

The Pleasures of Documentary Tragedy

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Two assumptions are common in discussions of the paradox of tragedy: (1) that tragic pleasure requires that the work be fictional or, if non-fiction, then non-transparently represented; and (2) that tragic pleasure may be provoked by a wide variety of art forms. In opposition to (1) I argue that certain documentaries could produce tragic pleasure. This is not to say that *any* sad or painful documentary could do so. In considering which documentaries might be plausible candidates, I further argue, against (2), that the scope of tragic pleasure is limited to works that possess certain thematic and narrative features.

The ‘paradox of tragedy’—the puzzle of explaining why we enjoy tragedies when they provoke negative emotions—has generated a great deal of discussion in aesthetics. Although the elements of the puzzle may be traced to Aristotle’s contention in *Poetics* 14 that the pleasure of tragedy is that which ‘derives from pity and fear by means of *mimesis*’,¹ the classic formulation is Hume’s:

It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end.²

As Hume notes, the puzzle is deepened by the fact that spectators of tragedy ‘are pleased in proportion as they are afflicted’.³ In other words, we appear to enjoy tragedy not despite, but precisely because of, the painful emotions we feel in response. This was the psychological puzzle that exercised Hume; but the puzzle is not merely psychological. For it seems that the *value* we attribute to great tragedies is closely tied to the pleasure we take in them. As usually interpreted, Aristotle located both the pleasure and the value of tragedy in its production of pity and fear through *mimesis* and the catharsis of those emotions.

The standard approach to the paradox of tragedy is to provide an account of tragic pleasure, one that makes such an experience intelligible (for persons who are neither sadistic nor masochistic).⁴ My purpose is not to offer a new account. Instead I want to challenge an assumption common to many thinkers on the topic: that it is a prerequisite of our taking pleasure in tragedy that the story be either fictional or, if non-fiction, then non-transparently represented (as by actors). In opposition to this assumption I argue that documentaries—in particular, non-fiction films that do not use actors⁵—could produce tragic pleasure. This is not to say that *any* documentary, or even any sad or painful documentary, could do so. The interesting question is which documentaries would be plausible candidates.

Unfortunately, we get little guidance in identifying sources of tragic pleasure from the literature. Since Hume’s formulation of the paradox of tragedy, most philosophers have taken for granted that tragic pleasure is not limited to our experience of paradigm tragedies. Hume includes rhetoric, painting and music in his discussion. Jerrold Levinson says that the paradox of tragedy is merely a ‘classical illustration’ of a more general puzzle about art that provokes

negative emotions.⁶ Still others take the puzzle to encompass anything that prompts enjoyment of negative emotions, including sad music, horror flicks, even roller coaster rides.⁷

It is unlikely that any interesting conception of tragic pleasure, let alone one that illuminates the value of tragedy, could be generated from accounts that take such variegated phenomena as a starting point. By examining the possibility of tragic pleasure from documentary, I aim to show that the scope of the puzzle is more limited than these approaches suggest. The documentaries most plausibly construed as productive of tragic pleasure turn out to be a relatively restricted group. These are documentaries that possess thematic and narrative features associated with the literary genre of tragedy, and which may therefore be called *documentary tragedies*.

Documentaries vary in subject matter: there are documentaries about individuals, historical events or periods, concerts and sporting events, as well as investigative exposes, educational and nature films. They also vary in style: some argue a point using voice-over narration, while others utilise ‘fly-on-the-wall’ observation, and still others are driven by the filmmaker’s interaction with people and events.⁸ And they vary in purpose: some documentaries offer little more than newsreel footage, recording a specific event; others aim for more in-depth understanding or even a universal insight.⁹ I suggest that to qualify as a tragedy, a documentary would have to treat a serious—in the sense of both ‘dignified’ and ‘non-comedic’—subject, usually dealing with personal misfortune; to aim for a broader, perhaps moral, insight into human experience; and to develop a dramatic storyline that achieves a satisfying sense of closure.

My contention is that a documentary with these features could prompt tragic pleasure, because what matters to this effect is not medium or fictionality but subject and structure; and that to the extent that a documentary *lacks* these features, we will be less likely to count it as a potential source of tragic pleasure. Given the dispute over the scope of the paradox, though, I do not defend either part of this claim directly. Instead, I consider and reject various reasons to deny that documentaries could provoke tragic pleasure, in the process narrowing down the class of documentaries likely to produce this response.

§1. Fiction and distance

One argument for the view that tragic pleasure requires fictionality assumes that our emotional responses to fiction differ from our emotional responses to real events. Perhaps we enjoy experiencing pity or anguish in response to fictional tragedy because these are not full-fledged, genuine emotions, but ‘quasi-pity’ or ‘quasi-anguish’—correlates of the genuine articles, which we experience in fictional contexts.¹⁰ While real pity and anguish might be unpleasant, the correlates need not be. From this perspective, since our responses to documentaries are genuine emotions they cannot give rise to the same pleasure.

Leaving aside the controversy over the existence of quasi-emotions, this resolution of the paradox fails on at least three fronts. First, the difference between genuine emotions and their fictional correlates is not a difference in affect. In principle, quasi-anguish may have exactly the same phenomenology as the genuine article; the difference is that one emotion involves belief while the other involves imagination.¹¹ The fact that some people find depressing fictions too difficult to bear suggests that this can also be true in practice. Second, the fictionality requirement is too strong. Aristotle and Hume are explicit that tragic pleasure may be derived from skilful representations of reality. If we respond with tragic pleasure to Cicero’s eloquent historical narratives, as Hume argues, we are responding with genuine emotions to real events. Most importantly, third, even if our responses to tragedy are quasi-emotions, this putative fact provides no explanation of why we enjoy or value them.¹² Even supposing quasi-emotions always less intense than their genuine correlates, the fact that an episode of sadness will be relatively weak gives me no motivation to experience it.¹³

The appeal to the different intensity of emotions leads, though, to a second argument against the possibility of tragic pleasure from documentaries. It is often claimed that we do not enjoy direct confrontations with real suffering because the painfulness of the negative emotions overwhelms any possible pleasure. That something like ‘aesthetic distance’ is required to allow the pleasure in tragedy to take precedence is thus widely accepted. As Hume puts it, when the audience is ‘too deeply concerned in the events’, or the represented action ‘too bloody and atrocious’, greater eloquence or artistry does not convert pain into pleasure, but instead has the opposite effect.¹⁴ Edward Bullough, in arguing that psychical distance is required for aesthetic appreciation, makes the same point: the jealous husband watching *Othello* will find it difficult to appreciate the play given how closely his situation matches the protagonist’s.¹⁵

The concern is that insofar as documentaries show us real suffering, we might not be able to achieve the necessary distance. Documentaries of the Holocaust containing footage of concentration camp victims, or documentaries of more recent genocides such as *Ghosts of Rwanda* (2004), can be intolerably painful. The same is often true (for me) of Paul Watson’s *Malcolm and Barbara: A Love Story* (1999), which follows the lives of an elderly couple for four years while the husband descends into the dementia of Alzheimer’s disease. When Watson shows Malcolm deteriorating to the point of becoming physically abusive to Barbara, I experience distress rather than pleasure. Watching real people suffer, even on film, is likely to affect us more strongly than watching actors feign suffering, though the degree to which this is true depends on the viewer.

Still, the mere fact that we ever watch documentaries that cause negative emotions suggests that some distancing is possible. Though documentary film, like photography more generally, strikes us as ‘transparent’ to the events shown, watching a documentary is not the same as being confronted by the reality.¹⁶ Sometimes documentary footage can be so ‘bloody and atrocious’ or otherwise painful that it is difficult to watch. The same is true, however, of paradigm tragedies and other works of fiction. Flint Schier reports that he finds Kafka’s ‘Penal Colony’ hard to get through; I have the same reaction to the film *Breaking the Waves*. While tragic pleasure requires us to be ‘pleased in proportion as we are afflicted’, there comes a point when too much affliction overwhelms the pleasure. If this fact does not exclude fiction as a potential source of tragic pleasure, it does not exclude documentary either.

Of course the possibility of distance does not show that we enjoy documentaries of human suffering. Plausibly we are motivated to watch some documentaries by a desire to know the truth, even when painful. Significantly, exactly the same point has been made with respect to tragedy: ‘There is ... no reason at all to imagine that the value and importance of tragic drama must ultimately derive from its capacity to *please*. And that, surely, is just as well, since successful tragic drama—think of *Lear*, think of *Oedipus*—is simply not all that pleasing.’¹⁷ Most aestheticians reject this conclusion; they assume that seeing *King Lear*, unlike a trip to the dentist, is enjoyable and not just valuable.¹⁸ These aestheticians argue that our pleasure in tragedy involves more complex kinds of satisfaction than a pleasant stream of experience. If so, the same complex pleasure may also be available from documentary. Thus far we have no reason to deny this possibility.

§2. Moral feeling

Susan Feagin’s solution to the paradox of tragedy provides a more sophisticated account of tragic pleasure, one designed to explain the connection between pleasure and value.¹⁹ It is worth considering Feagin’s argument in some detail because it seems explicitly to rule out tragic pleasure from documentaries.

Feagin distinguishes between two kinds of response to tragedy. A *direct response* is a response to the painful subject matter and is thus unpleasant. Our awareness of this sympathetic direct response gives rise to a pleasurable *meta-response*: ‘We find ourselves to be the kind of people who respond negatively to villainy, treachery, and injustice. This discovery, or reminder,

is something which, quite justly, yields satisfaction' (p. 98). Feagin's account is supposed to explain the common observation that we value tragedies as more significant or important artworks than comedies, because tragic pleasure is founded on human sympathy, the same feeling that explains moral action (p. 99). The connection to moral feeling rules out tragic pleasure from real-life suffering:

It is not possible in real life to respond to the importance of human sympathy as a distinct phenomenon, since that sympathy depends on, one might even say 'feeds on,' human misery. ... In art, however, one experiences real sympathy without there having been real suffering, and this is why it is appropriate to feel pleasure at our sympathetic responses to a work of art, whereas it is not appropriate to feel pleasure at our sympathetic responses in reality. There the sympathy comes at too great a cost. (p.102)

Feagin goes on to say that taking this sort of pleasure in one's sympathetic responses in real life would reveal a certain 'smugness, self-satisfaction, and complacency', not only in direct confrontations with suffering, but also 'when one is confronted with just the idea or memory of the event' (p. 103). It is the fact that the suffering is (or was) real that precludes our taking satisfaction in our sympathetic feelings.

Whatever sympathies we may feel in response to a documentary that shows actual suffering, they depend on the existence of real suffering in essentially the same way that memories do. As a result they raise obvious ethical concerns where the events occur before the camera. For instance, they give rise to worries about the extent to which camera and crew interfere or fail to interfere in events. Paul Watson, often credited with inventing the 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary, has dealt with both criticisms: he was accused of breaking up the Wilkins, portrayed in his groundbreaking BBC series *The Family* (1974); while in an interview about *Malcolm and Barbara* for Channel Four's *50 Greatest Documentaries* (2005), he spoke of the difficulty in standing by while Malcolm abused Barbara. Feagin's claim seems to be that moral qualms about such films could make it inappropriate, even impossible, for us to enjoy them.

I do not think, though, that Feagin's argument supports her conclusion. First, the meta-response described by Feagin seems perfectly possible in response to real-life events, where it need not involve smugness or be morally inappropriate. For instance, one symptom of clinical depression is indifference to other people's feelings, so that recovery might be marked by pleasure in experiencing sympathy. Second, if feeling good about oneself for being sympathetic does reveal smugness, what matters is one's attitude to oneself, not the reality of the objects of sympathy. So again there should be no difference between the real-life and art cases. Third, if we do experience pleasure at our own sympathy, this should not be true only in tragic contexts. Human sympathy is displayed not only when we pity others for their sorrows, but also when we are happy at their good fortune. The meta-response described by Feagin is therefore not special to tragedy and cannot explain its value by contrast with comedy. Finally, supposing that Feagin does not mean to exclude representations of past suffering as sources of pleasure but only direct confrontations,²⁰ the theory faces a different problem: it seems to predict tragic pleasure in response to *any* documentary that evokes our sympathy. Surely, though, there is more to tragic pleasure than enjoying our own sympathetic responses.

§3. *Painful truths*

The traditional view of the moral significance of tragedy locates it, not in provoking our natural sympathies, but in confronting us with painful realities in a way that prompts ethical reflection. Ridley captures the traditional connection made by philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche:

Tragedy engages more directly than any other artform with philosophy's own most fundamental question: How should one live? By depicting worlds in which things go wrong—in which chance and necessity play prominent and often devastating roles in the shaping of human lives—tragedy shows us aspects of a world that is, in reality, our world, the world in which we must live as best we can. ... In such a context, the question how to live acquires its proper urgency and complexity.²¹

Although Ridley attributes moral importance to tragedy, he does not think this importance translates into pleasure. By contrast, others have argued that our pleasure in tragedy is precisely a pleasure in facing up to painful truths, truths about 'our own predicament' and 'the nature and causes of human suffering'.²² One may reasonably ask why we should enjoy confronting painful truths that we usually try to suppress in everyday life. Flint Schier's answer is that, because knowledge of the human predicament is intrinsically valuable and thus desirable, we take pleasure in its acquisition. In our own lives we gloss over the painful truth; tragedy satisfies a fundamental need to face up to it.

At first blush, it would seem that documentaries are perfectly suited to satisfy the same need. They often confront us with painful truths about human suffering: think of all the documentaries about war, disease and so on. Unlike horror movies, roller coaster rides, and other situations in which we seem to enjoy negative emotions, documentaries offer the potential for the same kind of knowledge attributed to tragedy. Even so, there are reasons to deny that documentaries afford the appropriate *kind* of confrontation with painful realities.

One might think that documentaries are unlikely to address the weighty ethical issues described by Ridley. For instance, *Malcolm and Barbara* may not strike us as having the profundity of such tragedies as *Antigone* or *Hamlet*. On the other hand, it does centre on how one ought to deal with terrible events outside one's control, such as the devastating impact of disease on a loved one. Similarly, in *Startup.com* (2001), which tracks the relationship of two friends through the rise and fall of their internet company, one of the friends is faced with a choice between firing the other or letting the company fail. While not a life-or-death decision, it reflects the difficult choice many people face between relationship and career.

Perhaps these examples seem too mundane to compete with the 'larger than life' characters and conflicts exemplified by classical Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. If we deny that ordinary people facing ordinary problems can provide the materials for tragedy, however, we are also committed to the rejection of such 'modern tragedies' as Ibsen's *Ghosts* or Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.²³ Though it was once fashionable to argue that tragedy is incompatible with the modern language and outlook of such dramas, such an extreme position is implausible.²⁴ The fact that documentaries are often topical works in a mass medium also should not detract from their potential moral implications. Although we think of tragedy as high art, both classical and Shakespearean tragedies were originally forms of popular entertainment.²⁵ So there is no reason to deny that documentaries can provoke consideration of fundamental questions. The interesting question is why the confrontation with difficult ethical choices should be pleasurable, a question that arises for any kind of tragedy.

A different concern is less with the gravity of the documentary's subject matter as with its handling. Those who emphasise tragedy's cognitive contribution usually focus on a certain kind of knowledge gained from this experience. 'It is the individual and particular grief which captures our interest. We are interested in *what it is like* for particular people to meet the misfortunes that life has to offer.'²⁶ The capacity to convey 'what it is like' is often associated with fiction. According to Peter Lamarque, for instance, even in a tragedy based on real events the content is 'fictionalized' insofar as the drama 'invites imaginative rather than belief-based involvement ... [and] encourages participation, not a concern for correspondence with the facts'.²⁷ Similarly, Schier says that tragedy 'gives us an imaginative sense of what it is like to feel, see and live in a certain way. No mere perception of grief from without could give us so

strong a sense of the subjective reality of grief'.²⁸ Documentaries are concerned with the facts, and our involvement with the persons on screen rests on beliefs about what they have endured. If documentaries provide a 'mere perception of grief', perhaps they do not engage us imaginatively in the right way for tragic pleasure.

There are, however, documentaries that offer a view into the personal experience of misfortune, providing revealing portraits of individuals dealing with painful events and choices. In *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), which tells the story of the disintegrating Friedman family after the father and one son were arrested on charges of sexually abusing young boys, the most compelling footage was filmed by one of the sons experiencing his own family's implosion. It is hard to think of a more intimate picture of a family's suffering. Such documentaries also plausibly sustain imaginative participation. The fact that we believe something to be true does not preclude our also imagining it; for instance, vividly written narratives of historical events may prompt visual imagining.²⁹ In the case of documentaries and other visual media, I think we imagine seeing the events occur as we are watching, in a way that increases our emotional participation. Because watching a documentary is not the same as being confronted by the events themselves, the space for this kind of imaginative engagement exists.

If tragic pleasure arises from gaining valuable insight into personal misfortune, we should therefore agree that some documentaries count as sources of this pleasure. I am not convinced, though, that the satisfaction of our desire for this kind of knowledge is sufficient. Even when we add the requirement of aesthetic distance, the lack of pain does not necessarily imply a positive pleasure, since it is consistent with mere toleration of documentaries in the interest of acquiring valuable knowledge. We do not want to conclude that *any* documentary—or indeed anything at all—that provides valuable insight into the human condition produces tragic pleasure. So we need some way to narrow down the scope of tragic pleasure.

§4. Artistry

One element missing from the discussion so far is the role of artistry. Hume famously, if obscurely, claims that it is precisely the eloquence or beauty of a tragic artwork that 'converts the whole impulse of [the disagreeable] passions into pleasure'.³⁰ The connection is already made by Aristotle when he classifies tragedy as a form of mimesis. In a passage from *Poetics* 4 often cited in connection with the paradox of tragedy, Aristotle says that 'we take pleasure in contemplating the most precise images of things whose sight in itself causes us pain—such as the appearance of the basest animals, or of corpses'.³¹ The pleasure here is in the skill of the artist, and it is a general pleasure available from any form of representational art.³²

Documentaries can certainly offer this kind of pleasure. For example, the scenes of migrating birds in *Winged Migration* (2003) are visually stunning, indeed beautiful, in a way that goes well beyond the aesthetic qualities of actual birds flying overhead. Documentarists do not just let cameras roll and show the result; they make choices in planning, filming, and editing that offer ample opportunity for the appreciation of artistic skill. The pleasure we take in the artistry manifested in a tragedy is not best identified with this kind of general aesthetic pleasure, however; it must be causally connected to the experience of negative emotions.

In arguing for the superiority of art over life in generating specifically tragic pleasure, Schier claims that grief is expressed more powerfully in art than in ordinary contexts. We appreciate *Guernica* in part because of Picasso's ability to express the tragedy of the massacre; the provocation of pity and horror within spectators attests to the artist's skill. Similarly, a tragedian's 'characters will speak and act in a much more revealing way than would an actual victim of disaster'.³³ The artist creates the plot and characters so as to generate the negative emotions, and our recognition of the artist's skill in doing so is part of our pleasure in tragedy. Since documentaries show (in the standard case) actual victims responding in unscripted ways, the same pleasure may be lacking.

Although eloquent dialogue may enhance our pleasure in tragedy, however, it is not constitutive of it. Tragic pleasure may be possible even when the tragedy is not especially eloquent; not every tragedian is Sophocles or Shakespeare. That Ibsen's or Miller's characters speak colloquially is not a sufficient reason to exclude their plays from the tragic genre. Indeed Aristotle's own view was that in the best tragedies, the pleasure from pity and fear arises from the plot alone, independently of expressive speeches or spectacle. Plain expression is sometimes more effective, and a good documentary filmmaker knows how to capture the poignant moment.

Moreover, the fact that the documentarist does not create characters or write dialogue does not preclude the artistic shaping of materials to elicit certain emotional responses. For instance, Andrew Jarecki, the director of *Capturing the Friedmans*, was criticized for its even-handedness in presenting both sides of the sexual abuse case, leaving out evidence that the Friedmans were probably innocent. Asked about the omissions, co-producer and editor Richard Hankin said,

We tried to build the film like any dramatic film. I think we didn't think to ourselves, well, it's a documentary and therefore it needs to follow this structure that's based on historical information and putting it in the context of other cases like this. You know we knew this was a film about the family. It wasn't a film about a phenomenon. Or it wasn't a film about a period in American history. It was a film about a family.³⁴

To create the drama of the disintegrating family, to elicit a certain response from the audience, the filmmakers selected and arranged their materials in a certain way.

Suppose, then, that we have an expressive documentary that provides intimate knowledge of ethically significant though painful truths about the human condition, thereby prompting negative emotions, and all via the skill of the filmmaker in choosing and arranging his materials. We take pleasure in both the valuable insight and the artistic accomplishment that renders it possible. Is this sufficient for tragic pleasure? The answer to this question requires a decision about the appropriate scope of the paradox. The elements of tragic pleasure described so far seem applicable to a variety of art forms. Schier's account, for instance, is meant to apply to Goya's etchings as well as Kafka's stories and Shakespeare's tragedies; Feagin's definition of tragedy is equally inclusive. I am sceptical of the explanatory power of such broad conceptions of tragic pleasure, however. Like Alex Neill I suspect that 'there *is* no single account to be given of the sources and causes of our negative affective responses to tragedy, to music, to painting, and so on'.³⁵ If we are interested in pleasure from tragedy, we must pay attention to the features of the genre.

§5. Narrative closure

A key component of tragedy often tied to tragic pleasure—and missing in such arts as painting and sculpture—is the plot, and specifically the sense of closure it affords. Perhaps no one places more emphasis on plot than Aristotle, who says that the beauty of tragedy turns on its being complete and self-contained. Although Aristotle's reticence on catharsis, identified as tragedy's proper pleasure, renders interpretation difficult, there is a consensus that it is also tied to plot closure. Atypically, Nehamas identifies the two: he defines catharsis as the "resolution," "denouement," or "solution" of the tragic plot'.³⁶ More usually, the claim is that the resolution of the plot generates the pleasurable catharsis of pity and fear within the audience: a kind of pleasurable relief, release, or clarification of the negative emotions through the resolution of the narrative arc.³⁷ 'Because it represents a story that is complete in itself, uninterrupted by the irrelevant flotsam and jetsam accidents of every-day life, drama brings the further pleasure of the sense of closure, the recognition of something that has been structured into a well-formed whole.'³⁸ Such pleasure is not independent of the ethical or cognitive contribution of tragedy. The unified structure of the plot puts events into their appropriate place in the causal stream,

prompting emotional responses appropriate to their objects—a clarification and training of emotions essential to moral education for Aristotle.³⁹ To the extent that we recognise that the characters' fate could be ours, we come to grasp the universal truth embedded in the particulars of the story.

Because a documentary takes as its subject real persons whose lives begin and end outside the film, and because it inevitably records extraneous elements of real life, one could argue that it can never attain the closure that fictional tragedies achieve. This may be true of some documentaries, which offer a 'slice of life'. For instance, at the end of *Hoop Dreams* (1994), about two high school students trying to escape the inner city through basketball scholarships, viewers are left wondering what happened to Arthur and William now that they made it to college. But a documentary can be structured to provide a stronger sense of closure and clarification. I think this is true of *Startup.com*. It is worth saying more about this film.

Startup.com tracks the rise and fall of the Internet company GovWorks, founded by long-time friends Kaliel Tuzman and Tom Herman. The film is comprised entirely of documentary footage, with occasional subtitles informing us of the month and number of employees: eight in May 1999 when the company was started, 30 in August, 70 in October, and up to 233 six months later. The first footage shows Tuzman cleaning out his desk at his previous job; within a few months he is in a roundtable discussion of the role of the Internet in democracy with President Clinton. From these meteoric heights events take a turn for the worse: someone steals sensitive technological information from GovWorks; on the eve of their going public they discover serious problems with the software; a competitor squeezes them out of the market they created. But these events are not the focus of the film. Rather, the rise and fall of the business provide a foil for the human drama: the sense of personal failure, the toll on relationships, and especially the events culminating in the ugly break-up of Tuzman and Herman's friendship, when Tuzman decides that to save the company, Herman must leave.

Even though the film is made up of actual documentary footage, it does not try to present everything that happened during a time period to various people, as Aristotle maintains that history, as opposed to poetry, must do. In *Startup.com*, a unified, self-contained plot is created through editing. Jehane Noujaim, Kaleil's friend and roommate, and co-filmmaker Chris Hegedus amassed over 400 hours of footage during a period of more than a year. They could have decided on any number of versions: with producer D. A. Pennebaker, they made more than 25 cuts of the film before settling on the 90-minute feature that was released in May 2001. While the documentary does follow out the failure of an Internet company, the causes of the failure are only mentioned insofar as they affect the protagonists personally. Clearly, the filmmakers chose to tell a particular story, one that is not primarily about groundbreaking technology or the failure of Internet businesses:

'Ultimately,' suggests Hegedus, 'this is a classic story about friendship and ambition and loyalty.' Adds Pennebaker, 'The film has almost a Russian quality to it, in that the characters are absolutely bound by their natures. They think in the beginning they can go anywhere, and yet they end up exactly where their innate impulses were leading them. It's really a case of character as fate.'⁴⁰

Pennebaker's invocation of 'character as fate' is strikingly Aristotelian. And it was in the probability of an inevitable negative outcome that the filmmakers saw artistic potential. Pennebaker said, 'I predicted that if we followed these two guys, they would split up before the company made it. We'd have a real human drama that examined their loyalty to each other.'⁴¹ In the end we find ourselves sympathising with both Tuzman and Herman,⁴² and recognizing how easily *any* good friendship could be destroyed by the pressures of business, just the sort of general insight that good tragedy provides. Moreover, our pleasure in the film depends on the evocation of these negative emotions.

One might point out that real-life events contributed to the possibility of closure: the film would not have been nearly as good had Tuzman and Herman succeeded with their company and had the path of their friendship remained smooth. The contribution of the filmmakers should not, however, be underestimated. For instance, it turns out that Tuzman and Herman started a new company shortly after the filming ended. The fact that it is so ‘incredible to anyone who has seen the film’ that they were back in business together underlines the sense of closure this documentary achieves, a sense of closure created by the filmmakers through editing and not available in real life.⁴³ For this reason, Tuzman and Herman judged that the movie ‘sacrificed realism in the interest of telling a good story’.⁴⁴ The story told by *Startup.com* is true, though as with any narrative, the way it is told is the creation of its makers. As a result of their creativity, the plot of *Startup.com* achieves the kind of closure that seems necessary to tragic pleasure.

Of course, someone who wished to deny this conclusion could insist that whatever pleasure we take in *Startup.com*, it is not properly *tragic* pleasure. But the force of this objection is questionable. I agree that my pleasure in *Startup.com* is not the same as my pleasure in *Hamlet*, but then again my pleasure in *Hamlet* is different from my pleasure in *Antigone* or *Death of a Salesman*, and my pleasure in one performance of a play will differ from my pleasure in another. Similarly, my pleasure in a masterpiece will differ from my pleasure in a less impressive work; nothing I have said should imply that *Startup.com* is as great an artwork as *Hamlet*. In discussing tragic pleasure we are necessarily talking about a *type* of experience. Given that the range of instances may be, and has been, defined in widely divergent ways, from any case of enjoying negative emotions (caused by tragedies or documentaries, but also horror films or skydiving) to specific experiences of tragic plots, we will not get very far comparing the introspective qualities of these experiences.

By contrast, when we turn our attention to the *causes* of the experiences—in particular the narrative handling of a certain kind of subject matter—we can draw more secure conclusions. All those who countenance such an experience as tragic pleasure would presumably accept that works in the genre of tragedy provoke it. If at least some documentaries share important features with paradigm tragedies, features which we have reason to believe are causally relevant to the production of tragic pleasure, we ought to conclude that these documentaries could prompt that experience, and to reject the common association between tragic pleasure and fictionality. At the same time, we should agree that documentaries lacking those features are less likely to produce tragic pleasure, and thus that the experience is plausibly limited to artworks with certain thematic and narrative features. The scope of tragic pleasure is thus both wider and narrower than has often been assumed.⁴⁵

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¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. Halliwell, in *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1987), p. 46.

² David Hume, ‘Of Tragedy’, in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1987), p. 216.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁴ Henceforth I ignore the qualification.

⁵ This restricted focus is not meant as a definition of documentary. It is designed to pose the greatest challenge to my claim, since documentaries containing reconstructions of events are obviously much closer to standard dramatic tragedies.

⁶ Jerrold Levinson, ‘Emotion in Response to Art’, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), §5.

⁷ On the ‘control theory’, for instance, negative emotions in all such contexts may be enjoyable so long as we are in control of the situation. See Marcia Eaton, ‘A Strange Kind of Sadness’,

Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism vol. 41 (1982), pp. 51-63; and John Morreall, 'Enjoying Negative Emotions in Fictions', *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 9 (1985), pp. 95-102. Both Eaton and Morreall discuss further artistic elements that contribute to our pleasure in paradigm tragedies, but do not treat these as essential to addressing the paradox.

⁸ For a discussion of various 'modes' of documentary, see Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 99-138.

⁹ Thanks to Peter Lamarque for emphasising this distinction.

¹⁰ On quasi-emotions see Kendall Walton, 'Fearing Fictions', *Journal of Philosophy* vol. 75 (1978), pp. 5-27, and *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹¹ On this conception of quasi-emotions, see Stacie Friend, 'Real People in Unreal Contexts: or is There a Spy among Us?' in *Empty Names, Fiction and the Puzzles of Non-Existence*, eds. A. Everett and T. Hofweber (Stanford, CA: CSLI, 2000), pp. 183-203.

¹² Flint Schier emphasizes the significance of motivation in 'The Claims of Tragedy', *Philosophical Papers* vol. 18 (1989), pp. 7-26.

¹³ This is also a problem for the view that negative emotions are not intrinsically painful, on which see Walton, *Mimesis*, pp. 255-259; and Alex Neill, 'On a Paradox of the Heart', *Philosophical Studies* vol. 65 (1992), pp. 53-65.

¹⁴ Hume, 'Of Tragedy', pp. 223-224.

¹⁵ Edward Bullough, 'Psychical Distance', in *The Philosophy of Art*, eds. A. Neill and A. Ridley (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), p. 301.

¹⁶ This merely phenomenological claim should not be taken to imply a position in the debate over the literal transparency of photographs.

¹⁷ Aaron Ridley, 'Tragedy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. J. Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 413. The position was earlier defended by Malcolm Budd in *Values of Art* (London: Penguin, 1995).

¹⁸ On the dental analogy, see James Shelley, 'Imagining the Truth: An Account of Tragic Pleasure', in *Imagination, Philosophy, and the Arts*, eds. M. Kieran and D. M. Lopes (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 180.

¹⁹ Susan Feagin, 'The Pleasures of Tragedy', *American Philosophical Quarterly* vol. 20 (1983), pp. 95-104. Page references in the text are to this article.

²⁰ Jinhee Choi suggested this reply in her comments on a previous version of this paper.

²¹ Ridley, 'Tragedy', p. 408.

²² Schier, 'The Claims of Tragedy', p. 23. For other proposals tying tragic pleasure to the confrontation with painful truths, see Shelley, 'Imagining the Truth'; and Oliver Conolly, 'Pleasure and Pain in Literature', *Philosophy and Literature* vol. 29 (2005), pp. 305-320.

²³ Thanks to Alun David for highlighting the relevance of such cases.

²⁴ See, e.g., John Gassner, 'The Possibilities and Perils of Modern Tragedy', *Tulane Drama Review* vol. 1 (1957), pp. 3-14.

²⁵ On the popular audience for classical tragedy, see Alexander Nehamas, 'Plato and the Mass Media', *Monist* vol. 71 (1988), pp. 214-231.

²⁶ Schier, 'The Claims of Tragedy', p. 23.

²⁷ Peter Lamarque, 'Tragedy and Moral Value', in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, eds. P. Lamarque and S. H. Olsen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), p. 278.

²⁸ Flint Schier, 'Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment', in *Philosophy and Fiction: Essays in Literary Aesthetics*, ed. P. Lamarque (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1983), p. 84.

²⁹ For more general reasons to think that belief and imagination are not mutually exclusive, see Shaun Nichols, 'Imagining and Believing: The Promise of a Single Code', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* vol. 62 (2004), pp. 129-139.

³⁰ Hume, 'Of Tragedy', pp. 220-222.

³¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 34.

³² On Aristotle's meaning in this passage, see Jonathan Lear, 'Katharsis', in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. A. O. Rorty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 322.

³³ Schier, 'Tragedy and the Community of Sentiment', p. 24.

³⁴ Quoted in Harvey Silverglate and Carl Takei, 'Mistrial: The Capturing the Friedmans DVD Sheds New Light on the Case', *Slate* (27 Feb. 2004), online at <http://www.slate.com/id/2096296/>.

³⁵ Alex Neill, 'Hume's "Singular Phaenomenon"', *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 39 (1999), p. 124.

³⁶ Alexander Nehamas, 'Pity and Fear in the *Rhetoric* and in the *Poetics*', in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, p. 307.

³⁷ For these views of catharsis, see Lear, 'Katharsis'; Shelley, 'Imagining the Truth'; and Martha Nussbaum, 'Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity', in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 261-290.

³⁸ Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 'The Psychology of Aristotelian Tragedy', in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, p. 16.

³⁹ The effect is also achieved by certain works of non-dramatic narrative literature, such as novels and short stories.

⁴⁰ From the Film Forum press release for *Startup.com* (2001), online at <http://www.filmforum.org/archivedfilms/startuppress.html>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Of course not everyone will sympathise with Tuzman and Herman. But I take it that the same variation can occur with fictional tragedies.

⁴³ The observation is from John Schwartz, 'The Internet Bubble Bursts on the Screen', *New York Times*, 30 April 2001.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ This paper has benefited from comments by audience members at the session on Tragedy at the American Society for Aesthetics Annual Meeting, Miami, Florida, October 2002; and at the Birkbeck Philosophy Study Weekend at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor, November 2006. Special thanks go to Jinhee Choi for her commentary at the ASA session and to Peter Lamarque for helpful comments on a previous draft.