THE IDEA OF VALENCE OF EMOTIONS

I shall argue in this first part of my thesis that the paradoxes of horror and tragedy challenge the idea of an intrinsic (negative or positive) valence of emotions. If so, it follows that supposedly intrinsically negative emotions such as fear, pity or sadness need not be negative or unpleasant when elicited by certain works of art, while these emotions generally are so when elicited by reality.

In order to support this claim, I shall first say a few words about what I take to be the origin of the concept of valence—i.e. the common-sense intuition upon which, I shall argue, this concept is based. I shall then hold that this intuition turns out to be, in real fact, unsupported—which casts doubts on the relevance of the concept of valence grounded in this intuition. Eventually, I shall indicate positive reasons to think that emotions such as fear, pity, or sadness, when elicited by fictions and about fictional entities or situations, are not negatively experienced but are, on the contrary, positively experienced, which shall put me in a position to claim that there is no such thing as valence of emotions. More generally, I shall provide a certain number of reasons to think that it is not the case that, whatever the context in which it occurs, any emotion is, depending only on the type of emotion it is (for instance, an emotion of fear), either positive or negative. In the second part of this thesis, I shall explain what makes supposedly intrinsically negative emotions such as fear, pity and sadness *not negative and unpleasant* when they are fiction-directed while they are so when they are reality-directed. In the third part, I shall explain why these emotions, when they are fiction-directed, are not just *hedonically neutral*, but *positive and pleasant*, which makes it prudentially valuable—and so, rational—to expose ourselves to fictional works that elicit them.

I.1 How to understand the idea that each emotion possesses a certain valence in virtue of being an instance of the type of emotion it is?

I.1.1 A common-sense intuition

According to most people, emotions can be classified in two easily distinguishable categories: the positive ones, and the negatives ones. In other words, most people take

emotions to be either positive or negative, depending on what type of emotions they are. Thus, when reading things about emotions, it is frequent to see them divided into two groups: a group of “positive emotions”, such as joy, pride, admiration, satisfaction, etc., and a group of “negative emotions”, such as fear, sadness, anger, pity, anxiety, etc. Unsurprisingly, “positive emotions” are said to be pleasant or enjoyable while “negative emotions” are described as unpleasant and disagreeable.

It seems natural then to wish to experience in one’s life the former emotions, which are pleasant, while avoiding the latter, which are unpleasant, if not painful. And, as a matter of fact, this is what most human beings aspire to experience. It is then *prima facie* rational to do our best, or at least to try, to find ourselves in situations that are likely to elicit the former emotions, and to avoid situations that should give rise to the latter. And, as a matter of fact, this is what we do. Thus, we are not surprised to hear people saying “I’m looking forward to this afternoon at the beach, it’s so agreeable to be there” or “I cannot wait to eat this fresh ice cream, it’s going to be so good”, or “I hope that my lover will come back soon, everything becomes so pleasant when he is here”. Obviously, the same would not go if we were to hear things like: “I can’t wait to have this difficult conversation with my father, I’m sure we will fight again and that I’ll be so upset...”, “I will buy spinach for dinner, I really don’t like that”, or “Oh great! Here comes my worst enemy, this is going to be so unpleasant!”. It’s hard to make sense of these claims, and this seems to have to do with the fact that it seems to be absolutely irrational or incoherent to try to have negative emotions. We would certainly not understand a person who is looking for situations that are likely to elicit unpleasant and negative feelings, sensations or emotions. If she asserted that she enjoys experiencing negative emotions in her life, we would not only find her unhealthy and be worried for her—it is troubling and alarming to enjoy things that affect us negatively—, we would find her so *strange* or incomprehensible that we would probably say to ourselves that she probably means by that that things that most of us would emotionally experience as deeply unpleasant are things she experiences as deeply pleasant.

1.1.2. Conceptualizing this intuition: the concept of valence of emotions

The concept of valence of emotions seems to be based on this commonsense intuition:

the rough idea underpinning [the notion of valence] is that emotion types divide more or less neatly into those that are essentially negative – for example, fear, anger, envy, hatred,

sadness, regret – and those that are essentially positive – for example, love, joy, pride, admiration. (Todd 2014: 230)

Under this view, the apparent polarity of emotions would be explained by their having either a positive or a negative valence. This would not only explain their being either hedonically positive or hedonically negative, but also a related phenomenon: “[w]e describe an emotion as negative when it is typically accompanied by an aversive reaction – that is, we typically avoid situations that arouse the emotion” (Smuts 2009: 41). In contrast, we describe an emotion as positive when it is typically accompanied by an attraction reaction – that is, we typically look for situations that arouse the emotion. In other words, the valence each emotion is supposed to have given the type of emotion it is also explains that distinct “behavioral” tendencies are associated with different types of emotions: either we are inclined to get closer to the object of the emotion in question, or to move away from it. These tendencies are supposed to be fundamental to emotional valence. And some other tendencies are supposed to be explained by the valence supposedly possessed by any emotion: the fact that we either want it to stop or to go on. Fabrice Teroni writes in this spirit:

[L]a honte est déplaisante, c’est pourquoi nous voulons la voir cesser, la joie est au contraire plaisante, ce qui explique notre désir qu’elle persiste. En un mot, les émotions sont positives ou négatives en vertu du fait qu’elles exemplifient des propriétés hédoniques positives ou négatives. (Teroni 2011 : 30)

Let’s sum up: negative emotions are so due to their having a negative valence that explains a) the two aversive tendencies just mentioned, and b) the “negative affect”, negative “hedonic tone”, or “negative “phenomenology” and other “psychological symptoms” associated with these emotions. The same goes for positive emotions, that involve, as for them, attraction reactions, and have a “positive affect”, “feel good”, or have a positive “hedonic tone”.

Others authors maintain that the valence of an emotion results from a desire directed at the emotion in question. More specifically, certain desires are supposed to be intrinsically tied to certain types of emotions. Emotions are positive to the extent that we want them to persist and negative to the extent that we want them to stop. In that sense, our emotions are thought to be either “a source of desire”, or “a source of aversion” (Smuts 2009). And it is not only the situations that arouse negative emotions that we tend to run away from, but these emotions *themselves*. We not only want to avoid the terrible

event of a family funeral, we *also* want, in addition, to avoid the emotion of profound sadness that this event is very likely to elicit, because “[such] emotions are painful⁴” (Smuts 2009). And, on the contrary, when we desire to go to the nice event that the wedding of one of our dear friends is, this is *also* because of the profound joy that this event is likely to elicit in us.

Relatedly, a so-called positive emotion is positive insofar as it “represents” a desire of the subject as potentially or actually satisfied, and a negative emotion is negative insofar as it represents a desire of the subject as potentially or actually frustrated. As Teroni explains:

La peur est négative parce qu’elle représente, disons, le désir de préserver son intégrité physique comme potentiellement frustré, alors que la joie ressentie suite à une victoire est positive en vertu du fait qu’elle représente le désir de succès comme satisfait. (Teroni 2011 : 27).

Whether or not one endorses the view that the valence that any given emotion is supposed to possess necessarily involves such desires, “valence is supposed to be a basic aspect of emotions”: “an account of valence must appeal to a fundamental contrastive property of emotions that does not itself in turn require explanation by another of their properties”.

The problem, however, is that the idea of an intrinsic valence of emotions—and the intuition that upon which it is based and that this idea conceptualizes—does not appear to be well founded. Not only it is hard to find in the literature positive reasons to believe in the existence of this “fundamental contrastive property of emotions”, but we have, on the contrary, good reasons to think that emotions are not intrinsically negative or positive, depending on the type of emotions they are.

1.2 Reasons to be doubtful that emotions either have a positive or negative valence depending on the type of emotions they are

Even if the idea that emotions either have, depending on the type of emotions they are, a positive or negative tone seems natural, we do not, I shall argue, have any positive reason to think that this idea of an intrinsic hedonic polarity of each type of emotion is adequate. I shall also argue that the case of certain *non-fictional*, or *reality-directed*, emotions—

⁴ Cain Todd (2014: 242) notes that for Jesse Prinz valence is “an inner ‘marker’ that signals a demand for the emotion to stop or continue. According to Prinz, negative emotions are emotions that ‘contain a component that serves as an inner punishment – a kind of signal that says, “Less of this!””.

i.e. emotions that are not elicited by fictions, and that are not about the entities or situations these fictions show or describe, but by reality and its inhabitants—makes this idea doubtful. I shall then advance that the case of *fictional*, or *fiction-directed emotions*—i.e. emotions that are elicited by fictions, and that are about the entities or situations these fictions show or describe—provides strong reasons to reject the idea of an intrinsic hedonic polarity of each type of emotion. More precisely, I shall argue that the paradoxes of horror and tragedy give us strong reasons to reject it; fear or sadness, for example, depending on whether they are directed to fictional or to non-fictional situations, can be pleasant or, on the contrary, (typically) unpleasant, respectively.

I.2.1 There is no real positive argument in the literature for the claim that emotions have an intrinsic valence

As I suggested above, the concept of valence is founded on a common-sense intuition that this concept conceptualizes. The problem is that this conceptualization does not amount to a defence of this intuition, and that no clear arguments have been advanced in the literature to support it, or to defend the relevance of this conceptualization. The notion of valence might then just be the name of a “misleading intuition”; maybe “[t]here is nothing like ‘the valence’ of an emotion, but rather various considerations that bear on it and that are likely to go in different directions”. Moreover, it is doubtful that this notion really helps us to understand emotions: maybe “[w]e have been led on a wild goose chase, thinking that the label ‘valence’ denotes a unified phenomenon and that our intuitions can be used to track a deep level of explanation” while in fact the concept of valence is too “polysemous and variegated to divide emotions neatly into positive or negative categories” (Todd 2014: 231) and, more generally, to explain anything about their nature.

I.2.2 Positive reasons to think that there is no intrinsic valence of emotions

The common-sense intuition according to which emotions intrinsically have either a negative or a positive hedonic tone, depending on the type of emotions they are, may seem to be, *prima facie*, irresistible. But there also appears to be solid reasons to reject it. Think about “ambiguous emotions”, as we may call them; when we think about them, the idea of valence ceases to be so intuitive. For example, how to categorise nostalgia? How to understand it? What is the valence of nostalgia, positive or negative? Do we want to experience nostalgia; do we seek out this emotional state? Or do we tend, on the contrary, to avoid this emotion? Does nostalgia have a pleasant hedonic tone? Does it feel good to

feel nostalgic for certain past events? Or does it feel bad? Does nostalgia represent a desire of the subject as potentially or actually frustrated, or as potentially or actually satisfied? Do we want nostalgia to persist when we experience it, or do we want it to stop? How to respond to these questions does not seem clear at all. And this contributes to making the idea of valence less intuitive than it seemed to be.

Moreover, this problem of categorisation seems to extend far beyond the case of particularly ambiguous emotions such as nostalgia. According to Bantinaki, all emotions are hedonically different, and then may have an unclear hedonic tone: “[d]ifferent positive and different negative emotions feel quite different, that is, they do not seem to have a phenomenological common denominator that could sort them neatly into positive or negative category” (Bantinaki 2012: 387). In other words, there does not seem to be any clearly identifiable negative “sensation-like” or phenomenological features that all negative (or positive) emotions would share. As Bantinaki points out, an emotion of sadness—which is supposed to be an intrinsically negative and unpleasant emotion, in virtue of its negative valence—does not have the same hedonic tone in any situation in which it occurs: “[t]he ‘pain’ involved in grieving for a close friend is simply incomparable to the pain experienced by the jealous and ashamed cuckolded husband” (Todd 2014: 231). But if all emotions of sadness do not have the same phenomenology, are not sad *in the same way*, on which basis to classify them as negative?

This remark, however, does not really speak against the idea of an intrinsic valence of emotions; what this remark implies is simply that there are different ways for an emotion to be negative (or positive), and varying degrees of negativity (or positivity) between negative (or positive) emotions. All emotions of sadness, for example, do not feel quite the same, do not have the same hedonic tone, the same phenomenology, depending on many factors: “[b]ecause the ‘pain’ or ‘pleasure’ of emotions depend on the meanings of particular emotion experiences, there is no reason to suppose that, for example, all negative emotions make us suffer in the same way” (Todd 2014: 231). This is, however, compatible with the idea of valence, which only requires that all negative emotions be painful or unpleasant, not that they be so in the same way or to the same degree. Different types of negative emotions (e.g. sadness and fear) can have different phenomenologies—can be unpleasant in different ways and to different degrees. And different instances of a same type of emotion (e.g. sadness) can also be so: authors who endorse the idea of valence can accept without incoherence that being sad because of a broken relationship and being sad because of the

loss of a close friend are unpleasant in different ways and to different degrees. As Fabrice Teroni also remarks, since “positive or negative valence is supposed to be a feature intrinsic to types of emotions [...] it is [supposed to be] independent of the specific objects that elicit emotions or the potential effects emotions may have”. In this sense, an emotion of sadness, whatever the situations and objects that elicit this emotion, and whatever the effects this emotion has on us, is a negative emotion in virtue of its negative valence: the unpleasantness and aversive reactions that are said to result from its having a negative valence are sufficient to classify it as a negative emotion.

But how then to understand the fact that some people sometimes want to put themselves in danger, to desire to find themselves in situations in which they will be under stress and will experience fear? They seem to look for these situations rather than to do their best to avoid them; they seem to be excited when they see them coming; and they seem to take pleasure in experiencing fear in these situations. Cain Todd suggests the following explanation of this phenomenon:

many of [the] symptoms of, for example, fear can also constitute positive overall responses, such as the exciting adrenaline rushes one experiences during bungee jumping, or mountain climbing. So even the bodily sensations themselves appear to be open to some level of contextual evaluation. (Todd 2014: 232).

How is this possible if fear is intrinsically negative in virtue of its intrinsically having a negative valence from which unpleasantness and aversive reactions are supposed to follow in any context? Does not this fact rather suggest that the negativity of fear is not intrinsic to this type of emotion, but rather depends on the context in which fears occur? This would speak against the idea of valence, because this idea implies that the negative or positive phenomenology associated with each type of emotion is intrinsic to it and does not depend on the context in which emotions of this or that type occur.

But the strongest reasons to reject the idea of an intrinsic valence of emotions come from that the paradoxes of horror and tragedy, because they highlight the fact that supposedly intrinsically negative emotions, such as fear, are not so because when they are fiction-directed they are not experienced negatively nor give rise to the behavioural and psychological tendencies that are typical of negative emotions.

If the idea of valence were correct, we would always try to avoid situations that are likely to elicit certain supposedly intrinsically negative emotions, such as fear, while we would always want to find ourselves in situations that are likely to provoke intrinsically

positive emotions, such as joy. The paradox of tragedy arises precisely from this idea of valence: how to explain the fact, that, as a matter of fact, we do not tend to avoid certain artworks—thriller movies, dark paintings, sad stories—that are likely to elicit supposedly intrinsically negative emotions, such as fear and sadness, which then are supposed to be intrinsically unpleasant or painful? And not only do we not tend to avoid these artworks, but we intentionally expose ourselves to them, and are sometimes ready to pay and to queue for hours for this. But if these emotions are not, in real fact, intrinsically negative, the paradox starts to dissolve: if these emotions are not always or necessarily unpleasant when experienced, there is nothing particularly strange in the fact that we often desire to be exposed to the artworks that give rise to them. And if it turns out that these emotions can sometimes even be pleasant, and that this is precisely what turns out to be the case when they are fiction-directed, the paradox vanishes entirely.

Now, when it comes to fictional works, we not only want to experience joy or rapture—i.e. supposedly intrinsically positive emotions—, we also want to experiment the emotions elicited by so-called “painful art”: obviously, when watching a horror or a thriller movie, we desire to feel fear, tension, anxiety, terror, to jump in fear, etc. And, when watching a sad film, we want to experiment sadness, pity, anger, to have tears in our eyes, etc. We even look forward to the most intense moments of fear or sadness, and we are disappointed when the horror movie was not frightening enough or the sad love story not sad enough—when we remain, so to speak, external to these movies. In such cases we even tend to think of them as failed movies. And not only do we appear to expect these moments, but we often experience joy, excitement and impatience when we think we are about to experience such emotions by reading certain books or watching certain movies. Now, these psychological states and behaviours are typical of expected pleasant moments; when we are about to go to the beach, to eat our favourite ice-cream, or to have a party with our best friends, and that we find these things particularly pleasant and not just hedonically neutral, such psychological states and behaviours typically occur. As a consequence, their occurring when we know we are about to experience fiction-directed fear and sadness is evidence for the claim that these emotions are positively experienced, and, a fortiori, not unpleasant.

Another evidence for this claim is that we do not want the emotions in question to stop when we experience them: we generally do not want to stop watching a movie that gives rise to supposedly negative emotions so as to stop experiencing them. It is rather

when we judge a movie to be bad that we want this—which happens, most of the time, when we are not emotionally moved by it, *whatever the emotions are*. When we are deeply moved by a sad movie, we do not desire these emotions to stop, and hence do not desire to stop watching this movie in order for these emotions to stop. We even take our experience of the movie to be spoiled when an event in real life interrupts the movie and these emotions, and we generally take such events to be particularly annoying and unpleasant. Let's also note that when we are not moved at all by a movie, when we are not saddened (nor delighted) by the fictional love story it presents to us, we are often inclined to stop this emotionally neutral experience that often makes the movie boring. This, combined with the previous observation, also evidences the claim that supposedly intrinsically negative emotions such as fear or sadness are positively experienced when they are fiction-directed.

Another reason to think that this claim is correct is the fact that we often vividly recommend to people we love and we want to be happy to watch certain movies or read fictions that will make them experiencing such emotions. In such cases, we want them to experience fiction-directed fear and sadness, while, because we care about these people, we do not want them to be frightened or sad in real life. We even want them to experience these fiction-directed emotions in the way we want them to be happy in their real life. More precisely, we clearly seem to think that their being exposed to the artworks that elicit these emotions will contribute to making their lives better. And this does not seem to be so in the way we want people we care about to go to school (in the case of children) or to read great non-fiction books we take to be highly valuable: in this latter case, we sometimes think that reading them won't be a nice a moment for these people, and that their wellbeing won't increase after having read them (but that this is not a decisive reason not to read them because prudential value is not the only thing that matters). But when we recommend a sad fiction book or a horror movie to people we care about, we do not do so while thinking that reading it or watching it could be for them unpleasant in the way reading certain non-fiction books we also recommend to them could be. In fact, we think that by watching this movie they will have a great moment.

If these different reasons to think that fiction-directed fear or sadness are positively experienced are correct, and if it is admitted that reality-directed fear or sadness generally are negatively experienced, it follows that the idea of valence of emotions should be rejected: such types of emotions are not intrinsically negative by being the types of

emotions they are—which refutes the idea that, for all type of emotion, all emotions of this type either are positively or negatively experienced.

This is not, however, sufficient to solve the paradoxes of horror and tragedy. In order to do so, I also have to explain *why*, or *what makes it the case that*, fiction-directed emotions such as fear and sadness are *not unpleasant or negatively experienced* while they undoubtedly are so when they are reality-directed and elicited by real events in real life. This is the task I undertake in the second part of this thesis. This however won't be sufficient to entirely solve these paradoxes, because explaining why fear and sadness, when they are fiction-directed, are *not unpleasant or negatively experienced* is compatible with their being hedonically neutral. Now, in order to account for the apparently puzzling fact that we often deliberately and actively seek out artworks that we believe to elicit such emotions—i.e. the fact that we are often *attracted* to such artworks—it is not sufficient to say that we believe that being exposed to them will be hedonically neutral. Indeed, we are not *attracted* to hedonically neutral things. We are attracted to hedonically *positive* things. So, in order to solve entirely the paradoxes of horror and tragedy, what has to be shown is why our experience of fictions such as sad, thrillers, or horror movies is hedonically positive. This is the task I undertake in the third part of this thesis. If what I say there is correct, it follows that we are not irrational to desire to expose ourselves to fictions we believe to elicit such emotions.

PART II

WHY FICTION-DIRECTED EMOTIONS ARE NOT NEGATIVE

I shall explain in this second part of my thesis why supposedly intrinsically negative emotions such as fear, sadness, pity, etc. are not negatively experienced when fiction-directed. In other words, I shall explain what makes them not unpleasant nor painful when elicited by fictional works and directed toward them. I shall first examine the different views that have been advanced in the literature to explain why we intentionally expose ourselves to fictions we take to be likely to elicit such emotions. All of these views aim at showing that, overall, our experience of so-called “painful art” is not, emotionally, as hedonically negative as it may seem. But, as we shall see, none of them really argues that these supposedly negative emotions are not, in real fact, unpleasant. At most, according to these views, they are not *entirely* or *importantly* so. I shall reject this claim and explain why supposedly negative *fiction*-directed emotions such as fear and sadness are not so, compared to *reality*-directed fear and sadness.

II.1 Existing solutions to the paradoxes of horror and tragedy

I shall examine in this section four views that have been advanced to solve the paradoxes of horror and tragedy: 1) the Quasi-emotions View, according to which fiction-directed emotional states such as fear and sadness are not as negative as *reality*-directed fear and sadness because, in the former case, that are not real emotions but quasi-emotions; 2) the Compensatory View, according to which these “negative” emotional reactions are compensated by some other positive effects of our being exposed to the fiction in question, whether positive epistemic consequences or associated positive hedonic consequences, which make it, overall, rational to expose oneself to it; 3) the Conversion View, according to which these emotions, because of certain aesthetic properties of the fiction in question, are converted into positive emotions; 4) the Control Theory, according

to which the kind of “control” that we have when experiencing fiction-directed emotions neutralizes almost entirely their unpleasantness.

II.1.1 The Quasi-Emotions View

What exactly are “quasi-emotions” according to the Quasi-emotions View? This concept comes from K. Walton’s 1978 attempt to solve the paradox of fiction. He claims, in line with many other philosophers, that it is not rationally possible to be moved by objects we know not to exist (such as fictional events, situations or characters). So, when Charles, a spectator of a horror movie, feels his heart beating very fast, his pulse accelerating, and his muscles tightening—in short, when he experiences all the physical symptoms of an emotional state of fear—and when he even sincerely declares to be afraid of the monster of the movie, Charles is not in fact really so, according to Walton (see also Seahwa 2005: 31). For him Charles’s emotional state is not a genuine state of fear, because he knows the monster not to exist.

Charles knows perfectly well that the slime is not real and that he is not in danger. Is he afraid even so? He says that he is afraid, and he is in a state which is undeniably similar, in some respects, to that of a person who is frightened of a pending real-world disaster. His muscles are tense, he clutches his chair, his pulse quickens, his adrenaline flows. Let us call this physiological/ psychological state “quasi fear”. (Walton 1978: 6)

Walton grants that “Charles’s condition is similar in certain obvious respects to that of a person frightened of a pending real disaster” but he also claims that “this is not genuine fear”. Here is his reasoning:

- (a) We feel fear toward someone or something only if we believe that it exists and endangers us”.
- (b) We know that characters and situations do not exist thus that they do not endanger us.
- (c) Therefore we do not feel genuine fear toward fictional characters or situations. (Seahwa 2005: 31)

So Charles cannot really be moved by the monster, but only quasi-moved. This is supposed to explain why Charles's response to the work of art is rational, and hence why the emotions provoked by the fictional monster on the screen are not “negative” emotions, since they are not real emotions at all.

Walton's second argument for the claim that Charles does not feel genuine fear is that real fear

[h]as a motivational force. It puts pressure on one's behavior. But Charles does not do anything deliberate to avoid the green slime. Charles does not try to leave the theater. He does not exhibit deliberate behavior characteristic of fear at all. Thus, what Charles feels is not genuine fear because it lacks the motivational force which is characteristic of genuine fear. (Seahwa 2005: 31)

Here is Dos Santos useful formalization of this point:

1. Suppose that Petra does fear the Grady sisters.
2. If Petra fears the Grady sisters, then her behavior must accord with her fear (for example, she must be motivated to flee).
3. But Petra's behavior does not accord, or even show the slightest tendency to accord, with her fear. Therefore,
4. Petra does not fear the Grady sisters. (Dos Santos, 2017: 268)

But Charles, even if he has all the physical symptoms of a genuine fear, does not have the behavioural reaction typical of a state of fear—e.g. trying to escape, calling the police, alerting the neighbours, etc. But at no time while watching the movie does Charles do anything, nor wonders what he could do vis-à-vis the object of his “fear”. He just remains comfortably sited in his chair. And this is because Charles knows perfectly well that the monster is fictional and that nothing can happen to him in front of the horror movie. This is precisely this certitude of the non-existence of the monster that explains Charles' attitude. If he does not run away and does not even think about the possibility of escaping, this is because he knows that the monster is not real.

One possibility is that Charles half believes that there is a real danger, and that he is, literally, at least half afraid. To half believe something is to be not quite sure that it is true, but also not quite sure that it is not true. But Charles has no doubts about whether he is in the presence of an actual slime. If he half believed, and were half afraid, we would expect him to have some inclination to act on his fear in the normal ways. Even a hesitant belief, a mere suspicion, that the slime is real would induce any normal person seriously to consider calling the police and warning his family. Charles gives no thought whatever to such

courses of action. He is not uncertain whether the slime is real; he is perfectly sure that it is not.⁵ (Walton 1978: 7)

Charles' quasi-fear can however be easily confused with genuine fear because these two emotional states are hardly distinguishable phenomenologically. Similarly, we do not genuinely pity Anna Karenina (and so, do not do anything to help her, not even consider the possibility of helping them)⁶ nor really hate Iago: just as we just quasi fear the monster, we just quasi pity Anna Karenina, and quasi hate Iago (see Scruton 2010).

Thus, art-generated emotions, because they are not “full-fledged instances of the emotions they are labelled as being”, cannot be “real negative emotions”, which is supposed to explain why we can rationally look for “painful” art: the emotional states it elicits are not as negative as real negative emotions because they are not real or genuine emotions, but only quasi emotions—i.e. affective states that look like emotions but that differ from them. This is supposed to make it possible to enjoy exposing ourselves to so-called “painful art”.

This view correctly holds that fiction-directed emotions such as fear or sadness are not negative in the way in which reality-directed fear and sadness are. It is however deeply problematic under many respects, which makes it a bad candidate to solve the paradoxes of horror and tragedy.

The first problem simply is that when watching a sad film, our tears do not seem to be “crocodile tears” but genuine tears provoked by real sadness. It is particularly counterintuitive to claim that when we pity Anna Karenina for her tragic destiny, our pity for her is not as real as the pity we have when we hear the pitiful story of a neighbour or colleague because there allegedly is a difference in the nature between the emotional responses we have in front of fictions and those we have in front of real-life situations. As

⁵ As (Walton 1995: 28) also explains: “Celui qui voyage en avion, mais qui pense que voler est dangereux, accomplit des actions délibérées auxquelles on peut s’attendre. Une fois à bord de l’avion, il doit lutter contre la tentation de sortir. Mais Charles n’éprouve pas le désir de quitter la pièce ou d’appeler la police. Les seuls signes qui peuvent lui faire croire qu’il est en danger sont les réactions plus ou moins automatiques ou involontaires de son organisme : l’augmentation de son rythme cardiaque, la moiteur de ses mains, les contractions de son estomac.”

⁶ As (Neill 2005: 366) argues: “L’émotion implique l’action. Pour être ému par la situation terrible dans laquelle se trouve quelqu’un il faut vouloir l’aider. Un élément central de la pitié est un désir d’aider la personne dont la souffrance nous émeut. Généralement nous ne désirons pas venir en aide à des personnes que nous savons fictionnels. En fait, il est possible d’affirmer que nous ne pouvons pas avoir un tel désir”. See also (Allen 1986: 64): “[Charlton] argues that emotion includes an element of desire and thus of action, as well as of belief, such that ‘I am moved by someone’s plight only if want to help him’”.

Fileva argues, “the emotions we experience when watching a film such as *Amour*, at least for viewers moved by the film, are genuine” (Fileva 2014: 175). In addition, aren't we genuinely moved by things that no longer exist, things we simply remember? And aren't we sometimes genuinely moved by events we believe will happen in the future? Or by events we believe could happen in the future (such as the sudden death of members of our family in a car accident)? But if we are, wouldn't we be genuinely moved by possible events described or shown by a fiction?

As I shall argue in the last section of this part, it is true that there is a distinction to be made between *fiction-directed emotions* and *reality-directed emotions*, but it does not consist in a difference in nature between them that would make the latter genuine emotions whereas this would not be the case for the former. The difference between them is, I shall argue, between what is *associated* with latter but not with the former.

Furthermore, if fiction cannot elicit genuine emotions but can provoke “bodily and psychological reactions that are similar to them”, why would these phenomenologically similar reactions not be as painful and unpleasant as those of emotions elicited by real-life events? If, as Walton claims, we physically and psychologically feel the same way when experiencing real events and fictional ones, how to solve the paradox of tragedy? How to explain the fact that we intentionally expose ourselves to fictions that will elicit fear and sadness while we want to avoid such emotions when they are reality-directed? Does not the phenomenological similarity between emotions and quasi-emotions imply that quasi-fear and quasi-sadness are as unpleasant and painful as real fear and sadness?

II.1.2 The Conversion View

The conversion view has been advanced by Hume in “Of tragedy” in 1757. It consists in the idea that while emotions elicited by so-called painful artworks are in themselves negative or unpleasant, the overall experience of these works is not necessarily so because of some of their other features, such as the “beauty of a narrative” (Todd 2014: 227). The unpleasant or negative emotions elicited by, and directed to, tragic, horrific or disgusting works of arts are transformed or “converted” into an overall pleasant experience due to formal aesthetic qualities of these works. As Strohl explains, “according to conversion views, painful emotions can be converted into some positive experiential element in such a way that no negative affect persists past this conversion” and this conversion is “connected with appreciation of the artistry displayed in the work” (Strohl

2018: 3). Thus, according to this view, no negative affects are felt in front of “negative” works of arts: they are a source of aesthetic pleasure only, since, as Smuts argues, under this view “the pain is converted into a larger, more pleasurable experience” (Smuts 2009: 40). So, as Robinson underlines, Hume’s view is that “in our experience of tragedy, not only are we delighted by formal qualities, but also the unpleasant emotions aroused (by the subject matter) are converted into pleasant ones”. This delight does not simply compensate the unpleasantness of the emotions aroused, but renders them pleasant. Then, “it may well be just this intertwining of form and content that suffices to explain why we seek out the negative experiences induced by such art, but do not do so in real life” (Todd 2014: 227).

According to Strohl, this view can also be classified as a “weak ambivalence view” since it holds that the “negative affect makes no positive contribution to the experience so long as it remains negative”, but ceases to be so in the conversion process (2018: 3).

However, many objections have been advanced against this theory:

this treatment is widely thought to be defective on one ground or another. It is said, for instance, that the conversion would make watching a tragedy an unalloyed pleasure, or that the conversion mechanism is mysterious or unintelligible, or that the conversion theory rests on no sustained. (Williams 2014: 69)

Firstly, it is not clear why the emotions in question continue to be defined as “negative”, “painful” or “unpleasant” if “they are transformed into an overall state of pleasure by the dominant positive emotion aroused by”, e.g., “the beauty of the narrative” (Todd 2014: 227). If the “overall” experience is, after the conversion process, “positive” and “pleasant”, why should these emotions still be characterized as being in themselves unpleasant? In other words, if one holds that the supposedly negative emotions are *transformed* or *converted* into an overall positive experience, then one has to hold that the emotions in question are not, in real fact, negative but pleasant. If at no point these emotions are experienced as unpleasant due to certain aesthetic properties of the artwork, why describing them as negative? However, this is what the partisans of the Conversion View keep on doing:

although our experiences of the content of representational tragic works of art are negative, constituted as they are by emotions such as fear and pity, the aesthetic and formal elements of such works give us pleasure, arousing in us feelings of beauty. (Todd 2014: 226)

A second objection to this view is that the nature of the “conversion process”—due to which the “disagreeable feelings elicited by the represented events are ‘converted’ into an

agreeable feeling of beauty, which the disagreeable feelings serve to fortify” (Williams 2014: 69)—is particularly mysterious. One can find in the literature no detailed explanation of how a supposedly negative affect can be transformed into a positive affect. Relatedly, there is a serious lack of empirical evidence that such a process exists.⁷

Finally, some authors have also criticised the Conversion View on the ground that it “does not describe the way we typify our experiences of painful art. Reviewers and ordinary viewers often describe putatively painful art as “utterly depressing, heart-wrenching, terrifying, and disgusting” (Smuts 2009: 44). Todd argues in this fashion that

the problem with Hume’s account [...] is that it fails to explain that often our overall experiences of negative art are negative, and fails to explain why we would seek out negative art at all when we could content ourselves with the pleasures of form combined with the joyful content of, say, comedies. Surely that would be, overall, a more pleasurable experience. (Todd 2014: 227)

In other words, a horror movie for example “does not provide a pleasurable experience. Not even close”. Similarly, “the conversion would make watching a tragedy an unalloyed pleasure”, which makes this view defective according to Williams (2014: 69). It also seems implausible to most philosophers that fiction-directed disgust is “convert into pleasure without losing its character and ceasing to be disgust” (Robinson 2014: 76).

At best a disgusting object can be appraised as fascinating or amusing or pleasurable as well as – and sometimes because of – being repellent, but if the object is disgusting, then, even if it has other more pleasant properties as well, the response to it will normally be, at least in part, deeply unpleasant. (Robinson 2014: 77)

This is why it is often argued that the conversion theory cannot serve as a general solution to the paradox of painful art.

It is certainly correct that tragedies are not pleasant *in the way* comedies can be. But there not being so does not imply that they are not *as* pleasant *as* comedies can be. Being joyful is not the only way for a movie to be pleasant, and not being joyful does not mean being unpleasant, contrary to what Todd seems to suggest. In the last section of this part, I shall argue that, setting aside the difficult case of disgust, no fiction-directed emotions are

⁷ Matthew Strohl holds that “recent work in psychology has supplied evidence that negative affect can bolster positive affect, but this effect depends on its ongoing negativity and not on any conversion process” (2018: 3).

experienced as unpleasant, and shall explain why things are so. But let's first have a look on other solutions to the paradoxes of horror and tragedy that take the contrary to be true.

II.1.3 The Compensation View

According to this view, negative emotions elicited by certain fictions are indeed experienced as unpleasant, but their being so is “compensated” by something else. Now, “if the pleasure–displeasure balance is positive, there is of course nothing mysterious about the fact that people engage with works of art arousing a certain amount of displeasure” (De Clercq 2014: 114). This view then denies the “universal avoidance thesis” (Fileva 2014: 173) according to which we tend to avoid all unpleasant experiences. According to compensation views,

in cases where we experience painful emotions in connection with the appreciation of art, these emotions make no positive contribution to our experience but can be compensated for by positive experiential elements. Compensation views hold that negative emotions are unavoidable costs that must be incurred to access certain forms of aesthetic value. (Strohl 2018: 4)

According to “non-hedonic compensatory theories” there are others kinds of values—such as epistemic value—that we can derive from fictions that elicit negative emotions. Acquiring through painful art knowledge of important truths can compensate for the unpleasantness it generates. According to “hedonic compensatory theories”, some of the emotions elicited by certain fictions are indeed experienced as unpleasant, but their being so is “compensated” by the fact that these fictions also give rise to pleasant experiences, making the overall experience of these fictions desirable and positive. If there is a positive “pleasure-displeasure balance” (De Clercq 2014: 114), we can then understand why people want to engage with works of art that induce a certain amount of displeasure:

Some think the puzzle can be resolved by appealing to the various pleasures to be had from putatively painful art. We take pleasure from a well-crafted narrative, beautiful prose, a melodious tune, and skilled acting. Plausibly, one might suggest that these pleasures compensate for the pain of the negative emotions. Call this style of solution to the paradox the hedonic compensatory theory (HCT), since it holds that the pain is compensated for hedonically. (Smuts 2018)

Noel Carroll is one of the most famous partisans of this view. He advances a hedonic compensatory theory according to which the reason why we seek out horror fictions is the “compensatory cognitive pleasure” (Smuts 2009: 47) we can take in them.

On Carroll's theory, fear and disgust do not make a positive contribution to our experience of horror art-works, but the concurrent fascination that we experience toward monsters does. (Strohl 2018: 4)

The viewer of horror movies does not enjoy being frightened or disgusted by fictional monsters, but she enjoys having her “curiosity piqued and then satisfied”, and understands that this is possible only if the fear and disgust in question are experienced. Then, this view maintains “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” (Smuts 2009: 47). The unpleasant affects elicited by horror movies are the “price we are willing to pay for the pleasure of discovery”. According to Carroll, fictional monsters also fascinate us because of the way they “violate ordinary conceptual categories” (which is also the reason why they frighten and disgust us). So, while fear and disgust do not in themselves “make a positive contribution to our experience of horror art-works” (Strohl 2018: 4), the curiosity and fascination elicited by the monsters who frighten and disgust us do.

One major problem with 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” (Smuts 2009: 47), making our overall experience not painful but pleasant. And the problem is that these views do not provide any such reason to think that this is what happens.

Another problem is that it seems that what audiences of horror movies enjoy and value are fear and disgust *themselves*, not a pleasurable experience derived from or compensated by this fear and disgust. In other words, the putatively negative emotions experienced by these audiences do not appear to be for them a “cost that must be incurred to experience fascination” (Strohl 2018: 4). Correlatively, it seems “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” (Smuts 2009: 48).

Moreover, how to understand, under hedonic compensatory theories, the pleasure we take in a sad movie? Do we feel our curiosity piqued by such a movie? Do we seek out “compensatory cognitive pleasure” by watching it? This does not seem very plausible.

The “meta-response view”, on the contrary, is in a position to answer these last questions in a more satisfactory way. This view is a species of compensatory theories. It holds that we can find pleasure in our “second-order responses” to works of fiction that elicit emotions such as pity, sadness, fear, sorrow, etc. Feagin holds that, according to this view,

when one feels pity for a character in a tragedy, one might have the positive meta-response of valuing one’s own capacity for sympathy. The painful emotion makes no positive contribution to the experience in its own right, but it is compensated for by the value of the meta-response. (Feagin 1992: 86)

In other words, by experiencing pity, we experience this positive meta-response: the pity we feel is the sign of our morally good character, but this pity is not itself pleasant. “We do not feel pleasure when Oedipus gouges 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” (Smuts 2009: 49). Such fictions give us the opportunity to recognise that we are fundamentally empathic human beings, that we belong to the family of those good persons who feel pity toward the suffering of other human beings. As C. Todd puts it, under this view, “the value of the overall tragic experience [...] consists in the fact that it leads to a form of pleasure that is intimately connected with, or perhaps is in some way identical with, an appreciation of our own moral goodness” (Todd 2014: 228).⁸

One frequent objection to this view is that even if it makes it possible to account for the pleasure we take in experiencing pity, this view “is designed to handle fictions that are akin to tragedy [but], unsurprisingly, [...] does not cover horror cases such as the film *Cure* (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 1997), where pity is not a major component of the response” (Smuts 2009: 49). More generally, this view demands too much, cognitively, of such engagement and a level of detached reflection that does not ring true to the phenomenology” (Todd 2014: 234).

More generally, it can be argued that all compensatory solutions to the paradoxes, whether hedonic or non-hedonic, fail to explain the pleasure that many people seem to take in tragedy and horrific fictions: “[d]oes the pleasure of tragedy really stem from a reinforcement of feelings of humanity, it might be asked, and does the pleasure of horror

⁸ See also (Levinson 1992: 300): “Pity and fear, which are not in themselves pleasant, may in some measure (or in some form) be raised in us by a tragedy, to take Aristotle’s time-honoured example, and yet as we view ourselves affected this way we may in the end be gratified, judging it to be both good and fitting that we were so affected, and an essential means of actually understanding the import of the drama”.

really consist in a curiosity-driven urge to read on?” (Davies 2014: 248). These views admit that the fear and anxiety we experience when watching a horror or a thriller movie have a negative hedonic quality on the ground that they involve physiological symptoms that are typical of unpleasant experiences. But if things were so, the fact that we *enjoy* such movies would be hardly understandable.⁹ It then seems to be preferable to argue that supposedly negative or painful fictions are not pleasurable *despite* the emotions they elicit, but pleasurable *because* of them. But how this is possible remains to be explained.

II.1.4 The Control Theory

According to the Control Theory, it is possible to enjoy the negative emotions elicited by horrific or anxiety-inducing work of arts, because we have “control” over these works and the fictional situations that give rise to these emotions. John Morreall is the main figure of this view, that Fileva nicely summarizes as follows:

According to Morreall, it is a familiar fact of life that, upon occasion, we enjoy negative emotions. Fear provides a case in point – people deliberately engage in risky and dangerous games and activities in order to experience fear, and they do so because they enjoy the experience. Morreall goes on to ask under what conditions we take pleasure in negative emotions, and he settles on ‘control’ as the key to the answer: the experience of such emotions is pleasurable when we can keep them within certain boundaries. Much like the person who enjoys a little spice in her food but would not enjoy too much spice as she would find the burning sensation painful, the viewer of challenging art finds negative emotions enjoyable below a certain threshold but unpleasant above that threshold, and in the context of art, it is up to her to keep them from crossing that threshold. (Fileva 2014: 173)

Contrary to what happens in most real-life fear-inducing situations, we are able to “control” the fear-inducing fictional situations that elicit this emotion, and this enable us to “enjoy a wide range of [fictional] experiences, even unpleasant ones” (Morreall 1985: 97), while in real life such experience, such as fear and sadness are not, generally, pleasant or enjoyable at all. As Todd writes, “since we can usually control when such experiences take

⁹ Smuts (2018), however, does not take this to be fact: “people typically, or at least frequently, describe their experiences of the kinds of works in question as on the whole painful, distressing, gut wrenching, and emotionally devastating, not as on balance pleasurable”. This is why for him “the principal problem with hedonic solutions is that they fail to accord with the phenomenology. Although there are surely many pleasures to be had from a well-crafted narrative, audiences do not always describe their experiences as on the whole pleasurable. In fact there are many cases where people describe their experiences as genuinely painful” (*ibid.*).

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” (Todd 2014: 225). Correlatively, “intense” emotions—i.e. emotions that “get too strong”—, whether fiction-directed or reality-directed, are not enjoyable, because in such cases we “lose control over our attention, our bodies and our total situations”: “[e]xtreme sadness or pity [...] takes us out of control so that the emotion cannot be enjoyed”.

The control in question can make the experience of “painful art” positive because:

[this control] 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. (Todd 2014: 239)

As Todd writes, “[t]his distancing allows us the time and space for reflection on the interaction of form and content, and on our own responses, that provides the overall resulting experience with the kind of moral or cognitive or aesthetic value elaborated by these accounts” (Todd 2014: 228).

Morreall then explains in the following way what exactly makes it that we experience more control vis-à-vis fictions than vis-à-vis reality:

The most important factor in enjoying negative emotions [...] is our maintaining control, and being in control is a function of our desires and what we are doing in a particular situation. It is usually easiest to maintain control [...] when we are merely attending to something that has no practical consequences for us. Then being in control requires only the abilities to start, stop, and direct our attention and thought. By contrast, when the situation evoking the negative emotion has practical consequences, especially when it requires action from us, it is unlikely that we will feel in control. (Morreall 1985: 97)

The Control Theory is not, however, without problems. First, it is rather unclear about what exactly the control in question is. Morreall claims 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. (Morreall 1985: 97)

However, contrary to what he writes, we have no control over our emotional reactions nor over the narrative: just as with reality-directed emotions, we cannot decide to

stop being frightened, sad, anxious or disgusted when exposed to the situations the narrative in question presents to us. Our only control is over our being exposed or not to them. But even this control is only partial: when we decide to stop watching a horror movie because cannot stand it anymore, when we want not to be exposed to what will elicit in us certain affective reactions, it is often too late—or more exactly, it cannot but be too late, in the sense that this decision supposes that we already do not feel well while watching the movie. In short, movies often take us by surprise, which makes our control over them more limited than Morreall suggests.

Moreover, supposing that the control theory can explain why our fiction-directed supposedly negative emotions are “less painful”, or “more tolerable” than similar real-life emotions, this does not “mean that [the former] are not painful at all”. Control theorists then simply offer a “partial explanation” for why in response to art we are willing to experience emotional responses that we avoid in real life—that is, they simply offer a partial answer to the “differential question” stated in the Introduction)—, but they do not have a “plausible answer for why we want to experience such emotions at all” (Smuts 2009: 46). When forced to make a choice between unnecessarily experiencing a pain we will *not* be in a position to stop, and unnecessarily experiencing a pain we will be in a position to stop, it is clear that the rational decision to take is to choose the second option. But this would not make it rational to decide to unnecessarily experience a pain we will be in a position to stop when are entirely free not to experience it at all.¹⁰

The Control Theory then does not explain at all how it is possible to *enjoy* “negative” art:

the proposed solution does not explain why controlled disgust would bring positive pleasure rather than merely a lessening of the displeasure that disgust normally brings. It certainly does not explain why we would seek out disgusting art rather than art with a more benign subject-matter. (Robinson 2014: 65)

The same goes for other supposedly negative fiction-directed emotions: the Control Theory does not enable us to understand why fiction-directed fear or sadness can be positive or pleasant. As M. Strohl argues, this view doesn’t enable us to understand our

¹⁰ I think that this even makes it misleading to write, as Smuts does, that “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” 2009: 41, my emphasis). If, as he admits, “they do not have a plausible answer for why we want to experience such emotions at all”, the fact that we intentionally expose ourselves to fictions that will elicit such *moderately unpleasant* emotions when we are free not experience them at all remains entirely mysterious.

“positive interest in experiencing painful art but rather identifies a background condition that removes obstacles to such positive interest”.

Morreall suggests however an interesting idea when presenting his Control Theory: what contributes to making fiction-directed fear or sadness different from reality-directed fear or sadness is the fact in the former case they are directed at something that “has no practical consequences for us”, while the contrary is true in the latter case. This fact is not what explains, according to him, our experiencing differently these emotions. What this fact explains is that we have more control over fictions than over reality, and *this* explains, according to Morreall, our experiencing differently reality-directed and fiction-directed emotions.

In the next section, I shall articulate and explore the idea that this is because we think that nothing can really happen to us, our loved ones, and the rest of the world when we experience supposedly negative fiction-directed emotions—nothing is rendered unsafe as a consequence of what fictionally happens—that they are not so in reality, and that we can enjoy experiencing *all* fiction-directed emotions (except disgust, maybe).

II.2. Why fiction-directed emotions are not hedonically negative: The No Associated Harm View

Undoubtedly, our emotional responses to the content of “negative art” differ saliently in terms of their phenomenology from the equivalent real-life responses to actual events. Fiction-directed emotions obviously “feel different” from real life-directed emotions. According to Todd, this is

in large part because of the role of and awareness of formal features such emotions are relevantly different from ‘ordinary’ emotions because of this awareness of and attention to formal features that are intrinsic to an appreciation of the fiction and that govern and shape our emotional responses to it. (Todd 2014: 239)

[T]he nature, phenomenology, and valence of our emotional responses to the content [of fictions] are informed and shaped by an awareness of the formal features of such works, including the fact that such-and-such a work is a work of art and created with various artistic intentions. In addition, our overall experience is coloured, at least in good cases, by an appreciation of the skill with which form and content harmoniously combine.¹¹ (*Ibid.*: 240)

¹¹ Todd also writes that fiction-directed emotions distinctively go with “attention to and appreciation of the way in which content is conveyed by formal features, where this includes appreciating the skill with

This explains, for Todd, why “our first-order affective reactions to negative, unpleasant representational content are not straightforwardly intrinsically negative” (*ibid.*: 241). But Todd also advances a complementary explanation: our “awareness of the non-actuality” of fictional situations, and what this implies. This awareness contributes to explaining the “dissimilarity between the kinds of events we seek representations of and the kind of events we seek in real life” (Smuts 2009: 52).

What the awareness of the non-actuality of fictional situations implies is that we know that the objects of our fiction-directed emotions—e.g. fiction-directed fear—, contrary to those of our reality-directed emotions, do not and cannot endanger or wound us. Bantinaki remarks, more or less in line with this idea, that “[f]ear can, on occasion, be a positive emotion, in particular, in those circumstances where the benefits and rewards that subject gains from the overall experience surpass the risks” (2012: 389). What makes fear unpleasant when elicited by, and directed toward, non-fictional situations is the fact that when experiencing it we take our lives, or that of other people, or, more generally, aspects of the actual world that matter to us, to be threatened (to some extent) by what this fear is a fear of. This is why “the fear we feel in connection with a horror movie is different from the fear we experience when we think that someone might actually be breaking into our house to murder us” (Strohl 2018: 7).

And what goes for fear also goes for other negative reality-directed emotions, such as pity or sadness: when experiencing them, there is something bad or negative that we take have happened in the actual world, while this is not the case when such emotions are fiction-directed. This is also, conversely, what makes positive reality-directed emotions such as joy different from fiction-directed joy: in the former case, there is something good or positive that we take to have happened in the actual world while this is not the case when joy is fiction-directed, and this explain why such joy cannot be as strong and pleasant as reality-directed joy. When emotions such as fear or sadness are fiction-directed, these emotions are not associated with potential or actual harms or risks, while the contrary is generally true when it comes to reality-directed fear or sadness. This is why supposedly unpleasant or negative fiction-directed emotions are not so in reality.

While the Control Theory affirms that the negative dimension of emotions such as fear or sadness is, so to speak, “neutralised” by the fact that, when it is fiction-directed, we

which the interrelation of form and content is achieved, an awareness that one’s responses are being guided by the work, and an awareness that those features are there for a reason” (2014: 240).

have a form of control over them, the idea that I defend is rather that *they do not have any negative dimension to be neutralised*, and that *what makes these emotions negative when they are reality-directed is something that is simply contingently associated with them in such cases*. This means that fiction-directed emotions do not differ in nature from reality directed-emotions (contrary to Walton's quasi-emotions for instance)—which makes the former as genuine as the latter.

PART III

WHY FICTION-DIRECTED EMOTIONS ARE POSITIVE

I put forward in the first part of this thesis different reasons to think that it is not the case that each type of emotions is associated with an intrinsic valence—e.g. it is not the case that fear and sadness are intrinsically negative emotions. Among these reasons, three are about fiction-directed emotions:

1) The fact that we are often excited and impatient to watch movies or read books we take to be likely to elicit in us fiction-directed supposedly negative emotions such as fear or sadness.

2) The fact that we generally do not want the emotions in question to stop while we are experiencing them (as evidenced by the fact that we generally do not want our viewing of these movies or reading of these books to be interrupted or disturbed, which would lead these emotions to stop).

3) The fact that we recommend to people we care about to watch these movies or read these books that will arouse in them emotions.

These three facts strongly speak in favour of the idea that an emotion such as fear is not, in such cases, negatively experienced, and even is, on the contrary, positively experienced. This entails, since reality-directed fear is indisputably mostly negative, that this emotion does not have an intrinsic valence, being sometimes negatively, sometimes positively experienced.

I then endeavoured, in part (II), to account for this fact, i.e. to explain how it is possible that emotions like fear, which are almost always negative or unpleasant when they are reality-directed, are not so when they are fiction-directed. I advanced a simple and straightforward explanation of this fact (after having examined and rejected previous accounts of it): when emotions such as fear or sadness are fiction-directed, these emotions are not, objectively and psychologically, associated with potential or actual negative consequences or risks for the real world and its inhabitants, while the contrary is generally true when it comes to reality-directed fear or sadness. This is due to the fact that, even when “caught” by fictions, we do not believe that the fictional situations they describe are

real. In other words, when such emotions are fiction-directed, we believe that nothing negative or potentially negative for this world and these people is associated with these emotions, contrary to what is generally the case when they are reality-directed. (Let's note in passing that this is also true for the fear and anxiety that we sometimes experience when playing games—in particular, so-called “escape games”. More precisely, this is also true when we play games that are not gambling games, and, more generally, when we play games while knowing or believing that defeat or victory won't have any practical consequences.)

The Control Theory is often criticised for not being able to solve entirely the paradox of tragedy: even if this view were correct, it would just explain why fiction-directed emotions are not negatively experienced. But this does not explain the fact that we clearly seem to seek out these emotions and very often enthusiastically plan to expose ourselves to the artworks that provoke them. If these emotions were just not unpleasant or negative, if they were just hedonically neutral, and so would not contribute to our well-being, this fact would remain mysterious; after all, we are not enthusiastic about spending money for movies or pastries whose only hedonic quality in our eyes is their being “OK” or “not bad”. Solving entirely the paradoxes of horror and tragedy not only implies showing that supposedly negative emotions aroused by certain works of fiction to which we voluntarily expose ourselves are not so in reality, but *also* showing that these emotions are hedonically positive in themselves, or, at least, contribute to our well-being. This is the aim of this third part of my thesis.

III.1 What are the fictional situations to which our emotional reactions to fictions are directed?

In order to explain why our “negative” emotional reactions to fictional situations can contribute to our well-being, let us start with what I take fictional situations to be, from a metaphysically. I shall rely here on what I put forward in my first Master thesis, on the so-called *paradox of fiction*.

First, we do not have to believe in the real existence of what moves us to be rationally and genuinely moved by it, but to believe of what moves us that it is *possible*. And believing this does not imply ascribing to the possibilities described or shown by the work of fiction in question any kind of existence. This is because these possibilities that move us are not, metaphysically, *objects* but *properties*, and more precisely properties we take to be *metaphysically compossible*. In other words, judging that *the combination of properties* described or shown by the work of fiction in question *is metaphysically possible* makes it possible to be

moved by it. Under this view, the *intentional objects* of our fiction-directed emotions are combinations of properties we take to be possible and that we judge to be, e.g. sad, frightening, pitiful, heartening, etc.

(Conversely, when we take a combination of properties described or shown by a work of fiction to be impossible, we cannot be moved by it. Correlatively, if we take the behaviour and psychological reactions of a fictional character to be unintelligible and deeply incoherent—for instance, given what just happened to him in the movie—we can hardly be moved by this character. And taking them to be so seems to be nothing other than taking them not to be possible. If we take it to be unintelligible that, just after having learnt the loss of one's beloved child, someone cooks a good meal for one's friends to celebrate one's new job, has a sudden crush for an unknown woman during the dinner, decides to go abroad for the rest of the weekend with her, comes back on Monday for the funeral of one's child, cries a lot, and then says to the rest of his family, "well, nothing is irreplaceable you know, we all have to move on. By the way, I think I felt in love with this woman I met on Friday. And you know what? Gosh, she's so f*****g hot!", there is no way for us to be moved by this character. And taking this behaviour to be deeply incoherent and unintelligible seems to be nothing other than taking it not to be metaphysically possible. This is why, as often remarked, understanding fictional characters is necessary to be moved by them.)

So, when we are afraid of Dracula, we do not believe that it is *epistemically* possible that he exists—we know this character to be fictional, we do not have any doubt that Dracula does not exist, and we even are certain of his nonexistence and of his not being a threat for us—, but we believe that the combination of properties that the fiction presents to us is *metaphysically* possible (even if very distant from our world), and that this combination of properties is frightening for the other characters of the movie, given their own properties, that we also take to be compossible. This makes our fear rational, because it is not based on the irrational belief that Dracula *might* exist and may be a threat for us in our seats. Our fear is rather based on the belief that Dracula apparently *could* exist, in which case he would be a threat for the other metaphysically possible characters—and, in case their properties are similar to ours, for us if we found ourselves in the situation described by the fiction.

What then could explain that the apparently negative emotions we have vis-à-vis fictional situations we take to be possible are not, in fact, really so, and even contribute to our wellbeing?

III.2 Fictions enrich our life

III.2.1 The Rich Experience Theory: fiction-directed “negative” emotions can enrich our lives by enhancing their worth, but not by enhancing our welfare

According to the Rich Experience Theory, fictional emotional experiences can be unpleasant while being valuable and desirable. This makes these experiences good for us despite their negative hedonic quality. More generally, many things in life can be worthwhile while not predominantly pleasurable, in which case it seems perfectly rational and understandable that we seek them out. According to the partisans of the Rich Experience Theory, in art just as in real life we can be glad to have certain experiences without them being pleasurable. This can be so even if they are emotionally devastating. The pain experienced during our encounters with negative works of art does not have to be converted or compensated, but is an integral part of the enrichment of our experiences. This pain can, for instance, give us an “insight into the human condition or into ways of beings in the world”. We can want and desire these insights even if, sometimes or often, they cannot but be negatively or unpleasantly experienced. They “worth it” despite this. Here is how Levinson similarly argues for the idea that we can desire these insights through art even if they are painful. We desire them

because one's cognitive faculties are notably exercised or enlarged; because one's eyes or ears are opened to certain spatial and temporal possibilities; because one is enabled to explore unusual realms of emotion; because one's consciousness is integrated to a degree out of the ordinary; because one is afforded a distinctive feeling of freedom or transcendence; because certain moral truths are made manifest to one in concrete dress; or because one is provided insight, in one way or another, into human nature. (Levinson 1992: 301)

According to Smuts, who is the main figure of the Rich Experience Theory, many of the emotional experiences that we have when watching an horror movie or reading a sad book are definitely not pleasant. Even if he finds, while watching it, Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* “to be one of the most effective affair fictions ever created”, and would “recommend it to others, largely for the experience”, he maintains that he would not

describe the emotional experience one has when watching is as pleasurable. On the contrary:

[watching this movie] is nothing less than emotionally devastating. At several moments along the way, if you stopped the movie and asked me what I think, through a mist of tears, I would say it is terrific and absolutely crushing. This is precisely what makes it a masterpiece [...] We praise many works for their effectiveness at eliciting just such painful responses. We praise *Scenes from a Marriage* for its power to disturb — to elicit heart-wrenching, painfully felt sorrow. In part, this is what we intrinsically desire from the work. (Smuts 2018: chap. 7)

Why does Smuts claim that being so negatively moved by this fictional work of art is precisely “what makes it a masterpiece”, and that it is these particularly painful emotional responses to it that we desire when we plan to see the movie? This does not only sound deeply counterintuitive: saying that we are deeply attracted to such emotional responses is not in itself contributing to solving the paradox of tragedy but, rather, restating the puzzling phenomenon that grounds it. Answering the question “Why do we seek out art that is likely to elicit unpleasant emotions?” by saying that we desire them does not dissipate the mystery surrounding the idea that painful and pleasant emotions can be something we desire to experience. As Fileva summarizes,

Smuts contends that an experience may be unpleasant but valuable and perfectly desirable, a view he dubs the ‘rich experience’ view. On the rich experience view, the pain associated with negative emotions is neither converted nor compensated for; rather, it is seen as an integral part of a complex experience which, though it may have painful aspects, is desirable on the whole, without necessarily being pleasant. (Fileva 2014: 174).

In order to solve the paradox of tragedy, Smuts then advances that although the painful emotional responses that we sometimes experience in front of certain fictions are not prudentially valuable, these responses can nevertheless be constitutive of things of “cognitive” or “epistemic” value. These emotional responses can, for instance, enable us to grasp truths of high cognitive value such as “recognizing humanity’s profoundly depressing proclivity to cruelty”. “Fully understanding such insights”, Smuts argues, “necessarily involves painful emotional experiences”.

Smuts does not claim however that audiences of such fictions desire painful emotions responses because they want to be reminded of such depressing trivialities. He clearly doubts that this is the “primary source of audience motivation, one to which all

negative affect must be subsumed”. What he claims is, rather, that audiences of putatively negative works of art “desire the ultimately unpleasant experiences for the sake of having the experiences”. For Smuts, we don’t want such experiences of fear or sadness because of the knowledge of certain truths of high cognitive value these emotional experiences enable to attain, but because we want to *experience* these truths of high epistemic or cognitive value. That’s because not only is “feeling profound sadness” an epistemic means to understand “the significance of things that matter to us”, or a sign of our understanding of these things; “rather, it seems that having the emotion is part of the understanding itself” (Smuts 2017)—in other words, is *constitutive* of it. This is why, when engaging with certain artworks, we “intrinsically and contemporaneously desires the non-pleasant experiences they afford”.

Smuts’ view is not, under this aspect, a non-hedonic compensatory theory, because he claims that these unpleasant emotional experiences can be desired for the sake of having them as *being* what understanding certain important truths consists in. This is how his claim that “audiences desire painful works in part for the rich experiences they afford” should be understood: such experiences are not rich because they are intense or multifaceted, but because, being constitutive of what understanding these important truths is, they are cognitively rich. And having this understanding is something that enhances the worth of one’s life.

The Rich Experience Theory also holds that these rich experiences that “painful works” can provide, and that their audiences desire, can often only be experienced through fictions but not in their daily lives, or at least not without a “risk of serious bodily harm or worse”. The reason why we usually seek out art- or fiction-directed unpleasant emotional experiences rather than real life-directed emotional experiences is that art provides a “degree of safety” that is not present in real-life situations that arouse supposedly intrinsically negative emotions such as disgust, anger, fear, horror, sadness, misery, etc. Under this view, most of these emotions 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” (Smuts 2009: 53). Matthew Strohl notes about this point that for the Rich Experience Theory “one might value the experience of grief in response to a tragedy because it expands the range of one’s experience without having to actually incur the loss of a loved one” (2018: 5).

In short, the Rich Experience Theory’s way of solving the paradox of tragedy is to say that “painful” fictional works of art can enhance the worth of our lives by giving us

understanding, *through* painful emotional reactions to these works, of truths of high cognitive value without thereby putting ourselves at risk, which is often not the case with real life-directed understanding-enhancing negative emotions.

However, experiencing so-called painful art cannot in itself enhance our well-being or welfare. Such artworks can contribute to enhancing the worth of one's life, but this does not make them prudentially valuable:

enhancing my evaluative understanding via painful art might enhance the worth of my life without affording much, if any, prudential benefit... Rather than focus on the welfare impact of painful art, we should be concerned with its impact on the worth of our lives. Most plausibly, the value had from painful art often makes our lives more worth living, despite sometimes having an adverse affect on our welfare. And it is not irrational to pursue works of art that make our lives more worth living (Smuts 2014: 143)

Audiences seek out “non-prudential forms of value (such as self-knowledge) from most painful art, and they are perfectly rational to do so, because it helps us to appreciate what matters”. For Smuts, “the charge of irrationality follows only if we also accept a narrow theory of well-being, such as hedonism — the view that pleasure and pain are the only things that are ultimately good or bad for a person” (Smuts 2014: 124). We then have to distinguish well-being from worth:

Our listening [to sad songs] seems important, worth it, but not good for us. Perhaps having a good cry does sometimes, even frequently, lead to some relief. But few seek out sad songs explicitly for this purpose. It's accidental at best. But they do want to focus, to intensify their emotional experience. We pursue a kind of knowledge of self and relationships in the process. [...] Although this is valuable, it does not appear to have any direct prudential benefits. The distinction between well-being and worth provides the machinery to solve the problem. (Smuts 2018)

For Smuts, “what makes a life *worth living*” is not the same thing as “what makes a life *good* for the one who lives it”—i.e. what makes a life prudentially good, or good in terms of *well-being*. Even if these two things are “clearly related” they should not be conflated, because “most likely worth is not strictly a matter of welfare, since one can live a life of great hardship and suffering that might nevertheless be worth living”. (Smuts 2014: 141).

Consider the reluctant cancer researcher: Although he has an aptitude for biochemistry, he took little pleasure from his studies in college. He pursued the field only out of pressure from his father. Despite his dissatisfaction, he made several major discoveries that revolutionized cancer treatment. Although his life was high in achievement value and

knowledge, most plausibly it was not a very good life for him. He was chronically dissatisfied. Despite the objective goods, the cancer researcher did not have a life high in individual welfare. [...] A life high in all the goods other than subjective happiness seems disproportionately deficient. This suggests that it is not objective goods but some subjective state, such as happiness, that is most important for welfare. [I]t will not suffice to merely include pleasure or happiness in the list of goods. The reluctant cancer researcher would be deficient in this regard, but high in several other goods. Yet, his life would still be low in prudential value. (Smuts 2018)

Conversely, if a man is deceived so that, contrary to what he thinks, he does not have, in real fact, “genuine loving relationships”, nor “the respect of his peers”, and more generally “believes a suite of important falsehoods about himself and those near and dear to him”, “the goods of his life tally low in comparison to [another, non-deceived man], and the bads tally high. Although these defects might not negatively impact his welfare, they most certainly make his life less worth living” (Smuts 2014: 142).

This distinction between “well-being” and “worth” is, for Smuts, the key to solve the paradox of tragedy: “enhancing my evaluative understanding via painful art might enhance the worth of my life without affording much, if any, prudential benefit (Smuts 2018, chap.7). It is true that, “if anything makes a life worth living, it is prudential value” and that “other things being equal, the more pleasure in a life the more the life is worth living”. But that we have to keep in mind that pleasure and welfare are not the only things that can make a life worthwhile. Hence, there is nothing irrational for Smuts in exposing ourselves to “painful art” as soon as we think that this will enhance the worth of our life, even if this won’t enhance our well-being. This is how the paradox of tragedy can be solved, because this is, for Smuts, sufficient to show that we are perfectly rational when we engage with (supposedly) hedonically disvaluable works of art.

Because, for Smuts (who agrees on this issue with most philosophers), “pleasure seems like the clearest source of prudential value”, and because the sadness and fear elicited by sad music, horror movies and tragic novels is for him “painful”, it follows that for him these emotions cannot enhance our well-being at all. But this does not prevent them from enhancing the worth of our lives.

Obviously, Smuts’ Rich Experience Theory is based on the common idea that fiction-directed fear or sadness, just as any other so-called “negative emotions”, are experienced as unpleasant or painful. But this idea can be challenged, as I did in the first

part of this thesis. I not only highlighted the fact that those we decide to watch a sad or a horrific movie do not seem to suffer atrociously when they do so, but I put forward three reasons to think that such emotions, when they are fiction-directed, are not unpleasant or painful. One of these reasons I indicated is that fact that, given the joy and excitement we often experience when we know that we are about to watch a movie that is going to elicit such emotions, it is not really plausible to claim that we think that it is going to elicit in us unpleasant emotional experiences. Things that we do because, while experiencing them as unpleasant, we take them to be objectively better for us or to enhance the worth of our lives (such as doing gym or reading important books we find particularly boring) are not associated with such joy and excitement when we are about to do them, or when we plan to do them. Smuts' view then cannot explain the emotional state in which we often are when we are about to watch a good horror or thriller movie, or a good drama. It is much more plausible to claim that the joy and excitement we often experience when we know that we are about to watch a movie that is going to elicit supposedly negative emotions indicate that we in fact experience these emotions as pleasant.

What then needs to be done is explaining what makes them so, and so why they not only can enhance the worth of our lives, as Smuts argues, but can also enhance our wellbeing. I shall argue that they do so by enriching our lives in a way that has been overlooked in the literature in general, and by Smuts in particular.

III.2.2 The Enriched Rich Experience Theory: fiction-directed “negative” emotions can not only enhance the worth of our lives, but also our welfare

I shall argue in this section that there is a sense in which fiction-directed emotions, whether negative or positive, enrich our lives that has been missed by Smuts. In the main, I agree with the way in which Smuts describe how they can provide us—without putting ourselves at risk, contrary to what goes for reality-directed emotions—rich experiences that enhance the worth, or objective value, of our lives in virtue of the important truths that are so grasped. But there is another way in which they enrich our lives, and I shall argue that it makes them contributing to enhancing our well-being (III.2.2.1). In the following subsection (III.2.2.2), I shall indicate another argument for the claim that fiction-directed emotions, whatever they are, contribute to enhancing our well-being.

III.2.2.1 Fiction-directed emotions contribute to enhancing our well-being by making us *live more than we would have otherwise*

Here is the main claim I shall argue for in this section: fiction-directed emotions contribute to our well-being because they enable us to *live* or *experience* fictional situations we would otherwise only have *knowledge* of by, e.g., reading books and watching movies.

A first aspect of this claim is that thanks to these emotions, fictions do not only enrich cognitively or epistemically our life, but *enrich our lived experience* itself by enabling us to live or experience the fictional situations to which these emotions are directed and that, without them, we would only get knowledge of by consuming the work of fiction in question. In other words, by being emotionally moved by fictional situations or state of affairs, we do not just get knowledge of them: these emotions make it possible to live or experience them.¹² In short, when fictions elicit emotions that are directed to them, these fictions enrich our life in a strong, or literal sense.

(Let me insist here on the idea that fictional works are a way for us to live situations we would never have lived otherwise. Through fictions, we can experience state of affairs we take to be metaphysically possible but that do not exist. Correlatively, fictional art is not just to be watched or admired: possible situations they present to us are to be lived, which requires that they move us. Horror movies, for example, should elicit fear by presenting to us frightening compossible properties that are not associated with actual or potential harms, contrary to what would happen if the combinations of properties in question were instantiated. Hence, through moving fictions, we can experience what it is to face atrocious monsters, to hide from dangerous psychopaths, to struggle to survive natural disasters, etc., by being frightened or horrified while not risking to be wounded, or worse. Through fictions, we can then be moved in a way in which we cannot be otherwise.)

Now, it seems to be intrinsically pleasurable to live more lives, so to speak, than to live only one, as soon as these additional lives—or, to speak less metaphorically, these *life enrichments*—are not hedonically negative. Now, as I have argued in part II, supposedly unpleasant or negative fiction-directed emotions are not so in reality because when they are fiction-directed rather than reality-directed they are not associated with actual or potential harms or risks. (Fiction-directed emotions then differ from reality-directed emotions by

¹² Let's note that when fictional situations do not move us—so that, according to the claim just made, we do not live them—, and we see the knowledge we get of them to be of little value or uninteresting, we are bored by the fictional work in question.

enabling those who experience them to have, so to speak, “the benefit without the risks”—i.e. to live or experience fictional situations without thereby putting themselves at risk, or evaluating as negative the object of these emotions.) It follows that these emotions cannot be in themselves a source of unpleasantness. Bantinaki, as for her, holds that “our encounter with horror fiction is [...] one type of occasion when fear is (or can be) experienced as a positive and thus an enjoyable emotion which explains our attraction to horror” (Bantinaki 2012: 389). Matthew Strohl also writes, in this perspective, that “in the case of tragedy, for instance, the sadness we feel might figure positively in our enjoyment”¹³ (Strohl 2018: 4). But whether or not the emotions in question are positively experienced rather than just not unpleasant, thanks to fictional art we can be emotionally moved as we cannot be in real life when our emotions are reality-directed.

This, however, is not sufficient to be in position to claim that such life enrichments cannot be hedonically negative. After all, one could argue that it is not pleasurable to live more lives than to live only one when one is not interested in—more generally, when one does not *value*—living these additional lives, even more so if one disvalues them. But this is usually not the case with the life enrichments we gain through fiction, because we usually are not forced to be exposed to such and such works of fiction, but chose on the contrary to be exposed to them (or to re-expose ourselves to them), and so to experience the fictional situations these works show or describe if these works succeed in eliciting emotions directed to these situations.

In short, because, generally, we value the life enrichments brought by the fictional situations we live by emotionally reacting to them (because, generally, we choose to be exposed to this or that fictional situation), and because the fiction-directed emotions they elicit cannot be negative, it follows that these life enrichments generally have prudentially value, and not just increase the worth of one’s life.

III.2.2.2 Fiction-directed emotions contribute to enhancing our well-being by being *in themselves* pleasant to have

The foregoing way of arguing for the claim that fiction-directed emotions, even when “negative”, contribute to enhancing our well-being does not involve the claim that

¹³ He adds: “but we also might value it because it expands the range of our emotional experience in a way we find worthwhile”.

these emotions are *in themselves* hedonically positive, but the claim that these emotions enhance our well-being as *means* to have life enrichments one desires to have.

But it can also be argued that these emotions are *in themselves* hedonically positive. Indeed, it can be argued that what Dubos takes to go for all emotions just goes, in fact, for all fiction-directed emotions but not for all reality-directed emotions. As Hume summarizes it in “Of Tragedy”, Dubos’ position is 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 Cain Todd remarks,

Hume discusses and ultimately rejects [Dubos’ idea] that suffering any emotional experience, including negative ones, is better than the alternative, namely boredom or ‘insipid languor’. The idea is that being in a state of “emotional agitation holds our interest, arrests our attention, and hence perhaps suffices to motivate us to pursue such experiences. (Todd 2014: 241)

In order to defend the claim that all emotions are *in themselves* hedonically positive, it is important not to have a too narrow representation of what pleasure is. Fiction-directed fear, for instance, does not have to be pleasant in the way in which many reality-directed pleasant emotions are. And reality-directed pleasant emotions too are not all hedonically positive in the same way. Pleasure can take many forms, as philosophers who defend attitudinal views of pleasure—according to which whether a given experience is pleasant or not “depends upon the attitudes we take towards that experience” (so any experience with “any felt-quality might be pleasurable, unpleasurable, or affectively neutral” (Pallies 2020: 11))—have put great emphasis on. As Willem van der Deijl argues: “the kind of feelings that we consider to be pleasurable—sex, the taste of good food, learning that you have passed a course, etc.—feel so differently, that it seems dubious that pleasure itself has any distinctive phenomenology” (Deijl 2018: 1773) that all pleasant experiences would have in common. It rather seems that they do not “feel alike” (Pallies 2020), that they do not resemble one another in “felt-quality”. As Eden Lin summarizes, “do orgasms feel anything like the pleasures that some people obtain from contemplating mathematical truths? When you get pleasure from eating a juicy steak, does that feel anything like the way it feels when you take pleasure in the fact that summer will soon be here?” (Lin 2020: 512).

Once we no longer are under the grip of the idea that all pleasant experiences resemble to a degree or another to the kind of pleasure we can take in sunbathing, drinking

beers, eating ice-creams or getting a massage, it seems much less *prima facie* implausible to argue that *we positively experience and value any emotion as long as it is not associated with actual or potential harms*—in other words, to argue that *we positively experience and value any emotion as such*. Since fiction-directed emotions are not so associated, we can positively experience any fiction-directed emotion, even those which are supposedly negative, such as fear and sadness. In line with this idea, I would argue that we often go to the movies or read books because fictions are *perfect emotions machines*: not only can they elicit much *more* and *varied* emotions in a relatively short time interval than real life generally does, but they also do this *in a perfect way*, i.e. by not being associated with any actual or potential harms.

The sort of “desire for intensity” that some people often have in their real life, and that may lead them to (knowingly) put themselves at risk, seems to be nothing than a desire to experience strong emotions, to be strongly emotionally involved into the life they live. But with fictions, we don’t have to put ourselves at risk to experience this. Obviously, the emotions then experienced are not as strong as reality-directed emotions would be—precisely because of their not being associated with any actual or potential real event. But fiction-directed emotions move us nonetheless, which makes them, I would argue, *desirable in themselves, in addition to their being desirable as means to get life enrichments through fictions*.

What then could explain the fact that experiencing emotions seems to be desirable in itself? I have argued that the value of *fiction*-directed emotions partly comes from the fact that, due to them, we can *experience* or *live*, and not only *acquire knowledge of*, the fictional situations toward which they are directed. But maybe this also goes for *reality*-directed emotions: due to them, we can *really live* the real situations toward which they are directed, in the following sense: being deprived of any emotion vis-à-vis one’s real life would indeed come to not really *live* this life but, rather, to be a sort of *interactive external spectator* of it. So not only can fiction-directed emotions enable us not to be pure spectators of the fictions toward which they are directed but to live them, but reality-directed emotions enable us not to be just interactive spectators of the real world toward which they are directed but to really live our own lives.

III.3 Some potential objections to the Enriched Rich Experience Theory

A first possible objection against the view that emotions elicited by so-called painful art in fact can enhance our well-being is that we sometimes want to avoid being exposed to certain fictions because of the way we might feel as a result.

It is indisputably true that we are sometimes negatively affected by works of fiction, and that this sometimes leads us to want not to be exposed to fictions that could have this effect upon us—i.e. that could lead us to “feel bad” afterwards. Correlatively, “people sometimes confess that their mood or level of sensitivity makes them unable to cope with a sad story or a horror movie, which suggests that something ‘affectively challenging’ is going on” (De Clercq 2014: 112).

This, however, does not speak against the view I defend. What happens in such cases is that we do not want to be, because of the work of fiction, in a bad *mood*—which can happen when we evaluate negatively (elements of) the fictional situation shown or described by the work of fiction (for instance, when we take it to bring fully to light how human beings can be repugnant). Since, arguably, negative moods do not contribute to our well-being, it *may* not be, in certain cases, overall prudentially valuable for certain individuals to be exposed to certain works of fiction. This however does not tell against the claim that all the fiction-directed emotions, whether “negative” or “positive”, experienced while watching a movie or reading a book contribute to our wellbeing by making us live or experience fictional situations we have chosen to live or experience by choosing to watch this movie or to read this book, and by making us being moved rather than not (without putting us at risk). It’s just that it may happen that the degree to which the *mood* resulting from having seen a certain movie reduces our wellbeing is superior to the degree to which the *emotions* experienced while watching the movie enhance our wellbeing.

A second objection is that being exposed to certain fictional situations and experiencing the emotions they elicit sometimes causally leads us to feel afterwards truly negative *emotions* toward the real world. However, this does not speak against our claim that the emotions directed to the fictional situations a given fiction presents to us are not in themselves unpleasant or negative. Once again, it’s just that it may happen that the degree to which the *reality-directed emotions* resulting from having seen a certain movie or read a certain book reduces our wellbeing is superior to the degree to which the *fiction-directed emotions* experienced while watching the movie or reading the book enhance our wellbeing.

A third potential objection to the view I defend is that it is problematic to focus on pleasure to decide whether or not “negative” fiction-directed emotions can have prudential value; indeed, for many philosophers, hedonism is deeply problematic as an account of well-being:

Hedonism's narrow focus on just one valuable feature of experience has made its position vulnerable to a significant problem: pleasure itself cannot account for the goodness of rich experiences. Pluralism [about the sources of prudential value] is more plausible as an account of experientialist prudential value, even if pleasure may have an especially important role in the value of experience. (Deijl 2018: 1787).

However, I do not claim that pleasure is the *only* thing that we are looking for in fictional works of art. As I already said, I agree with Smuts' claim that they can also make our lives more worth living, in particular by putting us in a position to experientially grasp important aspects of reality. Thus, I do not "focus on just one valuable feature" of our interactions with fictions. Moreover, to the objection that pleasure cannot be the only part of the story when it comes to explaining why people go to the movies, to the theater, read novels, or listen to music because this factor is not sufficient to explain why, for instance, we choose to see a certain movie rather than another, or to read certain genres of books rather than others, it can be replied that: 1) we can take more pleasure in certain (genre of) fictions than others; 2) our motivation to watch certain movies or to read books rather than others can be easily explained by the fact that we want to experience certain fictional situations more than others—i.e. in terms of desire satisfaction.

Hence, these different objections do not refute the thesis I defend about how to solve the paradox of horror and tragedy: we intentionally expose ourselves to fictional situations that we (rightly or falsely) take to be likely to elicit emotions, such as fear or sadness, that we usually do not want nor like to experience when they are elicited by non-fictional situations because these emotions, when they are fiction-directed are pleasant and, being so, contribute to our wellbeing. What makes them prudentially valuable is that: 1) they enable us to *live* (rather than simply *know*), without putting ourselves at risk, fictional situations we have chosen to live by choosing to be exposed to the fictional works that show or describe them; 2) they are enjoyable in themselves, as emotions, in particular because, once again, our experiencing them, whatever they are, is not associated when they are fiction-directed, to actual or potential risks. This is what makes emotions of fear or sadness sparked off by fictional works, and directed to them, contributing to enhancing the worth of our lives *and* our wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

I mentioned a few times in the course of this thesis one emotion that may be an exception—namely, disgust. To conclude, I would like to say a few things about this emotion that maybe makes the paradox of horror different from the paradox of tragedy—if it is admitted that disgust is central to horror but not to tragedy.

Can it be pleasant to be experience fiction-directed disgust while it is clearly not pleasant to experience reality-directed disgust? And can it be rational to expose ourselves to fictions that elicit this emotion?

What goes for other supposedly negative fiction-directed emotions such as fear, sadness or pity does not seem to go for disgust. It seems that experiencing disgust by reading, hearing or seeing certain fictional things is intrinsically deeply unpleasant even if no potential or actual harms or risks are associated with experiencing this emotion. There is then a distinctive “paradox of disgust: how can such an unpleasant emotion contribute in any way to pleasurable aesthetic experiences” (Robinson 2014: 65), which would make it rational to expose ourselves to fictions that give rise to this emotion?

Undoubtedly, some people do not find disgusting certain things that some other people clearly do. Some people can take pleasure in seeing things that some other people find intolerably disgusting. But it seems that what is going on in such cases is that the former people are not *disgusted* by what provokes disgust in the latter. This makes it possible for the former to take pleasure in seeing the things in question.

This is not, however, a counterexample to the claim that experiencing disgust, whether reality-directed or fiction-directed, is always, in itself, deeply unpleasant. Then, contrary to other emotions that can all be good to feel in themselves when fiction-directed, it seems that we do not, and cannot want to experience the emotion of disgust *in itself*. In this sense, contrary to all other “negative emotions”, disgust only can be said to have a negative valence. I then agree with Robinson when she claims that

to the extent that disgusting artworks are disgusting, they cannot be sources of pleasure, because the characteristic elicitors of disgust and feelings of disgust are deeply unpleasant. For the same reason, disgust cannot convert into an ‘aesthetic attraction’ or change its valence. (Robinson 2014: 56).

This raises two questions: how to explain this difference between disgust and all other emotions? How to explain that some people seem to look for movies (e.g. “Saw”) or literary fictions (e.g. Baudelaire’s “Une charogne”, which is about a decaying body¹⁴) that will give rise to this emotion? I won’t try to answer the first question here, and shall simply mention some potential answers to the second:

(1) people who desire and enjoy experiencing disgust, whether reality-directed or fiction-directed, are incoherent and irrational;

(2) disgust can be “outweighed by the satisfaction we take in being the sort of person who can endure disgust” (Robinson 2014: 68).

(3) disgust can elicit in us an emotion of “fascination”, and can make us experience the emotion of sublime (*ibid*).

(4) we are looking for fiction-directed disgust as a *way* for us to be (particularly) afraid of fictional states of affairs; and being so afraid is in itself pleasant, as I have argued.¹⁵

Under these four views, disgust is in itself unpleasant and is not converted into something pleasant. The unpleasantness of disgust is rather compensated, under (2), (3), and (4), by something pleasant or valuable this emotion can generate.

¹⁴ “Rappelez-vous l’objet que nous vîmes, mon âme,
Ce beau matin d’été si doux :
Au détour d’un sentier une charogne infâme
Sur un lit semé de cailloux, [...]
Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe
Comme une fleur s’épanouir.
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l’herbe
Vous crûtes vous évanouir.
Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,
D’où sortaient de noirs bataillons
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide
Le long de ces vivants haillons.” (« Une Charogne », Charles Baudelaire)

¹⁵ In line with this fourth answer—which I favour—, Carroll takes horror to be “a mixture of disgust and fear”, as Robinson remarks (2014: 58).

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