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Audience Reception of Tragic Entertainment and the Value of Cathartic Reflection

Abstract: Our enduring esteem for stories that are dark, reflective, and emotional indicates their potential value. Books, films, and related media that facilitate somber entertainment experiences can promote meaningful and longer-lasting gratifications and, possibly, improve well-being. The element of negativity in these mixed, complex emotional experiences seems capable of enhancing an overall positive feeling and prompting deeper content reflection and introspection. Tragedy, the most distressing and sad of somber entertainment, has long been revered by humanists as a genre that fosters beneficial contemplations about the human condition. Whereas the themes in somber entertainment tend to address the joys and pains of life, human compassion, and social connections, tragic drama tends to place greater attention on human vulnerability. Informed by disclosure research in social psychology, the present chapter concludes by proposing a research program that examines the potential therapeutic effects of tragedy when tragic entertainment experiences are followed by cathartic reflection.

Introduction

First Maxim: It is not in the human heart to put ourselves in the place of those who are happier than ourselves, but only in the place of those who are most to be pitied. From this it follows that to incline a young man to humanity, instead of making him admire the brilliant fate of others you must show him the sad sides of things and make him fear them. (Rousseau, quoted in Rozin & Royzman, 2001, p. 309)

In the Western tradition, the study of somber entertainment and subsequent audience responses traces back to the Ancient Greeks. Among the darkest and most distressing stories are tragic dramas. Aristotle theorized that a well-constructed tragedy evokes emotional upheavals that, in turn, lead to *catharsis*. This classical definition of tragedy features a flawed but basically good protagonist who commits errors in reasoning, but remains resolutely ethical in their subsequent actions even as those mistakes precipitate their ruin. However, Aristotelian tragedies, such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, differs slightly from later tragedies; whereas the former emphasizes human excellence through the

depiction of exceptional virtue at the risk of irreparable harm, the latter, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, tends to focus on the sadness of the human condition (Golden, 1984). Sad narratives are not limited to tragedies. Meaningful entertainment, including the drama genre and similar story types that offer insights into the human condition, can sometimes provoke painful feelings as well (Bartsch & Oliver, 2017). Media psychologists have recently begun to examine these forms of entertainment as nonhedonic content that produces mixed emotional responses (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Scholars of aesthetic emotions have argued that these emotionally blended responses can intensify and deepen audience satisfaction with an artwork (Menninghaus et al., 2019). Overall, our age-old fascination with somber entertainment, from the tragic to the more emotionally complex portrayals, suggests that these vicarious experiences are beneficial.

The enduring appeal of somber entertainment is complemented by its acclaim. In the context of popular films, the highest regard by critics and audiences was given to movies with “dark, contemplative, and emotional themes” (Oliver et al., 2014, p. 854). Why would individuals engage with these distressing experiences? More recent scholarship has typically focused on three benefits: pleasure (e.g., Belfiore, 1992), aesthetic emotions (e.g., Menninghaus et al., 2019), and a healing effect (e.g., Zillmann, 1998). The process of deriving pleasure from distress seems paradoxical at face value (Hofer, 2017; Koopman, 2015; Oliver, 1993). In media psychology, this apparent contradiction has led researchers toward possible explanations involving the hedonism principle (Mares & Cantor, 1992; Zillmann, 2000) or audiences' existential concerns (Goldenberg et al., 1999). However, recent research that takes a non-hedonic approach to entertainment experiences has shown that “pleasure” is not limited to fun or enjoyment but rather includes meaning-seeking gratifications that are deeper and longer-lasting (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011; Wirth et al., 2012). The feeling of “being moved” has also been presented as an exemplary aesthetic response to artworks (Menninghaus et al., 2019). Further, the Aristotelian idea that a well-made tragedy produces a medicinal catharsis (Zillmann, 1998) has long fascinated scholars, but empirical evidence for this benefit remains scarce. This influential explanation of the value of tragedy rests on Aristotle's catharsis theory, which describes the capacity of tragic drama to evoke pity and fear, followed by a rewarding relief from those feelings (*Poetics*, 1449b24-27). While empirical scholars have made progress in understanding the role of distress in our gratifications from art, the apparent therapeutic effects of engaging with tragedy remain a contentious proposition.

In psychology, the dominant model of catharsis asserts that the arousal of negative emotions, such as sadness, purportedly leads to the beneficial release

of those aversive states. However, this venting or purgation model of catharsis has been empirically discredited by several decades of psychological research (Gee & Quaint, 1977; Gentile, 2013). In recent years, a handful of scholars has attempted to reconceptualize this model without recourse to venting. Although different labels have been used, such as *purification* and *clarification*, these alternative approaches tend to agree that the cognitive processing of the upheavals from engaging with tragic drama is necessary to produce the promise of catharsis (Belfiore, 1992; Nussbaum, 1986; Scheele, 2001). Underlying this cognitive model is the hypothesis that catharsis is a developmental process of a person's progressive understanding of the link between their affective turmoil from the tragic narrative and unresolved conflicts related to the self (Scheele, 2001). These reassessments of the catharsis concept bear theoretical similarities with emotional expression research, which has produced robust evidence for the benefits of processing personal events, usually by disclosing negative experiences through writing (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Drawing from the cognitive model, Khoo and Oliver (2013) proposed an initial framework for the effects of tragedy that is based on the addition of a reflection procedure, adapted from emotional disclosure research, that is expected to produce health improvements as an indicator of a cathartic outcome. Taken together, tragedy is a revered and enduring form of entertainment that may provide its greatest benefits when audience emotional responses, especially evoked negative feelings, are deeply processed and personally understood and accepted over time.

In this chapter, the adjectives somber, eudaimonic, and meaningful are used interchangeably to describe narrative entertainment (e.g., books, plays, and films) that is generally disturbing, reflective, and emotional, of which tragedy is a subset. The present chapter broadly examines the impact of tragic entertainment on audiences' gratifications in the short term and how processing tragic emotions may be beneficial in the longer term. This chapter begins with a discussion of genres and themes that are linked to somber entertainment and defines tragic entertainment experiences within the eudaimonic framework of current entertainment research. Then, extant research on the appeal of eudaimonic entertainment and various underlying explanations will be reviewed to illuminate the immediate value of these somber experiences. The later sections will focus on tragic drama, the darkest and most distressing type of somber narrative, and the link between negative responses and depth of psychological processing. Also, popular beliefs about the related concept of catharsis will be critically examined to demonstrate its limitations, and an alternative model of emotional clarification will be provided. This chapter will conclude with a research program proposal to investigate the potential benefits of engaging with tragedy when combined with supplementary cathartic reflection. Central to the

present chapter is the question of whether and how exposure to tragic drama and disclosure-like reflections produce a therapeutic effect.

Genres and Themes

Central to Aristotle's theory of art is the idea that human beings are naturally predisposed to imitate, partly as a means of learning, and that the function of art is to illuminate aspects of the human condition (Golden, 1984). In narrative art, virtually every story genre contains portrayals of shared human experiences, from common joys to common sorrows, including comedy and drama. For example, the classic film *The Gold Rush* (1925) chronicles the perils of a vagrant's adventures in the Yukon via lighthearted hilarity in depicting obsession, starvation, and hypothermia; in a sequence where the protagonist is snubbed by new friends, audiences remember his charming potato dance more than the social rejection. Conversely, the coming-of-age drama *Into the Wild* (2007) treats the tramping adventure differently. In this film, a college graduate's final trek to Alaska is enriched by the social and spiritual connections he makes with strangers along the way; the beauty and hardships experienced in the wilderness are depicted with greater realism. Whereas the comedy genre usually addresses the human experience by deflecting attention away from the distressing aspects of a situation and eliciting mirth and laughter, the drama genre tends to grapple with human suffering more directly and encourage reflectiveness. Cupchik's (1994) distinctions between the *reactive* versus *reflective* models of aesthetic response seem applicable to the current comparison: comedies typically provoke more spontaneous emotions that are linked to the body's basic responses to pain-pleasure and their intensity, whereas dramas tend to promote more complex processing and effortful meaning-making that slow down those immediate bodily responses. Dramas are also more likely to evoke sadness and/or more complex emotional responses, such as a blend of positive and negative feelings (Cupchik, 1994) that is associated with spontaneous reflective thoughts (Bartsch et al., 2014). In short, stories that fall under the drama category tend to portray the human experience in a way that permits slower, more deliberative psychological processes.

Despite its general utility, a shortcoming of genre groupings is the reduction of the finer distinctions between similarly labeled stories, such as the differences between a tragedy and a coming-of-age film that are both classified as drama (Bartsch & Oliver, 2017). Further, stories have a tendency to be classifiable into multiple genres, e. g., a darkly comic family drama. Instead of genre labels, the use of thematic descriptions may prove more useful when examining

somber narratives (Bartsch & Oliver, 2017). In a study that instructed participants to describe a movie that they found to be particularly meaningful, Oliver and Hartmann (2010) observed that the most common themes reported were centered on human virtue (e.g., integrity and inner beauty) and insights into valuable life lessons (e.g., human connectedness through social relationships and acknowledging tragedy as a part of life). The thematic approach to describing meaningful narratives may benefit the study of tragedy. Tragic drama, which has been theorized as a narrative form that promotes “insights into the meaning of the human situation...” (Golden, 1984, p. 142), clearly addresses these themes. For example, despite his “flaw of impetuosity” (Kenny, 2013, p. xxii), King Oedipus’s steadfast insistence upon uncovering the culprit behind a plague on his citizens highlights his extraordinary integrity because “he refuses to retreat from the truth that will cause him infinite pain” (Golden, 1984, p. 146); from his early efforts to ward off a dark prophesy, by leaving his childhood home, by his self-exile upon discovering his own culpability for the plague, Oedipus exemplifies high moral virtue. Other scholars have argued that Oedipus’s story is a cautionary life lesson on the consequences of shamelessness (Belfiore, 1992; Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Kenny (2013) also noted Aristotle’s emphasis on the importance of character morality as a key element of a tragedy, aside from plot construction. In short, tragedy shares the humanistic themes found in meaningful narratives.

The present chapter situates tragic drama within the broader scope of meaningful or eudaimonic entertainment. In an influential work that began to theorize the values of meaningful entertainment, Oliver (2008) posited that eudaimonic entertainment experiences are associated with at least three common human themes: (a) the joys and sorrows of human life, (b) compassion from and for fellow human beings, and (c) the importance of social connections. In light of tragedy’s emphasis on the protagonist’s reversal of fortunes through “some sort of mistake in action that is causally intelligible, not simply fortuitous, done in some sense by oneself” (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 383), its salient theme is human vulnerability. Whereas meaningful experiences typically involve a mixture of negative and positive affect as the audience grapples, respectively, with both the disturbing as well as inspiring aspects of human life (Oliver & Hartmann, 2010), the salient responses to tragedy are primarily negative, specifically distress and sadness. Golden’s (1984) interpretation of the classical definition of tragedy and expected audience responses supports this assertion (p. 143):

Aristotle sees tragedy as the *mimesis* of an action involving pity and fear. (Pity is a technical term which refers to the painful emotion we feel in the face of undeserved misfortune,

and fear is a technical term that refers to the same emotion when it focuses on our own, personal vulnerability to such undeserved misfortune.) As *mimesis*, it essentially and naturally serves as a learning experience and reaches its climax in *katharsis*, which is the ultimate clarification of the events presented in the *mimesis*.

Whereas Aristotelian tragedies evoke pity and fear and encourage “tragic optimism” (Golden, 1984, p. 155), later tragedies leave the audience with a feeling of human wastedness. As an example of non-Aristotelian tragedy, the eponymous protagonist in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* does not exemplify human excellence, but rather, as Golden (1984) argues, “the pathetic waste of high human potential” (p. 146). Compared to King Oedipus, Prince Hamlet is neither courageous nor highly virtuous and the life challenges that confront him are mainly resolved through accidents rather than unwavering, ethical behavior (Golden, 1984). Consequently, an audience will tend to pity or sympathize with Hamlet and his situation, but the story lacks an exemplary portrayal of human excellence, which sets it apart from Aristotelian tragedy. Further, this emphasis on the unnecessary squandering of great human potential remains a mystery at the end of a tragedy as the protagonist spirals towards ruin or death without leaving any prospect for self-redemption within the narrative. Thus, tragedies tend to be deeply mournful and, compared to non-tragic meaningful stories, less hopeful in their portrayals of the human condition.

Hedonic Explanations

What are the underlying explanations for the long-held esteem for stories that elicit negative feelings, especially profound sadness? The traditional approach to the empirical study of audience interest in and preference for somber entertainment focuses on hedonism and pleasure. The dominant theory of entertainment in media psychology is mood management, which conceptualizes the audience as pleasure-seekers who seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Zillmann, 2000). Hedonists show a positivity bias when performing mood regulation using media content, often without conscious awareness of their own motives. Empirical evidence supports this theory (Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Meadowcroft & Zillmann, 1987), including narratives in a new media context (Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). Later research, including a field observation and survey conducted at a brick-and-mortar video store, found evidence for the predictions of Mood Management Theory (MMT) as well as contradictions (Strizhakova & Krckmar, 2007); the results showed that people in a sad mood tended to prefer dramas. Earlier research

had begun to challenge the assumptions of MMT when Oliver (1993) reported robust positive associations between participant ratings of a film's sadness and their enjoyment. Further, Gibson et al. (2000) found that most adolescent participants preferred to match their popular music selections with their existing mood. For example, when they imagined being deserted by their romantic partner (sad mood), they reported greater preference for sad romantic music. Although MMT could explain a large portion of media preferences and behavior, these results raised questions about uncertainties in the "positivity bias" explanation for certain cases.

Some scholars continue to explain the appeal of sadness by relying on hedonistic accounts. Zillmann (2000) addressed this issue by comparing impulsive hedonism with telic hedonism. Telic hedonism refers to "forgoing immediate gratification in the interest of later gratification of potentially greater magnitude." (Zillmann, 2000, p. 107). For example, the enjoyment of popular genres that contain portrayals of character distress, such as thrillers and some dramas, may be partially explained by the audience expectation that the entertainment will conclude with a reassuring or satisfying resolution if only they endure the characters' momentary peril and agony. However, telic hedonism cannot fully explain the tragic reversals that do *not* conclude with portrayals of redemption or any positive note for the protagonist. Further, Zillmann (2000) argues that, at times, remaining in a state of distress may be comforting for some individuals. In a pre and post-test experiment, Mares and Cantor (1992) showed that lonely, elderly participants reported a greater rise in positive affect after exposure to a sad video about an isolated, elderly man, compared to a cheerful video about a socially-integrated elder. Non-lonely participants did not exhibit this response pattern. Further, the lonely participants expressed a greater preference for programming with negative portrayals, whereas non-lonely participants preferred the opposite. These findings seem to confirm that "misery loves company," but on closer inspection, these results suggest that downward social comparison processes have likely taken place. The rise in positive affect is likely caused by self-esteem enhancements after witnessing a less fortunate but similar other in a relatively unfavorable situation. For the lonely participants, distressing portrayals can "provide some degree of relief and pleasure" (Zillmann, 2000, p. 117) in a manner that is compatible with hedonistic explanations of MMT. Through the lens of MMT, the appeal of vicarious distress can be explained by either delayed gratifications or downward social comparison processes.

The prohedonic motives described in MMT above are more common than the lesser-known contrahedonic motives. In the literature on emotion regulation, contrahedonic motives refer to the desire to feel pain, and at least two underlying explanations are possible: (a) less intense pain is preferred over

more severe pain, and (b) hedonic reversal (Tamir, 2016). First, individuals with mental health troubles, such as sufferers of major depressive disorders, may select a sad story because the distressing vicarious experience is perceived as a less painful experience than their own (Arens & Stangier, 2020). Contrahedonic motives in the pursuit of sad experiences may also be explained by the concept of *benign masochism*, which refers to the drawing of pleasure from pain, including emotional pain (Rozin et al., 2013; Tamir, 2016). However, the research on masochism in the context of sad media (e.g., Rozin et al., 2013) has mainly referred to the work of media psychologists (e.g., Oliver, 1993) and currently does not offer additional explanations for the apparent “hedonic reversal” that may occur in those who derive pleasure from pain. In short, contrahedonic motives are rarer instances of obtaining pleasure from distress that seem more applicable for those who suffer from major clinical depression.

Reappraisal Explanations

Oliver (1993) offers another explanation for gratifying outcomes in the course of experiencing distress by appealing to the concept of meta-emotions. Direct emotional responses are differentiated from responses at the indirect or reflective level. The latter are meta-experiences, where the individual reflects on their direct responses or reappraises their initial emotional responses. Meta-emotions are understood as emotional responses to direct emotions, cognitive reappraisals of emotions, or a combination of both (Hofer & Wirth, 2012; Koopman, 2015; Oliver, 1993). For instance, feeling negative emotions in the course of watching a tragic drama (e.g., “it is sad”) may lead to positive meta-responses (e.g., “I really enjoyed the experience of that sad movie”). Previous research has found a positive relationship between favorable meta-responses and preference for sad books (Koopman, 2015). Further, viewers who were high in “need for affect,” a trait of individuals who enjoy feeling intense emotions, showed greater positive meta-emotions after watching either a history-based drama or a horror film; the data analysis controlled for gender and Big Five personality traits (Bartsch et al., 2010). How do negative emotions (e.g., sadness, fear) change into positivity in the context of sad narratives? Hofer and Wirth (2012) examined this aspect of meta-emotions using the term “valence transformation” in an experiment that compared viewer responses to a somber drama with either a sad or happy ending. Level of sadness after watching an emotional drama predicted viewers’ perception that their emotions were appropriate to the film’s depictions (i.e., norm compatibility), which, in turn, was associated with film enjoyment; when the sad ending versus happy ending groups were examined

separately, this indirect effect was significant only for the former, not the latter (Hofer & Wirth, 2012). In short, feeling sad from film exposure can be reflected upon as a positive experience if those feelings are perceived as socially and morally appropriate.

A second explanation for the enjoyment of vicarious distress that emphasizes reflection involves fearful reminders of mortality. Terror management theory (TMT) predicts that our self-conscious terror of death's inevitability is psychologically managed with a process of denial through thoughts and behaviors that bolster our self-esteem and cultural worldview (Khoo, 2017a; Solomon et al., 1991). This theory has been tested most extensively using a writing task that prompts participants to think about their own death and its effects on their physical bodies. Drawing from TMT, Goldenberg et al. (1999) argued that tragic drama could also provide opportunities for individuals to cope with death thoughts. In an experiment that utilized literary fiction to compare a tragic versus non-tragic story excerpt, Goldenberg et al. (1999) found that for those exposed to tragedy, undergoing death reminders (also known as *mortality salience*) predicted greater emotional arousal compared to a non-death reminder group (control); for those who read the tragic excerpt, the level of story gratification (enjoyment and appreciation) seemed to favor the mortality salience group more than the control, but the difference was not statistically significant. Despite the weak interaction result for story gratifications, Goldenberg et al. (1999) did find a strong main effect of tragedy exposure on enjoyment and appreciation, regardless of death reminder. Based on these findings, Goldenberg et al. (1999) reasoned that "tragedy is a valued form of entertainment because of the vital anxiety-buffering function that is served by allowing people to approach the fears associated with death in a relatively protected context" (p. 323). From a terror management perspective, a distress-laden genre like tragedy may be pleasurable by providing a safe way for the audience to calm their basic fear of death.

Although terror management theory assumes that our need for survival motivates a myriad of death-denying coping strategies (e. g., Arndt et al., 2004), there are times when this basic need may be disrupted. In cases of near-death experiences (e. g., a serious car accident), these individuals undergo a subjective experience of death, which unsettles their basic assumptions about the self and the world (Khoo, 2017a; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In the aftermath of such psychologically traumatic experiences, survivors tend to report positive growth rather than prolonged depression (Janoff-Bulman, 2006; Shakespeare-Finch, & Barrington, 2012); examples of posttraumatic growth include relating more strongly with other people, developing new life possibilities, and having greater life appreciation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Cozzolino et al. (2004)

contrasted mortality salience with a death reminder that simulates a highly intense, near-death experience (called *death reflection*) to show that the latter tends to suppress greed and promote spirituality for individuals who highly value money, fame, and beauty (i. e., extrinsic orientation). Whereas terror management triggers self-esteem and worldview defense as coping mechanisms when mortality is salient, a more reflective form of mortality awareness, death reflection, promotes a desire for further development of the self and openness to changes in life. In short, a deeply reflective death reminder may encourage a person to seek meaning and new information about the self and the world.

Drawing from the research in posttraumatic growth, Khoo (2017a) conducted an exploratory, selective exposure experiment that compared mortality salience with death reflection. In the death reflection condition, participants were first instructed to imagine a scenario in which they died unexpectedly in an apartment fire; they were later asked to (a) relive the imagined traumatic event, including thoughts and feelings during their final moments, (b) think about how well they have lived their life, and (c) reflect on friends and family's reactions to their death. Compared to the mortality salience group, death reflectors showed significantly greater arousal and a higher interest in watching sad drama (Khoo, 2017a). The latter was measured using a set of three generic descriptors with which participants expressed their viewing interest, including "A tale of inner anguish...filled with heart and soul: An intelligent, perceptive, and deeply moving drama." Further, a mediation analysis found that arousal (upstream) and self-perceptual depth (downstream), mediated the link between death reflection and sad drama interest (Khoo, 2017a). In this indirect effect, the mechanism of self-perceptual depth, or introspection into one's neglected past (Sikora et al., 2010), suggests that the emotional intensity from death reflection has prompted some "soul-searching," specifically on unresolved life events. Overall, these findings suggest that when individuals are motivated to seek growth after an intense death reminder, entertainment that portrays distressing human experiences in an insightful and moving way may become particularly appealing. One possible explanation for the appeal of emotional dramas when viewers are deeply introspective is that they are expecting to find human insights that may move them towards self-development. There are times when we find troubling but meaningful stories more appealing than those that offer momentary pleasures.

Eudaimonic Explanations

A recent movement in the direction of positive psychology within entertainment research, along with results that contradicted the hedonism principle (Gibson et al., 2000; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003; Strizhakova & Krcmar, 2007), has contributed to interest in examining somber entertainment from a *eudaimonic* approach. In Zillmann's (2000) discussions of pleasure-seeking motives for entertainment use, he hints at the possibility that highly intense emotional states could halt spontaneous hedonism because "diversionary stimulation would interfere with instrumental coping efforts and subsequently tends to be avoided" (p. 109). In a seminal work, Oliver (2008) showed that individuals who experience meaningful affect, which is a blend of positive and negative responses, prefer sad drama and films that grapple with the human condition. Tender or meaningful affective states are complex feelings that include sad affect, but not exclusively, and are associated with "empathy, warmth, kindness, and connection" (p. 44). These results suggest that people who are in a somber mood are more attracted to somber materials about human struggle because it enables them to cope with their emotions. Further, Oliver and Raney (2011) showed that meaning-seeking motives (e. g., "I like entertainment that makes me more reflective") are related to preferences for films that evoke meaningful affect, but unrelated to preferences for "fun" films. Conversely, pleasure-seeking motives are associated with "fun" film preferences, but not meaningful film preferences. Thus, entertainment psychologists have provided a path towards resolving the "paradox" of tragedy's appeal by proposing a eudaimonic framework that provides a counterpart to the hedonism principle for instances where individuals seek life meaning and human truths.

Contemporary perspectives on the empirical study of aesthetic emotions are aligned with the eudaimonic framework. Menninghaus et al. (2019) argue that "feeling moved" while engaging with an artwork, which is a favorable evaluation implying "artistic achievement" (p. 177), is an exemplary aesthetic emotion. Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) use of the term *appreciation*, or a deeper, more reflective, and longer-lasting form of gratification, is similar to the experience of being "moved" and associated with "complex blends of emotions and cognitive responses" (p. 59), including a mixture of negative and positive emotions. The element of negativity, especially sadness, that is constitutive of mixed emotional responses plays a crucial role in enhancing this experience of "feeling moved." Menninghaus et al. (2019) explains that negative emotions allow the audience access to three facilities: "attention, emotional involvement, and memory" (p. 179). By grabbing and involving the audience and tapping into pri-

or experiences that resonate with the artwork, the negativity within a mixed emotional experience amplifies its overall positive outcome (Menninghaus et al., 2019). This intensifying function of negativity may also be present in the unfolding of tragic narratives, but the negativity from tragic endings seems to serve a different purpose. Tragedy's specific focus on human vulnerability, particularly when the protagonists' fortunes are reversed near the denouement, is not balanced by a positive counterpart, as is the case in meaningful stories. For example, in the film *Sophie's Choice* (1982), the irrevocable decision of choosing one child over another during The Holocaust left the protagonist with the guilt and pain that eventually led to her self-destruction. Through an emphasis on human vulnerability to cruelty, loss, and despair, tragedies highlight the bleakness of human existence as a salient life meaning.

Reconceptualizing Catharsis as Emotional Clarification

The following sections of the present chapter revisit the idea of catharsis. An argument will first be made to establish tragedy as a thought-provoking genre, followed by an account of the long-accepted, but debunked notion of catharsis as emotional venting. Then, the catharsis concept will be revived through an alternative conceptualization called *clarification* that accounts for the cognitive processing of aroused tragic emotions. Disclosure research from social psychology will be drawn upon to understand the processing of tragic emotions and the possibility of subsequent, delayed outcomes. Finally, a definition of *cathartic reflection* will be offered and recent as well as ongoing experimental tests of the construct will be described.

The salience of negativity in tragic entertainment experiences has implications for depth of processing. Koopman (2010) argues that depictions of pain and suffering in literary fiction encourage "empathic unsettlement," which provokes critical reflections on audiences' own responses to the portrayals. Reviews of research on negativity bias have concluded that negative events, including those depicted in fiction and other media, not only garner greater attention, but encourage greater psychological elaboration (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). These effects of negative information are likely due to its "greater informational value than positive ones" (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990, p. 45) and to its greater "urgency" than positive stimuli (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Empirical evidence ranges from our tendencies to elaborate distressing

judgments more than positive evaluations about ourselves and others to journalists' and popular writers' greater devotion to negative rather than positive events (Baumeister et al., 2001). In the context of entertainment psychology, a more moving film experience has been found to naturally promote a greater degree of processing (Bartsch et al., 2014). Bartsch et al. (2014) examined participants' exposure to 6.5 minutes of a film about loss and redemption and found that feeling moved predicted reflective thoughts during and after the film; reflection was measured using Likert-type items as well as a thought-listing task that was coded for thoughts about character psychology, the film's morality and social reality, and audience introspection. Coupled with the fact that negative events are processed with greater depth and that somber media experiences promote contemplation, the arousal of tragic emotions should encourage deeper processing of distressing portrayals. In short, tragedies are naturally thought-provoking.

Although emotion processing is integral to the tragic entertainment experience, as suggested by entertainment research (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2014) and argued by Aristotelian philosophers (Belfiore, 1992; Nussbaum, 1986), mainstream psychological research on catharsis has focused solely on emotional expression or venting. The venting or purgation model of catharsis can be traced back to the work of Breuer and Freud (1964) who, at the turn of the twentieth century, sought to cure hysteria symptoms. The belief that relieving "pent up" emotions is a psychotherapeutic remedy eventually entered the popular imagination and persisted for several decades, including, to some extent, the present day. Geen and Quanty (1977) reviewed venting research, mainly studies of anger and aggression catharsis, and concluded that a person who becomes angry through provocation could not be reliably relieved of that anger or frustration through emotional venting, e.g., acting out physically by punching a bean bag. More recent research in anger studies have further contradicted the venting hypothesis by showing that angered participants who vented their anger tended to feel *more* angry and become *more* likely to act aggressively at a later time (e.g., Bushman, 2002). Less research has tested the venting model through tragedy exposure. In the few studies on the venting potential of tragedy, Zillmann (1998) reported an unpublished project that found a positive relationship between tragedy exposure and participant stress and depressed mood; this result contradicts the venting hypothesis. Further, consuming tragic drama did not relieve participants of angry feelings after an initial anger provocation (Zillmann, 1998). Taken together, the research from anger studies and media effects examined a conceptualization of catharsis that did not address the emotion processing that would have accompanied the arousal. Thus, a study on audience recep-

tion of tragedy and the potential for cathartic effects must account for the contributions of audience reflections to their emotional responses.

In social psychology, researchers have long noted the benefits of emotional processing. A research paradigm on emotional expression that began in the mid-1980s has established a causal link between written reflection about autobiographical events in a person's life and later health benefits, although the writing tends to produce short-term distress (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Expressive writing research has found robust benefits of emotional expression on physical and mental health, physiological functioning, and general wellness, usually assessed after a 4-week interval (Pennebaker et al., 1990; Pennebaker et al., 1988; Suedfeld & Pennebaker, 1997). Further, the most recent meta-analysis of research on emotional disclosure indicates that the procedure shows a modest effect size for health outcomes; despite producing much smaller effects than psychotherapeutic treatment, it is still considered effective because of its short duration and low cost (Frattaroli, 2006). In light of its replicated benefits, psychologists have been trying to uncover the underlying explanations of emotional expression. Although researchers have not agreed upon a single underlying mechanism that explains its health outcomes (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011), the evidence shows that emotional processing using language matters. In study 1 by Lyubomirsky et al. (2006), participants who wrote or talked about their "worst" negative life event reported improved subjective well-being and mental and physical health compared to those who thought privately about their events. Lyubomirsky et al. (2006) explained that the use of language to reflect on emotional experiences helps to organize one's thoughts about the event and promotes meaning-making, whereas unexpressed reflection may spiral into unhelpful ruminations. In short, extant research shows that emotional processing is generally beneficial, especially when recalled events are expressed in an externalized form, usually through writing or talking.

How feasible is the application of the disclosure paradigm to the unguided processing of tragic entertainment experiences? The method of processing in the emotional disclosure literature usually involves emotional expression or cognitive reappraisal (or both) of an upsetting, or traumatic autobiographical event that was previously concealed (Lu & Stanton, 2010), but the thought-listing task in somber entertainment research (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2014) is less structured. Bartsch et al. (2014) instructed participants to freely write "everything that crossed [their] mind during the film and after, even if it had nothing to do with the film" (p. 132). Consequently, the issue of whether disclosure-like reflections on entertainment are ecologically valid as a naturally occurring phenomenon appears debatable. Further, Bartsch et al. (2014) argued that the impact of emotion on cognition is bidirectional and "a self-sustaining cycle of

being moved and reflectiveness may occur” (p. 135) beyond the period of exposure to emotional content. However, such contemplations could spiral into circular ruminations that lessen the potential for gaining new insights. Research on *the social sharing of emotions* has also observed situations of spontaneous social discussions after pairs of viewing partners watched highly arousing film content (Luminet et al., 2000). In study 2 by Luminet et al. (2000), the researchers reported that the type of discussions that occurred the most between participants and their respective partners involve “expressing their feelings” about the emotionally intense film (75% of cases); discussion content was judged independently by raters who were blind to study conditions. A minority of partners discussed “release of tension” (under 35%) after experiencing the film (Luminet et al., 2000). Taken together, these results suggest that the use of the disclosure paradigm on tragic entertainment experiences is a supplementary intervention that provides additional guidance, rather than a naturally occurring “working through” of distressing and sad responses.

Although tragic portrayals may not trigger extensive processing in the majority of audiences, an added reflection procedure after tragedy exposure may promote similar processes as disclosure about an upsetting autobiographical event. Previous literary research has reported that having real-world loss, trauma, or traumatic loss predicts an involving reading experience that is disturbing and introspective yet uplifting (Kuiken & Sharma, 2013). An experiment by Greenberg et al. (1996) may have inadvertently addressed the impact of reflecting on tragic scenarios when they examined whether a disclosure task that uses an imagined but novel traumatic incident has comparable benefits to disclosing an autobiographical event. A pool of female participants with a history of trauma, e. g., violent assault and parental divorce, were recruited and randomly assigned to one of three groups: (a) disclosing a real trauma, (b) disclosing a researcher-assigned imaginary trauma that the participant has never experienced, and (c) writing about the physical space of a college campus, a non-emotional writing control group (Greenberg et al., 1996). Controlling for baseline levels of illness visits from physicians’ records, the results showed that both the real and imaginary trauma groups exhibited lower illness visits after 4 weeks of writing compared to the control group (Greenberg et al., 1996). When participants in the imaginary trauma group thought about a new emotional scenario and imagined themselves in that situation, their empathic involvement with another person’s circumstances resembled the processes of identification with fictional characters in a book or movie. These findings suggest that contemplating the emotional depictions in a tragic drama may also produce health benefits, if the reflectors undergo similar psychological processes to autobiographical disclosures.

Cathartic Reflection

In an attempt to account for both the arousal and cognitive processing of tragic emotions, Khoo and Oliver (2013) synthesized catharsis theory from the clarification perspective (Belfiore, 1992; Nussbaum, 1986) with the intervention from disclosure research (Greenberg et al., 1996) to propose a therapeutic model of tragic catharsis involving tragedy exposure and disclosure-like reflections on the audience's emotional experience. Khoo and Oliver (2013) argue that exposure to tragic narrative gives rise to negative emotional states that are likely to move the audience to think reflectively on aspects of the narrative (e. g., characters), and additional writing instructions may ensure that the reflectors have opportunities to express and *clarify* their presumably distressing experiences. Although this clarification activity can be brief (e. g., 3 minutes), the cumulative experience of tragic emotions and the attempts to clarify their meaning may set off and sustain an ongoing set of reflective processing that promotes insight and produces delayed effects. In time, those psychological processes may encourage personal growth that is observable in the individual's sense of wellness. Thus, cathartic reflection refers to a cognitive processing activity that helps the consumer of tragedy to acknowledge, clarify, and potentially assimilate the experience of imagined distresses.

The therapeutic model of catharsis in this chapter focuses on promoting changes in the audience's sense of self. Media psychology and literary research provide possible underlying explanations for these latent self-transformations. One explanation is provided in the model of Temporarily Expanding the Boundaries of the Self (TEBOTS; Slater et al., 2014). Central to the TEBOTS model is the assumption of a naturally bounded selfhood and the continuous and sometimes tiresome effort required to maintain one's self-concept (Johnson et al., 2015; Slater et al., 2014). The experience of stories temporarily eases the constraints of one's unique self; by engaging in a fictional world, an individual can enter a wide range of universes and, through processes of involvement and identification, satisfy needs of agency, autonomy, and social connection via an imagined set of situations, environments, and characters (Slater et al., 2014). Further, the idea of TEBOTS is "distinct from escapist media use" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 198) because the individual is not driven to distract from or abandon the self, e. g., through substance abuse or ideological extremism (Slater et al., 2014). Importantly, narratives allow the individual to participate imaginatively with "the same socially complex world that is otherwise a source of stress and challenge to the self-concept" (Slater et al., 2014, p. 443). Consequently, catharsis can be understood as a process of potential self-transformation as the

individual grapples with their neglected past events (Sikora et al., 2010), while the boundaries of self are briefly loosened and allowed to grow through the “disturbance” of tragic emotions. These processes likely involve “metaphors of personal identification” (Kuiken et al., 2004), a form of engagement with literary works (e. g., poems) where the imagined world blends with “what readers know, believe, or feel about their own lives” (Miall & Kuiken, 2002). Further, the addition of the cathartic reflection task may encourage some individuals to undergo a process comparable to expressive enactment (Kuiken et al., 2004), where the entertainment experience resembles a mourning for a real-life experience of loss from the distant past (Khoo, 2016).

Testing a Model of Catharsis as Emotional Clarification

Khoo and Oliver’s (2013) model of catharsis as *emotional clarification* was tested in a lab experiment where college-age participants were measured at three points in time: (a) baseline measures 1 week prior to the experiment, (b) measures of responses to the stimulus and writing task on the day of the experiment, and (c) repeated measures 4 weeks after the experiment. Two award-winning Hollywood dramas about the loss of a teenage child and the fathers’ misdirected acts of revenge were used as the stimulus material. The cathartic reflection instructions, adapted from Greenberg et al. (1996), asked participants to (a) describe their most intense feelings brought up by the story, (b) clarify and make sense of those aroused feelings, and (c) interpret the meaning of the final scene (Khoo & Graham-Engeland, 2016). Although no main effects were found for cathartic reflection compared to a non-emotional writing control group, mediation analyses showed small but statistically significant indirect effects on mental health outcomes (Khoo & Graham-Engeland, 2016). More specifically, cathartic reflection indirectly predicted reductions in depressed mood and anxiety after 4 weeks. These indirect therapeutic effects were mediated by the use of words that indicate insight-gaining and discrepancies between present and ideal selves, which, in turn, predicted a 4-week rise in self-efficacy in managing sadness and self-compassion. The increases in emotional self-efficacy and self-compassion were associated with decreases in depressed mood and anxiety after a 4-week interval (Khoo & Graham-Engeland, 2016). In short, the manner of reflection had an impact on the positive effects of contemplating tragic drama on psychological health, especially by drawing insights from the portrayals and remaining open to characters’ traits and actions without judging them.

In a follow-up clarification study, Khoo (2016) examined the impact of the reflection component using a 2-condition lab experiment that compared cathar-

tic reflection with a tragedy exposure only group (control). Using the same film drama stimuli and reflection task from Khoo and Graham-Engeland (2016), Khoo (2016) showed that the college-age participants reported significantly higher enjoyment and appreciation in the treatment group than in the control group. Further, in an interaction analysis, the cathartic reflection group showed a positive association between self-perceptual depth (Sikora et al., 2010) and a 4-week change in self-compassion, whereas the control group did not display a link between personal introspection during the experimental manipulation and the outcome (Khoo, 2016). These results suggest that the reflection activity after a tragic drama is generally gratifying, and those who reported thinking deeply about their past life experiences showed improvements in their degree of self-acceptance over a 4-week period. Although this study did not measure health outcomes *per se*, it provides additional evidence that engaging with a tragic drama in a reflective manner can lead the viewer to think about their personal life experiences in a psychologically beneficial way.

Current Research

The clarification model of catharsis is a work-in-progress because the main effects of cathartic reflection after tragedy exposure have not been established and replicated. In an unpublished online experiment, Khoo (2017b) investigated the possibility that individuals who reported high subjective stress (Cohen & Williamson, 1988) may benefit from watching either a tragic drama (a reflective genre) or a light-hearted comedy (a less reflective genre); participants were also instructed to think about the film after exposure. Khoo (2017b) employed a similar clarification procedure as Khoo's (2016) cathartic reflection task in his main treatment group (drama plus cathartic reflection). In addition, two other "movie night discussion" conditions that use a less threatening reflection prompt than cathartic reflection were added to examine the impact of "comedy plus discussion" and "tragedy plus discussion"; these two movie discussion groups used identical instructions that asked participants to imagine having a brief conversation after the movie with their imagined viewing partner without being instructed to think deeply or emotionally. The control group wrote in a non-emotional way about sitting inside a cinema. In total, four conditions were compared to test cathartic reflection in the context of perceived stress.

Results showed no main effects of the experimental conditions on self-reported health outcomes, specifically 4-week changes in general health and ten physical health symptoms (e.g., headaches and muscle tension) (Khoo, 2017b). After controlling for gender, Khoo (2017b) found that the cathartic reflection

group, as expected, showed a stress-buffering effect on 4-week changes in physical health symptoms for individuals who reported above-average perceived stress prior to the experiment; the control group showed the predicted positive relationship between perceived stress and 4-week increases in physical symptoms (Khoo, 2017b). Further, the “tragedy plus movie night discussion” group also showed a similar stress-buffering effect on physical symptoms when compared to the control group (Khoo, 2017b). Finally, the “comedy plus movie night discussion” group was not significantly different from the control; in the comedy group, those who felt more subjectively stressed also showed diminished physical health 4 weeks after the study (Khoo, 2017b). These unpublished results show promising evidence that disclosure-like reflections or imagined film discussions about tragic entertainment experiences can lessen the negative effects of stress on physical health. Combined with the two previous findings (Khoo, 2016; Khoo & Graham-Engeland, 2016), the results in Khoo (2017b) could be understood as early evidence for the healing effects of cathartic reflection, specifically for individuals who reported above-average perceived stress.

Future Directions

The empirical exploration of tragic entertainment experiences using the clarification model of catharsis shows potential for reinvigorating the study of catharsis and contributing to the research on entertainment more generally. The potential stress-buffering capacity of reflecting on a tragic drama (Khoo, 2017b) aligns with the predictions of the TEBOTS model (Slater et al., 2014). Previous research had found that individuals with depleted self-control who later read a short story reported greater story enjoyment, favorable response, and transportation (Johnson et al., 2015). Applied to the stress-buffering result, individuals who experienced high stress (and who benefitted from the cathartic reflection/discussion conditions) likely had their finite self-control resources depleted and were in need of relief and repair. Subsequently, their engagement with the tragic narrative followed by the instructed processing likely provided opportunities to expand the boundaries of the self, which temporarily loosened their self-concept maintenance and relieved the pressures on their sense of self that are linked to the stressor. Future work on the effects of tragic entertainment on viewer responses and well-being may benefit from testing levels of identity threat and perceived stress as competing moderators.

Future work should consider other individual differences that may interact with cathartic reflection, such as the predisposition to be more reflective after a somber or negative emotional experience. Future studies may also consider

more conventional study designs to disentangle the unique contributions of tragic stimulus and reflection (e. g., emotional clarification versus no reflection) on health symptoms. Further, future work should also examine the underlying processes that could explain the delayed health effects. One promising avenue is to test variations on the reflection instructions to not only encourage emotional expression and clarification of tragic emotions but to also include a cognitive reappraisal task, which has been defined as “a positive change in the evaluation of stressors and/or the self” in autobiographical disclosure research (Lu & Stanton, 2010, p. 670). Applied to tragic entertainment research, participants may be instructed to reappraise their negative emotions from the tragic depiction and write about any positive thoughts they may have on their distressing responses. If the psychology of processing fictional tragedy overlaps with the processing of autobiographical events, clinical psychology research may offer useful insights on potential mediators of the benefits of contemplating tragedy, although the effects of processing tragic entertainment experiences are expected to be smaller by comparison.

Concluding Remarks

The present review of the various explanations for engagement with somber content has centered on processes that provide short-term gratification, as well as those that promote greater and deeper reflection, which are associated with longer-term benefits. Although engagement in hedonic entertainment has short-term therapeutic benefits (Lapierre et al., 2019; Sugawara et al., 2010), the greater research focus on pleasure and enjoyment corresponds with the tendency of viewers to prefer hedonistic genres, such as action/adventure films and comedies. The popularity of these genres speaks to the general belief that entertainment is intended to be leisure activity “that serves to release tension, to incite mirth, to give rise to thrills, and to provide distraction from worries” (Oliver et al., 2014, p. 856). Consequently, it is likely that even entertainment seekers who are in a negative or mixed affective state after experiencing a distressing day may select entertainment for pleasure rather than reflection. However, as the present review of cathartic reflection suggests, if individuals who experience negative moods related to human relationships decide to include somber entertainment in their media diet and reflect briefly on that experience, they may gain longer-term benefits. In sum, a good recommendation for entertainment use may be a combination of both hedonistic material as well as more emotional and reflective content plus a short reflection task or post-screening

discussion that may help the viewer grapple with aspects of their complex life experiences.

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