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Title: 3S_JOURNEY

Genre: abstract collage

Size: 8 ½ in x 2 ¼ in

Material: paper, foam, paper cement, plastic laminate

Andriy Bilenkyy is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at the University of Toronto. He specializes in aesthetics and philosophy of art, especially where those intersect with philosophy of language and metaphysics. His artwork straddles the line between representational and abstract art, particularly in collage and mixed media. His method involves breaking down pre-existing representational images into their no-longer-representational constituents, and then mixing and recombining those into evocative abstract pieces. More of his work can be seen on Instagram at [@modus.catus](https://www.instagram.com/modus.catus).

Letter from the Editors

Dear ASAGE Readers,

We thank you for your continued support of the *American Society for Aesthetics Graduate E-Journal*, which is in its thirteenth edition in 2021. This issue contains two Fast Philosophy submissions, with replies, and a book review.

The first Fast Philosophy article by Damian Fisher (University of Kansas) is entitled “The Paradox of the Emotional Responses to Fiction is Conceptually Misguided.” In this work, Fisher provides a sharp and concise diagnosis of the titular paradox, suggesting that it is not precise in its predominant formulation. Fisher then suggests that the paradox can be dissolved when clarified using a Parsons-Meinongian metaphysic.

This issue includes two replies to Fisher’s piece; the first is from Andriy Bilenkyy (University of Toronto). Bilenkyy notes that Fisher’s position looks quite promising if one is interested in explaining the actual/metaphysical mechanics of emotional responses to fiction. That noted, he challenges Fisher’s view by raising two concerns about whether it explains the normative appropriateness or fittingness of emotional responses to fiction.

The second reply to Fisher is from Brian McNiff (NYU). McNiff compares the paradox of emotional responses to fiction to the phenomenon of emotional recalcitrance, suggesting that they are closely related, if not the same phenomena. McNiff’s comparison is both illuminating and potentially expands the scope of Fisher’s work.

The second Fast Philosophy article by Austin Fuller (CUNY-GC) is entitled “Making *Minecraft* Magic: Art as the Medium.” Fuller suggests that some games, such as *Minecraft* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, can be both artworks themselves and artistic mediums. Drawing from Lopes’s *A Philosophy of Computer Art*, Fuller suggests that creation-based games can be devices for the creation of further works of art, and not simply works with multiple displays.

This issue includes one reply to Fuller’s piece from Tylor Cunningham (University of Tennessee, Knoxville). Cunningham, using Semple’s infamous Pinkest Pink pigment and Photoshop as comparisons, asks whether these creation-based games are best classified as tools. He then wonders whether these games, if they are tools, can really be classified as works of art themselves.

The issue concludes with a book review by everet smith (Emory) on *Mary Coffey’s Orozco’s American Epic: Myth, History, and the Melancholy of Race*. In this review, smith offers a clear and lively analysis of the methods and stakes of Coffey’s piece, and draws insightful parallels between Coffey’s and Orozco’s relationships with their readers.

The Editors at ASAGE want to ensure that the journal provides graduate students with useful opportunities for career and research development and fostering community. Thus far we have done this by being a venue where graduate students can publish while retaining copyright over their work. With the introduction of Fast Philosophy and an emphasis on non-traditional submission formats, we hope to turn ASAGE into a place where graduate students can share their new ideas, further develop

them, and engage in written dialogues with other graduate students. This noted, we would like to highlight the call for Fast Philosophy Submissions for the next issue.

A Fast Philosophy submission raises a question or presents an underdeveloped idea or fringe topic in aesthetics in a maximum of 1000 words. Replies to initial submission are then solicited in order to start a discussion between graduate students and professors. The initial submission and replies are then published as a set. We envision the Fast Philosophy submission format as an online supplement to the kind of research development often done at conferences, where students can make connections and share resources, develop and refine their arguments, and strengthen papers to submit to other journals for publication.

Making ASAGE useful to graduate students in aesthetics is our primary goal, if you have suggestions for ways the journal can be improved, including content that you'd like to see featured, submission formats that you think would be beneficial, or suggestions for how we can run the space more effectively, please let us know at asa.graduate.ejournal@gmail.com. Thank you for reading.

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The Paradox of Emotional Responses to Fiction is Conceptually Misguided

Damian Fisher

The paradox of emotional responses to fiction (hereafter, PERF) is the problem of how anyone can respond emotionally to nonexistent objects or objects we do not believe to exist. Here I focus on two claims better suited for a longer format. These claims are:

- (1) (PERF) is not conceptually clear, and consequently current arguments do not sufficiently explain whether (PERF) is about the properties of an object, its existence, or both.
- (2) (PERF) is about the properties of an object, specifically the nuclear properties of an object.

1. Preliminary Remarks

(PERF) arises from the conflict of three conditions obtaining:

- (C1) *Response*: People ordinarily experience genuine emotions toward fictional characters, situations, and events.
- (C2) *Belief*: People ordinarily do not genuinely believe in the existence of fictional characters, situations, and events.
- (C3) *Coordination*: People ordinarily do not experience genuine emotions toward objects they do not believe exist.

For example, Bob and Bill enjoy watching new movies on Fridays. They tend to respond emotionally. When watching *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Bob and Bill find themselves sufficiently moved to tears at Dobby's death. Bob and Bill do not believe that Dobby or house-elves exist, yet Bob and Bill experience genuine sadness at Dobby's death and the plight of house-elves. Bob and Bill meet (C1)-(C3). Bob and Bill respond with tears – (C1) – to the death of a fictional elf, Dobby, who they believe does not exist – (C2) – and Bob and Bill are crying because of an object they do not believe exists – (C3).

There are three categories of arguments for dissolving (PERF). These are Pure-Cognitivism, Non-Cognitivism, and Hybrid theories. I define each position as:

Pure-Cognitivism: For any person A, if A believes that p , A's belief in p sufficiently grounds some emotion, e , such that if e obtains for A, then A believes p .

Non-Cognitivism: For any person A, A's perception or feeling that p sufficiently grounds some emotion, e , such that if e obtains for A, then A perceives or feels that p .

Hybrid Theories: For any person A, A's emotion, e , is sufficiently grounded in belief, perception, feeling, or some combination of these.

Pure-Cognitivism rejects (C3), Non-Cognitivism rejects (C2), and Hybrid theorists may reject either (C2) or (C3). Almost no one seriously rejects (C1).

The problem with these arguments is that they do not justify *why* anyone cannot feel emotions towards fictional or nonexistent objects. This stems from the problematic formulation of (PERF) which does not specify if (PERF) arises from the properties of an object, the existence of an object, or both.

2. Nuclear and Extranuclear Properties

Terence Parsons outlines a theory for objects that includes nuclear and extranuclear properties, among other relevant distinctions which I do not discuss here.¹ I provide the definitions for nuclear and extranuclear properties and provide an example to illustrate each. Given all possible worlds, nuclear properties have two principles:

- (1) No two objects (real *or* unreal) have exactly the same nuclear properties.²
- (2) For any set of nuclear properties, some object has all the properties in that set and no other nuclear properties.³

Planes, trains, and automobiles are real objects. Harry Potter, Sherlock Holmes, the round-square are unreal objects.

For my purposes I will focus on a fictional or unreal object. There is only one object which has all the same nuclear properties as Harry Potter, HP₁. There may be any number of other Harry Potters, HP_n, with more or fewer nuclear properties. Take Harry Potter, HP₁, for instance. HP₁ will have only those nuclear properties that correspond to HP₁:

{*being Harry Potter, being pitiable, being scarred, ...*}.

Now if there is another Harry Potter, HP₂, then HP₂ will necessarily have different nuclear properties. We can say HP₂ has the nuclear properties:

{*being Harry Potter, being pitiable, being scarless, ...*}.

Following from (1)-(2), HP₁ is distinct from HP₂ in virtue of their distinct sets of nuclear properties. But it is not necessary that HP₁ or HP₂ exist, in part because existence is an extranuclear property.

Extranuclear properties are not nuclear properties. There are four categories of extranuclear properties: (i) ontological, (ii) modal, (iii) intentional, (iv) technical.⁴ Some predicates (e.g., extranuclear predicates)⁵ attribute extranuclear properties to objects and these fall into the categories above. For example: (i) “exists,” (ii) “is possible,” (iii) “is thought about by *x*,” (iv) “is complete.”⁶

This theory has strong explanatory appeal regarding (PERF). Regarding the extranuclear property, *being existent*, this theory treats the nuclear properties of real or unreal objects as primitive. If *being pitiable, being miserly*, etc. are primitive nuclear properties, this suggests (PERF) is about the nuclear properties of an object—*not* the existence or extranuclear properties of an object. If this holds, then (PERF) likely arises from the conflation of nuclear and extranuclear properties. This suggests (PERF) should be reformulated. I suggest that a Parsons style metaphysics is apt to reformulate (PERF) and

¹ Terence Parsons, “Nuclear and Extranuclear Properties, Meinong, and Leibniz,” *Notus* 12, no. 2 (May 1978): 137-51; Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980).

² Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 19.

³ Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 19.

⁴ Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 23.

⁵ Nuclear predicates are those predicates that pick out nuclear properties.

⁶ Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, 23.

sufficiently ground emotional reactions to nuclear properties of an object, rather than extranuclear properties.

3. Final Remarks

If this argument holds, then (PERF) is not precise in its current formulation, and I think this suggests two options for moving forward. One is to develop a longer argument with this Parsons-Meinongian metaphysics to dissolve (PERF). This should distinguish between characters, situations, and events and their respective possibility *and* obtaining. If not this, then sufficient argumentation for why these should stay conflated needs to be given. The other option is to develop an epistemology which sufficiently justifies (C1)-(C3) as currently formulated. For this type of approach work in group epistemology seems sufficient to handle this task.

Whether my argument for how to solve (PERF) is accepted or not, it should be clear that (PERF) is not clearly outlined in its current formulation and consequently current arguments seeking to address (PERF) are insufficient for the task.

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References

- Parsons, Terence. "Nuclear and Extranuclear Properties, Meinong, and Leibniz." *Noûs* 12, no. 2 (May 1978): 137-51.
- Parsons, Terence. *Nonexistent Objects*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980.

Reply to Fisher

Andriy Bilenkyy

Some of readers' responses to fictional objects seem phenomenally indistinguishable from emotional responses to non-fictional objects. If these responses are genuinely emotional, they surely are of a strange sort, and are importantly different from emotional responses to non-fictional objects. The dissimilarity between emotional responses to fictional objects and those to non-fictional objects is problematic or at least demands explanation.

In this thoughtful and well-researched piece, Damian Fisher argues that one's explanatory options are constrained by one's position on the grounding of emotions. On Fisher's presentation, the standard map of possible positions on the grounding of emotions is tripartite and consists of non-cognitivism, cognitivism, and the hybrid view. Fisher suggests, very reasonably, that this map is too coarse-grained for the task at hand, since it risks conflating positions that offer great explanatory promise with those that look less promising. He offers a way to subdivide two of those: cognitivism and the hybrid view, according to which emotions are grounded (respectively) in cognitive states only or in both cognitive and non-cognitive states.

On Fisher's view, we can subdivide those positions by considering the ways in which objects figure in the content of emotion-grounding cognitive states. In many cases, objects surely figure in such states as bearers of some properties. Is existence among those? The view that existence is a property might strike one as metaphysically problematic. Fisher suggests, plausibly, that it is not the case; after all, existence is treated as a peculiar but legitimate property in Parsons' metaphysics. Suppose Parsons is right, and existence is indeed a property. In that case, Fisher suggests, we can fine-grain the map by dividing cognitivism and the hybrid view into (let's call it this way) Parsonsian and non-Parsonsian varieties. Parsonsian cognitivists and hybrid theorists would argue that the cognitive states that ground emotions include those in which the objects of these emotions figure as anything but existing. Non-Parsonsian cognitivists and hybrid theorists would argue to the contrary.

I agree with Fisher that the Parsonsian varieties of both positions are philosophically legitimate. But how promising are they when it comes to the task at hand? In my view, that depends on the sort of explanatory work that we expect them to do, and, in particular, on what variation of the problem of emotional responses to fiction we want them to solve. Recall that the problem arises from a dissimilarity between emotional responses to fictional and non-fictional objects. Normally, subjects do not respond emotionally to objects they believe not to exist, and when they do, it seems reasonable to describe such responses as inappropriate; with fictional objects, such responses are common and seem appropriate. What are we interested in explaining, the commonality and mechanics of such responses or their appropriateness?

Suppose we are interested in the former. In that case, we would treat the Parsonsian varieties of cognitivism and the hybrid view as positions on the *metaphysical* grounding of emotions, that is (roughly), on what explains emotional responses and has a tight modal connection to them. Then we

could claim that emotional responses to fiction are different from those to non-fiction in that the former are grounded in cognitive states in which their objects figure as anything but existing. This is a plausible claim. One of its virtues is that it preserves the intuition that the objects of emotional responses to fiction are fictional characters and not, for example, general scenarios in which fictional characters serve as placeholders, as in Dadlez (2021).¹ Interestingly, the plausibility of this claim does not depend on the correctness of Parsons' metaphysics. Perhaps existence is not a property, or the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear properties is untenable. No matter; to explain the mechanics of common emotional responses to fiction, the cognitivist or the hybrid theorist only needs to claim that readers are, as it were, folk Parsonsians, not that their folk metaphysics or its refined variants are correct. Overall, if we are interested in explaining the mechanics of emotional responses to fiction, positions presented by Fisher look quite promising.

But suppose we are interested in explaining why emotional responses to fiction are not merely common, but appropriate as well. In that case, we would treat the Parsonsian varieties of cognitivism and the hybrid view as positions on the *normative* grounding of emotions, that is (roughly), on what explains appropriateness or fittingness of some emotional responses. Then we could claim that emotional responses to fiction are appropriate insofar as they are grounded in cognitive states in which their objects figure as bearers of all sorts of properties except existence, as long as those properties are normatively relevant to emotional responses. This claim has some initial plausibility but might be problematic for two reasons. First, it seems to commit Parsonsian cognitivists and hybrid theorists to the correctness of Parsons' metaphysics, and that commitment might be difficult to sustain. Second, it seems to commit them to the appropriateness of emotional responses to all non-existents, fictional or otherwise. And that is an undesirable outcome. It is appropriate to feel pity for the wretched non-existent *fictional* Dobby. But it is hardly appropriate to feel pity for the inhabitants of the unbearably hot non-existent *non-fictional* planet Vulcan. Positions presented by Fisher might be able to address these issues, and might, therefore, help us explain the appropriateness of emotional responses to fiction. To do that, they would require further refinements, and refinements would be quite in the spirit of Fisher's nuanced and careful discussion.

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¹ Eva Dadlez, "Art Fear and Loathing in Fictional Worlds: Quasi-Emotion, Nonexistence, and the Slime Paradigm," in *Art, Representation, and Make-Believe: Essays on the Philosophy of Kendall L. Walton*, ed. Sonia Sedivy (New York: Routledge, 2021), 74-93.

Reply to Fisher

Brian McNiff

In Fisher's insightful analysis of the paradox of emotional responses to fiction (PERF), I am reminded of emotional recalcitrance, a phenomenon in which one feels an emotion that is contrary to a belief that they possess such as fear in response to a knowingly benign object.¹ This can be illustrated with an example relevant to Fisher's project. Take watching a horror film, for instance. In this scenario, a rational person watching the film is not under the impression that what they are viewing is a real threat to them. However, this does not stop the film from eliciting strong emotion in the viewer. A fear response is felt and brings along with it all the associated phenomenal properties that it would in an instance of genuine danger (one's heart rate increases, their pupils dilate, etc.).

There are a number of important similarities between the (PERF) and recalcitrance. Firstly, both seem to indicate a level of disregard for an established belief that would otherwise contradict the emotion felt. Like in the case of (PERF), an instance of recalcitrance is seemingly agnostic to the facts of the matter of what is being reacted to. Just as Bob and Bill empathize with Dobby the house-elf despite not believing in his existence outside a work of fiction, so too does someone experiencing emotional recalcitrance feel the force of their emotions *in spite of* their belief to the contrary.

Secondly, the two have similar relationships with nuclear and extranuclear properties as described. For instances of recalcitrance, it would not be the extranuclear properties of the object that one is reacting to (i.e., that it exists), but rather its discernible nuclear properties that help to induce the emotion (the unnerving qualities of the horror film's antagonist, the shrieking of its soundtrack). Further, the exaggeration of any particular nuclear property could conceivably induce a heightened emotional response (if the film's script was more disturbing or its directing more effective at inducing fear). The same is, importantly, not the case for extranuclear properties as it does not make sense to say that any given object could have exaggerated extranuclear properties. Objects cannot, presumably, be said to "exist" more than they do or be more "possible" than they are.

While it would take more argumentation than could be provided for here, these preliminary similarities between (PERF) and recalcitrance would appear to indicate that the two are closely related if not the same phenomena. In seeming agreement with what Fisher argues for, I would hazard to guess that the (PERF) is itself simply an instance of emotional recalcitrance directed towards a given set of fictional characters, situations, and events and would thus be in need of dissolution if not reframing. In this sense human beings could be thought of as reacting emotionally to works of fiction just as they so often do to the content of the real world: in contrast with what reason would demand.

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¹ Michael S. Brady, "Recalcitrant Emotions and Visual Illusions," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2007): 273-84.

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Making *Minecraft* Magic: Art as the Medium

Austin Fuller

Currently it seems controversial for one to call video games works of art *as* video games and not as something else, such as a work of interactive film or literature, and it might still be controversial to call them works of art as one of those mediums. But I would like to presuppose that video games can be works of art as games, and what I want to suggest here may even be more controversial: while games can be works of art, certain games can *also* be a medium for artistic creation while still being a work of art itself. Games that I have in mind primarily are what are called creative or sandbox games, i.e., games that have little to no narrative and are primarily played for the sake of the game and not to finish some goal or objective. My paradigm example is the block-based *Minecraft*.

Minecraft gained somewhat of a cult following that's still alive to this day. The visuals of the game are completely block or cube shaped, and players can hit certain blocks with tools (or their hands) to gain resources and to build things with those same blocks they mined. But there is one thing in particular interests me. The game has two modes: "survival" and "creative." In survival mode the player has to deal with things like hunger, monsters in the world, taking damage from falling; but in creative mode, there little to no restrictions to what a player can do. They can fly, they take no damage, there are no monsters (unless players place them), and, most importantly, they have unlimited resources to build whatever they want. It is what players do in this creative mode that interests me the most here.

First, I would like to look at Dominic Lopes's *A Philosophy of Computer Art*, where he gives some insight on how interactive art such as video games involve the user or player. His paradigm examples of computer art aren't video games, but rather works such as *Telegarden* where users can visit a website to control a robot to tend to a garden, or *Project X* by Damian Lopez, which is another website that features verse detailing the story of Vasco da Gama's voyage around Africa. However, every word of the text is a link to a different screen that "elaborates, opposes, or recontextualizes the previous screen."¹ *Project X* is interesting because this allows many different displays of the same work to be experienced, where perhaps each display is unique. But Lopes notices this leads to an interesting problem: if a work like *Project X* can be used to create many different readings, does it become less of a work or more of a device for creating new works?

Lopes brings up the example of magnetic letters that people use on refrigerators, and that these can be used to write poetry for example. But the thing about the magnetic letters is that we do not appreciate the letters themselves, rather we appreciate the works we can create with them. Lopes says that the magnetic letters can either be merely a device for generating poems or it can be a single work that has many varying displays—just like *Project X*.² The big difference for Lopes seems to be that, in the case of *Project X*, we appreciate both the single display and the work itself, similar to how one might enjoy a certain version of a composition and still appreciate the original score.

¹ Dominic McIver Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 22.

² Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art*, 54.

This is where *Minecraft* can come back in. As I said before, *Minecraft* features a creative mode that allows players to do things in the world of *Minecraft* that are similar to what people do with LEGOs. We wouldn't say that *Minecraft* isn't a single work, since we do appreciate the original work/game itself, but *Minecraft* can also be used as a device to create amazing works of computer art. Players can create massive castles and other infrastructure, create models of things from the real world, recreate works of art such as the *Mona Lisa*, or even create their own original visual works similar to paintings. It turns out that making these types of art in *Minecraft* can be extremely popular, too. And this is why it is such a great example of a work of art that itself can be used to generate a new form of art even if it might be niche. Another example of a (non-video) game that could be seen this way is the tabletop classic *Dungeons and Dragons*. Players are given the rules and resources, but they themselves create amazing stories and situations with the tools they are given. Both *Minecraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons* are different from the magnetic letters, since they do seem to be more like a single work, but they *can also* be devices.

For this reason, I think it's fair to ask questions such as: can a work be both a work with multiple displays *and* a device for creating new works? Or is it possible for a work of art to be turned into a medium of art? Examples like *Minecraft*, where the creations that players build are almost as popular as the game itself, might show that they can be appreciated apart from the game itself, while still somehow being *a part* of the game. In my view, it's fair to say that something like *Minecraft* or *Dungeons and Dragons* can be seen as both something like *Project X*, where it is one work with many varying displays *and* as something like the magnetic fridge letters, as a tool to *create* those varying displays as works of art.

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References

Lopes, Dominic McIver. *A Philosophy of Computer Art*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Reply to Fuller

Tylor Cunningham

“Making *Minecraft* Magic: Art as the Medium” raises an interesting question about the variety of mediums we can use when pursuing artistic endeavors. The author posits that certain kinds of art, like games, can be used by players to form their own works of art. The two examples that they use are *Minecraft* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. Since these are relatively complicated cases, I think it might be helpful to start from what I think is a clear example of art being used as a medium, supporting the author’s thesis.

Originally, the “Pinkest Pink” was developed by Stuart Semple in response to Anish Kapoor purchasing exclusive artistic rights of Surrey NanoSystem’s newly developed Vantablack pigment in 2016. Semple created it for widespread use and specifically mentioned on his website that it wasn’t for use by Anish Kapoor. On its own, the entire stunt seems to be exactly the kind of thing we would call art. It’s a creation with an intended message behind it. It just so happens to also be a material used in the creation of other people’s art. That is why they’re purchasing it.

So, what about the art of *Minecraft* or *Dungeons & Dragons* is being used in subsequent creations? If what makes *Minecraft* a work of art is the fact that it’s a game, then something about its being a game needs to be involved in the player’s creation of their own art within the sandbox. My first thought is that it’s not enough that players are using tools created within the program. With other digital artistic spaces like Photoshop, there are a variety of tools that someone can use to create their own works of art, from brush and smudge tools to blur effects. I take these to be analogous to the various materials that exist within *Minecraft*. So, while these artists are using Photoshop to create art, Photoshop is not a work of art itself. It’s more a toolbox that allows for the creation of art.

Minecraft, as the author mentioned, is a work of art in virtue of its being a game. I think that the analysis is correct as long as the fact that it’s a game can be preserved in the sandbox mode where these creations are happening. At least one interpretation of games challenges that possibility, however. Bernard Suits, for example, says, “Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”¹ On Thi Nguyen’s analysis this means that the medium for games is player agency: “The game designer crafts for players a very particular form of struggle and does so by crafting both a temporary practical agency for us to inhabit and a practical environment for us to struggle against.”² If it’s true that what makes games art is their ability to manipulate agency through artificial struggles, then sandbox modes where the limitations of the game are removed for the sake of creativity seem to be removed from the category of games *as art*.

It’s possible that there is something else in non-Suitsian games, games like make-believe games or sandbox games, that makes them art. I’m not sure what this would be. So, work would need to be

¹ Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, 3rd ed. (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014), 43.

² Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2020), 17. It’s important to note that Nguyen himself thinks that Suits’ account of games is incomplete as he mentions in 6n4. There are other types of games, though I wonder if a lack of agential modification makes them art.

done to establish these kinds of games as works of art, as opposed to mere tools like Photoshop, to motivate a claim that art can be used as a medium for the creation of further art. I suspect a helpful place to start would be the distinction between physical and artistic medium raised by Joseph Margolis.³ Nguyen summarizes the distinction, “For example, in paintings, the physical medium consists of pigments applied to a surface, while the artistic medium includes various techniques, including brushstrokes.”⁴ Where Semple’s art would be used as physical medium in the creation of further art, I wonder if it’s possible that what makes creations in games like *Minecraft* art is the technique of the specific engagement of the system developers have laid out.

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³ Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy: Conceptual Issues in Aesthetics* (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), 1-42.

⁴ Nguyen, *Games*, 14-15.

Book Review

Orozco's American Epic: Myth, History, and the Melancholy of Race

MARY K. COFFEY

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. 2020. PP. 384. \$28.95 (PBK)

Mary K. Coffey's *Orozco's American Epic: Myth, History, and the Melancholy of Race* challenges understandings of linear time, interpreting José Clemente Orozco's Dartmouth cycle from "the space of the crisis, where the 'Modern Industrial Man' reclines with his book" (37). This opens the space for her reading of Orozco's work through the lens of Walter Benjamin's "melancholy dialectics," her focus on the "Modern Industrial Man" implicating readers in Orozco's critique of history. In working through how Orozco implicated his viewers, Coffey's investigation of myth and redemption likewise implicates her readers. As Benjamin and Orozco did, Coffey demands we see "the concerns of an oppressed past as our own" (114).

Coffey's work is particularly innovative in that she distances Orozco's method from his contemporaries Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, as it is easy to assume they are motivated by similar political goals. Rivera's and Siqueiros' work is characterized by the translation of tangible history into pure discourse, and an attempt to manifest Marx's material dialectics, respectively. Orozco, however, depicted his ideas as visual constellations, using the excessiveness of images to address the mutability of our past. Orozco's work therefore exemplifies the Benjaminian constellation rather than the traditional dialectics of his contemporaries.

Putting Benjamin's interpretation of historical materialism into practice, Orozco engaged with the continuum of history rather than observing it as a stagnant object of study. Coffey describes his *Epic of American Civilization* as a pure dialectical image that examines the past as dynamic, creating a space for the past to disrupt the present and for critical engagement with repressed events, particularly our complicity as Americans (on both sides of the border) in the violence that inaugurated South and North America. The mural and Coffey's interpretation suggests that we are responsible for reimagining both spaces "the way [they] would have to be imagined at any of its moments in accordance with the idea of redemption" (69).

Chapter two explores the role of myth and its relationship with history. Coffey examines the tensions produced at the moment of contact in 1519 between the eschatological time of Catholic conquistadores and the cyclical time of the Aztecs. Orozco's mural depicts the Quetzalcoatl myth deployed by both the Spanish and the Aztecs to legitimize their political power, illustrating the impossibility of reconciliation following the meeting of these two cultures. Coffey shows that these moments of conflict cannot be overcome by reconstituting a past Indigenous mythos, emphasized by a Quetzalcoatl who is incapable of bridging the gap between the "crisis of the now time" and the "has been" (61).

Addressing the ramifications of political engagement with an "oppressed past," chapter three pursues an interpretation of Orozco's *Epic* as a *Trauerspiel*, or "mourning play." This interpretation sets

Orozco apart from his contemporaries who, in the spirit of Marxist thought, depicted history as a triumphal march of historical progress. Situating modern America as a “traumatic inheritance rather than an enlightened project,” Orozco’s engagement with melancholy dialectics raises questions as to what sort of political actions one might take in the face of the mourning, sorrow, and misery felt in the modern era (122). Coffey’s interpretation serves to “[ground] a different historical materialism... an alternative formulation of messianic politics” (122).

Orozco’s messianism recalls Benjamin’s conception of “weak messianism,” wherein we become material historians by turning *toward* the theological to “win the philosophical game of history” (184). Perhaps to awaken this weak messianism, Coffey analyzes Orozco’s supplement to the *Epic*, “Modern Industrial Man.” The racial ambiguity of the figure (often interpreted as *mestizo*, Mexican, or black) expresses the mutability of the past, the shifting constellations of ideas, and the uniquely “American feeling” each reading suggests. For example, reading the figure as black speaks to “the role that antiblackness [plays in situating] the violent bordering of ‘Anglo-’ and ‘Hispano-America’ and their respective racial imaginaries” (41). This fluidity of “Modern Industrial Man” problematizes identification, disidentification, and relationality, making demands on us to imagine and enact social justice even as we might be unable to “remediate the violence of the past” (41).

The stakes of Coffey’s analysis are offered in two examples of responses to Orozco’s Dartmouth cycle: Walter Beach Humphrey (1939), and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2002). Painted in Hovey Grill in 1937, Humphrey imagined a homogenous group of Dartmouth Men as the hypothetical viewers of his mural. He caters to the Anglo-American male with images of Dartmouth’s founder, Eleazer Wheelock and noble male “Savages” participating in drunken debauchery alongside scenes reminiscent of pinup magazines featuring Native women (topless or completely nude) looking at books upside down or playing with Wheelock’s European garments. A critic of Orozco’s cycle, Humphrey’s mural may be a direct response to the *Epic*. The clash between Orozco’s anti-modern primitivism and Humphrey’s modern primitivism is brought into sharp focus by the panel above the grill’s hearth featuring Wheelock amidst a group of Anglo-Saxon men in redface (272).

Coffey offers the “audiotopia” of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra Collective (LPNC) in 2002 to contrast Humphrey’s stunted response to Orozco. Done against the backdrop of Orozco’s mural, the performance affirms the “melancholia of disidentification that the vestigial blackface of Orozco’s ‘Modern Industrial Man’ puts in play” (261). LPNC engages in the drama of self-construction by creating “ethno-cyborgs” that take on their own life on stage, encouraging the audience to do the same. The performance shifts the understanding of identity as self/other to an inventive process, “rooted in violent fantasy [which is] also potentially transformative,” suggesting we must rethink the structure of “the two Americas” (284).

Coffey’s interpretations are, admittedly, highly speculative. Regardless, the book is a must-read for anyone with an eye toward innovative artistic interpretation, critical theory, or the political stakes of (re)imagining liberation. Synthesizing art criticism, historical analysis, and philosophy, the attention to detail presents a wealth of information that can prove difficult. This is to Coffey’s credit, as her engagement with Benjamin anticipates her rejection of linear narrative form. While initially it seems she only analyzes Orozco’s visual constellations, her writing constructs constellations that offer readers varied modes of engagement with the text. In disavowing Coffey’s interpretation, we find

ourselves trapped inside an immutable America. This fate manifests itself in the desire to “play Indian” reflected in Humphrey’s Dartmouth mural, removed in 2018 amidst protests. Only by becoming material historians ourselves can we create opportunities to decenter and reimagine “Man” and our national identities.

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