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Balint, Katalin; Tan, Ed

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Katalin E. Bálint

Department of Communication Science, VU Amsterdam

Ed S. Tan

ASCOR, University of Amsterdam

12. Absorbed Character Engagement: From Social Cognition Responses to the Experience of Fictional Constructions

Katalin Bálint & Ed S. Tan

> "…there's a part of you that…you've grown accustomed to not sharing with other people. It's a very private, intimate personal aspect of yourself, and then all of a sudden you see it reflected in something other than yourself. A sense of acknowledgement, that you're being acknowledged. That's why I call it positive. It's an affirmation that the ideas you have, the emotions you have, aren't yours alone; they're things that are found in others that you can share. That's what I got from this film."
>
> - Participant 18 on Bergman's *Winter Light* (1963)

Absorbed character engagement – a special case of character engagement – is a deeply personal, complex and meaningful experience leaving viewers and readers with a profound impact on the self, illustrated by the quote above. This chapter explores how absorbed character engagement comes about and what psychological processes and phenomenological experiences are reflected in it. To this end, we conducted interviews on absorbed film and literary experiences and analyzed them in light of concepts of character engagement developed in cognitive film studies. This phenomenological-empirical approach is not that common in cognitive film studies. Being mostly concerned with neurological and psychological mechanisms the phenomenology of character engagement tends to suffer some undertheorizing. To address this gap, we consider first-person experiences in more depth than usual in cognitive film studies. This study explores how fictional characters appear in the narrative experience, and what personal meanings are attributed to them by audience members.

Mind and Person Perception in Character Engagement

Fictional characters have been conceptualized as narrative constructions in the text, or as mental constructions in the audience.[1] This latter approach states that characters are *imaginary human beings* having mental states and stable traits that are constructed mentally by audience members from signs in fictional texts. Following this latter *mimetic assumption*, research on character engagement borrowed much from social cognition, the field in social psychology studying how people make sense of others and themselves in the real social world.[2] Two major social cognition research strands are relevant for character engagement: *person perception* and *mind perception*.[3]

Person perception in character engagement is a dynamic process in which narrative information cues mental schemas in audiences. The idea of character engagement as person perception was expressed in work by Dolf Zillmann, Murray Smith, Carl Plantinga and Ed Tan.[4] These authors describe character engagement as a largely automated process involving spontaneous perception and comprehension of social information. Viewers' and readers' impressions of characters are guided by characters' physical appearance, non-verbal communication and observable behavior. These features implicitly activate previously stored mental representations of social situations. Prototypical narrative situations or genre related expectations are more likely to activate schematic representations of character types or standardized character constellations (e.g., the villain, the victim, the lover).[5] When a character stereotype is activated it leads to very quick, automatic moral judgements and emotions towards others. Zillmann's theory of involvement in drama stressed the importance of automatic schema-based moral appraisal of characters in viewers' sympathy or antipathy.[6]

Writers and directors try to influence these person perception processes through *characterization*: the narrative technique through which character-related information (traits,

properties, motivations) are made salient.[7] Characterization leads audience members to perceive similarities with characters in terms of superficial features (e.g., age, gender, occupation), and prompts instant moral judgements or feelings of sympathy, worry, pity, or even counter-empathy.[8] Fast and implicit evaluations of p*erceived similarity* with characters were shown to be an important factor in effects of character engagement on audiences.[9]

Besides top-down schema based person perception, bottom-up information processes have also been identified in character engagement.[10] The latter processes are the concern of *mind perception*. Mind perception research builds on person perception, but narrows its focus to how people make inferences about the *mental states* in others' minds.[11] The significance of mind perception in character engagement is recognized in work by Oatley and Mar, Grodal, and Tan, and strongly implied by Murray Smith and Plantinga.[12] In these theories we have identified two conceptualizations of how viewers and readers grasp mental states in character engagement. Following already existing terminology, we label the cognitive route *mind modelling*, and the visceral route *embodied simulation*.[13]

Mind modelling refers to the cognitive process through which people infer mental states in others and self. Exploiting the mimetic assumption and models of Theory of Mind, several researchers in cognitive film studies have assumed that observing situations and inferring mental states in fictional characters is a dominant mechanism underlying the experience of character engagement.[14] This direction of inquiry was already set out in Zillman's seminal papers, in which he introduced *empathy as* an explanatory psychological mechanism for the intense emotions people experience when receiving fictional stories.[15]

Mind modelling processes are strongly implied in the work of Murray Smith, which has viewers recognizing fictional characters as real persons.[16] Due to narrative procedures, such as

spatio-temporal attachment that regulates the range and depth of character-related information, viewers understand characters' minds – i.e., "what they know and feel."[17] Based on this knowledge of feelings and intentions, viewers morally evaluate the character, which creates allegiance. Mind modelling of characters has also been regarded the basis of audiences' emotions. Obviously, characters are engaging through the emotions to which they give rise. For example, in Plantinga's treatment of filmic emotion as "concerned-based construals," feelings such as pity, fear, compassion, etc. emerge from spectators' appraisal of a narrative event with regard to characters' goals and desires.[18]

Mind modelling most emphatically underlies *emotional simulation* – described by Oatley and Mar and also by Murray Smith as a set of operations through which viewers imaginatively project themselves into the situation of characters.[19] The most complex emotional simulations drawing heavily on mind modelling can be explicit, voluntary and involve reasoning about characters to explain unobservable mental states. Embodied simulation can but do not have to be part of this process.[20] The most complex simulations were scarcely dealt with in the literature of person perception. However, recently they have been referred to as *enactment* by Goldman, and *wondering why* by Malle.[21]

Several authors proposed that besides mind modelling, audience members' may come to grasp the inner world of a protagonist by viscerally simulating it.[22] While mind modelling is considered to be a willful process, embodied simulation of characters' minds is considered to be an effortless, automatic, and fast involuntary affective process. It involves *affective and motor mimicry*, and *emotional contagion*.[23] As opposed to the cognitively driven mind modelling, embodied simulation has its support in interoceptive, viscerally-driven synthesis of bodily sensations.[24] The concept of embodied simulation is based on the identification of neuronal

mirror systems that are activated both in observing and performing a motor action. Inspired by these findings, Gallese and colleagues designated the brain areas for emotional mirroring, that are more than likely the bases for our strong involuntary emotional reactions to fictional characters.[25]

The processes of person and mind perception are important and well-defined building blocks of engagement with fictional characters. While describing underlying implicit psychological mechanisms, they can in no way capture *what it is like to be engaged* with a fictional character or what makes absorbed character engagement experiences as impactful and memorable as they are. Tackling these issues requires introducing the phenomenology of character engagement into the equation.

Phenomenology of Character Engagement: Experimental Method & Results

We conducted a qualitative interview study with twenty-five English-speaking participants (12 female) from the area of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, ages 21 to 72 ($M = 36.1$ $SD = 11.7$), from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Fifty-two percent of the sample reported formal education in literary, film or media studies at a postgraduate level. We recruited participants who most likely experience character engagement, and could provide in-depth descriptions of their experiences with fictional narratives. Each participated in two individual in-depth interview sessions conducted by the first author in English. Prior to this, participants were asked to list their ten "most engaging" story experiences. The first session explored the experience with a book or film story they found the most memorable/intense, and a story with which they had the most difficult experience. Several open-ended questions were asked. The most important were: *What happened to you while you were reading/ watching this story? What*

was in your mind, body, whatever when you watched this film/ read this story? What did you feel,

think? During the second interview, participants watched or read and discussed two participant-

selected story excerpts. Interviewees gave informed consent, were debriefed and paid 30 euros

for their contribution. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

The interview analysis was guided by a theory-driven category system consisting of the

categories *person perception, mind modelling*, and *embodied simulation*. Units that contained

any reference to character engagement were selected and assigned to categories. This systematic

thematic analysis served as a basis for the qualitative analysis of the data.

i. Person perception

Fast, implicit schema-based person perception, comparison and evaluation of characters were not

prevalent in the interviews. Moral evaluations were much less immediate and frequent than could

be expected by Zillman's notion of audience members as moral evaluators in mind.[26] Evaluation

of aesthetics and likeability of characters were the more common responses.

Evaluative person perception often co-occurred with mind perception processes. For

example, saying at the same time that the protagonist is "pretty" and "vain" (as P16 did) implies

recognition of a character feature intermingled with a moral judgement. More profound

evaluations were found in the wake of modelling characters' minds and feelings:

[1] They were very likeable characters and they had a lot of substance. (P5)

[2] She was definitely the warmest of the characters and the most interesting of the
characters. (P15)

ii. The pleasure of mind modelling

On the other hand, mind modelling was very common in the interviews. Mind modelling of characters was not only functional and limited – employed in order to build a representation of characters' mental states sufficient to follow the story. Rather, participants were keen on elaborating protagonists' inner worlds at depth, without having been prompted in any way:

[3]   It's a very private moment and very personal between the two of them and neither of them feel really comfortable talking about it, but here they are talking about it. (P6)

Also, explorations of complex protagonist emotions beyond narrative requirements were found:

[4]   What this shows for me is that what she was trapping inside was just massive, so massive that it physically weakened her when she released it…Christian falls apart because the love of his life has gone and now he knows what true love is like because it's gone and he is sad. But he's also angry, he feels betrayed. (P7)

[5]   Just maybe breaking down himself. Because he has to explain why he's come back and he finds himself talking about his whole life so it must be quite hard for anyone to do that obviously. (P17)

The following is an example of what Malle called the most encompassing attempt to understand a person's feelings: *wondering why.*[27] P16 tried to explain feelings using counterfactual reasoning, an act going way beyond story comprehension and the immediate experience of the given fictional world.

[6]   What could have been different in his life that he didn't have to be bitter, that he didn't have to become so bitter and angry? (P16)

To conclude, the interviews suggest that absorbed moments of character engagement seem to emerge not from type-driven perception but rather from the bottom-up process of mind

modelling. It seems that absorbed moments of character engagement occur when viewers and readers intensely exercise mind modelling not only to comprehend the structure of the narrative, but to explore the depth and complexity of protagonists' emotions, seek for conflict in characters' emotions, and to engage in interpretation driven by curiosity about the background of the character's actions and feelings.

iii. Enforced access to characters' subjectivity

The interviews unearthed an experiential component of mind modelling that has not been extensively described yet, viz. enforced access to characters' subjectivity:

[7]   It makes you feel sympathetic to basically a child molester. (P21)

[8]   And so as much as I didn't want to kind of see the world through Rob's eyes, because that means I would also have to take on those, that vulnerability, it was just inevitable.

Enforced access to characters' subjectivity can be linked to Murray Smith's notion of subjective access to characters' minds. Its degree depends on the amount of information conveyed through narrative procedures. Remarkably, interviewees reflected on their unwanted responses and – due to the narrative's control – reported a sense of the narrative's enforcing the perspective of a character upon them, eliciting reluctance to model their mind. Yet, such an enforced and unwanted mind modelling response seems to contribute to moments of absorbed character engagement. One possible explanation is that participants practice *moral disengagement*, a set of strategies aiming to preserve sympathy for a morally ambiguous character.[28] We will go into this in the discussion.

iv. Self-character comparison

As said, person perception processes were less characteristic; however, interviewees did make comparisons, and perceived similarities with the characters. Similarity was not just perceived or implicitly comprehended using person schemas as the person perception theories would have it; rather it was construed in an explicit comparison of character and self.

> [9]　His humor was definitely the kind of humor I would use. (P5)
>
> [10]　And there are some huge differences between how I live my life and the life of the characters in the book. (P19)

And so were specific events in the participant's life:

> [11]　The first time I read the book would have been five years after we'd moved to the Netherlands, so I also knew what it was like to move with your young children to a foreign country. (P15)

Participants reflected in wonder about immediate perceptions of similarity. Such reflection could wind up in the realization that they were part in a universal experience:

> [12]　It was not relatable, in that I'm not rich, I'm not from England I'm not like these people and I didn't grow up in 1935 but regardless we all go through puberty and we all still go through some experience that we feel like we wish we could take back. (P16)

In other cases, audience members in the comparison enacted distance from a character asking themselves "what would I do:"

> [13]　…If it was a 10-year-old me, I have no idea what they were so I doubt I would have run away. I mean it's frightening, I guess she is quite frightened. (P10)
>
> [14]　Afterwards he doesn't explain it to anyone and he doesn't let on his real feelings, he

just swallows it up again with him, so he can't express himself before or after, this is the only way he can express himself is by basically destroying the house that he built for him and Vera Miles as he hoped…Maybe if I was him I would have explained things to Vera Miles, maybe you know a bit different. (P17)

This participant distanced herself, and at the same time sympathized with the character. The self-character distinction here seems to lead to both positive and negative feelings, but the experience is richer than an awareness of two opposite responses. Engagement here hinges on a construal of tragic dilemma ("so he can't"; "the only way").

Participants also hinted at *perceiving dissimilarity* with, or even a *sense of detachment* from the character. For example, a participant felt extremely similar to the protagonist in the first part of the book, while in the second part the protagonist acted in an unexpected way eliciting strong sense of dissimilarity, detachment and resistance to mind modelling:

[15] You never understand what her thought process is, having gone from being attacked, to finding something attractive in this man, enough that she wanted to forgive him and then start a relationship with him. I think I sort of felt like I had taken a step away from the story and I couldn't really relate to what she was going through anymore because I'd never had anything like that happen to me. (P12)

Going beyond affective reactions to physical features readers and viewers may take the characters' mindset and worldview as a starting point for a *wished similarity*:

[16] He doesn't really let many things affect him, he's very relaxed for the most part. And so, kind of whenever I read a Scot Pilgrim book I usually come out feeling very relaxed too, I can deal with this stuff, crack a joke and just keep going. (P19)

The engaging experience seems to consist of enactment of feelings and behavior, rather than just

recognizing them as desirable.

These absorbed moments of character engagement largely involve self-referencing of character related information, for example through comparison with one's own personal life experiences, or with hidden parts of the self. Self-referencing, perceived similarity, and personal relevance have been thoroughly discussed in communication research, however, only as a function of or a means to memory, learning and persuasion. A novelty is that our interviews illustrate how self-referencing can bring about extraordinary and profound emotional connections with characters.

v. Self-character merging

Mind modelling, surprisingly, co-occurred with sensations of self-character merging. In cognitive film theory mind modelling responses are associated with clear boundaries of selves, and non-isomorphic feelings, that are complementing the character's feeling but not identical with them.[29] The following instance illustrates that narratives can facilitate clearly isomorphic experiences with characters through mind modelling. Participant 22 was reading the novel *Austerlitz* (2001), in which the protagonist comes to realize that his parents adopted him to save his life during the Second World War. She relates her understanding of the character's situation and then links the obtained insights to her feelings:

[17] So, it's almost like transference, where you place what's happening to the main character on yourself and you start to feel what they're feeling. Physically I felt almost as if I was just as disturbed as the main character in the book with how these things were being revealed. I felt like I was experiencing it with him. (P22)

Isomorphic compassionate feeling can be *extrapolated to the actual self* of audiences:

[18] I'm very tied to the character and so I fear for him. I know he's doomed and I fear for
       myself because of, I'm just scared of reality a little bit now. I'm just scared by that
       scene. (P19)

Some interviewees also wondered about their extrapolation of protagonist feelings to
their own lives, noting it as "weird":

[19] I've often had that sometimes where if you're reading a book and the character starts
       to fail a little bit, things in your life start to unravel or maybe you just start to see the
       failings in your life and make them more significant. But it's weird sometimes the
       connections that you feel with the character and how they impact your own existence.
       (P24)

The complexity of and affect in such a merging with the self seems to justify the label of
character engagement.

The quotes above illustrate absorbed character engagement's linkage to transgressing
self-character boundaries. It reminds us of media psychologist Cohen's notion of *identification*,
which involves a loss of the distinction between the audience's self and the character,
internalization of the character's perspective, emotions and motivations, and experiencing
isomorphic mental states.[30] Identification is a reliable predictor of media enjoyment.

Another novel finding is that experienced merging of self and character can evoke
disconcerting feelings:

[20] As a kid I had nightmares and I'd run to my parents all the time. And so even the
       setup I'm really kind of identifying with the guy who's had the dream, how he's
       embarrassed about it. To the fact I even wonder like does he kind of look like me in
       some ways, like when I shave can I have that weird little aftershave thing? But then

he has really thick eyebrows, no, he's a different guy for sure. (P19)

As we see, identification gave rise to *distancing* when experienced as too much. P19's identification with a protagonist in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) gave way to differentiation, yet the process was described as engaging. It can be assumed that this ambivalent reaction is characteristic for identification with vulnerable or "doomed" characters. We believe that distancing as part of engagement with a character needs to be differentiated from detachment, and also from Zillmann's counter-empathy which is typically coupled with anger or indifference.[31]

It seems that oscillations between proximity, identification and distancing can lead to absorbing moments of character engagement.

vi. Embodied simulation

Many utterances illustrated the embodied nature of film viewing. However, these were less connected to character engagement, rather to a general absorption experience, therefore we discuss them elsewhere.[32] Embodied simulation was less often reflected in the interviews than mind modelling. However, it went invariably with high absorption and intimacy moments of character engagement. In line with the literature, embodied simulation and isomorphic feelings were closely associated; there was no instance where embodied simulation led to non-isomorphic feelings. Embodied simulation was mostly reported in association with high intensity feeling in the character:

[21] You can almost hear his heart beating so fast and she's coming and standing next to him, sitting next to him, kind of flirting a little bit, brushing against his body and the mother is around. And you're kind of there with him, you know, almost your heart's

pounding at that, at that kind of fear and danger and, I guess titillation. (P21)

[22] It sort of made me feel really defensive like I think I probably even like curled up a little bit and was just sort of a bit protective of myself even. (P12)

Other embodied simulations were part of straight cognitive construal of the character's mind. Social cognitive theory explains the mechanism of mimicry or mirroring, and how it manifests in a measurable response, but leaves what it is like to simulate for the reader or viewer out of consideration. Quotes 23 and 24 illustrate the difference between a *description* of embodied simulation *responses* theorized in social cognition literature and the *experience* of embodied simulation:

[23] In one way, it makes me feel really sad because he's just realized that his parents aren't his parents, and he's telling it in such a way that you're experiencing it with him, you're experiencing it in the exact same way that he did, which was not expecting it at all. It's definitely the posture is down but it's also something inside here, sort of in my chest, again it just feels really heavy and I feel like my eyes are not as open as they were, they're sort of half-closed and there's, there's a heaviness in my head as well, yeah, in my brain maybe, I don't know, that's what it feels like. (P22)

The experience report on a response of mimicry or emotional contagion likewise enables us to capture what is engaging in what is actually an automated embodied simulation:

[24] The emotional reaction that I had was one of not relief but just an up-roaring of emotion in general, when someone else is able to pour their feelings out, I think the natural response is to pour your own, in the same way when you're in a room and someone is crying, your immediate response is not necessarily to cry with them but at least to feel as sad as they do. (P7)

Experiences of embodied simulation make for a peculiar intimacy and connection that is lacking in the theory of mimicry or contagion responses. Note also the elaboration of the feeling by differentiation ("not of relief") and generalisation ("in the same way when…").

Embodied character simulation seemed to be of higher intensity than embodied simulation of people in the real social world:

[25] You share that emotion with him I think. So, it's a very direct experience. (P6)

[26] I felt the excitement the boy was feeling and I was wishing I could be there and wishing it was real. You're breathing with them and you're just getting really excited, I think I felt what the characters were feeling so to speak. (P5)

The participant appeared throughout to be aware that her experiences were elicited by a fictional character ("I was wishing"), also that they were uncommon, note-worthily intense and special ("really excited").

Finally, the filmmakers' intention was also an object of embodied simulation:

[27] I think it was absolutely deliberate in this case, they wanted you to feel more emotionally attached to the character, while you watched her wither and die but it definitely makes you feel more connected and more empathetic to what's going on with her. (P7)

vii. Parasocial relations to characters

A considerable amount of utterances fitted neither person nor mind perception categories, but expressed a quality of the character engagement experience that has been left untheorized in cognitive film studies, namely a quasi-interaction with the fictional character. Following media psychologist David Giles' terminology, we labelled them *parasocial interactions (PSI)* with

characters.[33] PSI as the name implies refers to the tendency audiences have to actually interact with figures that only exist in the media. Broad notions of viewers' taking interaction for real taps important dimensions of what it is like to be, or be with a character. Audience members engage in feelings of real companionship and real behaviors, such as addressing the media figure directly. Importantly, PSI's conception of character engagement explicitly acknowledges the fictional nature of characters setting them apart from real people.[34] Also in this respect it is a unique approach in social cognition.

We found a great deal of PSI in the interviews, where participants referred to characters as quasi-real friends:

[28] It sounded like the narrator needed a friend to talk to and I was happy to sit there and listen to the story. (P16)

[29] Well she's starting to develop as a person I'd be interested in meeting. (P20)

Parasociality was also visible in the connection construed with the author:

[30] I felt the book was empathizing with me. (P21)

Negatively valanced PSI were also expressed, for example tendencies to avoid a character:

[31] I feel that he's not something I would want to meet. (P16)

In line with the PSI paradigm, strong compassionate feelings seemed to co-occur with PSI and participatory responses:

[32] I'm feeling more sympathetic, I'm feeling almost pity for him at this point, like oh, you shouldn't be doing this, like I feel bad like he's put himself through hell. Why doesn't he go around first, like the guy's obviously terrified of this? Why doesn't the therapist check it out first, why doesn't he say "Stop, you don't need to do this?" (P19)

On the other hand, PSI can have negative valence (e.g., irritation, antipathy), and were typically expressed through direct address of the characters:

[33] Really!? I think I even said it out loud, and I was like oh, how could you start something with a man who just attacked you? (P12)

[34] On the one hand, some degree of empathy, on the other hand, it was sort of, "My god woman, didn't you see this coming?" On the one hand, impatience, once again, you want to shake her up and say, "Why don't you go and lead a life that suits you instead of having other people decide who you should marry and then where you should go, how you should live." (P20)

The next quote is a uniquely telling example of a PSI. The interviewee felt responsible for the character, and at the same time realizing that she is unable to influence the course of fictional events. The felt disablement of one's tendency to act as one would in real social situations was often seen in reactions to protagonists.

[35] There's also this feeling that I want to like pull her aside and talk to her, you know that I want to stop her ahead of time, I want to say, kid, you don't know what's going on. I feel a little sense of like responsibility for her because there doesn't seem to be that adult around to guide her. (P16)

The example also illustrates explicit reflection on possibly automated emotional tendencies to protect and take care of persons, dealing with the fictionality of the story-world, the characters, and one's relations with them.

Contrary to theoretical considerations of disabled action tendencies creating a safe fictional place for viewers, the next example shows that the moral sense of responsibility can militate against comfortable contemplation.[35]

[36] Suddenly something tragic is happening to someone you care about and there's a reason you should be watching this because you are sucked in, as soon as you see her cough up that bit of blood…You're just sort of a passive observer, but you want to catch her when she falls down the stairs. (P07)

A PSI-like relationship with a fictional character can be as strong as to give rise to feelings of separation and loss at the end of a story, as one would feel when parting ways with real persons:

[37] It's like you've said farewell to someone…When [do] you see him again? It's gone what you shared, a sense of closure because you've grown so personal, you've had such a personal connection with the character, it's touched you and affected you in so many ways, it's finished, but you're still here, but the work is, you say farewell in a way. It leaves you with you can call it a sense of loss. (P18)

[38] It was just that feeling of loss, that you miss out on knowing what was happening in these people's lives and how things were ended and how things were going. (P15)

The opposite is the experience of a *prolonged connection* with the protagonist:

[39] I have been in relationships where I've felt like Christian and I've been in ones where I did not, and the ones that I did not, well actually in both cases I regularly thought of *Moulin Rouge* and I like, I'm either like him or I'm not like him and I'm happy or unhappy, when I am or not like him. (P07)

[40] I used to have dreams about Seymour Glass. (P21)

[41] You go through like the rest of the day in some cases almost adapting your behavior to the behavior that you've read in the book, which I found I've done or stealing phrases or something along those lines. (P24)

The most profound moments of character engagement were associated with referencing to deeper layers of the self in a PSI context. Two examples illustrate how the construal of similarity helps to psychologically affirm the self:

[42] It's a very private, intimate personal aspect of yourself and then all of a sudden you see it reflected in something other than yourself. A sense of acknowledgement, it's an affirmation that the ideas you have, the emotions you have aren't yours alone they're things that are found in others that you can share. (P18)

[43] There's something really satisfying about discovering that some of the feelings I've had or have, are not after all unique to me, others have had them too, others have written about them, others have undergone similar things. So, that already sort of breaks the barrier of loneliness, nobody would understand me, well suddenly here is somebody who doesn't know, but has written something that very much reflects where I am…And that makes me less alone in how I have felt about certain things. (P20)

Discussion of Results

This study explored how concepts of character engagement in film and media studies are reflected in actual viewers' and readers' absorbed moments of character engagement. The discussion singles out three overarching themes that add to the current theories on the subject: *dynamics*, *complexity*, and *awareness of fictionality and of the self*.

i. Character Engagement is a Dynamic Experience

The interview analysis highlighted the dynamic nature of character engagement at least in two

regards. First, participants related oscillations of attachment with and detachment from the protagonist. It suggests that emotional proximity to protagonists is constantly regulated to maintain an *optimal distance*.[36] Relatedly, character engagement was found to involve both attachment and detachment, with detachment being an active process that differs from disengagement. Current theories elucidate on the mechanisms of engagement with fictional characters, but provide a limited insight into mechanisms of disengagement. Character engagement seems to involve dynamic degrees of connectedness across the experience. The interviews also showed audience members hovering between isomorphic and non-isomorphic feelings towards the protagonist. This finding suggests that theories may be in need of acknowledging discrete transitions between these response types. Moreover, it seems that at any moment both types may also occur together.

ii. Character Engagement is a Complex Experience

Audience members' understanding of what goes on in the mind of characters occurred at different levels of complexity, ranging from schema based comprehension of the character's mental state, to complete explanations of the reasons of behaviors and feeling. We argue that it is the more complex levels of understanding that make for engaged experiences, because they involve considerable constructive investments from the viewer or reader. The following assertions illustrate the observed complexity of social cognition in character engagement.

1. Character Engagement Integrates the Outputs of Psychological Mechanisms into

Complex Experience

There was a remarkable variety of feelings associated with mind modelling of characters. Notably, we found not only compassionate understanding, but also cognitive appraisals that were

the basis of irritation or schadenfreude. The experience of mind modelling seemed to integrate the outcomes of processes that have been represented in causal models of social cognition as separate or even conflicting responses to other persons. In engaged experiences, schema-driven comprehension of characters, perceived similarity, and wishful identification were amalgamated, to the point of representing one multifaceted and integrated character construal. In addition, each of these qualities was not just implicitly perceived or felt, but subject to conscious elaboration. For instance, moral judgements were expressed in an explicit and argumentative fashion much more than Zillmann's implicit moralist would be capable to do.[37] Finally, mind modelling and evaluation were intimately associated. Participants found justification of evaluations in their understanding of characters' intentions.

2. Character Engagement Involves Explicit Reflections on Implicit Mechanisms

Mind modelling of characters involved explicit reflection. For instance, similarity with characters was not just perceived as the relevant social cognition concepts would have it. Rather, participants engaged in an explicit "mind matching" process comparing their mental models of characters' minds and behavior to their already existing beliefs on the self and human interactions. In other worlds, participants often contemplated how they used to/would behave or feel in similar situations, which contemplation may require much more complex interpretations. In absorbed character engagement, it may be these reflections that count, and the readily-perceived similarity, such as demographic similarity, is of a lesser role. Embodied simulation seemed to facilitate particularly intense feelings with characters, contributing to engagement. Interestingly, participants reflected on their embodied simulation – a response that, according to the literature, is implicit and automatic, cf. the mimicry concept. This reflection adds to a complexity going considerably beyond that of the experience of the actual response.

3. Character Engagement Involves Negotiation

Another emerging complexity of character engagement is the viewer's or reader's felt agency in the communication with the narrator. As in quote 7 and 8, participants expressed a sense of being forced into followed by a reluctance to mind modelling a character. They felt that this was an undesirable act; still they could not help but envision the character's mental state. These instances suggest that character engagement is not all about comfortably going along with characters' inner worlds, but one's own responses and feelings may feel as imposed on the self by the narrative. We discussed the experience of being forced from a pragmatic linguistic perspective elsewhere.[38] Here we consider readers' or viewers' reluctance in relation to their moral considerations. Raney has amended Zillmann's social cognition model of sympathy for protagonists based on favorable moral evaluations.[39] He proposed strategies that recipients can use to maintain their sympathy with immoral protagonists, like ameliorative relabeling of inhumane conduct, displacement of responsibility, blaming the victim, and the like. Empirical support for the effectiveness of strategies was found in various studies.[40] It was also shown that moral disengagement may be pleasurable in itself.[41] Participants' reports of reluctance elucidates that a narrative's suggestions to engage with a condemnable character calls forth explicit and conscious *negotiations* on the part of the recipient on whether or not to quit the story. The accounts showed that interviewees not only continued but found the experience engaging and even considered the materials as their favorite narrative. Obviously, research is needed to clarify how they went about the decision, but we propose that some weighing was necessary of the costs and benefits of going along vs. stepping out. This study shows that the outcome of negotiation is not always an attachment-based engagement, but can be a *detachment-based engagement* as well.

iii. Awareness of Fictionality of Characters

It seems that the awareness of fictionality of characters is an important component of absorbed engagement. The emerging theme of fictionality has been seriously underexposed in social cognitive theory. Throughout the interviews, these relationships were experienced as special or peculiar, and we propose that implicit references were made to the fictional nature of stories, characters and relations. The unusual nature, intensity, authenticity, etc. of characters' minds and feelings is implicitly compared, we argue, with real persons in social life as the standard. The responses studied in social cognitive research cannot account for this feature, because they refer to real persons in real interactions. Media-psychological research makes up for this shortcoming by taking variables such as *perceived* realism into the equation. However, the outcomes of these studies harness the fictionality of relations as explicitly dealt with in the experience of character. Fictionality of characters and interaction with them seems part of the challenges that participants deal with when they attempt to get everything out of a character experience that is in it. The parasocial interaction (PSI) paradigm is a major exception to the limitations of social cognitive theory, because its starting point is that characters are fictional. This study adds to this account a consideration of ambiguities struggled with and other efforts delivered in the constructive act that reading or watching fictional characters gives rise to.

iv. Awareness of Self and Parasocial Relations

Finally, we would like to characterize character engagement *grosso modo* as an experience of a meaningful connection between the viewers' or reader's self and a fictional human-like being. Mind modelling of characters seemed to infuse personal lives, values, attitudes and other

elements of selfhood into the experience. Needs of the self have, to some extent, been studied in so-called uses and gratifications (U&G) research. However, audience members' selves have come to the fore a great deal more pronounced than possible in social cognitive accounts of character engagement.[42] Character engagement appears to be self-conscious; comparison and negotiation may be important ingredients serving certain psychological needs. However, U&G research assumes that needs and gratifications may or may not be conscious to media users.

This study could capture the richness of one of these needs that is *self-affirmation*. Engaging with a character can elicit explicit feelings of belonging and a sense of validation and acknowledgement. Character engagement and related mind modelling processes were theorized as a one-directional process from audience members towards characters. Our finding shows, however, that at a phenomenological level, a reverse direction and feeling of being "empathized by the character" (P21) can be experienced. In a broader perspective, these self-affirmative feelings may help to understand the therapeutic effects of narratives.

This study elucidated the temporal and prolonged nature of character engagement, an important aspect that is difficult to capture by social cognitive theory. The *sense of loss of a character* reflected on feelings of separation upon finishing a fictional story, which elucidates the emotional significance fictional characters may have in audience members lives. A closely related phenomenon, so called parasocial break up, has been already investigated in quantitative studies in relation to TV show characters.[43] Our finding shows that this response emerges even when it is not prompted with a questionnaire. We noted a *sense of prolonged mental connection* with the character pointing at an internalized connection with the protagonist that does not need the input from the story to be maintained.

The occurrence of parasocial responses was so frequent as to call for a thorough

reconsideration of the psychological processes considered in cognitive film theory. We propose that the PSI framework can serve as a good starting point for this.

Limitations & Conclusions

This study analyzed recollections of experiences, and we can only assume likeness of reconstructions to the original experience. It cannot be excluded that identified enrichments of current theoretical concepts are elaborations in retrospect. However, even if this were the case, we argue that recipients must have had inklings during actual reception, possibly characterizable as the "feeling of" (e.g., understanding the author, wanting to criticize the character, etc.). This "feeling of" need not be any crystallized understanding or experience. Because it is impossible to separate original reception from post hoc considerations, we took the reports seriously as reflecting both explicit experiences and implicit traces of processes ("feelings of"). In opposition to implicit psychological mechanisms, the experience of character engagement continues beyond immediate reception. This is why re-experiences and even additional constructions need to be taken seriously as phenomenological data.

Furthermore, we did not submit the data to a separate analysis on the media specificity of character engagement. One reason for this was the lack of perceived dominant difference in responses to characters across media formats. We assume that a tailored media comparative study could elucidate the topic. Additionally, we used a purposive sampling ending up with highly educated and articulate interviewees with a sophisticated taste. The generalizability of our findings could be only confirmed by a larger scale quantitative study. Finally, our study cannot link audience responses to certain formal and content features in the narrative. A qualitative approach does not allow for that, but this could be a goal for an experimental study.

In this study, we were particularly interested in absorbed moments of character engagement – i.e., memorable and impactful experiences. Mind modelling and embodied simulation of fictional characters are important psychological mechanisms supporting this constructive process, however, character engagement is more than the sum of mechanism-driven psychological responses to characters. Rather, explicit reflections on these mechanisms are an integral part of the experience.

Absorbed character engagement is associated with high level of access to characters' subjectivity. This deep access, however, must be a result of a playfully stimulated mind modelling exercise, or a highly intense embodied simulation process, as in contrast to automated perception and schematic cognition of characters. Characteristic to the absorbed moments of character engagement is that the construction of this high level of subjective access to characters is intertwined with enhanced self-referencing. The emerging representation of the character is therefore as quasi-interpersonal as it is personally meaningful. Absorbed moments of character engagement are prolonged, agentive and motivated to seek depth and personally important meaning in characters in order to arrive at a most satisfactory comprehension, feeling and appreciation – satisfactory, in regard to audience members' personal needs, as well as to the depth of characterization in the narrative.

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[2] Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2016).

[3] Nicholas Epley and Adam Waytz, "Mind Perception," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, 5th ed., ed. Susan T. Fiske, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Gardner Lindzey (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), 498-541.

[4] See: Dolf Zillmann, "Mechanisms of Emotional Involvement with Drama," *Poetics* 23, no. 1–2 (1994): 33–51; Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1996).

[5] Yurij M. Lotman, *The Structure of The Artistic Text*, trans. Gail Lenhoff and Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1977), 209-84.

[6] Zillmann, "Mechanisms of Emotional Involvement with Drama."

[7] See: Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 96-145; Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 157; Edward Branigan, *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), 122-42.

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[10] Ralf Schneider, "Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction," *Style* 35, no. 4 (2001): 607-39.

[11] Epley and Waytz, "Mind Perception," 498.

[12] See: Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley, "The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 3 (Május 2008): 173-92; Torben Grodal, *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 181-24; Ed Tan, "The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema: Notes on a Psychocinematics of Mind Reading," in *Psychocinematics*, ed. Arthur P. Shimamura (Oxford University Press, 2013), 337-68; Murray Smith, "Engaging Characters: Further Reflection," in Eder, *Characters in Fictional Worlds*, 232; Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*.

[13] Matthew D Lieberman, "Social Cognitive Neuroscience: A Review of Core Processes," *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 58 (2007): 259-89; Epley and Waytz, "Mind Perception."

[14] For a seminal account of Theory of Mind, see David Premack and Guy Woodruff, "Does the Chimpanzee Have a Theory of Mind?," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 1, no. 4 (1978): 515-26. For subsequent research on the observation of situations and inference of mental states in fictional characters, see: Daniel T. Levin, Alicia M. Hymel, and Lewis Baker, "Belief, Desire, Action, and Other Stuff: Theory of Mind in Movies," in Shimamura, *Psychocinematics*, 244-66;

Tan, "The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema."

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[16] Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*.

[17] Ibid., 83.

[18] Carl Plantinga, "Emotion and Affect," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Plantinga, Routledge (New York, NY, 2008), 86-96.

[19] See: Mar and Oatley, "The Function of Fiction;" Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 7.

[20] Tan, "The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema."

[21] See: Bertram F Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior: Folk Explanations, Meaning, and Social Interaction.* (MIT Press, 2004), 72-75; Alvin Goldman, "Imagination and Simulation in Audience Responses to Fiction," in *The Architecture of Imagination*, ed. Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 41-56.

[22] See: Zillmann, "Mechanisms of Emotional Involvement with Drama"; Tan, "The Empathic Animal Meets the Inquisitive Animal in the Cinema"; Grodal, *Embodied Visions*; Smith, *Engaging Characters*; Gal Raz et al., "Cry for Her or Cry with Her: Context-Dependent Dissociation of Two Modes of Cinematic Empathy Reflected in Network Cohesion Dynamics," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 9, no. 1 (2014): 30-38.

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