

Propositions to accompany the PhD thesis

Reading Suffering

An empirical inquiry into empathic and reflective responses to literary narratives

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1. Contrary to most other book genres, “sad books” serve both a need for feeling and for meaning-making. (This PhD thesis)
2. Translating the Aristotelian concept “*catharsis*” as “clarification” instead of as “purgation” is more in line with people’s actual experiences when reading literary tragedies. (This PhD thesis)
3. Through repeated exposure to literary novels, readers train their ability to take another person’s perspective. (This PhD thesis)
4. By capturing readers’ attention, evoking mixed emotions and providing words and images for a certain state of being, an original literary style can widen people’s understanding of others. (This PhD thesis)
5. Stylistically striking scenes aid reflection in the longer run, but content is generally more important than form in making people think immediately after reading. (This PhD thesis)
6. By overstating the pro-social effects of literature, we are not doing literature a favour.
7. Measuring meaningful experiences poses a significant risk of reducing the meaningfulness of those experiences.
8. At least half of the disputes within the social sciences could be resolved through a more careful definition of commonly used concepts like “empathy.”
9. Those who feel the most intense empathic distress are also likely to turn into the harshest people after being confronted with less admirable human behaviour. The Dutch former politician Rita Verdonk may be a perfect example of this mechanism, which I therefore prematurely label “the Rita Verdonk-effect.”
10. Edward Snowden’s disclosures regarding the global surveillance of telecommunication and social media data have severely problematized diagnoses of pathological paranoia.
11. Human extinction through self-caused climate change would make humans the most tragic species to have ever walked the earth. If this happens, the tragic irony is that probably no other species would notice the tragic irony.¹

¹ But never underestimate the dolphins.