ON THE STUDY OF IMAGINATIVE RESISTANCE

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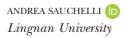*Lingnan University*

In the introduction to his *Notes from Underground*, Fyodor Dostoevsky claims that 'the underground man'—the unreliable narrator and protagonist of his novella—is fictional.[1] Dostoevsky also says that somebody similar to this fictional character must have existed in the city and period that serve as the background to the story—that is, St. Petersburg in the middle of the nineteenth century. By developing and narrating the story of a fictional character, Dostoevsky proposes various ideas about individuals in the real world. This is not an isolated case; in fact, great authors often do not simply want their readers to imagine or suppose certain moral claims or to interpret these claims as being true only in a fictional world. Rather, what some authors intend to do through their fictional works is frequently subtle, elusive, and complex.[2] Unfortunately, the appreciation of this complexity is lost in the current approach to the study of the so-called puzzle(s) of imaginative resistance.[3]

In general, the contemporary debate on imaginative resistance involves the individuation and clarification of the reasons and causes of a series of cognitive failures related to the imagination, with special reference to fictional works perceived as dissonant with some of our beliefs. Such cases of imaginative dissonance may be due to the perceived immoral character of a work or because of other perceived contrasts with some of our beliefs—for instance, (perceived) logical and factual mistakes or other kinds of impossibilities (e.g., nomological, historical) contained in the fiction. The relevance and influence

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[1] Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Notes from Underground*, translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Vintage Classics, 1864/1994.

[2] I leave aside the dispute between intentionalists and anti-intentionalists about artistic interpretation. See Livingston, Paisley. "Authorial Intention and the Varieties of Intentionalism." *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature.* eds Garry Hagberg and Walter Jost. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, (401–419) for an introduction to the current debate.

[3] The relevant papers on imaginative resistance are too numerous to all be listed here. Some influential contemporary works include Walton, Kendall. "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality – I," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 68 (1994): 27–250; and Moran, Richard. "The Expression of Feeling in Imagination," *The Philosophical Review* 103, 1 (1994): 75–106. Recent surveys include Liao, Shen-yi, and Tamar, Szabó Gendler. "The Problem of Imaginative Resistance: An Overview." *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Literature.* eds John Gibson and Nöel Carroll. London and New York: Routledge, 2015, (405–418), and Stock, Kathleen. "Imaginative Resistance and Empathy." *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy.* ed. Heidi Maibom. London and New York: Routledge, 2017, (327–338).

of such dissonances is claimed to be modulated by factors such as the genre in which the experienced fiction is categorised and perceived.

Interesting as these phenomena can be, some (praised) recent studies conducted by philosophers on these perceived dissonances are plagued by a reliance on a methodology dependent on mini stories as case studies (the mini-story approach).[4] This essay is an attack on the mini-story approach—I explain more in detail what this approach is in section 2—more specifically, an attack to its relevance and applicability to the study of the experiences of complex fictional works that belong to what we take to be (complex) artistic genres or categories. What I call 'the mini-story approach' is my reconstruction of what seems that some scholars hold or simply presuppose. To be clear, I do not argue against the application of the mini-story approach to cases that do *not* involve interesting/canonical forms of complex works of art; rather, I question the application of this approach to the study of only certain forms of imaginative resistance. In this essay, I use "works of art", "complex literary works", "fictional works of art" to refer to works such as films and novels—more on their *complexity* in what follows. Also, I will focus, although not exclusively, on cases related to imaginative experiences of alleged *immoral* works.[5]

The general line of reasoning of this paper is:

1 The experimental or philosophical literature on the puzzle(s) of imaginative resistance is focused on mini stories—the mini-story approach.
2 Cases of appreciation and imaginative experience of complex, fictional, and literary works (or works of art) that belong to recognised, sophisticated, or artistically complex genres/categories are relevantly different from cases of appreciation and imaginative experience of mini stories (and their related episodes of imaginative resistance).
3 Most (but not all) of the interesting puzzle(s) related to the imaginative experience of art are generally those about our

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[4] My primary critical target is Liao, Shen-yi, Nina, Strohminger, and Chandra, Sekhar Sripada. "Empirically Investigating Imaginative Resistance," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54, 3 (2014): 339–355, although this work is by no means the only significant representative of the approach I criticise—another example I have in mind is Gendler, Tamar Szabo. "Imaginative Resistance Revisited." *The Architecture of Imagination.* ed. in S. Nichols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, (147–174). A similar criticism has been made in relation to the use of short ad hoc stories in ethics; see Fisher, John Martin. "Stories," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1995): 1–14 for references. See also Kung, Peter. "Thought Experiments in Ethics." *Knowledge Through Imagination.* eds Amy Kind and Peter Kung. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 227–246; for a moderate and differently motivated form of scepticism.

[5] I do not offer here a comprehensive account of what makes a work of art immoral. However, some of the cases discussed in the paper should not be controversial. See Sauchelli, Andrea. "Aesthetic Value, Artistic Value, and Morality." *Blackwell Companion to Applied Philosophy.* eds David Coady, Kimberley Brownlee, and Kasper Lipper-Rasmussen. Blackwell, 2016, (514–526) for a recent introduction to the debate.

engagement with complex artworks that belong to specific genres or categories.

    4 Hence, since most of the cases taken into consideration, i.e., mini stories and complex works of art that belong to certain artistic categories, are structurally different and generate structurally different imaginative experiences, results deriving from the study of simple mini stories should not be extended to cover interesting cases of imaginative resistance—cases of imaginative resistance allegedly generated by works of art that belong to specific and complex artistic categories—without further argument.

As a corollary, I also suggest that a different methodology should be devised to study (interesting) cases of imaginative resistance, in particular to study the influence of genre in alleged cases of imaginative resistance.

The paper is divided into five sections. In the first, I set the stage for what follows by briefly enumerating several problems that have been associated with episodes of imaginative resistance. In the second, I give examples of the methodology I intend to criticise; while in the third I show that the case studies used in the contemporary literature on imaginative resistance are structurally and significantly different from what I call "the more interesting cases". In the fourth section, I defend the last point of the previous reasoning, and in the final section I clarify some of my main claims.

1. What Is to Be Explained?

The contemporary philosophical debate on imaginative resistance is generally traced back to Walton (1994) and Moran (1994), particularly to the former, who elaborated on certain points of David Hume's influential essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1757). Episodes of imaginative resistance are frequently characterised as cases in which we feel that our imaginative connection to the (fictional) story that we are experiencing is not, and perhaps cannot be, complete. I will not try to provide an exhaustive definition of the notion of imagination at issue here, and I will assume that it is a cognitive capacity that allows us, among other things, to assume, probably just partially, the perspective of other subjects—for instance, to imaginatively recreate an experience of a certain situation.[6] In addition, I will assume that (forms of) imagination may allow us to conjure up before our mind situations or objects that

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[6] See Van Leeuwen, Neil. "The Meaning of "Imagine" Part I," *Philosophy Compass* 8, 3 (2013): 220–230 for a recent survey and Balcerak Jackson, Magdalena. "On the Epistemic Value of Imagining, Supposing, and Conceiving." *Knowing Through Imagination.* eds Amy Kind and Peter Kung. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, (41–60) for a recent attempt to distinguish imagination from other similar and related attitudes (e.g., supposition and conception).

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may or may not exist (possibly on the basis of our beliefs or previous experiences). In the case of works that include a fictional narrative, an episode of successful imaginative *connection* is described as the experience of becoming absorbed in the story or of being transported into the relevant fictional world. The impediment to the complete imaginative engagement with such works has been described as a resistance or, in certain cases, even as a kind of imaginative failure.[7] Imaginative resistance seems puzzling because of its partiality: whilst we, as readers, do not have problems imagining that a man lived in St. Petersburg, was paranoid, and helped (or at least tried to help) a prostitute quit her career, we may encounter problems in fulfilling other (prompted) imaginative projects—for instance, imagining that a claim regarded as expressing a wrong ascription of moral value be true in the fictional world. When we resist imagining certain parts of a fictional story, we (sometimes) feel suddenly disengaged and are no longer transported into the world of fiction.

Recent works on imaginative resistance have already untangled a variety of different problems related to the previous remarks. More specifically, recent philosophers have individuated the following problems/ questions/puzzles: (1) The Fictionality Question: What is it that determines what is true-in-fiction?[8] Related to this question, some have specified the Fictional Morality Puzzle: why is there an asymmetry, in considering what is true in a fiction, between disbelieved moral and non-moral claims?[9] (2) The Puzzle of Authoritative Breakdown: the puzzle of identifying those features that systematically co-occur with, and explain, breakdowns in authorial authority.[10] (3) The Imaginability Puzzle: why are members of the audience sometimes reluctant or unable to engage in a mandated act of imagining so that typical invitations to make-believe are insufficient?(4) The Puzzle of Imaginative Failure: why do readers systematically fail to imagine that certain actions are right or wrong for the reasons outlined in the fiction?[11] (5) The Phenomenological Puzzle: why do certain imaginative experiences tend to evoke a particular phenomenology, sometimes described as an effect of 'popping out'? (The puzzle is occasionally formulated in terms of propositions evoking a particular phenomenology.) (6) The Aesthetic/ Artistic Value Question: are works that evoke various types of imaginative resistance thereby aesthetically/artistically flawed?

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[7] See Brock, Stuart. "The Puzzle of Imaginative Failure," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62, 248 (2012): 443–463.

[8] See Lewis, David, 'Truth in Fiction." *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978/1983.

[9] Walton. "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality".

[10] Gendler, Tamar Szabo. "Imaginative Resistance Revisited." *The Architecture of Imagination.* ed. S. Nichols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, (147–174). See Sauchelli, Andrea. "Gendler on the Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Acta Analytica* 31, 1 (2016): 1–9 for criticism.

[11] Brock. "The Puzzle of Imaginative Failure".

These puzzles and problems are interrelated, but I do not explore here their connections. Rather, I simply assume that some of the above puzzles/problems are genuine or at least worth exploring; in particular, I focus on (1), (3), and (6).[12]

2. The Mini-story Approach

The mini-story approach is an approach to the study of the above questions and problems adopted by certain philosophers—as well as by some 'experimental philosophers'. In particular, supporters of this approach explicitly or, more frequently, just implicitly hold that: (1) *ad hoc* mini stories, sometimes even just few propositions, can offer appropriate and relevant episodes of imaginative resistance; (2) *ad hoc* mini stories can be used as starting points to investigate the imaginative experience of fictions of various genres; and (3) the results obtained by investigating mini stories can be generalised to complex cases. Although some of the mini stories are clearly different from complex fictional works of various genres, some (experimental) philosophers seem to believe that the mini-story approach may work by analogy. In particular, they seem to believe that some of the imaginative reactions to their mini stories (e.g., imaginative resistance) are sufficiently analogous or similar to those produced by more complex cases and that, on the basis of this, general conclusions about works of art can be drawn.

An example of mini story that is considered paradigmatic in the current literature is Brian Weatherson's "Death on a Freeway."[13] The text runs as follows:

> Jack and Jill were arguing again. This was not in itself unusual, but this time they were standing in the fast lane of I-95 having their argument. This was causing traffic to bank up a bit. It wasn't significantly worse than normally happened around Providence, not that you could have told that from the reactions of passing motorists. They were convinced that Jack and Jill, and not the volume of traffic, were the primary causes of the slowdown. They all forgot how bad traffic normally is along there. When Craig saw that the cause of the bankup had been Jack and Jill, he took his gun out of the glovebox and shot them. People then started driving over their

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[12] See Stear, Nils-Hennes. "Imaginative and Fictionality Failure: A Normative Approach," *Philosophers' Imprint* 15, 34 (2015) for discussion.

[13] Weatherson, Brian. Morality, Fiction, and Possibility," *Philosophers' Imprint* 4, 3 (2004): 1–27. Liao, Strohminger, and Sripada seem to consider the above story a proper introduction to the study of imaginative resistance as, before quoting it, they write: "[t]o properly introduce the phenomenon of imaginative resistance, consider one of the alleged hard cases that is now standard in this literature: [. . .]". See Liao, Strohminger, Sripada. "Empirically Investigating Imaginative Resistance", at p. 341.

bodies, and while the new speed hump caused some people to slow down a bit, mostly traffic returned to its normal speed. So Craig did the right thing, because Jack and Jill should have taken their argument somewhere else where they wouldn't get in anyone's way.

When we present the general reader or our fellow philosophers with such a text, we may observe at least two types of response to it: one in which readers go along with the text up to a certain point and have the sort of reaction it was designed to occasion—to imagine its content—and another response that deviates significantly from that reaction, e.g., a reaction that interrupts their connection with the fictional world. Significant philosophical conclusions are then supposed to follow from the analysis of such reactions. (Weatherson recognises some of the limitations of the methodology used to study imaginative resistance and is not committed to the claim that his case study can be extended or employed to assess more complex works.) Cain Samuel Todd calls some instances of these mini stories "detachable parts of longer stories"; however, some of these mini stories are understood by their authors as being more than parts of longer works, that is, as complete case studies in themselves.[14]

Another mini story used in a recent study is supposed to show how and if considerations/knowledge of genre modulate episodes of imaginative resistance:

"*The Sun of the Second Creation* (Aztec myth)

A long, long time ago, in the valley of Mexico, there was only darkness. Everyone gathered around the high priest, Cihuacoatl, for an announcement. 'A message from the gods came to me. The youngest girl must be sacrificed in order to renew the sun'. They believed his every word. All eyes then turned to Ixchel, who had just given birth to a baby girl. Reluctantly, Ixchel gave her baby to the high priest to be sacrificed."[15]

The idea behind the study employing this story—I omit here some of the details, which involve a comparison with another story allegedly belonging to a different genre but regarded as structurally similar—was that some responses to the alleged immoral parts of the story are mediated by considerations of genre.[16] In particular, the study is supposed to prove that knowing the genre to which a work belongs (or

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[14] See Todd, Cain Samuel. "Imaginability, Morality, and Fictional Truth," *Philosophical Studies* 143 (2009): 187–211. Stear critically discusses Todd's sceptical stance towards some forms of imaginative resistance in "Imaginative and Fictionality Failure: A Normative Approach".

[15] Liao, Strohminger, and Sripada. "Empirically Investigating Imaginative Resistance," at p. 351.

[16] One of the alleged improvements of this study is that, instead of analysing the intuitions/experiences of some 'professional' philosophers, the authors consider the reactions of about one hundred University of Michigan undergraduate students and other randomly selected individuals.

simply categorising it before experiencing it) may affect our imaginative experience (and resistance) of the work at issue. The point of the study is that of testing the reactions of randomly selected people to two similar mini stories that are supposed to belong to different genres. The apparently positive results—considerations of genre may influence imaginative experiences—are taken to be generalisable and can be used to explain cases of resistance to more complex works of art.

Now, thinking about mini stories offers advantages. One of these advantages is that it is desirable to have concise examples to ruminate about or use as case studies in, say, experimental philosophy of art or experimental psychology. Additionally, testing the reactions to such short stories is allegedly logistically simpler. Also, there may be interesting and relatively sophisticated cases (e.g., haiku poems, Aesop's *Fables*) the (superficial) appreciation and experience of which may be structurally similar to that of these mini stories.

In general, however, I take it that more interesting episodes of imaginative resistance are those eventually elicited by complex artworks—although I do not claim that these works are the only interesting cases to be studied. I do not have a precise definition of what counts as a *complex* work of art but, to a first approximation, I will classify as complex those works of art that satisfy *at least* these conditions: (1) A complex work has an articulated internal structure that involves a certain amount of time to be experienced or appreciated. Such works may have a narrative form (e.g., some novels, novellas, or short stories), a series of narrative devices, and are crafted by authors with artistic/aesthetic intentions; (2) Complex works are (intentionally) embedded in at least one cultural tradition or literary background; (3) The appreciation of the way in which parts of a complex work interact with each other frequently constitutes a prerequisite for a full appreciation of the work itself; and (4) Complex works prescribe a mode of appreciation that can justify ascriptions to them of various kinds of artistic and aesthetic merits or values.

To sum up, the mini-story approach (frequently just implicitly) adopted in the current literature on imaginative resistance employs mini stories similar to those cited above and considers the imaginative experiences aroused by these stories as philosophically/aesthetically interesting. In particular, such imaginative experiences are considered to be relevant to philosophical reflections on our imaginative experience of fictional works *in general*, thus even to reflections on our experience of those complex fictional works that belong to various artistic categories—and these points provide reasons to believe premise (1) of the main argument of this paper (The experimental and/or philosophical literature on the puzzle(s) of imaginative resistance is focused on mini stories). For example, in specifying the scope of their study, Liao, Strohminger, and Sripada claim that they "adopt an inclusive notion of genre", having in mind, roughly, what Walton had in

mind in his paper 'Categories of Art' (1970).[17] In providing examples of what they take to be a genre, they mention 'Greek mythology', 'horror', 'romantic comedies', 'police procedural such as *CSI*', and so on. The idea is that their study, which is based on the mini-story approach, can shed light on how considerations of *any* genre, including categories of complex works, may modulate our imaginative experience of fictional works.

3. The Simplification of the Imaginative Experience of Art

In the following subsections, I articulate several arguments in support of premise (2) (Cases of appreciation and imaginative experience of complex, fictional, and literary works (or works of art) that belong to recognised, sophisticated, or artistically complex genres or categories are relevantly different from cases of appreciation and imaginative experience of mini stories (and their related episodes of imaginative resistance)) of the argument presented in the introduction.

3.1 The Temporal Dimension Argument

My first point is that a mini-story approach fails to capture the temporal extension of our experience and (eventual) imaginative resistance to complex fictional works—the appreciation and experiences of mini stories and of complex works are temporally different, perhaps simply as a matter of degree. For instance, when reading a novel that presents a problematic viewpoint, the experience of such a work can exhibit inconstant changes and manifest itself in subtle temporal variations.[18] An example of this complexity is an experience of Clytemnestra's speech in Sophocles' *Electra* (516–551). Clytemnestra, who has been presented by her daughter Electra in the play up to that point as an adulterous murderer, seems to provide a prima facie case for adopting a less accusatory attitude towards the immoral act that she committed: murdering her husband Agamemnon. The reader (or listener) may first be moved by her powerful speech: "Because this father of yours—the one you're always weeping about— was the only Greek hard hearted enough to sacrifice a girl to the gods—your sister. The pains he took to father her were nothing like the pain I had in giving birth. [. . .] don't I still have a right to justice? [. . .] Would any father do these things unless he had foul judgment and a wicked mind? [. . .] She would agree with me,

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[17] Liao, Strohminger, and Sripada. "Empirically Investigating Imaginative Resistance," at p. 344 and p. 344, note 13.

[18] A similar but relevantly different point is made in Levin, Janet. "Imaginability, Possibility, and the Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 41, 3 (2011): 391–421.

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the dead girl would, if she had a voice."[19] Later, however, the same apparently grieving mother, who had displayed grief at the (deceitful) news of Orestes' death ("It's wonderful and horrible to a mother— Even when he treats you badly, you cannot hate your child" at 770-1), seems to be relieved by the belief that her son is dead, thus making us suspicious of the sincerity of her previous attempted apology ("Nemesis heard what she should have heard; her ruling was good" at 773).[20] Our resistance to assuming a certain attitude towards the morality of this (fictional) episode of revenge may lessen or change throughout (or after) the reading experience. For instance, we may rethink and experience differently some of our reactions in light of other parts of the plot. The experience of certain complex works spans through time and this temporal extension does play a relevant role in shaping the imaginative experience of the work in question.

The general point is that the imaginative experience of complex works of fiction is not an isolated, momentary, and unstructured atom of experience—which is all that (most of the) *ad hoc* mini stories can offer. The experience of such *ad hoc* mini stories, and the model of appreciation suggested by them, is structurally different from that of complex works of literary fiction—not to mention other kinds of fictional art (e.g., TV series).

3.2 The Complexity Argument

Apart from obscuring the temporal aspect of the aesthetic/artistic experience of (complex) works of art, the narrow attention given to *ad hoc* stories precludes the appreciation of another possible dimension of variation in imaginative resistance: the complexity of the object of such experiences.[21] More specifically, philosophers who have narrowly theorised, e.g., the breakdown of authorial authority with regard to a few sentences that express a dubious moral claim do not take sufficiently into account the fact that a comprehensive imaginative experience includes more than a morbid attention to a couple of sentences that can then be properly described after some abrupt questions. This point can be understood in different ways. One way is that imaginative resistance can occur in experiencing the relation between parts of a work or towards the work as whole, possibly because of our final understanding of a work's meaning. For instance, although I may appreciate parts of, say, a painting for their colours or

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[19] See Sophocles. *Four Tragedies*, edited and translated by Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007.

[20] See Dunn, Francis. "Electra." *A Companion to Sophocles*. ed. Kirk Ormand. Blackwell Publishing, 2012, (98–110) for a list of resources on the play discussed above.

[21] Mothersill, Mary raised a similar issue in "Make-believe Morality and Fictional Worlds." *Arts and Morality*. eds J. L. Bermudez and S. Gardner. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, (74–94).

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details, I may imaginatively resist engaging the work while contemplating its broader meaning, and vice versa (e.g., as in an experience of Andy Warhol's *Silver Car Crash*). The mini-story approach does not reflect the structural complexity of experiences of complex works, since mini stories generally lack such an internal complexity—the interplay between the appreciation of parts, their interactions, and the whole of a work is lost in the mini-story approach. A fetishist focus on a few lines of a mini story is not the way in which we (should) experience complex objects such as certain narrative works of art.

3.3 The Neglect of Emotion Argument

A third element that has been overlooked in the current debate is the role that emotions play in some imaginatively problematic cases (e.g., *morally* problematic cases). According to an increasing number of psychologists, the emotional involvement that certain narratives elicit in the audience is the most important factor in adopting moral beliefs or rejecting frameworks that the audience does not regard as appropriate.[22] However, this aspect cannot be appreciated and is thus ultimately lost in the experience of *ad hoc* mini stories primarily because they are unable to elicit sympathy, empathy or, in general, complex emotional reactions that can, e.g., convert us to certain moral views that were initially perceived as immoral. The opposite of *ad hoc* mini stories in this regard is, e.g., Nabokov's *Lolita*—one of the cases that I take to be more interesting— which may subtly and masterfully prompt us to adopt (at least temporarily) a sympathetic stance towards a character with whom we would not want to sympathise in real life. Another example could be the TV Series *Breaking Bad*. However, mini stories, at least those used in the current literature on imaginative resistance, are inadequate case studies to the extent that they cannot elicit, in most cases, (ambivalent) emotions, which seem to be fundamental to certain complex cases of imaginative resistance.

Another way of making a similar point is the following. In order for a work to belong to certain genres, such a work is generally designed at least to elicit certain emotions in the audience or create a certain atmosphere and mood, e.g., horror. But this appeal to emotions is absent in the experiences of the cases discussed in the current experimental literature on imaginative resistance. For example, imaginative engagements with complex works of narrative art are likely to involve

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[22] See the collection of essays Green, Melanie C., Jeffrey J., Strange and Timothy C., Brock (eds.) *Narrative Impact.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2002, and in particular, Oatley, Keith. "Emotions and the Story Worlds of Fiction." 39–70. See Robinson, Jenefer. *Deeper than Reason.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005, for an excellent work on the role of emotions in the appreciation of art.

emotions that cannot be elicited in bland stories such as "The Sun of the Second Creation". It seems clear that, also with respect to the crucial role played by emotions, the examples frequently considered in the literature on imaginative resistance are significantly different from some of the imaginative experiences offered by complex fictional works of art.

3.4 The Implicit Moral Dimension of Variation Argument

Immoral works of art intrigue us, even if we sometimes cannot or do not want to imagine part (or all) of their immoral content. In the case of immoral artworks (e.g., Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, Tom Otterness's *Shot Dog Film*) and their related imaginative experiences, we may deplore a specific work's moral view or content yet have (and seek) imaginative experiences prompted by such immoral works. Now, works of art are related to morality in different ways. For example, we may properly judge as morally problematic a fictional work because of its implied or suggested attitude towards certain sets of values, character traits, institutions, actions, biases, or practices. In short, the moral character or value of certain works may not be judged only on the basis of what is explicitly asserted. Rather, systems of values are sometimes taken for granted or presupposed *and* these features may cause imaginative resistance when perceived by, say, an attentive critic. However, this dimension of variation is lost in the mini-story approach to the debate.

In addition, as Robert Stecker notes, a work may be moral or immoral because of its broad social or political consequences, either explicitly programmed by its author(s) or not, or because of the consequences for individuals who experience the work.[23] However, the mini-story approach does not seem to have the resources to model those responses. It can be objected that, in certain cases, the consequences or other implicit aspects of a complex literary fiction are not relevant to a proper artistic judgement or experience of that work.[24]

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[23] See Stecker, Robert. "The Interaction of Ethical and Aesthetic Value," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45, 2 (2005): 138–150. The above list of ways in which a work of art can be immoral is borrowed from this paper. See also Stecker, Robert. "Value in Art." *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. ed. Jerrold Levinson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, for a relevant discussion of the interaction of different types of values in art.

[24] Beardsley, Monroe. "Intentions and Interpretations: A Fallacy Revived." in his *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*. Cornell University Press, 1982. This point raises another question that I do not address in this paper: should not we, *qua* aestheticians or philosophers of art, also or exclusively be concerned with the *appropriate* reactions (e.g., of people who know something of the genre at issue) to a fictional work rather than simply with how some randomly chosen people react to a work?

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Although ignoring such aspects may sometimes be appropriate, these considerations may become more relevant in relation to the genre and the type of work of art under consideration (e.g., some works of religious art). To the degree that mini stories are devoid of such a dimension, they provide at best incomplete case studies for a more general understanding of imaginative resistance.

3.5 The Mode/Material/Function Argument

A fifth line of reasoning is related to the idea that the moral character of a work may not be immediately related to its content, implicit attitudes, or sociopolitical consequences but also to the material or process used to make it or of which it is made. For example, some scholars have questioned how Truman Capote gathered the information required to write *In Cold Blood*, and his methods of data collection may thus influence how the work is experienced and its moral character. Another example is Tom Otterness' *Shot Dog Film*—the title is self-explanatory.

Furthermore, it is possible that knowing how some works of art have been produced or the material of which they are made may reduce or enhance their aesthetic or artistic value. For instance, Frank Sibley suggested that coming to know the kind to which an object portrayed in a photograph or picture belongs may affect our reaction to it and function as an "aesthetic switch-off".[25] This observation can be extended to imaginative resistance: knowing that a certain work results from an immoral or a disgusting process or material may generate imaginative resistance towards the work (or towards some parts that were produced in the recognised immoral or disgusting manner or circumstances).

Besides, a work of art may also be considered immoral in virtue of its function and generate imaginative resistance because of this.[26] For instance, knowing a work's proper function may generate imaginative resistance based on moral considerations regarding its (successfully) performing (or having performed) an immoral function (e.g., nazi propaganda, some religious narratives aimed at justifying the atrocious treatment of infidels). The mini-story approach, at least in its current form, is not capable of modelling reactions generated by these cases and the mini stories used to study imaginative resistance are structurally different from some complex and interesting works also for the above reasons.

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[25] See Sibley, Frank. "Aesthetic Judgements: Pebbles, Faces, and Fields of Litter." *Approach to Aesthetics*. eds John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Cox. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, at p. 184.

[26] See Sauchelli, Andrea. "Functional Beauty, Architecture, and Morality: A Beautiful Konzentrationslager?," *Philosophical Quarterly* 62, 246 (2012): 128–147.

4. Relevant Differences

The mini stories employed in the mini-story approach are not just art-less (although this is part of the problem) but they are also structurally inadequate to model artistically interesting imaginative experiences (and resistances). If what I suggested in the previous section is correct, the simplification of interesting artistic experiences is so substantial that it may lead to, e.g., instances of the fallacy of the single cause. Now, part of a good methodology in the social sciences is that, in order to generalise conclusions from case studies of kind K to claims about more general cases G, there must be sufficient relevant structural similarities between Ks and Gs—as a general inductive rule.[27] I am not here claiming that there must not be any causally relevant disanalogies, only that a sufficient number of relevant structural similarities should be present.[28] For instance, Ks' structures and Gs' structures should ground relevantly similar causal powers—in our case, similar and relevant causal powers to produce certain imaginative experiences and resistances.[29] However, the experiences generated by Ks (mini stories) and the experiences generated by Gs (complex artworks) are generally so structurally different that, under all reasonable specifications of what a 'relevant structural similarity' can stand for here, the inference 'since the explanation of a property P to Ks is E (e.g., knowledge of genre), I am justified in applying E to the explanation of P to Gs' is *not* justified in the cases discussed here without further argument. If the arguments in the previous section are successful in showing that the experiences that mini stories and complex works elicit are structurally different in a relevant way, then the Ks (mini stories) and Gs (complex works) at issue do seem to have different causal powers; in particular, those powers that determine the way in which Ks and Gs may generate imaginative resistance. Using an analogy, I am not here claiming that we cannot generalise from studies on the effects of a drug on mice to claims about the effects of such a drug on humans, that is, I am not here claiming that we cannot extrapolate general claims from one population to another (e.g., from students to art connoisseurs). What I am claiming is rather that (some) experimental aestheticians are generalising results from the study of the effects of a drug to the study of a different drug, each drug having different relevant causal powers—the second drug being structurally more complex than the first. Mini stories cannot be

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[27] See Guala, Francesco. *The Methodology of Experimental Economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, and Steel, Daniel. *Across the Boundaries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, especially chapter 5, for discussions on some of the conditions that justify extrapolations or inductions from cases. Thanks to my colleague Jiji Zhang for these references.

[28] See Steel. *Across the Boundaries*, at p. 93 for a criticism of the stronger reading.

[29] See Steel. *Across the Boundaries*, pp. 82–85.

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considered akin to thought experiments involving, say, frictionless planes in developing or discussing physical theories in the general study of imaginative resistance to complex works of fiction. The reason is that mini stories do not simplify our experience of fictional complex art in a way that properly isolates the contribution of their fictionality or their belonging to a specific genre to eventual episodes of imaginative resistance.

One objection to the previous argument is that the mini-story approach is not aimed at studying what I call the 'interesting cases' or that (consequently) I am attacking a position that nobody holds. However, it is important to notice that most of the participants to the philosophical/experimental debate on this issue seem to believe that the results of their studies are general (e.g., they take themselves to be investigating the connection between imaginative experience and *any* genre or artistic category). More specifically, when considerations of genre are put forward, it seems that the supporters of the mini-story approach—I have in mind here Liao, Strohminger, and Sripada (2014)—believe that their results can be used to discuss explanations that apply to complex cases as well. As mentioned in section 2, after all these authors refer to papers such as Walton's 'Categories of *Art*' to illustrate the types of genres they have in mind, including *artistic* and complex kinds of fiction. In other words, their results are supposed to apply to all kinds of fictional works and genres—as the contrary is never specified in their works. If Liao and his colleagues did not think that mini stories were relevant to study more complex cases, then they should have specified that their methodology can apply only to the study of the appreciation of a very limited range of fictional genres/works *qua* fictions. If they believe that the mini-story approach can provide interesting philosophical hypotheses to discuss the role of our knowledge of some relevant artistic categories in the imaginative experience of complex fictional works that belong to *any* genre, then they have to argue that, despite the differences described in section 3, the similarities are sufficiently relevant to draw general conclusions about at least some of the relevant episodes of imaginative resistance.

5. Conclusions

The main conclusion I want to draw is that the mini-story approach should not be applied to the study of the general relationship between imaginative resistance and complex works of art because of the vast structural differences between imaginative experiences generated by mini-stories and those generated by complex works of art.

I defended premise (1) of my main argument in section 2; and I gave several reasons to believe premise (2) in section 3. I take the

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third premise ("Most of the interesting puzzle(s) are those about our engagement with more complex works of art [...]"), to be sufficiently plausible as it stands, provided some of the clarifications given above —e.g., I do not claim that only more complex works of art are interesting. I defended premise (4) of my main argument in the previous section. I have the space for only some additional clarifications of the scope of my argument. In particular, I grant that the mini-story approach may reveal something related to how considerations of genre modulate cases of imaginative resistance with respect to fictional mini stories *qua* fictions. For instance, the mini-story approach might successfully provide some useful data and results about episodes of imaginative resistance generated by certain (non-complex) works of fictional art.[30] I also grant that the mini-story approach may be a workable first step in the study of more complex phenomena related to fictional works of art. Still, mini stories should not be used to, e.g., test or make *general claims* about the influence of knowing the genre to which a work belongs and the nature of the imaginative resistance related to such a work—a different methodology should thus be devised. Such a methodology may be impractical, e.g., researchers may have to require their subjects to undergo a certain training or actually experience (properly) complex works.[31] However, I simply do not see any other way around it.[32]

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[30] The mini-story approach may be adequate to model certain imaginative reactions generated by an engagement with fictional works *qua* fictions.

[31] This paper is not against the empirical investigation of imaginative resistance or psychological studies on, e.g., the cognitive value of experiencing literary works of art as such. Rather, my paper is against the empirical investigation of imaginative resistance and other phenomena related to the arts as it has been done so far by some experimental philosophers. Judging from the methodology employed in studies such as the famous Kidd, David, and Emanuele, Castano. "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," *Science* 342, 6156 (2013): 377–380 (see the additional methodology and data information on the journal website), my criticism can be applied also to studies in the psychological literature when/if they employ only fragments of certain literary works (the description of their methodology is not always clear about the number of pages of literary fictions assigned to randomly selected people) or their examples elicit/can elicit only truncated and structurally simple (imaginative) experiences. See Panero, Maria. et alia, "No Support for the Claim That Literary Fiction Uniquely and Immediately Improves Theory of Mind," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 112, 3 (2017): 5–8, for the last part of a series of criticisms against Kidd and Castano's experiments. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this point.

[32] Thanks to Rafael De Clercq, Paisley Livingston, Jiji Zhang and the anonymous referee of this journal for their comments and suggestions.

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