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## Getting Emotional Over Contours: A Response to Seeley

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## **Abstract**

In the previous paper, Bill Seeley suggests that what follows from research into crossmodal perception for expression and emotion in the arts is that there is an emotional contour (i.e., a contour constitutive of the content of an emotion and potentially realizable across a range of media). As a response of sorts, I speculate as to what this might hold for philosophical and empirical enquiry into expression and emotion across the arts as well as into the nature of the emotions themselves.

# Getting Emotional Over Contours: A Response to Seeley

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## Abstract

In the previous paper, Bill Seeley suggests that what follows from research into crossmodal perception for expression and emotion in the arts is that there is an emotional contour (i.e., a contour constitutive of the content of an emotion and potentially realizable across a range of media). As a response of sorts, I speculate as to what this might hold for philosophical and empirical enquiry into expression and emotion across the arts as well as into the nature of the emotions themselves.

Bill Seeley's paper in this volume ("Hearing How Smooth It Looks: Selective Attention and Crossmodal Perception in the Arts") is much like any other paper by Bill Seeley in that not only is it exceptionally well-informed philosophically, scientifically, and art-historically, but (and perhaps most frustrating of all) the principal claims and conclusions reached therein are all measured, responsible, and *prima facie* plausible. As such, I think it far more productive here not to respond to Seeley's project but instead to make on his behalf precisely those immodest and speculative sorts of forays conspicuously absent from his work.

Towards the end of his paper, Seeley suggests that what follows from research into crossmodal perception for expression and emotion in the arts is that,

...there is an abstract dynamic quality, a contour, which is generally constitutive of the content of an emotion and can potentially be realized in any of a range of media with adequate structure and temporal flexibility.

For argument's sake, let's grant the above, and for simplicity's sake, let's call a contour that is constitutive of the content of an emotion an *emotional contour*. In what follows, I suggest

what must surely be the principal questions pursuant the above then speculate as to some of the general implications certain of our answers to such questions might hold for philosophical and empirical enquiry into expression and emotion across the arts as well as into the nature of the emotions themselves.

Assuming there are such emotional contours and structurally adequate media within which they can potentially be realized, the extent to which their employ within relevant areas of enquiry can be productive or explanatorily significant depends largely upon how we answer the following:

- 1) Do all or only some emotions have emotional contours? How might some emotions be better suited than others for possessing emotional contours?
- 2) Can all or only some emotional contours be potentially realized in any structurally adequate media? How might some emotional contours be better suited than others with respect to their realization either within the same structurally adequate medium or across the range of any and all such media?
- 3) Are all or only some *art-relevant* media structurally adequate with respect to the potential realization of emotional contours? How might some art-relevant media be better suited than others to realize either the same emotional contour or the range of any and all such contours?

Presumably, the most obvious starting point from which to begin to answer such questions is theory of the emotions — after all, in order to better understand emotional contours, we presumably must first better understand that to which such contours are generally constitutive.

For example, we might think how we ought to answer the first question depends upon what we take to be the individuating conditions for the emotions. That is, perhaps we should expect only those emotions standardly thought (in garden-variety cases) to be individuated via their phenomenal character to give rise to some emotional contour potentially realizable in some structurally adequate medium, and thereby expect such emotional contours to be largely absent for those emotions standardly thought (in garden-variety cases) to have largely non-phenomenal individuation conditions (e.g., formal or intentional objects, cognition, propositional attitudes, action tendencies, neurological processes, behavior or dispositional effects). Moreover, perhaps we should think relevant distinctions between individuation conditions for the emotions track some art-relevant distinction within the range of (art-relevant) structurally adequate media. In so doing, not only might we carve the art-relevant domain of emotional contours into more informative subcategories such as the *musical emotions*, *literary emotions*, *narrative emotions*, *cinematic emotions*, *plastic*

*emotions*, and so forth, but we also might take such distinctions to map onto those made at the level of individuation conditions.

This suggests, for example, that perhaps *the musical emotions* — i.e., emotional contours realized in musical media — most likely are those individuated largely via phenomenal character, while *the narrative emotions* — i.e., emotional contours realized in narrative media — <sup>1</sup> most likely are those otherwise individuated non-phenomenally (e.g., propositional attitudes, intentional objects, and so forth).<sup>2</sup> Given this, we would intuitively expect certain media (e.g., any purely musical medium) to be better (or best) suited for realizing the emotional contours of the more garden-variety emotions for which phenomenal character stands as the commonsense method of individuation (e.g., anger, sadness) and certain others (e.g., literary media) to stand better (or best) suited to realizing the emotional contours of those emotions for which phenomenal character looks less productive an individuation method (e.g., guilt, shame, and jealousy). Of course, the extent to which expression and emotion in the arts foundationally concerns phenomenal character of the emotions may well depend upon the extent to which the feeling theory of the emotions (e.g., Damasio 1999) wins out over its competitors, be they doxastic (e.g., Solomon 1976), cognitivist (e.g., Nussbaum 2001), or perception-based (e.g., Prinz 2004). Regardless, for any account of emotional contours and their corresponding media structurally adequate for their realizations to be even *prima facie* viable, it must be predicated upon (or at least consistent with) some minimally viable theory of the emotions. That said, perhaps we could make a *prima facie* plausible case that any minimally viable theory of the emotions must allow for emotional contours and the potential realizations thereof within various media across the arts.

Whether or not Seeley himself would assent to such speculation, his view nevertheless provides the ground upon which our so speculating can turn out to be productive and informative.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, one might think *suspense* paradigmatically a narrative emotion and as such incoherent when taken as either a musical emotion or plastic emotion. For the view that suspense is not an emotion, see (Mag Uidhir 2011a, 2011b)