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Commentary title: Explaining the enjoyment of negative emotions evoked by the arts: The need to consider empathy and other underlying mechanisms of emotion induction

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Abstract:
Any model aiming to explain the enjoyment of negative emotions in the context of the arts should consider how works of art are able to induce emotional responses in the first place. For instance, research on empathy and the arts suggests that the psychological processes that mediate the enjoyment of sadness and horror may be fundamentally different.

Main text:
The DISTANCING-EMBRACING model outlined by Menninghaus and colleagues is an impressive and comprehensive account of how negative emotions can intensify engagement and enjoyment in the context of the arts. While we applaud the broad, integrative approach adopted by the authors, and recognize the theoretical and

practical value of their model, we wish to comment upon certain limitations and potential inconsistencies that, in our opinion, may hinder the formulation of theory-derived predictions and hypotheses for empirical testing.

Although we agree that personal safety, control, and intentionality (i.e., the notion that emotions experienced in art contexts are typically self-sought) are indeed crucial preconditions for the enjoyment of negative emotions in the context of the arts, we find the overarching concept of 'psychological distance' internally contradictory. Although the lack of direct personal goal-relevance typically associated with art-elicited emotions could indeed be construed as 'psychological distance', the other preconditions – control and intentionality – are less compatible with 'distancing'; in fact, they imply voluntary proximity and engagement, and facilitate greater immersion, identification, and transportation. Empirical evidence has shown that greater immersion (and intensity of negative emotion) is positively associated with the enjoyment of narratives and music (e.g., Eerola et al., 2016; Green et al., 2004; Sparks, 1991; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010), and it could even be argued (as hinted at by the authors themselves) that transportation and the temporary suspension of disbelief may be conducive – or even a prerequisite – to enjoyable engagement with narrative fiction and other arts (cf., Green et al., 2004). Due to these positive associations between immersion, intensity of negative emotions, and enjoyment, we argue that the labelling of the 'Distancing' factor is potentially misleading.

In our view, the most crucial limitation in the multi-component model proposed by Menninghaus and colleagues is the omission of psychological mechanisms involved in the induction of emotion in the context of the arts. We argue that any model aiming to explain the enjoyment of negative emotions in the context of the arts should consider how works of art are able to induce emotional responses in the first place. While the authors discuss empathy briefly in terms of a 'meta-emotion' where sadness gets transformed into pleasure through a self-gratifying pro-social response, we argue that empathy and empathy-related processes (embodiment, theory of mind, emotional contagion, and simulation) are actually fundamental to our engagement with (and production of) various forms of art, enabling emotion-induction, transportation/immersion, and sense-making. In the context of music, for example, empathic processes are thought to take place on multiple levels, ranging from pre-

conscious, internal mimicry of emotionally expressive acoustic and gestural cues (e.g., Molnar-Szakacs & Overy, 2006) to imaginative perspective-taking and mentalizing evoked by the process of music listening (e.g., Levinson, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015) and extra-musical information (Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2015). These processes may be fundamental in understanding why we find engaging with arts and fiction enjoyable – including engagement with negative emotions, as empirical studies have associated trait empathy and deliberate perspective-taking with greater intensity (even at the level of psychophysiology) and greater enjoyment of negative emotion in the context of music, opera, and film (e.g., Eerola et al., 2016; Miu & Baltes, 2012; Vuoskoski et al., 2012; Zickfeld et al., 2017). However, while empathy and related processes may play an important role in facilitating feelings of being moved and the enjoyment of sadness-evoking works of art (e.g., Eerola et al., 2016; Vuoskoski & Eerola, 2017; Wassiliwizky et al., 2015; Zickfeld et al., 2017), this is probably not the case for horror films and suspension, for example. In fact, empirical evidence reveals a negative relationship between empathy and the enjoyment of horror films (Tamborini et al., 1990). These divergent relationships between empathy and the enjoyment of sadness and fear/horror in the context of arts highlight the need to consider the psychological mechanisms of emotion induction in association with the enjoyment of those emotions. For instance, although feelings of being moved and suspension may indeed both be mixed emotions that mediate the enjoyment of sadness and horror (respectively), the psychological processes through which this mediation takes place may be fundamentally different in the two cases.

Finally, we would like to address the somewhat confusing use of the term 'transformation'. Menninghaus and colleagues firmly reject the notion of "a full-blown transformation of negative into positive affect" (4.6 Summary), while simultaneously characterizing their model as a "two-factor transformation model". Despite this characterization, it is not explicated what kind of (partial?) transformation takes place and where, and thus it is unclear whether the notion of 'transformation' is an accurate (or necessary) characterisation of the processes involved. However, if the model actually rejects transformation, it would be constructive to label the building blocks differently.

Despite the aforementioned limitations and points of potential confusion, the DISTANCING-EMBRACING model undeniably moves the field closer to understanding the wide appeal of negative topics in the arts. Future work should strive to investigate the psychological processes underlying the different components outlined in the broad model, and put forward a more detailed account of how different mechanisms of emotion induction contribute to – and interact with – the model components. To put this plea more broadly, it would be important to specify the ontological bases of the different model components, since the assumptions concerning the interpretation of mixed emotions and cultural scripts (for instance) depend largely on the framework in which they are construed.

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