Gripped by movies: From story-world to artifact absorption

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CHAPTER 5

GENERAL DISCUSSION
This final chapter discusses the major answers that were provided in response to the research questions. Specifically, I address the implications these findings have for theory and research into varieties of absorption. I will focus in particular on findings concerning 1) narrative features that were shown to cause absorption, and 2) the nature of absorption in narrative film. I will evaluate answers and findings as to correspondence with the conceptualisation of absorption that I started from, and indicate what novel views of absorption seem to be implied.

The studies of this dissertation address two varieties of absorption that were conceptualized in advance (see Chapter 1), namely film viewers’ absorption in a story-world and absorption into film as an artifact. Chapters 2 and 3 focused on story-world absorption, whereas Chapter 4 investigated artifact absorption. The studies reported in Chapters 2 and 3 addressed what were proposed to be variants of absorption in the story-world, suspense and curiosity.

Chapter 2 defined suspense as an emotionally involving experience with narratives that consists of tension, uncertainty and impatience for an expected event from the story-world to be revealed (e.g., Tan & Diteweg, 1996; Tan, 1996; 2001; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Data from the second experimental study in Chapter 2 of this dissertation confirmed that suspense may indeed be considered a variety of story-world absorption in that the experience of it correlated considerably with narrative engagement, a well-established measure of story-world absorption. Narrative engagement involves attention focused on the story, emotional engagement with the events and the characters in the story and a feeling of presence in the story-world (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Kuijpers and her colleagues (Kuijpers, Hakemulder, Tan, & Doicaru, 2014) recently showed that narrative engagement in turn is associated with other measures of absorption. Chapter 3’s experimental study targeted not only suspense, but also curiosity (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982; Sternberg, 1993). Curiosity captures more of a cognitive form of absorption into the story than suspense does (Lowenstein, 1994). Chapter 3 confirmed both suspense and curiosity as forms of story-world absorption. The measures of both experiences correlated considerably with narrative transportation. Like narrative engagement, transportation is a form of story-world absorption well-established in empirical studies (e.g., Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2002). Narrative transportation involves the feeling of being transported into the story-world of a narrative. We observed that when people
feel suspense or they are curious about what happens in the story, they are more transported into the story-world too. Furthermore, both forms of story-world absorption were found to correlate positively and considerably with appreciation of film. Suspense and curiosity equally seem to lead to the appreciation of film.

To my knowledge, suspense and curiosity have so far not been associated with absorption. The literature on entertainment experiences does acknowledge their importance for enjoyment (e.g., Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). However, I propose that suspense and curiosity are not only enjoyable but also constitute absorption, meaning they are a variant of it, and this may explain in part why these experiential states are enjoyable. The emphasis in Chapters 2 and 3 was on answering research questions 1 – 3, about narrative determinants of absorption. Because I am confident that suspense and curiosity are varieties of absorption, I can say I did identify some determinants. Chapter 2 of this dissertation offered some important insights over how suspense can be boosted through narrative devices (Outcome Delay), but also how the Film Genre influences it. Both experimental studies presented in Chapter 2 establish Outcome Delay as narrative device determining suspense. These findings establish the use of available models of narrative structure for identification of features that cause absorption.

Structural-Affect Theory defines the typical narrative structure leading to suspense (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). SAT’s proposition that Outcome Delay is a critical feature had already been supported in de Wied’s empirical work (1991). Chapter 2 added to this body of evidence, and it added to it that there seems to be hardly any upper limit to Outcome Delay’s capacity to increase suspense. Despite the attempts to experimentally extend Outcome Delay at levels that even looked unnatural, no limit could be found as to the extent to which Outcome Delay could increase suspense. SAT was extended in yet another way. In my studies, Outcome Delay was tested and confirmed across a variety of films and Outcome Events, suggesting a universality of the utility of this factor for determining suspense.

We added to SAT-based research into determinants of suspense yet another novelty investigating the impact of Outcome Delay on suspense in character-oriented film (romance scenes). Thus far research has invariably tested suspense effects of action drama scenes, probably because of the common association of suspense with action-oriented genres (e.g., thriller, action, crime). I showed that
Outcome Delay affects suspense as much in the character-oriented genres. At the same time, we discovered that the valence of the expected Outcome Events may impact the intensity of suspense as much as genre does.

In identifying structural narrative features that make for absorption, Chapter 3 investigated another tenet from Structural-Affect Theory, namely the assumption that ordering the events of a story in particular ways in the discourse structure will lead to either suspense or curiosity. The reported study was the first to address specific effects on suspense and curiosity of the location of exposition materials. The results showed that indeed it does matter where exposition is placed in a narrative discourse structure to determine whether there will be more suspense or curiosity to be experienced due to viewing. The two varieties of absorption could be distinguished the one from the other.

Chapter 3 presented the first empirical confirmation of a highly influential, but as yet untested claim from narrative and film theorists (Bordwell, 1985; Sternberg, 1993; Thompson, 1988) that a discourse structure having exposition in the beginning tends to invoke suspense, while the narration starting in the middle of the action invokes curiosity. An important nuance to this claim, given by my findings, is that this distinction is the strongest when the final level of suspense or curiosity, measured at the end of a target scene, is concerned. Differences in the levels of suspense and curiosity due to exposition location are less obvious when the two are captured during the viewing, before the scene's ending. It emerges from the studies that suspense and curiosity are both varieties of absorption, so they also have a lot in common. Relatively high levels of both suspense and curiosity were reported for all tested discourse structures, and none of these discourse structures led to only suspense or to only curiosity.

The studies of suspense and curiosity reported in this dissertation illustrate how we can identify content features that provoke certain forms of absorption. The current research literature on absorption-like states and their consequences does not yet offer much of an account of what media and narrative content elements make for transportation, presence, narrative engagement and so on. In particular, the effect of narrative procedures has not yet been studied. Future research should explore other narrative techniques, such as surprise, character identification, and point of view procedures.
Chapter 4 did not directly go into absorption of any variety, but it prepared the ground for a further understanding of the two main varieties of absorption, story-world versus artifact absorption. Because absorption in the artifact reflects a film viewer’s preoccupations with the particular construction of the film and meanings inherent to it, it can be expected that it is related to aesthetic processing and aesthetic appreciation of the film. An important implication of the study is that aesthetic appreciation of film has structural similarities with that of other arts, like paintings. This implication is consistent with the notion that aesthetic appreciation is quite a universal experience, working similarly regardless of the medium to be appreciated. However, it was shown that in the case of film, differences between film audience groups and styles matter a great deal for aesthetic appreciation.

The study in Chapter 4 sought validation of a measure of aesthetic appreciation of film in the first place, but cognitive and affective aesthetic response processes that seem to be directly related to artifact absorption were also identified. The emerging dimensions of the factor solution, such as cognitive stimulation, negative emotionality and self-reference, do not seem to be part of an evaluation of aesthetic qualities but rather the ongoing cognitive and emotional process leading to this appreciation. This finding leads to the hypothesis that absorption in film as an artifact involves meeting challenges posed to perception and comprehension (cognitive stimulation), dealing with negative affect (negative emotionality), and exploring a film’s meanings to the self.

SAAF will open up the way for further empirical research of artifact absorption in film. Specific measures of this variety of absorption are as yet not available. Because artifact absorption must be assumed related to aesthetic appreciation, any candidate instrument can be validated with SAAF, as an external criterion.

STORY-WORLD ABSORPTION VS. ARTIFACT ABSORPTION
This dissertation did not aim to directly compare the two varieties of absorption: story-world absorption and artifact absorption. The two varieties were not operationalized and tested together in any of the studies. Artifact absorption was not even operationalized or measured directly. However, in closing this discussion, we can consider a few data that were gathered, and may be helpful in a tentative interpretation of similarities and differences between the two varieties of absorption, with the original model of absorption presented in Chapter 1 in mind.
Table 1 provides details on the correlations of narrative engagement, a well-known measure of story-world absorption and aesthetic appreciation. Narrative engagement has been shown to strongly and positively correlate with suspense in my studies, as well as in previous empirical studies (e.g., de Graaf & Hustinx, 2011). The measure of aesthetic appreciation is the best approximation of artifact absorption available among my data because it captured processes and responses presumably related to artifact absorption.

A first surprise is that narrative engagement and aesthetic appreciation seem to be associated rather than independent, as their moderate correlation suggests. If we consider aesthetic appreciation as a proxy of artifact absorption, then the two varieties seem to have more in common than their conceptualization in the project’s model of Absorption (Chapter 1) would predict. A possible explanation for this outcome is that most dimensions of aesthetic appreciation can also play a role in story-world absorption. Cognitive stimulation, self-reference, artistic quality and understanding are dimensions of aesthetic appreciation that don’t seem to be incompatible with story-world absorption. For example, cognitive stimulation derives as much from following events in the story-world as it does from wondering what a conspicuous use of some stylistic device may mean. Another unexpected similarity between the varieties of absorption is that aesthetic appreciation is correlated with Enjoyment. It suggests that the consequences of the two absorption states are more similar than expected. It appears that the entertaining value of films can easily go hand in hand with the appreciation of their aesthetic value.

Table 1. Intercorrelations Among Varieties of Absorption: Narrative Engagement, Aesthetic Appreciation, Enjoyment and Negative Emotionality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIETIES OF ABSORPTION</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Aesthetic appreciation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Enjoyment</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Narrative engagement</td>
<td>.65*</td>
<td>.42*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Negative emotionality</td>
<td>.52*</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. * = strong correlations;
Based on data from the second study in Chapter 2.

There are also data, though, that highlight the experiential differences between story-world and artifact absorption, as suggested in the presentation of the initial conceptual model (see Chapter 1). We observe a difference between story-world
and artifact absorption in their correlations with negative emotionality. Aesthetic appreciation was correlated with negative emotionality, whereas narrative engagement was not. This observation does not come as a surprise, because in our starting model, artifact absorption was associated with an effort of understanding the artifact, and a mix of both positive and negative emotions, given by having found new meanings in the film. On the other hand, story-world absorption was more typically associated with effortless experiences, pleasurable emotion, and an overall hedonistic gratification of the film viewing experience. This difference between story-world and artifact absorption in terms of negative emotionality brings my research closer to the research of Oliver and Bartsch, who did identify and investigated a form of entertainment appreciation different from enjoyment, and reached through bittersweet emotions (Oliver, 1993; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Bartsch, 2011). This seems to be a form of appreciation very similar to what I call in my dissertation aesthetic appreciation. However, it is puzzling that artifact absorption (that is its “proxy” aesthetic appreciation) is not only associated with negative emotionality, but with Enjoyment as well. This finding is all the more unexpected since so-called bittersweet emotions, that are part of aesthetic appreciation, were not expected to be associated with enjoyment and hedonistic forms of gratification. Story-world absorption, on the other hand, is typically related to occurrence of suspense and curiosity, which are more outspoken enjoyable emotions. However, Chapter 4 of this dissertation showed that aesthetic appreciation of film is not only about negative, or bittersweet feelings, but it also involves the thought-provoking aspect of understanding the artifact and the artistic appreciation of it. I suggest that a possible link between aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment is artifact liking.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES
The main findings of this dissertation point to the fact that story-world absorption may be rather similar to artifact absorption, as narrative engagement, form of story-world-absorption, proved to correlate quite highly with aesthetic appreciation, a concept that covers aspects of artifact absorption too. However, I identify the possibility that my results might have revealed more differences between narrative engagement and aesthetic appreciation if some of the items in SAAF had been phrased with a more specific focus on the artifact aspect of film. The items I mostly have in mind are the ones belonging to the sub-scale of cognitive stimulation. It is likely that both narrative engagement, as form of story-world absorption, and
aesthetic appreciation, expected to be more related to artifact absorption, involve
an aspect of cognitive effort and stimulation, but narrative engagement refers to
effort in understanding the story-world, while aesthetic appreciation and artifact
absorption should refer to cognitive stimulation evoked by the difficulties in the
film artifact. I recommend for future studies that will use SAAF to phrase the
cognitive stimulation items more specifically such as to cover the artifact elements:
e.g., The film techniques used in this production are though-provoking. In this way
aesthetic appreciation and indirectly artifact absorption may stand out more
distinctly from story-world absorption.

A second suggestion for future studies consists in identifying and
manipulating artifact aspects of a narrative film that affect the dimensions of
aesthetic appreciation: what artifact element in a film would increase cognitive
stimulation, negative emotionality or self-reference, and which are the ones
influencing all of them. In this way, knowledge on how different narrative films
are more likely to lead to either story-world absorption or artifact absorption
will complete the picture of how different absorption states are formed in film.
Other than these suggestions, the findings emerging from the amount of work
done within this PhD project offer a reliable if incomplete image of how story-
world absorption is being achieved though the narrative, as well as how it relates
to aesthetic appreciation, and implicitly to artifact absorption. All studies but the
study presented in Chapter 3 used more than one film as stimuli, films belonging
to various film styles, different film genres and/or different types of story events,
for the sake of ecological validity. Moreover, films were manipulated directly
through film editing techniques (Chapters 2 and 3), the dependent variables were
captured through self-report not only at the end of the film but sometimes during
the viewing, at key points in the narrative too (see Chapter 3), while variability
in other potentially influencing factors of the dependent variables was controlled
for as much as possible (see Chapter 2 for outcome valence for example). As for
the scale development study in Chapter 4, it was based on strong theoretical
background, on already existing models (e.g., Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin,
2004; Silvia, 2007, 2009) and on scales of aesthetic appreciation developed for
other similar media (Hager, Hagemann, Danner, & Schankin, 2012).
CONCLUSION

Through four different carefully designed empirical studies, presented in three different chapters (Chapters 2, 3 and 4), this dissertation contributes to a better understanding of film viewing absorption states, offering insights of 1) what different forms of absorption are there in relation to film, and 2) what elements of the narrative lead to them. The dissertation also brings understanding into a concept that is quite new in the case of film, and that proves to be much related to narrative absorption: aesthetic appreciation. Researchers that have an interest in narratives, like researchers in humanities, psychology, sociology or communication, can make good use of the clearer positioning in relation with each other of various types of absorption states into narrative film, offered by the work in this dissertation. Furthermore, empirical researchers interested in narratives are given the opportunity to further investigate a promising concept in relation to film, which is aesthetic appreciation, as the dissertation also emerged in a reliable and valid scale to measures this concept: The Scale of Aesthetic Appreciation of Film. At the same time, experimentalists are given clear guidelines of how to manipulate story-world absorption in film through the narrative, effectively. Practitioners who have an interest in absorbing film making could also use the dissertation as a helpful tool, applying into their films tips from the studies presented in the previous chapters of how to increase particular types of story-world absorption.
REFERENCES


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