



Philosophical Enquiry for Philosophy Clubs

The Paradox of (Spooky) Fiction

Why be frightened of fictional stories?

Celebrating Halloween

1. **Will you celebrate Halloween? Will you dress up as something horrifying or watch a scary movie? If so, why?**

Scary Movies

Share stimulus:

Age: 7-11: Paranormal Activity II (Audience reactions only, no scary clips!)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCA-W_Ps5dM

Age 11+ Paranormal Activity (Movie trailer with audience reactions... includes some scary clips)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovdrgIH3TeU>

2. **Most people find being scared an unpleasant feeling. Why do we seek it out on Halloween?**

Being scared: Fiction and Non-Fiction

3. **If you are walking home at night and hear footsteps behind you, would you be scared? How would you tell that you were scared?**
4. **If you watch a movie in which someone is walking home at night and hears footsteps behind them, would you be scared?**
5. **How similar or different are those two experiences?**
6. **You might think it depends on whether the movie is fiction or non-fiction, does it?**
7. **People in the video clips often appear to be smiling? Can fiction be pleasant and unpleasant at the same time?**

The Paradox of Emotional Responses to Fiction

In 1975, the philosopher, Colin Radford argued that our apparent ability to respond emotionally to fictional characters and events is "irrational, incoherent, and inconsistent".

8. **Do you agree?**

Radford offered the following argument: (*Display on slide or post in chat*)

- (1) For us to be moved by a person or situation we must believe they really exist or existed.
- (2) When we know something is fiction, we don't believe it exists.
- (3) Fictional characters and situations do in fact seem to move us.

Therefore: Our apparent ability to respond emotionally to fictional characters and events is "irrational, incoherent, and inconsistent"

9. **Can you find a hole in Radford's argument? Can you either show that one of his premises is false, or that the premises together don't support the truth of the conclusion?**

The Pretend Theory

Pretend Theorists, most notably Kendall Walton (1978), in effect deny premise (3), arguing that it is not literally true that we fear horror film monsters, it is only "make-believedly" true. He admits that these characters affect, us both physically and psychologically, and that these experiences *feel* very much like real fear, but despite what our bodies tell us, or what we might think, what we *actually* experience in such cases are only pretend emotions or "quasi-emotions" (e.g., "quasi-fear").

10. **Do you agree?**

Some philosophers disagree with Pretend Theory arguing that being scared about fictional films is quite unlike the other obvious example of pretending, playing games. When we play games, we can decide when to start or when to stop. Noel Carroll writes in his book, *The Philosophy of Horror* that we can be 'overwhelmed' by scary books and films.

11. **If you can't sleep on Halloween because you watched a scary movie. Can you say you were just pretending? If you want to drift off, can you just decide to stop being frightened? If so how, if not, why not?**

On the other hand, Carroll also points out that as consumers of fiction we aren't able to just turn our emotional responses *on*, either. Some films fail to get their intended response from us.

12. **If you watch a cartoon with some rubbish monsters in like this*. Can you choose to be scared by them?**

*Share stimulus:

Age 7-11 Still from the 1948 film *Unknown Island*

<https://maserpatrol.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/unknown-island1.jpg>

Age 11- 16: Selection of rubbish special effects monsters

<https://www.digitalspy.com/movies/a805705/crap-horror-movie-monsters/>

(Note it has the word 'Crap' in the title)

13. **If the pretend theory is wrong, how else can we explain the scary feelings we get from fictional movies?**

PTO...

14. **What's that behind you? Mwah ha ha ha haaaaa!**

This session was produced for Jason Buckley's weekly online philosophy classes. Sign up to take part in them here: <https://www.p4he.org/>

© 2021 Grace Lockrobin of Thinking Space
All Rights Reserved

Thinking Space c.i.c.
Public Philosophy Projects

101 Beechwood Road, Sheffield S6 4LQ
info@thinkingspace.org.uk
www.thinkingspace.org.uk

twitter.com/Thinking_Space_
facebook.com/ThinkingSpacePhilosophy
instagram.com/Thinking_Space_