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Reading perspectives on feeling and the semiotics of emotion

Abstract: This interdisciplinary approach to the semiotics of emotion offers insights on emotion as a semantic category organising an array of feelings, thoughts and sensations into meaningful (communicable) terms. This is achieved via an exploration of the role of perspective-taking in making meanings that are FELT rather than expressly articulated through words. Forming a semiotic system based on embodied experiences and their contexts, emotions, as semantic categories, are the first stage in processes of expression and communication. I lay the groundwork for an interdisciplinary semiotics of emotion in accordance with findings and stances taken in the fields of literary and cultural studies, neuroscience, and cognitive and comparative psychology. NARRATIVE EMPATHY (sometimes called narrative emotion), like emotion per se, stands upon processes of communication involving the interpretive capacities of feeling, cognitive processes of identification, and PERSPECTIVE-TAKING. Feeling, beginning as an interpretation of sensorial and neurologically driven values, intensifies through the cognitive-affectual interpretative processes of perspective-taking. With recursive (multi-perspectival) feeling resulting in intensifications of feeling we recognise as emotion, I define emotion as a complex recursive pattern of feeling and affect that calls attention to itself in terms that are readily identifiable with semantic categories such as love, hate, shame, sadness, and anger.

Keywords: affect; emotion; empathy; feeling; perspective

1 Introduction

Shaped by cultural values, emotions are the means by which we select and organise a range of internal feelings and sensations into states of being. They are the first stage in what comparative psychologist and linguist Tomasello (2019: 54–55) calls protoconversations. Emotion, I argue, following Tomasello (2019), becomes recognisable in and via others through perspective-taking, which

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enables the interpretation of bodily and mental experience in material and social contexts (Feldman Barrett 2018: 72, 32–41; Solomon 2008: 11). Literary and other cultural works, through their mediations of perspective (Van Krieken et al. 2016), supply a means to probe the seemingly common ground of culture (Willis 2018: 69). The semiotics of emotion thus refers to a form of communication, evident in our cultural works, that utilises our capacity to project ourselves into different places and times, through perspective-taking, and engage with the world from these projected positions feelingly. Literary critics call this kind of engagement narrative empathy. Yet our capacity to feel from another place and time is fundamental to our ability to communicate with one another beyond textual production. In other words, empathy, formed via perspective-taking, underlies expression per se. Formed from the mediation of multiple perspectives, empathy represents our capacity to imagine the embodied experience of others, which is vital for successful social engagement.

In laying out the framework for an interdisciplinary semiotics of emotion, I necessarily draw on different disciplines to define key terms like emotion, feeling, and affect. My position on emotion accords with contemporary views in neuroscience and psychology that regard it as a socially constructed category of feeling. This is in contrast to those approaches within my disciplines of literary and cultural studies influenced by early theories of emotion as based on the work of Silvan Tomkins (Gibbs 2010: 187–88; Leys 2017: 195–96) – for example, Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary affects* (2007) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity* (2003). Specifically, I differ from these stances in that I regard emotion as a semantic category (Reeve 2021: 31–32) rather than something that happens in a specific region of the brain. I take emotion to be an interpretive stance taken towards bodily feelings and thoughts, within a given context (Feldman Barrett 2018: 42–55). I also take thought to be an affective process that carries semantic content (Reeve 2021: 28), and I identify perspective-taking (Tomasello 2019) as a form of thought. Following Damasio (2018), I define FEELINGS as internal measures and messages about the state of our organism (Damasio 2018: 15); and I use the term AFFECT when discussing the processes responsive to or expressive of feeling (Forgas 2001: 11) as opposed to their meanings. Thus, affect and feeling, as I use these terms here, have profound overlaps in meaning. Like Damasio (2018), I use the term feeling when referring to the semantic qualities of affect as these meanings are measured in the body (rather than cognitively). I use affect, on the other hand, to describe both internal impacts and externally readable signs flowing from the organism's neurobiological response to measuring its progress in the world. Both feeling and affect refer to readable signs and measures. But whereas feeling refers to inward signs of interpretive measure undertaken by the organism, affect includes external signs readable by other

organisms and the syntagmatic processes involved in generating feeling as a semantic measure.

We might say that feeling is wholly internal and subjective, and that affect functions subjectively and intersubjectively – that is, inside and outside the organism in ways that contribute to the sociality of emotion. Thus, the expression of feeling through affect, when formed into recognisable emotion, projects subjective experience into the social space, making emotion a sociocultural experience through a process of determining what my feelings mean for me in the wider (intersubjective) experience of my existence as a social being. The sociality of emotion is also evident in narrative empathy. I argue that empathy – whether experienced in a social or literary context – depends upon intersubjectivity as a form of perspective-taking. For linguist Du Bois (2007), intersubjectivity refers to "the relation between one actor's subjectivity and another's" (Du Bois 2007: 140). But intersubjectivity is also understood to be a social construct operating within the mental space of the subject (Verhagen 2005: 2–29). It is a form of perspective-taking, in other words. Importantly, intersubjectivity relies upon our capacity to take perspectives from spaces and times other than immediate organic experience or sensation. It is a mental construct that enables us to view ourselves from other perspectives. Thus, we are capable of relating to ourselves intersubjectively by adopting other perspectives (including the collective perspectives of culture) when weighing our progress in the social sphere.

Finally, in drawing on cognitive psychology and neuroscience to define feeling and affect, I necessarily rely on two concepts used within these disciplines to describe certain cognitive processes. These are terms that have general usage but very specific meanings here; when I use the term IMAGE I refer to the mental representations we understand as sights, scents, sounds, tastes, and sensations of touch, as well as internal sensations or interoception (Damasio 2018: 151), and when I refer to SIMULATION I mean the coherent mental depiction of immediate experience, recollection, or acts of imagination formed by combining images (Feldman Barrett 2018: 29). Further, because I take sociality to be fundamental to questions of survival, I relate the semiotics of emotion to the work of HOMEOSTASIS, which in general terms refers to the drive to survive and thrive (Damasio 2018: 25).

Thus, in forming my framework for an interdisciplinary semiotics of emotion, I combine insights from Tomasello (2019), who identifies perspective-taking as fundamental to sociality, Damasio (2018), who emphasises the semantic nature of feeling as it measures our organism's progress in the world, and cognitive psychologist Feldman Barrett (2018), who takes emotions to be socially constructed categories that enable the communication of those meanings attributable to feeling as an interpretive measure. In uniting the work of these scholars, I have

determined that intensifications of feeling and affect arise and become communicable as emotion through the 'work' of perspective-taking going to wellbeing (Damasio 2018: 3–5, 8, 11, 17, 25). That is, emotion is a socially constructed category that refers to recognisable intensifications of feeling brought on by recursive perspective-taking involving empathetic alignments between subjective and intersubjective projections in space and time. And I demonstrate this through my reading of filmmaker Adin's (2017) reimagining of a popular song from the 1970s.

2 Emotion and perspective-taking

Damasio (2018: 25) explains that feelings are the internal bodily and mental expression of the HOMOEOSTATIC IMPERATIVE: "the powerful, unthought, unspoken imperative, whose discharge implies, for every living organism, small or large, nothing less than enduring and prevailing." Feelings, as "the result of a cooperative partnership of body and brain," are the internal measures informing homoeostasis (2018: 12). They are intimately subjective, therefore. Cognition, on the other hand, through its capacity for perspective-taking, is prototypically intersubjective and unbounded in space and time. This means that the human organism has the capacity for thought that projects hypothetical and recalled informants on homoeostatic measure (images and simulations) in terms of the perspectives taken. These projections make up the semantic material of our thoughts as we look forward or back in time – a process that happens so rapidly we are often unaware of it (Tomasello 2019: 66).

Because the content of our thoughts can be affecting (Reeve 2021), homoeostatic measures (feelings) resulting from perspective-taking, inform our biological organism, sometimes in ways that result in interpretable emotion. This can happen when we read or otherwise engage with cultural works that require us to step outside immediate experience and imagine a different space and time. Immediate sensation ultimately determines our actions however, as the homoeostatic imperative privileges these in the neurobiological processes that weigh and evaluate the unending stream of feelings we experience in our daily lives. This distinction between immediate sensation and the impacts of perspective-taking in informing homoeostasis is relevant to our understanding of what happens when we read or otherwise engage with creative works. Reading might not be informing our organism of a pressing need, yet it contributes to our wellbeing by broadening our experience of what Tomasello (2019) calls the common ground – a metaphor for generalised cultural perspectives that are sometimes viewed as objective (Tomasello 2019: 305).

Exploring "the unique forms of sociocultural activity in which individuals engage over the life course," Tomasello (2019) argues that evolutionary, biological adaptations have "facilitated social and mental coordination" largely through perspective-taking (2019: 304). These adaptations enable the social skills of "joint attention, collaboration, and cooperative communication" (Tomasello 2019: 304). With these skills directed towards joint and collectively configured intentions, our species has developed sociality to a high degree through our capacity to position ourselves from different standpoints and anticipate the views of others. This is so, for example, where "Joint Intentionality" involves "taking the perspective of others, including recursively …, and relating to others second-personally as equals," and with "Collective Intentionality," which involves "the cognitive capacity to form a group-minded 'we' and … participate in conventions, norms, … institutions, and … view things from 'objective' and normative perspectives" (Tomasello 2019: 305). Verhagen (2005) calls this meeting space of collective intentionality, "the dimension of intersubjective coordination" (2005: 214). We might say that the common ground is a mental space of maximal viewpoints, where the thinker can move in and out of different space-times to interrogate the possible meanings, values and outcomes of a given situation, informed by recalled episodes of intersubjective relations. Highly coordinated, thanks to the discipline that language affords us, our cultural products, emerging through and remaining interpretable via the common ground of culture, provide a virtual meeting of comprehension and sociality. Reading and other forms of engagement with cultural works enable rehearsals of, and expeditions into, the common ground of culture by offering reader and audience diverse stances – stances they might not otherwise occupy or negotiate, but which may nonetheless be useful to maintaining homoeostasis (the surviving and thriving of their biological organism) in the long run.

So important is our capacity to read the common ground, whole professions dedicated to mediating and reading viewpoints have come into existence across the many spheres of human endeavour. Literary critics like myself, for example, rely upon what Iser (1972: 290) describes as "the semantic possibilities of the text." With these possibilities being "far richer than any configurative meaning formed while reading," the impact and significance of a literary work, Iser (2003) argues, is to be found in its capacity to project and shape culture through its discursive relationship with the textual manifestations of the culture in which it emerges (2003: 26). Literature "enacts the operations" of cultural memory "through [the] multifarious interrelations" defined by Iser (2003: 26) as intertextuality, and by Palmer (2010: 185) as intersubjectivity or intermental processes. These same processes of intertextuality and intersubjectivity are, I argue, also identifiable as acts of perspective-taking. The skills of "facilitated social and mental coordination"

identified by Tomasello (2019: 304) are involved in processes that make the reading experience enjoyable as readers oscillate "between involvement in and observation of the illusion" (Iser 1972: 291). Interstitial humour, for example, involves oscillations between different perspectives (Elfenbein 2018: 58; Willis 2018: 118), often brought on by the broader demands of the text involving the reader in the perspective offered via the narrative voice as an instance of intermental thought.

We can see the role of perspectival shifts in the one-liner, 'Take my wife, please.' The joke, performed by Youngman (2000) in the 1960s, relies upon audience anticipation that 'take my wife' is indicative and that 'take' is metaphorical. The immediate rebuttal of that anticipation by the word 'please' causes a reappraisal: the phrase 'take my wife' was meant literally instead. All this happens so quickly, we experience the rebuttal of our anticipation as surprise, and laugh – or at least, Youngman's (2000) audience did back in the day, because the common ground has shifted to the extent that most contemporary readers would identify misogyny in the joke and stifle any laughter. Significantly, there are several shifts in perspective involved here – from (i) attentive listener, to that of (ii) standing back from the task (because Youngman (2000) does not actually require that we pay careful attention to what he is [(iii) not] about to exemplify – hence we laugh at (iv) our misunderstanding), to (v) appraising the old common ground (vi) against the (vii) new, and (viii) appraising our response to the one-liner, with the cluster of feelings and thought-affects potentially resulting in the recognisable emotion of shame, and (ix) on to deeper perspectives on our shame – potentially (x, etc.) proliferating and intensifying our emotional response to having laughed at a misogynistic joke. In short, we may feel shame when we laugh inappropriately, but what is often happening is that we are laughing from an earlier perspective and feeling shame from a later one. The rapidity of perspectival shifts, however, often obscures the alibi that the temporal sequence of our comprehension might otherwise be secure.

Bal (2000: 498), writing on aesthetic perspective, notes "how perspective … is a discourse: it can be intertextually signified without being obeyed yet it will be read." In other words, perspective in a text can be represented and shaped to signify something beyond the laws of the perspective. This might include broader collective perspectives on cultural practices of perspective-taking itself, like those involved in storytelling. Metaphor and allegory involve perspectival shifts that maintain allusions to an original stance through the likenesses that are established between two unlike things – the text and the intertext. This happens in the allegorical interpretation of Bernie Taupin and Elton John's "Rocket Man" (1972) by Iranian filmmaker Adin (2017). In Adin's music video, viewers are reminded of the song's original meanings through images of the film's character in a space suit boarding a rocket and floating in space. Other visual cues suggest, however, that

Adin's (2017) character only feels like a man lost in outer space; his journey is otherwise depicted as that of a refugee. The effectiveness of partial identifications (or likenesses) becomes apparent in Adin's (2017) music video when tracking the shifting perspectives available to the viewer. The song's lyrics invite perspective-taking that aligns with that of a man travelling into outer space, from which he observes, "And I think it's gonna be a long, long time/'Til touchdown brings me round again to find/I'm not the man they think I am at home" (Taupin and John 1972). Understanding these lyrics requires perspective-taking and identifications that imaginatively project the listener into outer space. At the same time, a deeper comprehension of these lyrics requires perspectival identifications with the slippery nature of perspective-taking itself – evident in the widely held concept of someone asserting "I'm not the man [you] think I am." Thus, Taupin's (1972) lyrics offer a reflection on the same processes that are involved in creative renditions like this – perspective-taking, shifting one's point of view to that of the subject in the song, followed by reflections on the problems of perspective-taking in comprehending others.

With the original song inviting the listener to identify with the speaker of the lyrics through likenesses to common emotional experiences of loneliness and homesickness, and the music video relating these experiences (space travel and social isolation) to the experience of the refugee, the viewer must adopt multiple perspectives in order to comprehend the relationship between the intertext ("Rocket Man," the song) and text (the music video). At the same time the intertext, through interrelation with the text, retains and enhances its original references to social practices around understanding others: just as the rocket man is not the man they think he is at home, the refugee is not necessarily the man we might believe him to be (he bears likenesses to the courageous and lonely adventurer in outer space, for example); and, as the allegory created by the visual narrative implies, the song, "Rocket Man," is not the song we thought it was because it now offers layers of interpretation beyond its original presentation. Initially inviting us to recognise loneliness, homesickness, and social isolation as akin to space travel, we may feel something for the solitary space traveller on listening to the song, but our reflections are likely to be empathetically focused on our own experience of these states since few listeners will have travelled to outer space. Indeed, many popular songs have this quality of inviting listeners to mull over images and simulations of love and loneliness by providing only the disembodied voice of a speaker (of the lyric), who may or may not be the singer of the song (Elton John is not the lonely astronaut), while referencing only broadly definable experiences (love and loss) for simulation. But with Adin's (2017) video redirecting that empathic reading to the earthly experiences of the refugee (leaving family behind, thinking of loved ones, travelling by train, sleeping

rough, journeying by sea) via its visual narrative, viewers are likely to encounter more resonances, leading to greater intensifications of feeling through the perspectives available in that narrative.

The effectiveness of perspective-taking in promoting understanding achieved through feeling (that is, via the semiotics of emotion) is arguably demonstrated by the success of Adin's (2017) music video, which, at the time of writing, had secured 123,249,052 views on YouTube – substantially more (by approximately 110 million) than other versions of the song on this platform. It is impossible to know the motivations of these YouTube viewers, but given that coherence is important for engagement, I would argue that Adin's (2017) interpretation of the song made sense to many. Further, Adin's (2017) allegorical alignments of visual narrative and song reveals something potentially overlooked in Taupin's (1972) lyrics. Taupin and John (1972), by referencing the social practice of perspective-taking involved in our endeavours to understand or know another person (and acknowledging the potential for failure in those endeavours), offers deeper insights on sociality, perspective-taking, and intersubjectivity itself. Involving viewers in multiple perspectives, including internalised perspectives of self, Adin's (2017) text invites the viewer to look upon the original text and, in doing so, look upon earlier versions of themselves as readers of that earlier text. That is, in viewing the video, I relate to myself intersubjectively by reflecting on my earlier comprehension of, and engagements with, the song and comparing this with what I now comprehend by, in a sense, seeing myself and my comprehension from those earlier subjectivities. I do not recall full simulations of experience relative to the song but draw upon images which I assemble into a general or summary sense of those earlier experiences in terms that are equivalent to what happens when we take a collective perspective. In reassembling myself as an historical subject, I measure my progress. I take, in other words, a collective perspective on the many instantiations of myself as a subject capable of feeling in response to listening to music, and I look at myself (favourably, in this case) from that historically configured collective perspective. I am so used to taking such views of myself, however, that I fail to notice that I am doing so until, that is, as happens here, I notice a difference between what I thought or felt previously and what I am thinking and feeling now.

A "narrative may mention a glance that perceives another glance" (Genette 1988 [1983]: 76; Reeve 2021: 34–37), or it may, as Adin's (2017) text does, simply involve the reader in taking such glances as part and parcel of comprehending. But in doing so, a viewer, on making a new reading of a song they thought they understood, may recognise (on experiencing different feelings in response to a familiar cultural product) that they too, in some small way, are not the person they

once thought themselves to be – that is, they may measure growth in sociocultural wellbeing akin to that measured by an organism (homeostatically) as thriving.

In this way, perspective-taking enables me to measure my progress in the cultural sphere. Enrichments of meaning and comprehension are deeply satisfying because my homoeostatic measures read my achievement in positive terms.

2.1 Feeling and perspective

Watching Adin's (2017) music video thus involves taking perspectives on other perspectives – including the collective perspectives invoked by the tonalities of the music. The majestic qualities of the instrumental elements in the lead up to the chorus, for example, seem to invoke collective perspectives on courage and nobility – something easily relatable to the demands of space travel. But with the layering of a new viewpoint via the visual narrative of the film, new perspectives on courage, nobility, and poignancy, as these are to be found in the music's tonality, are made available.

Engaging with cultural works such as Adin's (2017) demands that we hold (at the very least) two different space-times in mind at once: we think and feel from our immediate position and from the projected position of remembering or imagining as we read or engage with the text. Thus, the homoeostatic imperative, according to Damasio (2018: 165), extends beyond the body to "cultural minds" as we measure our actions in a social world. Our species' cultural minds, formed through intersubjectivity, have developed through our capacity for consciousness and shared intentionality (Damasio 2018: 30; Tomasello 2019: 305), which is dependent upon feeling and perspective in the building of subjectivity (Damasio 2018: 148–153). By taking us out of our immediate environment – seemingly diverting our attention from immediate sensation and the world at hand – reading, thinking, planning, and remembering invoke the intersubjective dimension of perspective-taking. In doing so, these processes of thought involve us in reappraisals of ourselves as we compare our progress from one point in time to the present – with progress measurable on these terms in either direction (forward or back).

In taking a new perspective on Taupin and John's (1972) song, and inviting us to take on his perspective, Adin's (2017) reinterpretation of "Rocket man" is an instance of recursive thinking – as is every cultural product. Recursivity also determines feeling – we feel (in neurological terms) in response to each perspective. This is significant for my argument that recursive feeling and affectual thought are the means by which neurobiological feeling develops into recognisable emotions. Emotion, as a product of recursive thought (in the form of perspective-taking), might arise in the simplest sense when we bring our attention

to our internal states, because in doing so we are taking a perspective on ourselves. With perspective-taking, we are able to apprehend the significance of certain feelings beyond immediate sensation (by projecting the effects into the future, for example, and by contemplating how others might react to the expression of our feelings through affect). And because recursivity is fundamentally an effect of perspective-taking (Tomasello 2019: 165), this layered apprehension (of how I feel about how I am feeling – as in 'I feel bad about feeling bad,' or 'I feel bad about feeling good') represents an intensification or complication of the initial feeling state brought on by perspective-taking. Thus recursivity of feeling – feelings about feelings – intensifies or complicates feelings of goodness or badness (valence) by becoming multilayered and multifaceted. If I feel good about feeling good, I might nonetheless come to feel bad about feeling good that I feel good. For this to happen, I will need to involve myself in perspective-taking: if, for example, I apprehend that another might view my feeling good about feeling good as smugness, I might start to feel bad about it. Thus, perspective-taking is involved in the formation of feelings insofar as these might supply motivations for personal and cultural endeavour and monitor the success or failure of such (Damasio 2018: 15). We might further say that complex organisms like ours experience the effects of recursive feeling and thought as consciousness, with more intense and specific instances of consciousness identifiable as emotion.

Armstrong (2020: 139) notes that as "we read or listen to stories, the ability to fluently construct consistent patterns fosters the building of illusions." Yet even our experience of the phenomenal world has an illusory quality when grounded in the present because the simulations we observe reflect our anticipation of the world, informed by the senses, and based on past simulations. This very quality of perception – of looking forward and back – makes our reception of fictional works possible (Armstrong 2020: 119; Iser 2003: 26–27, 1972: 287). And it is, moreover, the layering and blending of viewpoints in narrative that enables the constructed positions offered to the reader. Frow (2016 [2014]: 53–54) describes identification with character "as an effect of desire, understood not as 'someone's' desire but as a structure forming the imaginary unity of subjects in their relation to the imaginary unity of objects." Identification thus involves the reader in the formation of character through the recognition of aspects of self. Literary characters might be understood to be, in this sense at least, "an effect of the 'self-recognition' of a subject in its dispersal through the multiple positions offered to it by a text" (Frow 2016 [2014]: 54). These constructed positions include access to future and distant episodes, offering insights not necessarily available to the participants in a story (Van Krieken et al. 2016).

Reading, by involving us in assembling images into the cognitive simulations of the narrative can result in the intensifications of feeling known to literary critics

and theorists as narrative empathy or emotion. Opportunities for narrative empathy are available to readers within the very processes of comprehending the text, as they "expand … awareness of other points of view" and thereby become "more responsive to the rights and needs of others" (Fischer 2017: 439). The management of viewpoint also ensures that the reader remains at a 'safe distance' and is readily able to return to their subject position when appraising potentially traumatic circumstances (Van Krieken et al. 2016). This is important to maintaining the pleasures of reading whereby the reader suspends engagement with the world to indulge in projected simulations of a different space and time – something that arguably places homoeostasis at risk as attention is diverted from immediate measures.

3 Perspective and empathy

In conventional terms, empathy means feeling as another – comprehending how another might feel by metaphorically standing in their shoes. It involves aligning recalled mental images in the formation of simulations of experience that, as closely as possible, match what we perceive another to be experiencing. It is not unlike, in other words, my appraisal of myself as an historical subject. Indeed, empathy, we might say, is an outcome of intersubjectivity. It is, in effect, a stance – albeit one that we feel. Importantly, stance and perspective are not the same thing. For Du Bois (2007: 163), "Stance is a public act … achieved dialogically" that simultaneously evaluates an object while positioning and aligning "subjects (self and others) … with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field." Stance refers to a position taken (141), rather than perspective, since a stance is informed by multiple perspectives derived from earlier interactions (147) and taken in respect to other subjects (including prior manifestations or future projections of the subject's own sub-jecthood in relation to other subjects and objects); stance is thus always inter-subjective in composition (159–163), though it may be styled as wholly subjective in its presentation (163) (as happens with the conventional meaning given to empathy, which represents a unified subject experiencing a unified feeling rather than a mediated subject experiencing complex feelings attributable to multiple perspectives). Thus, my perspective-taking, in forming an empathetic stance, will necessarily be intersubjective, since it comparatively includes past iterations of myself as subject, and will necessarily include projected appraisals of another subjectivity's experience from a space and time different to that which I occupy in the immediate sense. Du Bois' (2007) theory of stance, in other words, involves

formulations of perspective, and perspective-taking, significantly, always involves mediations of space and time.

Narrative empathy, as a process by which the reader becomes involved in the story (Armstrong 2020: 26, 70; Elfenbein 2018: 12; Willis 2018: 4, 6), engages the same processes; simulations, generated by reading, cast the reader in the subject positions on offer in the text when those simulations correlate effectively to what she knows of her own embodied experience. In linguistic terms, words achieve their effects through the strength of the associations that are called to mind – through their meanings as realised in embodied terms (Herman 2010: 165; Willingham 2017: 91). Feldman Barrett (2018: 84–87, 182) makes a case for emotions functioning in similar terms – as meanings that organise and give shape to our experiences (see also Ahmed 2004: 1–16). Significantly, we have at our disposal, images and assemblages derived from earlier vicarious experiences – in my case, memories of watching the moon landing and films about space travel, for example, which included feelings precursive of awe and fear and loneliness. Our engagements with sociocultural material add to the resources we might call upon in assembling the simulations of a text, further enriching our capacity for comprehension, and going to our wellbeing in sociocultural terms. Our engagements with cultural material like Adin's (2017) film, also offer scope for strengthening our skills in perspective-taking by taking our attention from the present moment and involving us in simulations of experience beyond immediate sensation. In the formation of meaning (Pearce 2004: 28–30, 37; Willis 2018: 101, 103, 105), including emotional responses to the text (Keen 2006: 213), reader engagement as INVOLVEMENT (Iser 1972: 281, 283), depends upon spatiotemporal shifts in point of view or perspective – including different stances adopted with respect to diverse stylings of voice such as heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981: 291–331) and dialogical action, thought or expression, which necessarily involve intersubjectivity (Du Bois 2007: 140–141). Meaning would not be possible without this capacity to relate images and simulations of experience across space and time.

Thus, the semiotics of emotion is central to our capacity to relate to one another; and empathy is the means by which we achieve this. Perspective-taking becomes empathetic in its stance when it results in alignments of feeling between projected subjectivities. And in anticipating the internal features of each simulated action or experience, our simulation affects us by generating a predictive interoceptive response that measures the impact on the body of marshalling itself into the described activity (Feldman Barrett 2018: 66–69). Feldman Barrett (2018: 66) notes that the "brain is always predicting." Feeling, she explains, represents the apprehension of the state of our organism in terms of its internal "movement," with the brain involved in the task of "represent[ing] the sensations that

result from this inner motion" (2018: 66). This movement is the ongoing ceaseless activity that defines a living body, but we are seldom aware of it (2018: 67). Taking in information from the nervous system via the "networks for vision, hearing, and other senses," the brain, through the interoceptive process, "issues predictions about your body, and updates your brain's model of your body in the world" (2018: 67). Importantly, the networks supplying this information have "two general parts with distinct roles": one predicts those internal responses that "speed up the heart, slow down breathing, release more cortisol, metabolize more glucose, and so on"; the other part generates the sensations associated with these predictions; the two parts "participate in a prediction loop" – with sensations like the pounding of the heart triggering the neurobiological processes that sustain a rapid heart rate, further triggering sensations (Feldman Barrett 2018: 67–69) consistent with the messages that our feelings have interpreted. This means that the recollection of experience or the simulation of an imagined occurrence (whether partial or whole) because it supplies contradictory information in the determination of feeling, is sending information that may require the anticipation of far greater bodily reserves of energy than that needed. Reading a novel, for example, will involve us as readers in simulations (2018: 118) of actions like running, sailing, speaking. Yet, as we read, we are probably sitting comfortably. Nothing about our environment is likely to correspond to the energy needed to scale a mountain or sail the open seas.

At the same time, reading places intellectual demands upon the reader. There are conceptual gaps (Iser 1972: 285; Willis 2018: 6, 118) in every text – fictional and nonfictional – and this is a necessary feature of any work that seeks to engage its audience: "some readers can experience a text as too coherent" for example, and "this excess causes readers … to lose interest" (Elfenbein 2018: 43–44). Armstrong (2020), following the reader response criticism of Iser (1972), references these "gaps and indeterminacies" (Armstrong 2020: 139) as crucial to reading involvement. For Armstrong (2020: 17), figurative patterns or gestalts supply a model for cognition (see also Iser 1972: 285), whereby "gaps and indeterminacies," a "familiar feature of perceptual experience" (Armstrong 2020: 139), are resolved by the reader of narrative "by the intertwining of different modalities" – different gestalts or patterns of experience (2020: 133). This process creates "an illusion of presence and facilitate[s] immersion in a fictional world" (2020: 138; see also Iser 1972: 290). This is because interpretation, involving the reading of signs, finds its "neurobiological basis" in "the reactivations of simulation" in terms that are "partial and [which] can be configured in different ways" (Armstrong 2020: 120). Perspective-taking arguably supplies one such gestalt or pattern, in that it is a pattern that is figured into language through features such as grammatical mood (Genette 1988 [1983]: 73, 76). (Free indirect discourse demonstrates this by

providing an example of mood gone awry in ways that signal dual perspectives – of the focalised character and narrative voice).

Similarly, our memories of events are in part organised according to a remembered pattern or gestalt, rather than the precise replaying of the occurrence, and this applies to our memory of stories, or the stages of a narrative. Readers make sense of what follows from what they have just read by using "a situation model" containing the "reader's background knowledge, inferences, emotional reactions, autobiographical links, evaluations, and much else" (Elfenbein 2018: 103). When descriptions of embodied experience invoke internal sensations associated with these experiences, reading becomes a virtual experience capable of affecting us. To achieve this effect, the reader must identify with aspects of the description by drawing on images from recalled experience and assembling these into the simulations on offer in the text. In this way – by matching discrete images from what may be diversely different experiences – we are able to appreciate depictions of space travel without ever having journeyed into space. My reading of Adin's (2017) music video, for example, drew upon experiences of solitude, loss, and what I perceive to be 'empty' space in its many guises (a blank canvas, an unfurnished room, treeless landscapes, wide open seas, and the vastness of the sky, for example).

3.1 The semiotics of emotion

Perspective-taking is useful beyond immediate expressions of emotion or stance-taking. It is possible to take on perspectives without directly engaging feelings that are immediately perceivable – as when I approach a vehicle from the passenger side and move round to the driver's side anticipating that I can gain access that way. In doing so, I take on a perspective from previous experience and project this to a future position in moving around to the other side of the vehicle (I would not walk round to the other side if I could not imagine my future-self gaining access by that route). Perspective-taking, with its capacity to project into a different space and time, is thus important to the reading of our environment. It enables choices and actions that might not otherwise be taken. And anticipated feeling is always involved; our perspective-taking is enhanced by the interpretative capacities of feeling in neurobiological terms anticipating or interpreting the spatiotemporal world beyond our subjective organic reckoning to feel as another or simply survey a situation from a different vantage and interpret that alternative in terms of its potential impact on ourselves.

A reader, oscillating between a range of simulated stances with reference to recalled experience, constructs the simulations necessary for the imaginative

process of comprehending the narrative and, in doing so, engages a range of imagined experiences and feelings in response to these. Armstrong (2020) applies this kind of reasoning to literature when he observes that "The comprehension of a story requires active participation by the recipient, who must project relations between the parts that are told and their probable configuration in the whole that seems to be forming" (Armstrong 2020: 116). It is an oscillating, to-and-fro process whereby readers come to identify with aspects of the narrative – sometimes with specific characters – with these identifications forming the details of the simulation (the imagined scene, for example) and the source of our involvement with the text (Iser 1972: 296–97).

Tobin (2018) argues that readers and film audiences begin by comprehending the narrative in conventional ways that translate to Tomasello's (2019) common ground, and in a manner consistent with Iser's (1972) description of reading involving projecting consistency onto what we read. This consistency within Verhagen's (2005) intersubjective dimension, or Tomasello's (2019) common ground, functions as a pattern or gestalt that, for Iser (1972: 289), unites comprehension with reading expectations. As Tobin (2018: 56–87) describes the process, in the first instance, the reader assumes the most likely meaning or outcome. Surprises work by relying on this tendency to assume the obvious (based on prior knowledge), and by unsettling these assumptions (2018: 35–36). We might say that all narratives rely on surprise to some degree by forestalling outcomes in terms of the events of the story and the meaning of these events, which will include the emotional and moral values attributed to outcomes. It stands to reason, then, that readers will not initially interrogate the normative values on display in a narrative but will assume that these apply unproblematically in respect to the story as part of the social order (Tobin 2018: 4, 5, 15, 16, 20). As Tobin (2018: 35–36) explains, the reader will accept any reappraisals (that is, be satisfied with and persuaded by them) and the overturning of their assumptions, if the new interpretation is based on meanings that can be read back across the text as it stands. That is, reappraising the text – or reading the whole – involves shifting perspectives, and ultimately stances: we take on a different view of things at the end of a narrative to that which we held at the outset (Elfenbein 2018: 105–110). Indeed, this kind of shift in perspectives happens at the level of the sentence, as Youngman's (2000) one-liner shows; our stance towards a text and its meanings is constantly shifting.

This also happens with Adin's (2017) music video in that it offers readers new ways to read a text they are likely to have already interpreted in very different ways. The difference between the two texts (Adin's [2017] video and Elton John's earlier recording of the song), makes the encounter with the new text a potentially enjoyable experience in that it offers audiences new opportunities for

engaging with the original material. This refreshment of feeling for an old song, along with the satisfaction of comprehending the meanings explicitly generated by the visual (refugee) narrative, is arguably the basis of the film's success. Discovering something new about an established text is, by Tobin's (2018) analysis, highly satisfying. Readers, it seems, enjoy surprises (reinterpretations of story elements) that stand upon the very elements they had interpreted normatively. In such light, common ground might more readily shift if the new perspective is based on existing knowledge, as Adin's (2017) film is. This is arguably because normative readings have supplied simulations that readers find easy to compose and reference with respect to recalled images. When alternative meanings are supplied, the reader retains the original simulation, but applies new perspectives on their engagement with it (coalescing into a coherent stance). Looking at the simulation from the newly informed position of hindsight and realising that their earlier self was duped by the gaps and indeterminacies of the text (being too quick to rush to a normative conclusion), readers are nonetheless satisfied on achieving full comprehension, whereby they now have, not one, but two readings of the same material, and a new appreciation of themselves relative to these readings.

The satisfactions gained are often subtly realised – at least, from my experience. I discovered enhanced enjoyment of the original "Rocket man" (a song I hadn't particularly rated) through my encounter with the allegorical rendering of that text in Adin's (2017) music video; I found myself returning to the song (singing it in my head and out loud), time and again, pausing at times to reflect on the lyrics and indulge in the simulations these triggered. For reasons I can't fully explain, I find the line, "Mars ain't the kind of place to raise your kids," particularly affecting. The internal sensations it arouses are strangely satisfying if disquieting, because I survey a measure of something like sadness in the mix of perspectives invoked by that line. Recursive thought, in the form of perspective-taking, has no doubt layered diverse feelings and affective responses into my reading. This has occurred so rapidly that I am not yet able to comprehend or disentangle the complex recursive patterns of feeling, perspective, and other affects involved in my wistful feeling. But with intensifications of feeling such as this brought on by recursive feeling and affect projected into the sociocultural space of intersubjectivity, I suspect that I have reached common ground with many other YouTube viewers.

4 Conclusion

In understanding creative works, an audience must necessarily adopt at least some of the perspectives on offer. A complex pattern of perspective-taking enabled me to

recognise that Taupin's (1972) lyrics offer deeper insights on the limits of sociality and the slipperiness of intersubjectivity itself. Analysing Youngman's (2000) one-liner demonstrated the complexities of perspective-taking and the fluency required of audiences in navigating multiple shifts in points of view to 'get' the joke. These examples show that perspective-taking does not parachute the thinker/reader into the minds of others. Rather than infiltrating another's mind – as focalisation apparently does via the narrative voice for Genette (1980 [1972]: 31, 1988 [1983]: 73) – constructions of character (and of character perspective-taking) position the reader/perspective-taker in the subject position belonging to another (constructed) party. Aware of their organism while engaged in the act of reading, the involved reader is nonetheless measuring the energy requirements of these adopted perspectives. Reading, in other words, is an exercise in intersubjectivity. It is a satisfying experience by and large because of the disparity between what we imagine as we read and the (lesser) immediate demands of our environment. With our sensory portals (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin) indicating that there are no external challenges, and our visceral sensations in an equally relaxed state, the mental work of reading, reviewing the past, or imagining the future is likely to result in a positive homoeostatic inference, or a good feeling. As Barthes (1998 [1975]: 17) observed, "The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do."

Processes of identification are engaged beyond reading and involvement with creative texts. Our sense of ourselves is important in measuring our cultural credit, as much as it functions in appraisals of what Feldman Barrett (2018) terms our body budget. Am I in the black or in the red? My body informs me through feelings associated with wellbeing or malaise; while any sense of inadequacy or elevated status that I might derive from my cultural capital is arguably experienced in terms of shame or pride (formed via perspective-taking). To the pleasures of reading, then, we might add the satisfactions of identification and renewed understandings of self in the process of comprehending a text. With perspective-taking resulting in a kind of to-and-fro action from inside and outside subjectivity, reading and engagement with cultural works strengthens our understanding of the common ground of culture. Thus, the semiotics of emotion, beginning with perspective-taking in the simplest sense, coalesces into recursive structures recognisable by us as subjectivity and proves its versatility by projecting the experience of subjectivity beyond the experiencing subject to countenance other subjectivities (Verhagen 2005: 2–4). Engaging and relating these subjectivities through processes of comparison and alignment, recursive feeling and thought establish further coherences in the form of empathy. From there, shared feeling and experience forms into what we recognise as collective

perspectives, which, when we align with these, goes to our sense of wellbeing by endorsing our social capacity.

I have argued that the semiotics of emotion involves the reading of perspectives and that what we are looking for when we read are correspondences and alignments. We seek meaning, in other words – meaning on a cultural scale, known to us as sociality, which I have suggested, following Damasio (2018), Feldman Barrett (2018), and Tomasello (2019), is to be found in the alignment of our constructed subjectivities in the shared purpose of surviving and thriving.

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