

Pace as a measure of aesthetic value

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Abstract

The overarching aim of the present paper is to suggest a new way of looking at fiction in use. Genette argues that the duration of an oral narrative is measurable, in contrast to the duration of a written narrative, which is determined by its performance (1988: 33-34). The duration of a written narrative must be converted into length of text, then into duration of reading in order to compare the duration of the narrative with the duration of reading. The present paper deals with yet another temporal relation: that between actual film or play duration and experienced duration, and how this relation is used in conversation. The paper provides insights into how cinema- and theatregoers use pace as a value measure. Hume asks how the speeded up pace of contemporary fiction “affect[s] audiences and their attitudes towards the text” (2005: 105). The paper examines variations in what slow and fast can mean when used to express a view on a cinema experience in a multiparty conversation. Baetens and Hume (2006) describe how a book can be judged as too fast or too slow paced. In the present study, a combination of reader-reception studies (cf. Fish, 1998) and discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992) is used as the point of departure. This approach has been called *discursive reception studies* (Eriksson Barajas and Aronsson, 2009), which entails a discursive-psychological analysis of reader-reception data. Such an approach provides opportunities to analyse the role of social interaction in the co-construction of the experience of watching a film or a play.

Keywords: reader response, empirical, discursive reception studies, film, theatre

1. Introduction

In an editorial in the premiere issue of *Scientific Study of Literature*, Peter Dixon and Marisa Bortolussi (2011) present a comprehensive collection of ideas about what can and should be done in the field (where literature is understood in a broad sense, including film and theatre). Yet, I would like to

make some additional suggestions. The study of mainstream consumers of fiction is still limited, as has been pointed out by, for example, Swann and Allington, who argue “that reading groups provide an example of how ‘ordinary readers’ – i.e. readers other than academic critics and professional reviewers – interpret and evaluate literary texts” (2009: 247). Dixon and Bortolussi point out the lack of a broader understanding of literature in context. What I would like to emphasize is a focus on the *practice* part of context: How, where, and in order to fulfil what needs and pleasures do we use fiction in everyday life?

I would also like to suggest a new subcategory of Dixon and Bortolussi’s (2011) tools for understanding context: tools for understanding literary practices. Dixon and Bortolussi (2011: 68) suggest that the “greatest challenge is the development of theories of the reader in context”. Learning more about literary practices would help us in “understanding literature in society” (Dixon and Bortolussi, 2011: 69). Willie van Peer also emphasizes our lack of knowledge concerning the role literature “fulfills in the lives of individuals and social groups” (2011: 1).

Heather Bailey and Jeffrey M. Zacks (2011: 72) argue for using longer, naturalistic narratives, instead of short, laboratory-contrived “textoids”, by pointing out that: “If you want to understand how people really read then, at some point, you have to study how people really read”. In line with Hall (2008) and Gerald C. Cupchik (2011), I would like to further suggest not only using naturalistic texts but also naturalistic reading situations (Eriksson Barajas, 2007). In the journal’s first editorial, van Peer states the aim of Scientific Study of Literature (van Peer, 2011: 5): “its methods will be interdisciplinary and empirical in nature and will include the whole range of humanistic and social science disciplines”.

In the research project described below, I have made observations using video and/or audio recorders to collect episodes of naturally occurring reception of theatre performances and films. The present investigation picks up on Dixon and Bortolussi’s challenge to lead the “empirical study of literature into the next stage of its existence” (Dixon and Bortolussi, 2011: 64).

First, I will provide a brief background to the project and describe the data collection. Second, I will give some examples in which pace is used as a measure of value of a film or a play.

2. Background

Genette argues that the duration of an oral narrative is measurable, in contrast to the duration of a written narrative, which is determined by its performance (1988: 33-34). He suggests that one must first convert the duration of the written narrative into length of text, *then* into duration of reading in order to compare the duration of the narrative with the duration of reading.

Both film viewings and theatre performances can be seen as oral narratives; thus, using the terms of Genette, they have a measurable duration.

The present paper deals with the temporal relation between the actual film or play duration and **experienced** duration, and how this is used as a way of judging whether or not the film or play was ‘good’. More specifically, the paper provides insights into how cinema- and theatregoers use pace as a value measure.

There has been a call in the research literature for such issues to be addressed. For example, Hume argues that contemporary fiction is fast paced. She asks how this frantic pace affects “audiences and their attitudes towards the text” (2005: 105).

In dialogue with Hume’s (ibid.) paper, Baetens and Hume (2006) describe how a book can be judged as too fast or too slow paced, arguing that the book will be seen as hectic or boring, respectively. They differentiate between the narrator, the implied reader and the empirical reader.

3. Method

The present project is one of seven projects in a directed initiative called “Our need for and use of fiction”, funded by The Swedish Research Council. The overarching aim of the project is to generate knowledge about the functions and forms of narrative fiction in our age.

I am studying what people do in everyday life with their experience of fiction, in this case a film or a play. My project is called: Talk about Film and Theatre as Social Interaction.

Given this focus, I chose a method of data collection other than, for example, interviews or questionnaires. I tried to come up with situations in which people talk spontaneously about films and plays they have seen – irrespectively of possible participation in a research study.

Certainly, thoughts and conversations about films and plays happen now and then in normal life, for instance, on the bus, around the coffee table at work.

When designing the study, I felt such naturally occurring events would be difficult to gather data on and, thus, to study. (Since then, I have come up with some good ideas about how to collect that kind of data using new digital equipment, but that will have to wait for an upcoming project!)

In light of this, I chose to collect data in two contexts: when cinemagoers talk over coffee after having seen a film and when theatregoers talk over coffee or drinks during the pause. Apart from providing a picture of people's views about the film or the play, this method of data collection also provides a picture of what people actually talk about in connection with a visit to the cinema or theatre.

In the present study, I combine reader-reception (cf. Fish, 1998) and discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992) approaches. I call this approach *discursive reception studies* (Eriksson Barajas and Aronsson, 2009), which entail a discursive-psychological analysis of reader-reception data. Such an approach provides opportunities to analyse the role of social interaction in the co-construction of the experience of watching a film or a play.

On the whole, the participants do talk about the film or the play. I have one extreme case, however, in which two young girls only say “What a strange film”, “Yeah, totally strange” at the beginning and then proceed to talk over coffee for 45 minutes without saying anything that, as far as I can see, has anything to do with the film they just watched. Most conversations alternate

between fiction, coffee and other topics, whereas the film-club participants talk about film 90 per cent of the time.

My analytical unit is thus *talk* after films and during theatre pauses. I strived for variation and breadth when collecting the data. A total of 31 conversations were recorded (16 after seeing a film and 15 during the theatre pause). The data comprise three different plays and 14 different films, talked about by 39 cinemagoers and 44 theatregoers (see Appendix 1-2). The data collection took place at several cultural institutions: two local city theatres; one independent theatre; two cinema complexes; two film clubs. A local cultural institution arranged the film clubs. To ensure the participants' anonymity, the specific institution is not revealed.

4. Preliminary findings

In the data, I found different ways of talking about pace, and that the participants used pace as a measure of value. As you will see in the examples, the participants discriminate between different paces, remark about fictional temporality and make their appreciation of those features part of their critique of the film or the play they have just seen. However, they do not use the terms literary scholars would have used to describe the same features. I do not know whether they are aware of the relevant literary terms, or whether they learned such terms in school. What I find interesting is that they actually note the features and use them to form their opinion about the film or play they have just experienced.

Examples of when a long film is experienced as having been short in duration, and therefore perceived as good, are presented below.

Excerpt 1. Iron Lady

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001 Ada: → I thought the time went really fast. I didn't think it was
002 Ada:   going to end (.) when it ended. (0.2) one hour forty-five
003 Ada:   that's a pretty long time
004 Bea: → No it didn't feel especially long, really.
005 Ada:   it wasn't - no (.) I was a little disappointed when it was
006 Ada:   over
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In Excerpt 1, both Ada and Bea mention the *discrepancy* between real time and experienced time: 'time went really fast' (line 1) and 'it didn't feel

especially long' (line 4). Ada adds her disappointment that the film had ended. Tentatively, I argue that feeling absorbed by the film, or another form of fiction, is perceived as positive.

Excerpt 2. True Grit

001 Gun: → It was slow at first so I dozed off a little then it was
002 Gun: pretty exciting [so that it-
003 Siv: [yeah, yeah
004 Gun: Yeah, <don't think> (.) it was so bad

According to Gun, the film was so slow that she almost fell asleep; however, it became 'pretty exciting' and thus did not cause drowsiness. In this example, there appears to be a contradiction between slow and exciting.

Excerpt 3. Angels in America

001 Eva: but I think it's very good
002 Tom: → good but long, right?
003 Eva: yes four hours
004 Maj: another two hours then
005 Eva: yeah four hours with the pause
006 Maj: oh with the pause then?

In Excerpt 3, three friends discuss the length of the play *Angels in America*. Hence, their judgement goes from 'very good' (line 1), to 'but long', meaning not particularly good after all (line 2). In this way, a piece of fiction that is very good can lose some of its qualities if it is experienced as being 'long'. In relation to Excerpt 1, Tom did not feel absorbed to such an extent that he did not experience the time passing.

Excerpt 4. Hugo Cabret

001 Per: so you're not a fan of long films, are you?
002 Mia: → yes it depends on how good they are ... so *Titanic* like works
003 Mia: since it's as good as it is so it works being so long,
004 Mia: but often they fill it out with so much else, like
005 Mia: I saw *Lord of the Rings*

Mia talks about the variation in the relation between length and quality: In her view, if she likes a film it can be long, and the better a film is, the longer it can be.

Excerpt 5. Hamlet

001 Moa: I've never seen one like this before
002 Ali: x?
003 Eme: well, because I've seen the other one I think that

004 Eme: this one is much better, much easier to watch
 005 Moa: → yeah, well it is x good, because when 40 minutes had passed
 006 Moa: I thought it was 20 minutes max, it must be really warm up
 007 Moa: there on the stage when you have all those clothes on and
 008 Moa: things

Here Moa, starts out talking about the quality of the play, stating that it is good because she did not experience the time passing: ‘well it is x good, because when 40 minutes had passed, I thought it was 20 minutes max (line 5-6).

5. Summarizing thoughts

In the examples above, the experience of time is used in different ways to discuss the quality of the film or the play. Using the notions of Baetens and Hume (2006), this is connected to empirical “readers” of film and theatre and the different ways in which they orient to variation in pace as well as to how notions of slow and fast pace are used to express views on a film or theatre experience in multiparty conversation.

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Appendix 1. Overview of theatre data

Play	Theatre goers	Location for talk	Showing of play
Hamlet	2 female friends and a couple	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Hamlet	3 men and 1 woman	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Hamlet	10-party company	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
SCUM Manifesto	2 couples	Café (after)	Evening, independent theatre
Angels in America	Mother and daughter	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Angels in America	3 female friends	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Angels in America	4 men, 2 women	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Angels in America	1 couple	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Angels in America	1 couple	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Angels in America	1 couple	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Hamlet	2 women	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Hamlet	1 man with girlfriend and her mother	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Hamlet	1 couple	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Hamlet	2 couples	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre
Hamlet	2 men, 1 woman	Theatre café	Evening, local theatre

Appendix 2. Overview of cinema data

Film	Cinemagoers	Location for talk	Showing of film
One Day	1 couple	Bar	Night, SF
Jane Eyre	2 female friends	Tea-shop	Senior Day Cinema, SF
My Afternoons with Margueritte	1 couple	Café at cinema	Senior University, independent cinema
My Afternoons with Margueritte	1 couple	Café at cinema	Senior University, independent cinema
True Grit	2 sisters	Café at cinema	National Pensioners' Organisation, independent cinema
My Afternoons with Margueritte	1 couple + 1 female friend	Café at cinema	Swedish Association for Senior Citizens, independent cinema
Simon and the Oaks	2 female friends	Café	Early night SF
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo	2 friends	Café/Bar	Early night SF
Iron Lady	2 female friends	Café	Early night, SF
Cairo 678	Film club	Cultural institution	Individually seen, independent cinema
The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel	4 female friends	Café	Early night
We All Loved Each Other So Much	Film club	Cultural institution	Individually seen, independent DVD
Cockpit	2 female friends	Café	Afternoon, SF
We Are the Best	Film club	Cultural institution	Individually seen, SF
Nobody Owns Me	Film club	Cultural institution	Individually seen, SF

Appendix 3. Original Swedish transcriptions

Excerpt 1. Iron Lady

001 Ada: → Jag tyckte tiden gick väldigt fort. Jag trodde inte det
002 Ada: skulle vara slut (.) när det var slut. (0.2) en och fyrtiofem
003 Ada: det är ganska lång tid
002 Bea: → Näe den kändes inte speciellt lång, så.
003 Ada: den var inte- nej (.) jag vart lite snopen när den var slut

Excerpt 2. True Grit

001 Gun: → De va långsamt först nästan så ja nicka till lite sen vart
002 Gun: de'ju spännande [så att de-
003 Siv: [ja, ja
004 Gun: Ja↑ <tycker inte> (.) han ((syftar på filmen)) va' så dum

Excerpt 3. Angels in America

001 Eva: men det är väldigt bra tycker jag
002 ? : (um)
003 (3)
004 Tom: → bra men långt va?
005 Eva: a: [fyra timmar
004 Maj: [(då är det) två timmar till sen då
005 Eva: fyra må paus
006 Maj: fyra må: paus?

Excerpt 4. Hugo Cabret

001 Per: så du är inget fan av långa filmer då kan man säga?
002 Mia: Ja det beror på bra de är är.. så *Titanic* funkar ju den är så
003 Mia: → pass bra så det går ha den så lång, men ofta ska de fylla ut
004 Mia: med så mycket annat, som *Sagan om ringen* såg jag

Excerpt 5. Hamlet

001 Moa: jag har aldrig sett en sån förut
002 Ali: x?
003 Eme: nä, men eftersom jag har sett den andra tycker jag att
004 Eme: den här är mycket bättre, mycket lättsammare att se på
005 Moa: → ja men den är x bra, för när det hade gått 40 minuter,
006 Moa: trodde jag att det gått max 20, måste vara jättevarmt på
007 Moa: scenen när man har kläder och allting