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# How Many Emotions Does Film Studies Need?

## A Phenomenological Proposal

**Julian Hanich**

**Abstract:** A look at current emotion research in film studies, a field that has been thriving for over three decades, reveals three limitations: (1) Film scholars concentrate strongly on a restricted set of garden-variety emotions—some emotions are therefore neglected. (2) Their understanding of standard emotions is often too monolithic—some subtypes of these emotions are consequently overlooked. (3) The range of existing emotion terms does not seem fine-grained enough to cover the wide range of affective experiences viewers undergo when watching films—a number of emotions might thus be missed. Against this background, the article proposes at least four benefits of introducing a more granular emotion lexicon in film studies. As a remedy, the article suggests paying closer attention to the subjective-experience component of emotions. Here the descriptive method of phenomenology—including its particular subfield phenomenology of emotions—might have useful things to tell film scholars.

**Keywords:** being moved, emotion research, fear, phenomenology of emotions, sadness, standard scenes

We don't discriminate carefully enough, you know,  
between things that seem alike but are different.  
You should always do that.  
—Richard Ford, *Canada*

It was a success story. Since the 1990s emotion research has been not only “one of cognitive film theory’s most central and lively research projects” (Nannicelli and Taberham 2014, 5) but also among the most enlightening areas in film studies more generally. Film scholars like Noël Carroll (1990), Murray Smith (1995), Ed Tan (1996), or Carl Plantinga (2009) have done a tremendous service to the field by illuminating when and why viewers experience emotions in the cinema. Yet for three reasons emotion research has lost parts of its momentum.

For one, there is an overly strong focus on just a few standard or garden-variety emotions films can evoke in viewers, emotions like fear, sadness, disgust, or anger (see, for instance, Grodal 2017). Beyond this narrow spectrum we can surely discover a wide field of emotions that have hitherto been neglected (Elpidorou 2020b). Here I am also thinking of emotions that are not directed at the narrative but at the film-as-artifact (Ed Tan calls them A-emotions [1996]) and aesthetic emotions more broadly construed (for recent takes on aesthetic emotions, see Menninghaus et al. 2019; Schindler et al. 2017 or Fingerhut and Prinz 2020). We may think of wonder, awe, or *rasa*. Second, even though research into garden-variety emotions may still be important, our understanding of them is often too monolithic and one-sided. Potential subtypes of fear, disgust, or sadness may consequently be subsumed under—and thus lexically “hidden” by—these umbrella terms and are therefore overlooked. Third, and maybe most importantly, when we watch a film, we undergo a wide variety of affective experiences so rich that our limited number of emotion terms does not properly map onto it. Emotions falling outside the existing range of terms may therefore be missed. For example, what would be the appropriate emotion term that grasps the exhilarated, good-humored emotion with which we respond to the happy ending of a feel-good musical like *Singin’ in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stan Donen, 1952) or a romantic comedy such as *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998)? In such instances we may leave the cinema light as a feather, ready to laugh at the world and embrace it, but terms like joy, happiness, amusement, or cheerfulness seem too coarse-grained and other nouns like exhilaration or elatedness are not established as emotion categories yet. Or how would one call the—not at all uncommon—emotion that can well up when recognizing on the screen an object or event that has formed one’s identity and is positively rooted in one’s memory, such as the small town one grew up in, the particular dialect of the region one comes from, a foundational toy that one has played with? It is a particular mix of pride and nostalgia (and maybe other emotions) that none of these individual terms can capture by itself.

Thus the current limitations of emotion research in film studies partly derive from the lack of a lexicon fine-grained enough to adequately cover our range of emotional experiences. Let’s face it: we have an impressively detailed vocabulary when it comes to film analytical categories—just think of genres, shot scales, or types of lighting—but we are much less well-equipped with regard to our emotional experiences. This is astonishing not least because “affective gratifications” are a key motivational factor for viewers to go to the cinema (Tefertiller 2017).

This article makes a straightforward proposal: I claim that it would be beneficial for film studies to not only expand the range of emotions it sheds light on, but also introduce more granular and well-defined terms for new subtypes

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of existing garden-variety emotions as well as entirely new emotion categories. Below I will show that this move has at least four positive ramifications. Moreover, I propose that phenomenology as a descriptive method—including its subfield phenomenology of emotions—grants us a wealth of insights in this respect. The fundamental goal of a comprehensive phenomenology of film is to take stock of and describe the dynamic, ever-changing, extraordinary richness of experience that comes with watching moving images. But to make this abundance manifest in words and via description, we cannot accept being locked in the iron cage of existing categories. Instead, we need to break out, if necessary, and come up with a more varied vocabulary. As it will become obvious later, part of the reason for the focus on garden-variety emotions and the limited range of emotion terms derives precisely from the neglect in film studies of what phenomenologists call the *lived experience* of emotions. My account can thus also be read as a plea to reserve a place for phenomenology in the tool box of scholars studying emotions.

My programmatic proposal is encouraged by a number of other emotion scholars who share this impression. Historian of emotion Tiffany Watt Smith (2015, 13) writes in her *Book of Human Emotions*, in which she lists, encyclopedia-style, some 150 emotions from the most widespread to the most uncommon: “what we need isn’t fewer words for our feelings. We need more.” Likewise, philosopher Andreas Elpidorou notes in an editorial to a recent issue of *The Monist* on neglected emotions (Elpidorou 2020b, 136–137): “if emotions were not many—if they were limited in number of distinct kinds—then their effects would be circumscribed and predictable, incapable of addressing the demands of a dynamic and changing world. . . . We need enough distinctions and categories so that our accounts are fine-grained enough to capture our experiences, and we need to study as many emotions as we can.” Film scholar Murray Smith (2017, 198) has also expressed his concern about his field’s strong preoccupation with garden-variety emotions. Not least, consider Jens Eder, one of the pioneers of a cognitive approach to emotions in films in the German-speaking world: “our picture of the affective field is still diffuse and incomplete.” Quoting philosopher Matthew Ratcliffe, Eder notes that both in philosophy and film theory “there has been a tendency ‘to focus on a fairly standard inventory of emotions and moods, including anger, sadness, fear, joy, grief, jealousy, guilt, and so on’ and to overlook ‘a range of other emotional states, many of which do not have established names’” (2016, 76).

I could not agree more, both with respect to the many affective phenomena that lie outside the range of emotions proper, such as affects, moods, existential feelings, sentiments and the like, but also, and more importantly for the present purposes, within the field of emotion research itself. The ever-growing number of emoticons on our smartphones indicates that Apple, Samsung, and other companies have understood what the makers of *Inside Out* (Pete Docter

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and Ronnie Del Carmen, 2015), with their joy-fear-anger-sadness-disgust-view of the emotional world, have not.

But what are we actually talking about when we talk about “emotions”? Psychologists and philosophers often define emotions with a component model according to which emotions consist of at least the following elements: the appraisal component that evaluates a given situation; neurophysiological changes of the body; a motivational component with action tendencies; a motor element with facial and other bodily expressions and instrumental actions; and a particular subjective feeling or experience (see, for instance, the overview of appraisal theories in Moors et al. 2013). This is clearly the model most widely endorsed in film studies, either explicitly or implicitly. As examples we could refer to the work of Ed Tan (2008, 33–34) and Carl Plantinga (2009, chapter 2). But emotion research also knows other influential theories, for instance psychological constructionism, which considers emotions as psychological “compounds” emerging from the combination of the three major “elements”: (a) the interoceptive sensations from inside the body called “affect,” (b) exteroceptive sensations from outside the body like vision, audition, and so forth, and (c) concept knowledge such as knowledge about “fear” or “sadness” that makes the interoceptive and exteroceptive sensations meaningful *as* emotions (see Barrett 2014; Lindquist et al. 2015). Note that I do not mention the psychological constructionist position—also known as Conceptual Act Theory—because it has had great influence in film studies (it has not), but because it ascribes a strong role to concepts and language, a point I will come back to.

Given that the emotions we experience when watching films contain all the components of everyday-life emotions (if in differently weighed proportions), the talk of quasi- or make-believe emotions (Walton 1978, 1990) seems to me strongly misleading—emotions experienced in the cinema are full-blown, genuine emotions (see also Williams 2019). However, there are good reasons to distinguish between genuine emotions occurring in pragmatic, real-life situations and emotions evoked by moving images and in aesthetic contexts more generally. As philosopher Jesse Prinz (2019, 906) puts it, “Cinematic emotions may constitute qualitatively different subtypes of the like-named categories. They are not make-believe, but they are directed toward make-believe worlds, and their impact is correspondingly different.” Our conceptual framings of a situation—pragmatic/real-life versus filmic/aesthetic— influences how we experience the emotion. For one, the filmic context always implies a certain distancing effect through the art schema, the representation schema and, in many cases, the fictional schema, all of which lead to a relative safety of the viewer and a sense of control which, in turn, involves different action tendencies and a different subjective experience.<sup>1</sup> If this is true, we might do well to indicate these differences in emotion experience by using a

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modified, extended, and more fine-grained vocabulary, one that film scholars should not feel shy contributing to.

### **Filmic Emotions and Ordinary Language Terms**

In psychological and philosophical emotion research there is an ongoing debate about the value of ordinary language terms. On the one hand, we find theorists who strongly advise keeping scientific language distinct from ordinary language (Fiske 2020b); on the other hand, we have theorists who maintain that the clarification and correction of ordinary folk languages is at least one aim of scientific research (Mun 2016, 248). For us, as film scholars, there might be good reasons to keep some ties to everyday language and lay people's discourses on film and therefore not to cut the ties to vernacular terms completely. On the other hand, I am only mildly optimistic that folk emotion terms can always be so successfully modified and clarified to help us in our discipline. While this might work in some cases (below "fear" will serve as an example), we will not succeed in other instances (here "sadness" will be a case in point). To some degree, the pragmatic use of language and the requirements of a scholarly discipline stand in conflict.

For one, current folk emotion terms are often ambiguous or coarse-grained. Psychologists Craig Smith and Leslie Kirby (2005, 38), for instance, write: "Many emotion words, especially those held to refer to 'basic' emotions, appear to encompass a variety of distinctive states that share some common core characteristics." Just think of Daniel Kahneman's suggestion to distinguish two emotions with the label "regret": a hot, short-term one and a wistful, long-term one (1995, 390–391). Scholars have subsequently moved on to identify three (Gilovich et al. 1998) or even five types of regret (Price 2020): hot, wistful, despairing, sickened, and bitter regret. We have seen similar attempts with regard to boredom: here scholars have distinguished three (Heidegger 1983), four (Doehleemann 1991), or five (Goetz et al. 2014) different types (but see Elpidorou 2020a). What counts for regret and boredom might well be possible for other emotions. There seems to be a wide consensus, for instance, that disgust knows different forms. Following psychologist Paul Rozin, Carl Plantinga (2006), dissatisfied with the breadth of the category of disgust, has distinguished three types in the cinema: core disgust, animal-reminder disgust, and sociomoral disgust (see also the category of "racialized disgust" in Flory 2016).

Or consider fear. As Smith and Kirby point out (2005, 38), terms like "fear" do "not refer to monolithic emotional responses, but rather refer to families of rather similar emotional reactions that share important characteristics in common, but also differ in substantial ways." Sharing some parts, differing in others—that is a crucial aspect to keep in mind. In terms of action tendencies or actions proper, for example, there can be substantial differences between fearing a dog, being afraid to speak in public, or feeling scared by a monster

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on the screen. In the first case we might ready ourselves to fight, in the second case we try to avoid the occasion, and in the third instance we prepare to escape by looking away. This shows that the category of fear is rather broadly construed, because readying ourselves for fighting, avoiding the situation, and fleeing are not the same action tendencies. The same goes for the core-relational theme or formal object of the emotion: While we could argue that we are appraising the objects as—broadly—“threatening” or “dangerous” in all instances, the way they are threatening differs considerably. Something can be threatening to my bodily integrity, to my life, to my psychological well-being, or simply to my current mood. Moreover, it can be dangerous right now or in the near or even distant future. Just because in everyday language we use the term “fear” for all of these cases does not mean that in scholarly discourse we should stick to this broad terminology. As Murray Smith has observed (2017, 76), “Discussion of fear in the movies alone is sufficient to fill at least one library shelf.” However, not enough has been done to systematize what subtypes of fear exist in films and how we can distinguish their experience, either by drawing on existing terms from the fear-family or by introducing new lexical items.

Yet the problem is not merely that vernacular emotion terms can be ambiguous and coarse-grained; often we simply do not have terms for emotions we experience. As Murray Smith (2017, 207) maintains, “our perceptual and emotional responses outstrip the capacity of language to render them . . . Just as we have no words for much of the perceptual knowledge that we possess, so we have no words for many of the complexes of emotion that we are capable of recognizing and experiencing.” Quoting what Diana Raffman (1993, 136) says about musical experience, Smith (2017, 214) claims that “the grain of conscious experience will inevitably be finer than that of our schemas.” Hence the non-existence of a term does not indicate that a given emotion is inexistent and not experienced in a specific culture, as it was sometimes claimed by extreme versions of social-constructionist emotion research (Colombetti 2014, 30; Shiota and Keltner 2005, 34). The emotion may well be experienced, but for various reasons a term has not been established yet.

In fact, the emotion lexicon of a given language and culture merely reflects the social construction of emotional prototypes a particular culture finds useful to discuss, not the experience of emotions (Shiota and Keltner 2005, 33). According to psychologists Michelle Shiota and Dacher Keltner (2005, 34), some emotions are widely recognized: their core prototype is elaborated on and variants are reflected in a more differentiated emotion lexicon. Other emotions in any given society can be underemphasized: “Because they are of less social relevance, are less socially desirable, or are actually experienced less often because the social structure discourages events or appraisals that trigger such an emotion, such words receive less conceptual elaboration and thus fewer

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words in the lexicon.” On top of that, a lack of emotion terms might also feed back into how we remember certain emotion episodes. Since underemphasized emotions are not part of social discourse, the respective emotion episodes may not “stick” as easily in memory as others.

As we will see in more detail below, here we find an important reason to come up with new terms: They might help us to describe more accurately the wealth of recurring emotional experiences in the cinema. As an example, take the two melodramatic standard situations that elsewhere I have dubbed (1) the “farewell-note motif,” in which a character either sends or receives a farewell message through a medium (Hanich 2015), and (2) the “death-news scenario,” in which a character is informed about the death of a loved one (Hanich et al. 2014). For lack of a better term, until recently film scholars and media psychologists tended to mislabel the viewer’s emotional response as “sad” (for research on the “sad-film paradox,” see for instance Goldstein 2009; Oliver 1993; Schramm and Wirth 2010). How can these viewers not be sad given that they are confronted with such unhappy, sorrowful scenarios and are often moved to tears? But just because these scenarios would be sad if one experienced them personally in real life does not mean that they evoke an unadulterated sadness in viewers. Here the conceptual framings of the situation and the various distancing effects mentioned above are crucial. And just because people also shed tears when they are sad does not mean that tears are not often connected to entirely different emotions. Think of tears of anger, happiness or disappointment. Hence there is something reductive, even experientially distorting to speak of “sadness” simply because the farewell-note motif and the death-news scenario would be sad for someone in a comparable real-life situation and may make viewers weep.

What would be a better word then? Today, many scholars think that a more adequate term is the new compound “being moved”—a term that a decade ago “would not have been said to be neglected . . . because it was not acknowledged even to exist,” Julien A. Deonna (2020, 190) observes. Over the past few years, scholars have put considerable effort into establishing this term as a proper emotion category. Some have further differentiated “being moved” into the subtypes “joyfully being moved” and “sadly being moved” (Menninghaus et al. 2015; Wassiliwizky et al. 2015; see also Cova and Deonna 2014; for an attempt to define the related emotion of *kama muta*, see Fiske 2020a). “Being moved” is a good example of an emotion for which the English language does not have a proper noun, whereas similar terms like *Rührung*, *ontroering*, or *commozione* can be found in German, Dutch, and Italian. Linguists call this phenomenon “lexical lacunae,” the lack of words corresponding to concepts for which other languages have words. Lexical lacunae may indicate that certain phenomena are underemphasized in a culture, because they are relatively unattended or little valued (Colombetti 2014, 30). However, to many scholars in

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empirical aesthetics, film studies, psychology, and philosophy, “being moved” seemed a pervasive and widely recognized emotion both in aesthetic contexts and in everyday life—and hence in need of this new term.

### **Advantages of a More Fine-Grained Emotion Lexicon**

Before I shall indicate one possible way to introduce new terms to our emotion lexicon in film studies, I think it is helpful to first clarify what exactly we would gain.

First, having a richer and more fine-grained lexicon will facilitate research on emotions we experience in response to films, because it will be easier and more efficient to communicate about these affective phenomena. Moreover, it will reduce the propensity to making attribution mistakes such as confusing sadness with being moved when researching melodrama and weeping viewers.<sup>2</sup> If scholarship presupposes a language with well-defined categories in order to communicate and understand phenomena more clearly, then we should avoid using categories that are overly ambiguous and fuzzy.

Second, a more sophisticated language can have an effect on the ability of viewers to distinguish their emotional states and become more effectively aware of what they affectively experience. According to Lisa Feldman Barrett, people can train to recognize more accurately their emotional states. People who differentiate very coarsely between individual emotional experiences have a low emotion granularity. But they can improve from low to moderate to high emotional granularity—and thus become emotion experts—by having more emotion concepts and emotion terms at their disposal: “Just like painters learn to see fine distinctions in colors, and wine lovers develop their palettes to experience tastes that non-experts cannot, you can practice categorizing [emotions] like any other skill” (Barrett 2017, 182).<sup>3</sup> Even if I do not fully endorse Barrett’s constructionism—partly because I think some universal basic emotions do exist—I find her emphasis on emotion concepts and names intriguing.

How are emotion concepts acquired according to Barrett? They are imparted through the collective knowledge of the people one grows up with and who train the meaning of these concepts through the words they use (Barrett 2017, 110; see also the well-known concept of “paradigm scenarios” in de Sousa 1987, 182). But concept learning does not stop in childhood—it continues throughout life. “There are many ways to gain new concepts: taking trips (even just a walk in the woods), reading books, watching movies, trying unfamiliar foods” (Barrett 2017, 180). But is this not good news for film lovers? They can learn a broader repertoire of emotion concepts by watching films, for instance if these concepts re-occur again and again in emotional scenes in mainstream cinema. Of course, not every emotion concept has an emotion term to name it. Yet words are crucial in Barrett’s account: while concept learn-

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ing is possible without words, “perhaps the easiest way to gain concepts is to learn new words” (2017, 181). Thus, acquiring more emotion concepts through films and having more emotion terms for these concepts, up to a certain degree, can help us to recognize more varied emotional states and reach a higher emotion granularity.

Philosopher Giovanna Colombetti even goes one step further: she claims that emotion terms allow for enhanced emotional experiences (2009, 11). Emotion labels have “causal force” and “can act as catalysts” for feelings that would otherwise go unnoticed (2009, 20): “Naming emotions squeezes complex feelings into something compact, i.e. a word; complex feelings, once labelled, are more visible, and thus more easily and readily accessible than in the absence of the word” (2009, 17). Again, we may think of the effects a more fine-grained vocabulary has on the experience of wine: “Wine talk has several functions, and one of them is precisely to refine perceptual discrimination by making the taster attend to features of the wine that would otherwise go unnoticed, and that it would be difficult to bring into reflective attention” (Colombetti 2009, 21–22). But if this were true, could we not think of making the acquisition of a higher emotional granularity part of the curriculum in film studies? As part of their aesthetic education students would learn to discriminate more accurately between different types of emotions they experience when watching films and other audiovisual media. In fact, if we follow Colombetti, a richer emotion vocabulary would allow students to bring to reflective attention emotional experiences they would have otherwise not noticed. I can think of worse pedagogical goals for students.

This leads us to a third upshot for film studies: a more fine-grained emotion lexicon will allow us not only to distinguish our emotional experiences but also to be more discriminative in our film analytical skills, critical evaluations, and ethical-political interventions. Film analysis should not only teach students to perceive a match-on-action cut and distinguish it from a jump cut or keep a Steadicam movement apart from a dolly shot—it should also support viewers in analyzing how films try to evoke emotions and distinguish the concomitant experiences. As I have argued elsewhere, many viewers have a broad implicit knowledge and can readily recognize the stereotypicality of certain affective strategies, but there is still a lot we have to make explicit once we chart the vast territory of recurring cinematic emotions (Hanich 2011). More knowledge about the varieties of affective experience will at the same time allow for more subtle arguments about what is stereotypical and what is innovative. Looking at recurring, stereotypical emotional experiences is helpful: the more we know about the tried-and-tested, the easier and more convincingly we can point out the uncommon and inventive. In the best of all cases this even has a backward effect on film production as it also allows filmmakers more easily to discriminate between the stereotypical, the common, and the innovative. Not

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least, critical interventions—ideology critique, symptomatic readings, cultural criticism—will profit from a varied vocabulary to cover more adequately the many dubious aspects of representation, discrimination or the construction of aggressive and hateful emotion ecologies through and in media.

Introducing more fine-grained emotion terms in film studies—and this is my fourth point—might also have beneficial effects for scientific research outside of film studies. In laboratory studies psychologists and neuroscientists often rely on film clips to elicit emotions like fear, sadness, anger, or surprise, and a number of articles even recommend sets of pre-tested film clips as emotion-eliciting stimuli (see, for instance, Schaefer et al. 2010 and Jenkins and Andrewes 2012). However, the use of film clips can come with complications. First, in combination with various aesthetic distancing mechanisms film clips may evoke a blend of F-emotions related to the filmic fiction and A-emotions derived from the film as artifact, to use, again, the distinction by Tan (1996). Second, and closely related, discrete emotions are hard to single out and pinpoint via film clips due to the dynamic progression of the film. Films usually contain a denser concentration of events and actions than everyday life, and emotion episodes are often short and change quickly.<sup>4</sup> Hence eliciting a specific emotion in the necessary pure state for laboratory purposes seems difficult (unless psychologists are content with evoking a *dominant* emotion within a set of blended or mixed emotions in the multi-emotional trajectory of a given clip or scene). Third, most psychologists who work with film clips use scenes from mainstream movies, manufactured for a mass-market in order to entertain: people voluntarily expose themselves to such material and seek out the emotions evoked by these films. Using clips from these films to induce negatively valenced emotions like fear, disgust or sadness may run the risk to not evoke the negative valence at all, because the viewer enjoys these emotions (even if aware of their negative “flavor”). Yet given what I have argued so far, there seems to be a fourth problem: in their set of film clips, psychologists and neuroscientists risk commingling scenes that evoke different subtypes of fear or disgust that come with very different affective experiences, or they potentially confuse the emotions “sadness” and “being moved.” If we believe in an exchange between science and the humanities, the critical work of film scholars can be particularly useful here, because it may help psychologists and neuroscientists avoid eliciting imprecise emotions.

### **How to Arrive at New Emotions Terms: On the Phenomenology of Emotions**

If we agree on these benefits, then we would still have to tackle the question of how to sort out emotions into more granular categories. While today hardly any theory of emotion denies that the subjective-experience component plays an important role in defining an emotion, it is also true that not only specific emotions can be neglected but also aspects or components of

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emotions (Elpidorou 2020b, 139). With all their invaluable work on cinematic emotions, scholars such as Noël Carroll, Ed Tan, Torben Grodal, Carl Plantinga, and Murray Smith aimed to provide causal or functional explanatory accounts and thus paid little attention to the subjective-experience component. Partly due to the emotion theories they embraced—for instance, Nico Frijda’s appraisal theory in Tan’s case or the concern-based construal theory of Robert C. Roberts in the case of Plantinga—they put their emphases on components like action tendency and appraisal but not the various phenomenologies of cinematic emotions.

Yet for film scholars interested in providing more granular emotion terms a good starting point could be precisely the spectators’ affective experience. Why? To some degree, every film as an artifact is conventional, and films are conventional also in terms of their affective experiences. This is particularly true for mainstream genre films that repeat tried-and-tested formulas to elicit specific affective responses. Some of these affective responses, including their subjective-experience component, recur again and again; and some of them, as we have heard, drive viewers to particular films and genres in the first place. Just consider what Plantinga (2018, 231) writes about one of the most recognizable plots in cinema: the revenge scenario. It works so well “because it is a reliable way to elicit the strong emotions that draw viewers: anger, resentment, and hatred at the evil that is perpetrated on a sympathetic protagonist, and then delight and relief as vengeance is taken and the scales of justice are perceived to have been brought back into balance.”

Now, what if we already had a term for some of these affective responses—say, fear—but sensed a nagging feeling that considerable experiential differences existed between different types of cinematic fear? And what if we ran into a frequently recurring affective experience for which we do not yet have a proper name? Should this not be a starting point to think of a new term—say, being moved—given all the advantages discussed in the previous section? Of course, it would be helpful if we could somehow clarify if this affective response were not just personal and idiosyncratic to me. It would undoubtedly be more convincing if we were able to describe what it is generally like to undergo this particular emotion as opposed to another.

It is here that phenomenology as a descriptive method—and the phenomenology of emotions more specifically—might be particularly useful. After all, many practitioners of phenomenology consider it, maybe somewhat pompously, a science of experience. Of course, paying attention to the description of experience does not sit equally well with all film scholars, particularly those interested in explanation and providing functional accounts of the emotions. But given that emotional experiences are something we pursue as a fundamental asset of films, it strikes me as a valuable goal to pay closer attention to the different qualities of experience emotions make possible. Outside of film

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studies we have observed over the last three decades a growing rapprochement between phenomenology, on the one hand, and cognitive science, analytic philosophy, and the social sciences, on the other hand. Just think of the fascinating interdisciplinary debates in journals such as *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* or *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. To some degree, we can follow a similar development in film studies. In his guest editor's introduction to a recent issue of *Projections* on "Phenomenology Encounters Cognitivism," Robert Sinnerbrink (2019, 1) claimed that, while film-cognitivism and film-phenomenology are still estranged from one another, the polemical disputes have largely dissipated. However, a lack of familiarity remains that "still breeds suspicion, if not contempt, in some quarters" (2019, 4). To act as a broker, let me briefly try to attenuate lingering suspicions by mentioning some primary goals of phenomenology and potential misunderstandings about it. This seems all the more called for because phenomenology has become a buzzword and even a trend in film studies since the 1990s, but not all practitioners pursue it with the necessary care and rigor (for a critique of problematic sides of film-phenomenology, see Ferencz-Flatz and Hanich 2016 and Sinnerbrink 2019).

Now, suppose a phenomenologist studies emotions in the cinema: they would make claims about having experienced something that must also be true for others. The phenomenologist is convinced to have discovered, in this very experience, general principles that are true for everyone who has had an experience of that kind (Wiesing 2015, 100). While the phenomenologist relies on the first-person perspective, the interest does not reside in their individual-idiosyncratic experience. The goal is rather to determine the invariant features of the subjective experience without which it would not be the emotion that it is. In other words, the phenomenologist focuses on what we—in the generalized first-person perspective—necessarily and undeniably experience when—and only when—we undergo a certain emotion. As Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2012, 21) put it appositely: "Some people mistake phenomenology for a subjective account of experience; but a subjective account of experience should be distinguished from an account of subjective experience."

Importantly, what phenomenology is able to describe is restricted to what we consciously experience. A phenomenologist does not make any claims about mental or bodily processes below the level of consciousness. But being conscious of something does not at all imply that we have always reflected upon it and have gained a clear "understanding" of the experience: many of our conscious experiences remain pre-reflective and at the margins of consciousness, because we simply live through them and never bother to ask ourselves what the features of this experience are. This is particularly true for intense experiences, like those that occur when we watch a film. At first blush this may sound contradictory, but it is a completely common fact about our

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conscious lives. Phenomenologists have various names for it. Gallagher and Zahavi (2012, 24), for instance, call it the “ignored obviousness” of experience. We are already, in some oblique way, familiar with it because we have experienced it, but we need to bring it to proper “awareness” or “understanding” via reflection and description. The phenomenological writing thus invites the reader to reflect on the past experience (if the reader has undergone it previously), but it can also raise awareness in the future (if the reader happens to have that experience at a later point). Here we find the litmus test of every good phenomenological description: the text needs to resonate with the reader’s personal experience. Either it evokes the reader’s memory and sparks recognition of what is generally the case during a given experience; or it connects to the reader’s understanding of the plausibility of an experience they have not undergone yet (Hanich 2018).

Unfortunately, I cannot give a proper introduction into the phenomenological method in just a few sentences here, also because this is debated among phenomenologists themselves (for helpful introductions, see Gallagher and Zahavi 2012 and Ihde 2012; for film studies, see Sobchack 2011). But phenomenology is not a method without its own protocols. A strict Husserlian, for instance, would follow a number of systematic steps: the so-called epoché, phenomenological reduction, eidetic variation, and phenomenological description. More recently, attempts at second-person phenomenologies were introduced as well, for instance by conducting meticulous micro-phenomenological interviews (see Petitmengin et al. 2019). What unites these methods is the goal of their analyses: to reveal invariant structures of experience that are intersubjectively accessible and are thus open for correction and control (Gallagher and Zahavi 2012, 28). Like in any other scholarship, if the phenomenological description does not convince, it will be criticized and rejected. “There is . . . no claim to infallibility. Rather, the insights always possess a certain provisionality, a certain presumptiveness, and necessarily remain open for future modifications in the light of new evidence,” Zahavi (2019, 45–46) underlines.

Luckily, a phenomenology of emotions in the cinema does not have to start from scratch: we can draw on a long and enormously productive history of phenomenological research, as not only the *Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotions* (Szanto and Landweer 2020) testifies, and the field has regained considerable attention in recent years. Scholars relying on the phenomenological method have provided descriptions of emotional experiences on various levels of generality and granularity. They have looked at the emotional experience as such (Edmund Husserl; Jean-Paul Sartre), but they have also described the experience of specific emotions like disgust (Aurel Kolnai), fear (Hermann Schmitz), anger (Jack Katz), shame (Max Scheler; Dan Zahavi) and so on. Nothing speaks against moving to even higher levels of granularity, for instance by distinguishing various types of disgust or fear (the *Routledge*

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*Handbook of Phenomenology of Emotions* features not only a general entry on shame but also a more particular chapter that distinguishes “hetero-induced shame” and “survivor shame”). It would be a pity if film scholars let these valuable resources go unnoticed.

Given its emphasis on experience, it does not come as a surprise that phenomenology treats the subjective-experience component of emotions as essential to what an emotion really is. For phenomenologists, it is impossible to undergo a particular emotion without a subjective feeling because it is precisely this feeling that discloses the value of the object we appraise. In other words, when we evaluate an intentional object during an emotion episode, we always do so via an embodied appraisal. There is a specific double-sidedness to what philosophers have started calling affective intentionality. It is world-related and thus reveals how we evaluate and care about a given object or situation, but it is also self-related and thus tells us something about our self-awareness: how we feel with regard to this object or in this situation (Fuchs 2019). For instance, to feel afraid of a barking dog means not only to evaluate the dog as threatening but also to experience one’s body as vulnerable and to fear for one’s bodily integrity in a way that is characteristic of “what it is like to be afraid.” Using terms by Michael Polanyi (1967), Thomas Fuchs (2019, 97) distinguishes the proximal and the distal component of affective intentionality: the proximal resonance of the body is often backgrounded by the distal perception and evaluation of the situation. But by no means does this imply that we are unaware of the bodily resonance. While the subjective-experience component often remains at the margins of consciousness when we watch a film, it is the goal of the phenomenological approach to bring it to our attention more properly via descriptions.

Just to indicate briefly a few possible facets: there are serious sudden transformations of how we experience our lived body and—through and with our lived body—time, space, and the social surroundings when we undergo an emotion. Note that for phenomenologists the lived-body experience implies much more than feelings of the body and thus goes far beyond the usual suspects of observable and quantifiable physiological symptoms such as sweating palms, goosebumps, tears, hair standing on end, or accelerated heartbeat (Colombetti 2014). On this account, experiencing an emotion—in the cinema and elsewhere—can imply a reshuffling of our temporal, spatial, and social orientation that might not be measurable but is nevertheless real in the sense that we really experience it. And here we encounter another central tenet of phenomenological thinking: do not exclude and explain away what has clearly been experienced under the pressure of theoretical assumptions and ontological prejudices. As Zahavi (2019, 47) puts it: “Rather than letting our predetermined theories decide what we can experience, we should let our theories be guided by the object of experience.”

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Thus, there can be profound changes in how we experience the weight of our bodies—think of the light feeling while watching a feel-good comedy or the depressing, downward pressure of a “heavy” drama. There can be changes in the spatial experience of our bodies—from tightly constricted in moments of shock to wide and expanded in joy, from the tense body in suspense to the “sigh of relief” after a moment of horror. There can be changes in how close we feel to the movie—from overly distanced in boredom to immersed in a gripping action sequence, from put off and revolted in disgust to wholly absorbed in a deeply moving moment. There can be changes in how we experience time—from dense to protracted and from sudden and pointed to “flying by.” There can be changes in how we feel our relation to other viewers—from absent to closely connected, from openly seeking connection to avoiding the gaze of others. And this is just the tip of the iceberg.

To prevent a potential misunderstanding, let me hasten to add that phenomenology is by no means tied to a description of the lived-body experience alone, as if the film itself did not play a role. Looking at the intentional object and the concomitant lived-body experience is a standard assumption in the phenomenology of emotions. Consequently, what the emotion is about (intentionality and appraisal) and what it is like (subjective experience) should, from the beginning, be intertwined in our search for new emotion terms.

### **Standard Situations and Emotional Experiences**

As Noël Carroll has variously underlined, when we watch a film, our emotions are structured slightly differently than in everyday situations: we do not have to scan the environment and appraise our circumstances according to our personal concerns to the same degree, because the filmmakers have already pre-structured the scene by foregrounding or making salient pertinent emotional features (Carroll 2020, 341). Carroll calls this “critical prefocusing.” Some critical-prefocusing strategies have turned out to be particularly successful. They have solidified as conventionalized formulas and recur with slight variations as narrative standard situations populating much commercial cinema. Just think of the aforementioned “death-news scenario” and “farewell-note motif,” which we can find as emotional building blocks far beyond commercial melodramas. Or consider the “alone-in-the-dark scenario” in which a vulnerable character enters a threatening space, and the “chase-and-escape scenario” in which an endangered character frantically tries to escape a harmful villain who keeps closing in.<sup>5</sup> Some of these narrative standard situations were imported from older artforms (like literature or theater) and have subsequently resurfaced in newer media (like television series, commercials, and computer games).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, while standard situations can differ between cultures, they often transcend cultural boundaries. Scenes with a startle effect—what I call cinematic shock—figure not only in Hollywood horror films but also in those

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from Japan; and deeply moving scenes of separation or reunion occur both in Western and Indian melodramas. As a consequence, there can be something stifling and cliché-ridden about them. But precisely because they are so pervasive—and thus influential for our emotional ecology and our emotional concept learning—film scholars should not underestimate them. Most importantly for our purposes: we can often discover interesting correlations between standard situations and the subjective emotional experiences they intend to evoke—correlations sometimes sufficiently distinct to merit a new emotion term.

To indicate one potential way to turn this into practice in film studies, allow me to briefly turn to my own study on cinematic fear (Hanich 2010). Despite the considerable literature on cinematic fear, little had been said about how exactly it feels to experience fear at the movies. Moreover, it seemed to me that the term “fear” was used to lump together a number of affective phenomena quite diverse in their subjective experience. While retaining “fear” as an umbrella term, I consequently distinguished what seemed to me the most widespread subtypes. Here it helped to look at standard situations in horror films and thrillers, which vary considerably from one another in terms of form and content, style and narration, but have a distinct fearful signature that my phenomenological investigations helped me get a better grip on.<sup>7</sup> By combining formal and narrative analyses of the stock scenarios with phenomenological analyses of the experiences that accompany them, I ended up distinguishing five subtypes of fear. Using both ordinary language terms that I redefined and new technical terms I found fitting, I spoke of “cinematic shock,” “direct horror,” “suggested horror,” “dread,” and “terror.” These subtypes have enough in common to merit the common term “fear,” but also differ in substantial ways. We undergo a remarkably different experience when we are deeply startled by a serial killer suddenly attacking the likeable protagonist (cinematic shock) than when we have to imagine a gruesome monster slaughtering a group of people off-screen (suggested horror).

To illustrate a phenomenological description that distinguishes subtypes of fear according to the viewer’s lived experience, I will briefly zoom in on the structural differences in terms of time between dread and cinematic shock (for a more extended discussion, see chapters 5 and 6 in Hanich 2010; on dread, see also Hanich 2014). A prototypical moment of dread involves the aforementioned “alone-in-the-dark scenario” of an imperiled character entering a dangerous place. Cinematic shock—or startle effect (Baird 2000; Sbravatti 2019)—is best exemplified by the “boo!” moment of a killer suddenly attacking a character with a loud acoustic bang. Comparing the temporal experiences of these two gives me the opportunity to drive home the point that for phenomenologists the subjective feeling component of an emotion indeed goes far beyond feelings of the body such as sweating palms or accelerated heartbeat, as argued

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above. Moreover, it also allows us to see that two subtypes of fear can easily be conjoined, and even alternate, as scenes of dread in horror films and psychological thrillers are often, albeit not always, followed by moments of shock.

In dread, experienced time is marked by a strong form of anticipation: we scan the imminent temporal horizon in “search” of a prospecting threat and the suspended end of the scene assumes a considerable weight. Put differently, we “lean forward” in time because we expect that something will happen to the threatened character sometime soon. Although we usually do not reflect on this while following the scene, the fearful anticipation is a meta-emotional fear of another type of fear: we not only feel with or for the character’s life through empathy or sympathy—we are also intuitively apprehensive of a confrontation with the violent killer because this would imply a switch to another type of fear for us. It would mean that dread makes way for a moment of shock (due to the sudden attack) and/or horror (because we are confronted with moving-images of an act of potentially disproportional immorality and disturbing brutality). Since we are on high alert and anticipate that something will happen at any moment, dread scenes mark the opposite of the characteristic open-endedness of mere succession. Due to the apprehension of the outcome, the experience of time in between becomes more accentuated. More concretely, the felt duration is protracted and experienced time seems longer than objective time.

But in comparison to other forms of protracted time—think of boredom—dread scenes do not feel empty (or slack) but dense (or tight). In boredom, we experience time as empty: we do not concentrate on anything specific, our field of consciousness remains unstable, we are not fearful of things to come—boredom means monotony. In dread, on the other hand, we are highly attentive, consciousness is narrowly focused on the outcome of the scene, and the closer we approach the anticipated goal, the denser and more charged the temporal experience becomes. Filmmakers know how to toy with this gradual densification of time, for instance when the character arrives at a corner or a door behind which the threat seems to loom. The temporal relief, felt when the source of threat turns out to be harmless, can quickly make way for a further densification of inner time, for instance when the character reaches another dark room, corner, or closed door.

The temporal experience of shock, on the other hand, differs drastically. This becomes all the more obvious when it follows a scene of dread. In Gestalt psychological terms, we could say that the “figure” (shock) is experienced in a particularly pronounced way when it stands out most clearly from its “ground” (dread). Comparable to the experience of an abrupt pang, the suddenness of the cinematic shock marks a strong caesura: in contrast to the extended duration of dread that leans toward the future, shock implies a radical emphasis on the here and now. The durational flow seems to come to an abrupt halt

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and extended time shrinks to a very dense and pointed, even painful present. While time in dread can densify and slacken, in shock time seems to burst, even explode into consciousness, almost like a single block. But due to its insistence on the now, the cinematic shock goes as quickly as it comes. While the temporality of dread scenes unfolds more gradually, shock has a distinct and bounded temporal gestalt with marked beginnings and endings (even though a forceful moment of shock can also linger and only gradually die down like the tail of a comet.)

If this comparison sounds somewhat convincing, we would have come closer to a description of the temporal experiences of two types of fear in the cinema. Obviously, viewers can be entirely bored or left untouched by scenes that are meant to be dreadful and shocking but do not succeed in causing this intended effect. But in case spectators do undergo a proper experience of dread or shock, the descriptions above should be recognizable.

Note that the five subtypes of fear vary according to both the appraisal of the core scenario as well as their bodily, temporal, and social experience. While in all five subtypes we can characterize the formal object or core-relational theme as “dangerous” or “threatening,” this characterization seems too coarse-grained because of how it is threatening and what it threatens differ substantially. As Rick Anthony Furtak (2017) argues, emotions can have a truth-revealing function. They disclose something meaningful to us and therefore possess a bodily, intuitive knowledge we would otherwise have no access to. Thus, the different bodily experiences of different types of cinematic fear reveal something different about the film. For instance, what we appraise as threatening is overwhelmingly imminent in cinematic shock, but it is only to be expected sometime soon in dread; it leads to a sudden, explosive rupture of the lived-body experience with a feeling of radical constriction and subsequent expansion in shock; instead, it implies a petrifying immobility and almost breathless anticipation in dread.

Of course, it would be preposterous to assume that emotions connected to recurring standard situations are the only affective experiences worth studying. The important efforts to account for affective phenomena like moods (Plantinga 2012; Sinnerbrink 2012) or existential feelings (Eder 2016) need mentioning here. However, charting the territory of recurring emotional experiences beyond the restricted terrain of the garden-variety types seems equally called for. To paraphrase Charles Altieri (2003, 34), whose plea for an aesthetic and phenomenological approach to the emotions still strikes me as valid, even if I cannot persuade all film scholars that I am right, I am still hopeful that I may indicate that they are wrong not to explore certain phenomena.

Murray Smith has argued that “one function of narrative art is to represent and elicit *highly particular* emotions or configurations of emotion, even as works of narrative art draw upon our understanding of *more generic, garden-variety*

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emotions” (2017, 208, emphasis added). On the one hand, Smith underscores the ongoing importance of standard emotion terms like fear, sadness, or disgust, not least because entire genres are grouped around these terms. On the other hand, he wants to make room for and draw attention to highly particular emotion episodes that films represent, express, or elicit and that slip through the net of our coarse-grained categories. As an example, Smith mentions film critic A. O. Scott’s neologism “Almodóvaria” to describe the affective mix of “devastation and euphoria, amusement and dismay” in many of the Spanish director’s works (Smith 2017, 215). Because the work of art is so popular or canonical (or both), having an emotion term might spur future critical discussions, despite the fact that the emotion is rather rare or entirely idiosyncratic. I very much agree with Murray Smith, but as my brief discussions of “being moved” and the five subtypes of fear have indicated, my aim is a slightly different one. It is located somewhere between the broad generalities of garden-variety emotions like fear and highly particular emotional states like Almodóvaria.

Note that I am not postulating phenomenology should have the last word here. In fact, we should build two-way streets on which research can travel in both directions. On the one hand, film-phenomenological descriptions can serve as heuristics and hypotheses for further empirical research on cinematic emotions, such as qualitative self-report studies, physiological measures and fMRI experiments.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, phenomenologists may well profit from (a) personal-level descriptions gathered in sociology, psychology, anthropology, or empirically oriented film studies and (b) subpersonal findings from physiological experiments or neuroscientific research. These findings may put pressure on the original description and motivate the phenomenologist to fine-tune or revise it (Gallagher and Zahavi 2012, 34). For this, film-phenomenologists have to keep an eye on the best available knowledge in other disciplines, including analytic philosophy and the cognitive sciences (see Drummond and Rinofner-Kreidl 2017, 1–2; Szanto and Landweer 2020, 7–8). Phenomenology-inclined philosophers, psychologists, or sociologists such as Giovanna Colombetti, Natalie Depraz, Thomas Fuchs, Shaun Gallagher, Jack Katz, Dieter Lohmar, Matthew Ratcliffe, Hans Bernard Schmid, Jan Slaby, Evan Thompson, or Dan Zahavi are exemplary in this respect. I am convinced that in film studies a triangulation of film analysis, phenomenological description and empirical research, reminiscent of the one suggested by Murray Smith (2017), may prove highly productive for the study of the many neglected, overlooked, and missed emotions at the movies (see also the dialectical synthetic attempt to bring together cognitivism and phenomenology by Sinnerbrink 2019).

### **When Do We Have Enough Emotion Terms?**

How far should we pursue this exercise in distinction? Surely, at some point we will reach the limit of further differentiation and adding more emotion

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terms will be unnecessary or even counterproductive. The tentative guideline I will suggest here has to reckon with two constraints we inevitably encounter—the first one is practical, the second one pragmatic. First, at some point we will realize that our capacity to distinguish the phenomenology of our affective lives is not endless—the phenomenological method works only up to a certain level of granularity. On top of that, we will also reach the limits of our ability to put things into words: it is one thing to recognize an experience as typical and recurring, but it is quite another to put this into an evocative phenomenological description that resonates with readers. Second, at some point we realize that adding more emotion terms may not be useful any longer. If we have an emotional phenomenon without a name that occurs sufficiently often and is potentially of such canonical value in film studies to deserve further scholarly attention, this phenomenon should be named. But this does not mean that every standard situation comes with a sufficiently distinct emotional signature. Take the two melodramatic scenarios mentioned above: both the farewell-note motif and the death-news scenario are clearly correlated with *sadly being moved*.

In this context we may briefly consider the example of the Japanese emotion term *ijirashii*, which Tiffany Watt Smith (2015, 147) defines as the “sensation of being touched or moved on seeing the little guy overcome an obstacle or do something praiseworthy”: “It’s the feeling we might get watching an athlete, against all the odds, cross the finishing line, or on hearing of a homeless person handing in a lost wallet. . . . In Japan . . . this feeling is celebrated, considered the appropriate response to witnessing the immense fortitude of those who at first seemed weak and vulnerable.” We would certainly have a hard time claiming that this is not an emotional experience American, German, Dutch, or Italian viewers do not also undergo when seeing a film like *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) or *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Gabriele Muccino, 2006). The little man overcoming an obstacle is, in fact, a core scenario of many Western films, particularly in social melodramas from Frank Capra to *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016). In contrast to Japanese, languages like English, German, Dutch, or Italian do not have a label for this specific emotion. But do we need it? I think we do not. While *ijirashii* may be connected to clearly identifiable standard situations, the concomitant emotional experience is likely to be strongly overlapping with *joyfully being moved*.

Thus, in theory, one can come up with an emotion term for every single filmic scene that elicits an emotional response. Yet in practice this will ultimately be more confusing than productive. Hence adding a new term to the emotion lexicon in film studies makes most sense to me when we can identify a standard scenario that comes with a distinct emotional experience for which we can provide a phenomenological description of its invariant structures. As my epigraph from one of the great living American novelists has it: We should

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always discriminate between things that seem alike but are different—yet we have to do so carefully.

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## Notes

Epigraph: Richard Ford, *Canada* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012, 291), .

<sup>1</sup> For the distancing effect and the distinction between art, representation and fictional schema, see Menninghaus et al. (2017). See also Hanich (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Some psychologists and neuroscientists argue in a similar direction: “the use of the same word to refer to very different states that are elicited in vastly different contexts is hazardous and potentially misleading,” Richard Davidson and Carien van Reekum write (2005, 16).

<sup>3</sup> Following a widespread distinction in research on categories and concepts, Barrett (2017, 87) distinguishes between a category as a class of things that is grouped together and exists in the world and a concept as a mental representation of that category that exists in one’s mind.

<sup>4</sup> For a close analysis of various potential emotions in a two-minute scene, see Hanich and Menninghaus (2017).

<sup>5</sup> See also the list of various standard situations discussed in Koebner (2016).

<sup>6</sup> Standard situations work on the level of the individual scene. They are thus similar to but not identical with what Plantinga (2018, 233) calls “narrative paradigm scenarios,” which operate both “as an overarching narrative structure . . . or as a small-scale episodic scenario within a broader narrative.”

<sup>7</sup> It may be important to underline that in my work I never claim that the particular scenes I choose to illustrate my claims will always and automatically evoke the emotion I suggest in every viewer. Some viewers may not be affected by a given scene at all.

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My point is that the example scenes are evocative enough of the experience in general and that those who do not experience the suggested emotion vis-à-vis a particular example might still do so vis-à-vis another example of the standard situation.

<sup>8</sup> With Eugen Wassiliwizky and other colleagues from the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics I am currently cooperating on a project entitled “The Fabric of Cinematic Chills: Investigating the Psychophysiology and Cinematic Mechanisms of Film-elicited Goosebumps,” in which we work with my five types of cinematic fear I mention above.

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