

Ways of Being Close to Characters

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I. Introduction

Film viewers' cognitive and affective responses to characters are unlimited in their richness and variety. Spectators encounter fictional beings as different as Nosferatu and Bambi, Hannibal Lecter and Joan of Arc, Catwoman and the Elephant Man. Between art and entertainment, porn and propaganda, viewers engage with fictional humans, animals, aliens, artificial beings, gods, and demons. To subsume the whole range of their reactions under the global notions of 'identification', 'empathy', or 'parasocial interaction', is too reductive – usually, viewers do not identify with Lassie, empathize with the Alien, or parasocially interact with the computer HAL.¹

Recently, scholars in cognitive film theory have developed more precise accounts of character engagement and its rich nuances by distinguishing different dimensions, levels, and types of viewer responses and their functional correlates in film structure.² However, an exchange between different cognitive film theories and other, related approaches (such as communication studies)³ has only just begun.⁴ Moreover, while many theoretical models focus on viewers' appraisals of characters and their basis in common normative attitudes or innate features of the mind,⁵ these models have not yet fully accounted for the complex system of parameters that regulate and bias those appraisals. So the question is, how can different theoretical positions be integrated to develop a more thorough account of viewers' relations to

characters and the factors that shape those relations?

Somewhat surprisingly, a highly ambiguous phrase might provide a clue. When leaving the cinema, viewers sometimes speak of feeling or 'being close' to characters (in German: *sich Figuren nahe fühlen*). This phrase is used in colloquial speech as well as in film criticism and psychological theories. It has many meanings, most of which are highly metaphorical, but are systematically interrelated. 'Being close' to characters might seem to be a precondition of 'being touched' or 'being moved', but those concepts are themselves metaphors that have to be analyzed to be understood. It is exactly the ambiguity of 'being close' that makes the concept a good starting-point for analyzing viewers' imaginative and affective relations to characters. Clarifying its meanings and tracing their interrelations indicates how different approaches to character engagement can be connected. While many accounts stress the importance of moral appraisals of characters, examining 'closeness' should add to our current theoretical picture by drawing more attention to other factors, partly derived from social psychology. I begin by discussing some general issues surrounding the concept of 'being close'. I then outline several specific ways in which viewers can feel close to characters. Finally, I illustrate their interplay by analyzing relations between viewers and characters in David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999).

II. Relations of 'Closeness' to Characters: The Outline of A Model

Being Close to Characters and Being Close to Real People

Before discussing characters, it is helpful to consider what being close to real people can mean. At least three senses can be distinguished.⁶ In the most literal sense, somebody is close to another person if she is physically near to her in space and time: *spatiotemporal proximity*. But in addition to physical closeness, one can speak of *mental closeness*. Mental closeness occurs when someone has certain mental attitudes and dispositions towards another person which are *cognitive* (she understands the person well and feels familiar with her) or *affective* (she likes the person, desires her, or empathizes with her). A third sense of closeness concerns *intimate, close relationships* which involve two or more people knowing private things about each other, experiencing certain emotions, and interacting regularly in ways not open to others. Whether real people are close to each other in these ways is determined by causality, social norms, and mental schemata. For instance, people who are closely related – relatives, friends, or lovers – often live close to each another; they are expected to understand each other well and to feel emotionally close.⁷ Being close to someone in any of those senses is a matter of degree, and at a certain point it makes more sense to speak of 'distance' than of 'closeness'.

Characters are mental constructs, so viewers cannot be close or distant to them in the sense of spatiotemporal or social relations. But they can *feel close* or *imagine* being close to them in such ways, and those imaginings are in some respects analogous to feelings of being close to real people.⁸ Such psychological reactions are founded in the ways human minds construct phenomenal as well as fictional worlds. Audiovisual representations of characters can be conceived of as dense streams of cues that trigger a wide range of mental reactions in viewers, including perceptions, feelings, and imaginings. Some of those reactions are

significantly similar to reactions in encounters with real people or their medial representations.

Usually, perceiving character representations leads to cognitive states that associate a character with relatively stable physical, psychological, and social properties. If several such states are connected in a process some have described as *character synthesis*⁹ or *recognition*,¹⁰ they can be said to form a mental model of the character.¹¹ According to social psychology, we develop working models of real people as well as of characters, and both can become objects of imagination.¹² To understand characters, we rely on partly innate mental dispositions and on schemata learned primarily through interaction with real individuals. Character synthesis is based on social cognition in encounters with real people.

Of course, there are essential differences as well. Characters may be not only humans, but also animals or artificial objects, thus challenging our respective mental schemata. Moreover, viewers are usually well aware that they are perceiving fictional representations. They are able to withdraw their attention from the represented world, and they usually do not act on what they observe. They are not expected to take responsibility for characters or to help them (which makes it easier to get involved with them). Furthermore, narrative and stylistic structures cue the viewer's imagination, and fictional worlds often deviate considerably from reality. Thus, films are able to create unique ways of being close to characters. They are able to intensify feelings of closeness or to bring forth reflective distance. They give us information about a character and his inner life which we could never know about real people. They make us feel close to character types we would never meet or would actively avoid in reality. This power to guide and control feelings of closeness through narrative devices can be used for varied purposes, such as entertainment, art, or propaganda. Some of the power of films lies in their ability to produce closeness or distance to characters and to combine different ways of being close to them.

Before outlining the unique ways film makes

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us feel close to characters, I will mention in brief some of their general preconditions. Probably the most fundamental one is *attention* and the degree of frequency and intensity of mental acts directed to the character. It is difficult to feel closeness to a boring character or an extra. But closeness depends also on the level of *authentication*¹³ of the character by the film's narration. Viewers tend to feel less close to a character who is presented during unreliable narration or who is part of an embedded fiction. Furthermore, the feeling of closeness to a character is influenced by his contexts and the kind of *fictional world* in which he is shown to live, its norms and laws, other characters, and social situations. Further, closeness depends on the degree of *perceived realism* of this world, of perceptual correspondences between the audiovisual track and real environments, and of the viewer's *immersion* in the film's diegesis.¹⁴ And finally, viewers often feel close not only to characters but also to the *actors* who play them, and those feelings can merge.

Kinds of Closeness to Characters

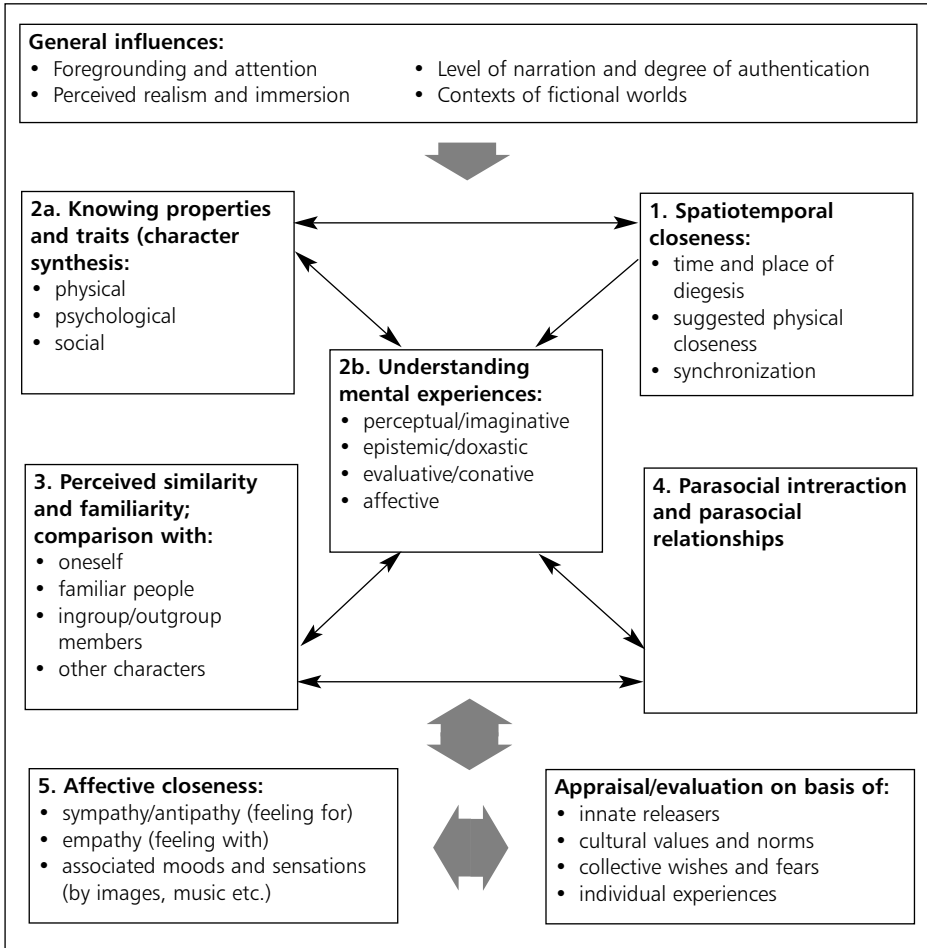
Keeping these general parameters in mind, I shall concentrate on the clear anthropomorphic protagonists of popular feature films, supposing that any other cases can be accommodated with modifications to the theory. We can distinguish at least five senses of being close to characters. Each of them corresponds to a way of being close to real people and correlates with a certain set of psychological relations that vary gradually between the poles of closeness and distance:

1. Perceived relations in space and time: spatiotemporal proximity and paraproxemics
2. Cognitive relations to fictional minds and bodies: understanding and perspective-taking
3. Perceived social relations: similarity and familiarity
4. Imagined interaction: parasocial interaction (PSI) and parasocial relationships (PSR)
5. Emotional responses: affective closeness

Each of these relations can be subdivided into more specific aspects, and all of them are connected in rather complicated ways. Most kinds of closeness are mutually self-enforcing, but their causes and effects are highly context-dependent. Figure 1 shows the network of connections that will be briefly outlined in the remainder of this paper.

Because of this model's complexity, I will have to simplify, making implicit *ceteris paribus* presuppositions, indicating only major tendencies and focusing on the first three entries on the list. Speaking of closeness to characters in a strong sense usually involves affective responses or PSI/PSR. But these topics cannot be considered adequately in this short paper, and they have been dealt with extensively elsewhere.¹⁵ Therefore, I shall only clarify the concepts, indicate their general position in the network, and roughly relate this network to established theoretical positions.

In communication studies, even in highly differentiated accounts,¹⁶ scholars often use 'PSI' as a generic term to cover any kind of engagement with media personae. However, narrower definitions contrasting PSI with other types of engagement¹⁷ are more convincing because they do not blur the differences between interaction, observation, and simulation. Viewers may relate to characters from different imaginative positions: as distant observers watching them, as simulators taking their perspective, or as 'interactors'.¹⁸ I use PSI only in the last sense, that is, when viewers imagine themselves interacting with a character (e.g., fantasize about having sex with him) or react to behavioural cues in represented face-to-face situations (e.g., actors speaking directly into the camera). Parasocial *relationships* additionally presuppose repeated encounters with a character over multiple viewings. PSI and PSR play a crucial role in engaging with computer avatars, news anchors, and soap opera characters, but they are embedded in a context of other responses which at least in cinema reception are more important. The meanings of 'closeness' might be a heuristic clue to those responses.



• Figure 1: Ways of being close to characters, and their interconnections.

While research in communication studies on character engagement focuses on PSI, many accounts in film studies centre on affective engagement. For instance, Murray Smith's classical model distinguishes between two kinds of affective responses: feeling *for* a character on the basis of positive or negative appraisals (sympathy/antipathy) and feeling *with* him on the basis of shared affects (empathy).¹⁹ Following this useful distinction, affective closeness – intense, positive feelings towards a character –

can take the forms of both sympathy and empathy, while distance can take the form of antipathy as well as cold observation. Given that viewers' affective responses depend on various kinds of cognitive input (perceptions, imaginations, appraisals, memories, etc.),²⁰ non-affective types of closeness can be seen as cognitive stances towards a character that influence the viewers' affective reactions. Again, Smith's account is helpful here in stating that sympathy is founded in the processes of

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recognition (character synthesis), *alignment* (spatiotemporal attachment to a character's external experiences and subjective access to his mind), and *allegiance* (affective, particularly moral, appraisal). Recognition and subjective access can be seen as forms of understanding; attachment is a spatiotemporal relation; allegiance/sympathy and empathy are forms of affective closeness. Thus, Smith's model corresponds to entries 1, 2, and 5 of my above list, but might be complemented by considering some further dimensions of character engagement (provisionally mapped in Figure 1). In the following I shall outline several of those dimensions, stressing their interconnections and their influences on affective closeness, and selectively indicating how they relate to existing theoretical accounts.

Spatiotemporal Proximity and Para-Proxemics

At least four aspects of our relations to characters involve the (mostly preconscious) impression of being close to a character in space and time, and in that respect can be seen as analogous to feelings of spatiotemporal proximity to real persons.

Proceeding from the more general to the specific, a first sense can be found in the relationship between the real environment of the viewer and the fictional environment of the character; that is, in their *general geographical and temporal proximity*. A strong mimetic connection between the film's setting and the viewers' present space and time can lead to two diverging tendencies. On the one hand, it will often be easier for the viewer to draw upon her cultural knowledge and experiences to understand the characters' traits and situations. On the other hand, spatiotemporal proximity can also facilitate the application of mental stereotypes that lead to a more automatic and less vivid reception. In this case, spatiotemporal distancing by historical or exotic settings might be more able to heighten interest and foster other ways of feeling close to a character.

A second, more dynamic sense of closeness is captured by Smith's already mentioned concept of *spatiotemporal attachment*: the extent to

which a film lets the viewer accompany a character through space and time and witness his externally visible experiences.²¹ In close attachment, most or all of the character's relevant experiences will be presented. Spatiotemporal attachment not only influences what the viewer knows about the character, but may also foster sympathy; according to the *mere exposure hypothesis* in social psychology, we tend to react more positively to people we see repeatedly.²² Moreover, a close spatiotemporal attachment and its audiovisual devices (e.g., surround sound) suggest that viewer and character perceive the same situation and share a mutual *semantic-perceptual space*²³ with certain constraints and capabilities to see, hear, judge, feel, and act. This shared space is the basis for recognizing the character's *situational meaning structure*.²⁴ If the viewer also shares the character's dispositions and motivations, it can make her feel as if they have congruent concerns, much like teammates (war films exploit this kind of feeling). The viewer also gains exclusive access to intimate moments of the character's private life, which may arouse feelings of complicity (a regular feature of romantic comedies). Those forms of imaginative goal sharing may lead to better understanding and to sympathy.

If geographical proximity and spatiotemporal attachment concern primarily *what* is presented, the other two kinds of spatiotemporal proximity concern *how* it is presented. A feeling of *physical closeness in space* may be evoked by framing and sound techniques. Different shot scales not only guide attention to relevant aspects of characters' bodies and behaviour (e.g., close-ups emphasize emotional expressions),²⁵ they also suggest different para-proxemic relationships to characters;²⁶ a close-up brings us very near to a character, while a panoramic view has a distancing effect. The framing activates mental schemata for typical behaviour. If you come as close to a real person as a close-up suggests, you might come into physical contact with her; she might caress or harm you. If you are far away from her, you might be estranged or at a safe distance. The camera angle may trigger

schemata of interpersonal behaviour as well, for instance of merely observing a character or interacting with him (PSI in frontal views).

If framing suggests closeness in space, then plot structure, movements of actors' bodies, and rhythms of framing, music, and editing all can suggest *closeness in subjective time or synchronicity*. The viewer can be rhythmically paralleled or synchronized with a character and his actions. Motor mimicry or the reaction of mirror neurons can cause the spectator to repeat the character's movements, physically or in her imagination. Slow motion, sluggish musical rhythms, and empty frames can invite the impression of time passing slowly. Generally, both synchronizing and close framing make it easier to understand the character, to recognize his emotions and their expressions. But distant framing or a rear view can also have emotionally intensifying effects, e.g. by making the character look small or defenceless and by forcing the viewer to infer or simulate the feelings she cannot simply read off the character's face. The four aspects of spatiotemporal proximity can be combined in various patterns, affecting other experiences of closeness by triggering or intensifying, and sometimes also hindering them.

Understanding and Perspective-Taking

I have mentioned how people can have close relationships based on intimate understanding of another person, and how viewers can imagine having similar relationships with characters. We must consider this aspect in more detail, because 'understanding a character' can mean several different things.

First, it can mean that the viewer knows the character's *personality and general traits*. Drawing on different sources of information (e.g., representations of the character's body and behaviour, dialogues, environments, star images, knowledge of social roles and genre types, or other narrative conventions) the viewer can construct a consistent mental model of the character and ascribe to him a relatively stable combination of physical, psychological, and social properties.²⁷ The viewer's knowledge of those properties can vary in kind and degree.

Films can make character synthesis easy or difficult, and they can control the construction of mental models by playing on psychological tendencies of impression formation (e.g., primacy and halo effects). According to Ralf Schneider, for instance, a mental model can be constructed either more top-down or more bottom-up.²⁸ If the film gives the viewer reliable information that corresponds to social or narrative types, the viewer may understand the character immediately. If not, she has to build the model from scratch, using mental simulations and her own memories as a guide. This process can slow down understanding but can also make the character model more detailed, individualized, and vivid.

Most other kinds of closeness depend to some degree on the viewer having this type of consistent mental model of the character. To compare him with others, to evaluate him or feel with him, she has to grasp at least his most relevant traits. This is interdependent with understanding the character in the further sense of *knowing or even sharing his experiences*, his fleeting mental life, his actions and their reasons.²⁹ This complex aspect is connected with psychological concepts of imagination, identification, and empathy as well as narratological concepts of point of view, perspective, and focalization, and has been discussed by many theorists.³⁰ I draw on the work of Berys Gaut here, in some ways modifying his approach.³¹

In film analysis we can ascribe to all viewers, characters, and narrators a range of mental experiences at certain times during the film – perceptions, thoughts, emotions, and other mental processes – which are caused by or directed to certain aspects of the diegesis, such as another character, a situation, action, or abstract idea. This relation of actual or fictional minds to intentional objects I call *mental perspective*.³² Applying Gaut's distinctions with slight modifications, we can distinguish between at least four kinds of mental perspective: 1) *perceptual and imaginative*, e.g. seeing, hearing, hallucinating, and dreaming; 2) *epistemic and doxastic*, e.g. knowing, and

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believing; 3) *evaluative and conative*, e.g. judging, evaluating, having interests, concerns, wishes, goals, and plans; and 4) *affective*, e.g. having emotions, moods, and feelings.

Mental perspective can be analysed with these partial aspects both individually and in their various combinations. In each aspect, the perspectives of viewer, narrator, and character can be compared to each other to see in which respects they are similar and in which respects they diverge. More specifically, we can ask how the viewer herself relates to a character's perspective (be it through interference of a narrator or not). Again, there are different possibilities. The viewer can just get to *know* the character's perspective, but may herself have a different one. She can *share* the character's perspective in the sense that she herself – independently of her relation to the character – perceives, thinks, judges or feels in a similar way. And she can actively *take* the character's perspective by way of mental simulation (activating her neuronal mirror system), thus reaching the highest degree of closeness.

In reality, most people get to know the intimate experiences and hidden traits of only a few people. In the cinema, they regularly become close to characters in this sense. A second sense of understanding a character is to understand his mental experiences, which is interdependent with knowing his traits. Understanding in this second sense can vary along at least two lines. First, there are several *levels* of understanding, from merely knowing the character's mental perspective to mentally simulating it. Moreover, understanding is always *aspectual*. You may be perceptually close to characters whose feelings you cannot guess, you may know more than characters whose interests you share, and you may empathize with characters whose values you reject. Thus, an average viewer can share the perceptual perspective of an idealised hero as well as of a sadistic murderer, and might judge their evaluative perspectives contrarily, yet might nevertheless feel distant to both of them. However, among the various aspects of mental perspective, the character's emotions, values, and goals are especially important. Sharing the

character's perspective in these respects seems to be necessary to being close to him in an emphatic sense. In particular, it is necessary to feel similar to him – a further sense of closeness I shall now consider.

Familiarity and Similarity

Once the viewer has built up a mental model of the character, she can relate him to both other characters and real people, especially herself or people she knows. Either preconscious associations or conscious comparisons with those people can arouse the feeling that the character is familiar or even similar to her. That feeling can be deepened by continued exposure to representations of the character and, more importantly, by knowing, sharing or taking his mental perspective. Feminist and psychoanalytical film theories, as well as cultural studies approaches, focus on similarities and differences between real people and characters, stressing the importance of sex/gender and class. But cognitive and empirical social psychology might contribute significantly to this discussion.

On a general level, relations between viewers, real people, and characters can be described in terms of *social identity* and *social distance*.³³ Differences in age, gender, class, ethnic background, and other properties separate social groups and influence one's ability to understand both other people and characters. The social categorization of characters involves biases and phenomena like 'ethnocentrism, ingroup favouritism, intergroup differentiation, conformity to ingroup norms, intergroup attraction, and perception of self, outgroupers, and fellow ingroupers in terms of relevant group stereotypes'.³⁴ For instance, the viewer can regard the character as a member of one of her ingroups with shared values and interests and tend to feel sympathy. In contrast, if she sees the character as belonging to an out-group, she might tend to stereotyping and antipathy. Alternatively, she might find him 'exotic and fascinating' or be interested in his unfamiliar ways. Such reactions may be more specific and intense if the character fits a certain social role, for instance in a situation of PSI, or if he

resembles a specific person whom the viewer loves or hates. In this case, the viewer may even try to explain the character's actions using specific knowledge about that person or to transfer her feelings for the person to the character.

But the viewer may also compare the character with her *self-image* and feel that he is 'like her' in some characteristic way. This comparison may lead to embarrassment, but more likely will lead the viewer to appraise the character more positively. According to social psychologists, *perceived similarity* usually contributes to interpersonal attraction and sympathy.³⁵ Similarity in attitudes and values seem to be particularly significant here. Moreover, similarity makes understanding a character easier and tends to confirm the viewer's world-view.

Another result of a viewer comparing herself to a character may be a feeling that, in terms of status or abilities, the viewer is higher, equal, or lower to him.³⁶ Based on this comparison, the viewer's positive feelings for the character might take the form of admiration or pity; her negative feelings, the form of fear or derision. Also, if the viewer perceives the character as better or more able than herself in important respects, she may want to be like the character, which might increase the viewer's readiness to take his perspective. Both processes intensify affective closeness.

If phenomena like 'similarity identification' and 'wish identification', as they are called by psychoanalytical theorists and some empirical researchers,³⁷ could be redescribed in terms of mental schemata and socio-psychological tendencies, the power of films could be explained more precisely. Some movies exploit familiarity and similarity for propaganda, others aim at dissolving social borders by playing down differences, changing mental schemata, and making the viewers share the characters' mental perspectives. Probably the most important means of generating familiarity to unfamiliar types of characters is to emphasize the familiarity of their situations and experiences.

III. Interconnections, Affective Responses and an Example: Being Close to Jack

Until now, I have outlined (albeit provisionally) in what ways viewers' relations of spatiotemporal, cognitive and social closeness to characters mutually influence each other, as well as influencing PSI and affective responses. As a rule of thumb, all these experiences act upon each other as intensifiers and catalysers. Most of them presuppose a degree of closeness of another kind (e.g., PSI entails physical proximity, whilst empathy requires an understanding of the character and his situation). But in some cases closeness of one kind may also hinder closeness of another; a close-up on the characters' hands, which makes the viewer share the character's visual perspective, may conceal facial cues for understanding the characters' mind. Also, being close to a character by understanding his mind may suggest differences rather than similarities.

Thus it is more adequate to say that all kinds of closeness to characters are interconnected in probabilistic and context-sensitive ways. One can empirically research those probabilities and can make heuristic use of them, but must always consider the individual case in addition to general trends. This is especially true for affective responses. While experiences of closeness to a character most often promote *positive* affective responses, they can also be accompanied by negative effects. For instance, a viewer might parasocially interact in close proximity to a character she understands, but hates or fears, for instance, a psychopathic killer. Closeness can function as intensifier for both positive and negative emotional reactions. Keeping this qualification in mind, it can be stated that viewers' affective responses are significantly influenced by other aspects of closeness. Similarity identification and ingroup categorization, matching perspectives and goal sharing, synchronicity, joint semantic-perceptual space, mere exposure effect, and other parameters often contribute to an appraisal that is positive rather than negative. Therefore, the moral evaluation of characters, which is often seen as the essential requirement of affective

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engagement, is important, but only part of the whole picture. For instance, moral appraisal and sympathy might be biased by feelings of similarity and by ingroup norms; empathy might be fostered by understanding and para-proxemic relations. Moreover, cognitive experiences of closeness influence not only the valence and intensity of affective reactions but also their kind. Whether the viewer develops sympathy or empathy is largely a matter of mental perspectives. Viewers of melodramas may empathize and morally evaluate; viewers of pornographic films may react to a character as an object of desire rather than as a moral agent (PSI); viewers of action films may use a character as an instrument of vicarious wish fulfilment.

On the remaining pages, I briefly illustrate the interconnections of different ways of being close to characters by tracking some typical relations of viewers to the main character of David Fincher's *Fight Club* (he is named 'Jack' in the script, but not explicitly in the film). Needless to say, I am not aiming at a comprehensive interpretation.

Because of its unreliable ego-narration, morally ambivalent protagonists, violent content, ironic stance, and Brechtian distancing devices, *Fight Club* is not an obvious example for being close to characters. But it is far more illuminating than a standard case. The film polarized the audience to a degree which can be fully explained only by taking into account the parameters of closeness and distance.³⁸ Moreover, it shows a particularly rich and innovative pattern of closeness which aims at a difficult satirical balance and significantly contributes to the film's impact. While the film in many respects does not conform to conventions of formal 'realism', other features allow for immersion. The diegesis is neither abstract nor a fantasy world but is modelled on modern capitalist societies. Attention is clearly focused on Jack, his mentor/antagonist Tyler Durden and their love interest Marla, played by the well-known actors Edward Norton, Brad Pitt and Helena Bonham Carter, respectively. Both story and narration centre on Jack as protagonist and ego-narrator. The plot is for the most part framed as a stream

of his memories, accompanied by his sarcastic voiceover and a self-conscious audiovisual track. Suffering from his void existence until the charismatic Tyler leads him into a new life of liberating fistfights and anarchist rebellion, Jack finally realizes that Tyler is his *alter ego* and everything has gotten out of control.

In the beginning of *Fight Club*, the viewer quickly grasps Jack's main characteristics. Many of Jack's traits suggest the social type 'employee'. Jack is about thirty, white, male, wealthy, weakly built, ill-looking. His behaviour, dialogue, and voiceover suggest that he is well educated, cynical, lonely, consumerist, burned out, suffering from insomnia and his immoral job, and helplessly struggling to get out of this situation. As the story develops, Jack acquires other traits (some of which the viewer can recognize only retrospectively, like his split personality), but the viewer starts with a rather consistent and detailed mental model. All things being equal, this model may be more nuanced in the case of American viewers since their spatiotemporal and cultural proximity enables them to apply more elaborate mental schemata.

Edward Norton's average appearance, noticed by several film critics, may help make Jack seem familiar to many viewers. Moreover, Jack is involved in situations, habits, problems and office politics many Western viewers can recognize. Jack suffers from widespread problems like structural violence, consumerism, estranged work, emotional coldness, (male) identity crisis, and psychic disorder. This in turn accounts for (and may partly excuse) his desires and attitudes, e.g. his egocentric cynicism. Whether viewers share or reject Jack's attitudes may be influenced by their disposition to see him as a member of one of their ingroups or outgroups (as 'corporate wimp', 'nihilist', 'punk' etc.), and they may react with certain biased expectations and appraisals. Some viewers may compare Jack to their relatives, friends, or enemies. Others may find similarities between Jack's traits or life situation and their own, and those similarities could lead to sympathy or similarity identification (and to being tricked into taking the perspective of a schizophrenic). In

contrast to Jack, Tyler Durden – mysterious, muscular, self-confident, energetic, and played by Brad Pitt – might for some viewers become a focus of wishful identification (as he is for Jack) or erotic attraction (as he is for Marla, and maybe for Jack as well).

As the plot develops, viewers are attached closely to Jack even in the most intimate situations. Jack is more often closely framed than other characters, cueing the viewer to feel physically near to him. This closeness in spatiotemporal attachment and paraproxemics may contribute to the impression of a shared semantic-perceptual space, to strengthened ingroup bias, and to the mere exposure effect fostering sympathy and empathy. But there are many other, local effects. The beginning of the film shows physical closeness to an extreme extent; the camera – partly substituted by computer animation – is travelling literally through Jack's brain and out of his head, ending in a frontal close-up of his beaten face with a gun in his mouth. He stares directly into the camera, on a perceptual level triggering the feeling that it might be the viewer who is threatening him.

Further processes of parasocial interaction may be elicited by the point-of-view shots of fight scenes, by the ego-narrator suddenly stepping into the picture and introducing Tyler to the viewers, or by Tyler turning to the camera and addressing the viewers directly.

Shortly after the film starts, voiceover and images establish the flashback structure of the plot. This deviation from synchronicity may have a momentary distancing effect which soon fades; at the climax, the viewer is explicitly synchronized again with Jack through first-person narration. There are many examples of more specific synchronizing: the serene music and slow movements of Jack leaving the support groups, the slow motion during his car accident, and the time lapses of Jack recovering after the accident.

Fight Club takes the viewer close to Jack by giving her an extraordinary amount of information not only about his external experiences and his sense of time but about his inner life in general. Significant experiences that



• The beginning of *Fight Club* (1999). Jack – with a pistol in his mouth – is looking directly into the camera (PSI).

are not conveyed by film style or by Jack's behaviour are often explained by the narrator. Moreover, the viewer is often cued to share Jack's perceptual perspective, seeing and hearing what he perceives, and often in similar ways. The film uses various devices to do this. For instance, Jack's tiredness at the office is suggested by lack of focus and muffled sounds. The viewer's attention is often guided to things Jack attends to, using eyeline matches, point-of-view shots, close-ups or camera movements. This match of visual and acoustical attention deepens the understanding of the character's situational meaning structure and intensifies the impression of a shared semantic-perceptual space.

Furthermore, often there is a far-reaching match between Jack's *imaginative* perspective and the viewer's *perceptual* perspective; that is, the viewer comes to know what Jack imagines by seeing and hearing it, as when Jack meets his 'power animal' and dreams of Marla. In these cases, the viewer's mental perspective is different in mode than Jack's, but has the same



• The end of *Fight Club* (1999). Sharing a moment of awe and destruction (and a semantic-perceptual space) with Marla and Jack.

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intentional objects and is similar in content. Because the first-time viewer knows only the content of Jack's mental processes, but not their mode, she can initially be tricked into sharing Jack's mistaken epistemic perspective (taking his hallucinated encounters with Tyler for real), then his conative perspective (wanting to know where Tyler is), and finally his affective perspective (being surprised by the revelation that Jack is Tyler). From moment to moment, there are many subtle shifts of perspectival relations. In some respects, characters' and narrators' perspectives can be only guessed at: for instance, the seemingly indifferent tone of the voiceover leaves the ego-narrator's attitudes often unclear.

Until now I have stressed various ways of being close to the protagonist of *Fight Club*. But there are some important exceptions to this closeness that also bring forth crucial effects of the film. For a long time, the viewer is given no obvious reason to distrust the narration, while the spatiotemporal attachment excludes every event that could indicate that Jack has a split personality. This strategy not only prepares the viewer for the surprising revelation that Tyler is Jack's *alter ego*, but it contributes to the viewer's sympathy for Jack over Tyler in their final confrontation. Furthermore, the narration undermines Tyler's status as a 'real' person in the film's fictional world, which makes his violent death acceptable.

The final confrontation between Jack and Tyler is especially revealing because the conative perspectives of the characters, especially their attitudes to life and morality, play a central role in their appraisal. Jack questions a value system that some viewers may appreciate, while others may feel equally disconnected to it, yet he still does not go as far in his challenges to society as Tyler. For instance, the use of physical violence as a means of (self-)liberation will be judged differently by Jack and Tyler as well as by different viewers (e.g., violent radicals and pacifists). Jack opens up to loving Marla, Tyler does not.

These differences in conative perspective will contribute to the development of positive or negative affective dispositions towards the

characters (sympathy and antipathy).

Accordingly, moral evaluation is an important factor in bringing forth affective closeness or distance. On the other hand, most viewers would agree that Jack is a morally ambivalent character, and if the story were told from another perspective, he could also be a villain. In spite of this, many viewers sympathize or empathize with him, as the websites of Edward Norton fans testify. How can we account for this response? A plausible explanation would be that the viewers' reactions are influenced by the various strategies that complement the affective impact of moral evaluation and appraisal. Part of the intensity and polarity of the audience's reactions to *Fight Club*, then, might be explained by the controversial attitudes to life, violence, sex, and society its main characters show – but *in combination with* the high degree of spatiotemporal and mental closeness to those characters. Of course, the viewers' assessment of the film's humour, its hyperbolic, satirical frame and its implicit comments on those attitudes, would have to be considered more than I could do so here. But in any case, it may be concluded that the complex, fluctuating pattern of closeness and distance to Jack and other characters contributes significantly to the film's impact.

IV. Conclusion

I started with the observation that in some ways we can become closer to characters than we can ever become to real people, while in other ways we will always be distant to them. My aim was to show that there are at least five different ways of being close to characters: spatiotemporal proximity, understanding and perspective-taking, familiarity and similarity, parasocial interaction, and affective closeness. These kinds of closeness are neither supposed to form a comprehensive picture of character engagement nor to be logically connected as necessary and sufficient conditions for closeness in a strong sense. Rather, I am suggesting that if a viewer says that she feels close to a character, her meaning might be any of the senses of 'close' I have outlined, as

well as any of their combinations. Even an outline as simplified as the one I have given shows that we are dealing with the complex interaction of diverse factors. It is always possible to be close to a character in one respect and distant in another; it is even possible that closeness in one respect *presupposes* distance in another.

Nevertheless, the different ways of being close to a character are not related randomly; a system is at work, even if it is one that is not based on strict rules or laws (see Figure 1). Understanding the complex patterns of closeness and distance might help us to more precisely analyze the different strategies employed by individual films. The system of closeness described fits well into current accounts of character engagement³⁹ but also suggests that our current theoretical picture could be made more complete by drawing on social and cognitive psychology, considering some further perceptual and imaginative relations of viewers to characters, and giving more attention to the interconnections of all these factors.

Much remains to be explored. How much relative weight and relevance do the different ways of being close have? How could they be empirically tested? Can we feel as close to fictional animals, aliens, or artificial beings as we can feel to fictional humans? What strategies are used to maximize closeness or distance? What kinds of films show what combinations of closeness and distance? And how do those combinations function in propaganda, entertainment, art or education? Such questions require a closer look.

Notes

- 1 The concept of parasocial interaction parallels interacting with characters or real people represented in media to interacting with people in actual face-to-face situations.
- 2 E.g., Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995); Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (eds), *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Torben Grodal, 'Film, Character Simulation, and Emotion', in Jörg Frieß, Britta Hartmann, and Eggo Müller (eds), *Nicht allein das Laufbild auf der Leinwand . . . Strukturen des Films als Erlebnispotentiale* (Festschrift für Peter Wuss) (Berlin, Vistas Verlag, 2001), pp. 115–28.
- 3 E.g., David C. Giles, 'Parasocial Interaction. A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research', *Media Psychology*, 4:3 (2002), 279–304; Christoph Klimmt, Tilo Hartmann, and Holger Schramm, 'Parasocial Interactions and Relationships', in Jennings Bryant and Peter Vorderer (eds), *Psychology of Entertainment* (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006).
- 4 Some possibilities of exchange are outlined in Jens Eder, 'Die Wege der Gefühle: Ein integratives Modell der Anteilnahme an Filmfiguren', in Matthias Brütsch, Vinzenz Hediger, Ursula von Keitz, and Margrit Tröhler (eds), *Kinogefühle. Emotion und Film* (Marburg, DE, Schüren, 2005), pp. 225–48.
- 5 E.g., Ed Tan, *Emotion And The Structure Of Narrative Film: Film As An Emotion Machine*, (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996); Dolf Zillmann, 'Cinematic Creation of Emotion', in Joseph D. Anderson and Barbara Anderson (eds), *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois, 2005), pp. 164–79; Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 245–90.
- 6 See *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 2000, 'Close'.
<http://www.bartleby.com/61/53/C0415300.html>;
Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm 2003 [1852–1961]: 'Nähe'.
<http://germa63.uni-trier.de:8080/Projects/WBB/woerterbuecher/dwb/wbgui?lemid=GN02271>.
- 7 Cf. Diana Dwyer, *Interpersonal Relationships* (London, Routledge, 2000).
- 8 Cf. Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft (eds), *Recreative Minds: Imagination in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002).
- 9 Cf. Hans J. Wulff, 'Charaktersynthese und Paraperson: Das Rollenverhältnis der gespielten Fiktion', in Peter Vorderer (ed.), *Fernsehen als Beziehungskiste. Parasoziale Beziehungen und Interaktionen mit TV-Personen* (Opladen, 1996), pp. 29–48.
- 10 Smith, *Engaging Characters*; cf. also Per Persson, *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 11 Cf. Ralf Schneider, *Grundriss zur kognitiven Theorie der Figurenrezeption am Beispiel des viktorianischen Romans* (Tübingen, DE, Stauffenburg, 2000); Jens Eder, 'Die Figur im Film: Grundzüge einer Theorie' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Universität Hamburg, 2001 [forthcoming 2006]).
- 12 Cf. the entries on *impression formation, implicit personality theory, social cognition* in Anthony S. R. Manstead and Mike Hewstone (eds), *The Blackwell*

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- Encyclopedia of Social Psychology* (Malden, MA, Blackwell Publishing, 1995); Leslie Zebrowitz, *Social Perception* (Buckingham, 1990).
- 13 Cf. Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
 - 14 Cf. Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
 - 15 For a survey on PSI, see Giles, 'Parasocial Interaction'; on affects: Eder, 'Die Wege der Gefühle'.
 - 16 E.g., Klimmt, Hartmann, and Schramm, 'Parasocial Interactions'.
 - 17 Cf. Jonathan Cohen, 'Audience Identification with Media Characters', in Jennings Bryant, and Peter Vorderer (eds), *Psychology of Entertainment* (Mahwah/ NJ, 2005); Giles, 'Parasocial Interaction'.
 - 18 Cf. Grodal, 'Film, Character Simulation, and Emotion'.
 - 19 Smith, *Engaging Characters*.
 - 20 Cf. Eder, 'Die Wege der Gefühle'; Eder, 'Analysing Affective Reactions to Films: Towards an Integrative Model' *SPIEL – Siegener Periodikum zur Internationalen Empirischen Literaturwissenschaft* 3, 2005 (to be published).
 - 21 Smith, *Engaging Characters*.
 - 22 Robert F. Bornstein, 'Mere Exposure Effect', in Manstead and Hewstone (eds), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, pp. 381–82.
 - 23 A term used by Persson, *Understanding Cinema*, p. 70.
 - 24 A term introduced by Tan, *Emotion And The Structure Of Narrative Film*.
 - 25 Cf. Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, p. 264; Carl Plantinga, 'The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film', in Carl Plantinga and Greg Smith (eds), *Passionate Views*, pp. 239–55.
 - 26 Joshua Meyrowitz, 'Television and Interpersonal Behavior: Codes of Perception and Response', in Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (eds), *Inter/Media: Interpersonal Communication in a Media World* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 253–72; Paul Messaris, *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind, and Reality* (Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1994); Persson, *Understanding Cinema*.
 - 27 This process is described in more detail by Eder, 'Die Figur im Film' and Persson, *Understanding Cinema*; cf. also the concept of recognition in Smith, *Engaging Characters*.
 - 28 Cf. Schneider, *Grundriss*.
 - 29 Cf. the notion of 'subjective access' in Smith, *Engaging Characters*.
 - 30 E.g., Grodal, 'Film, Character Simulation, and Emotion'; Alex Neill, 'Empathy and (Film) Fiction', in David Bordwell, Noël Carroll (eds), *Post-Theory. Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 175–94; Persson, *Understanding Cinema*; Plantinga, 'The Scene of Empathy'; Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*.
 - 31 Berys Gaut, 'Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film', in Carl Plantinga and Greg Smith (eds), *Passionate Views*, pp. 200–16.
 - 32 Eder, 'Die Figur im Film'.
 - 33 For an outline cf. Carla Godersky, *Intimität in organisationalen Beziehungen: Theoretische Grundlagen, Entstehung und Wirkung* (Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2000).
 - 34 Michael A. Hogg, 'Social Identity Theory', in Manstead, Hewstone et al. (eds), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, p. 556.
 - 35 Godersky, *Intimität in organisationalen Beziehungen*, p. 50; Harry T. Reis, 'Attraction', in Manstead, Hewstone et al. (eds), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, pp. 57–61.
 - 36 Jerry Suls, René Martin, 'Social Comparison', in Manstead, Hewstone et al. (eds), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, pp. 540–44; Godersky, *Intimität in organisationalen Beziehungen*.
 - 37 Cf. Els Andringa, 'The Interface between Fiction and Life: Patterns of Identification in Reading Autobiographies', *Poetics Today*, 25:2 (2004), 205–40.
 - 38 Cf. James Swallow, *Dark Eye. The Films of David Fincher* (London, Reynolds & Hearn, 2003).
 - 39 E.g., Smith, *Engaging Characters*.