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Reconceptualizing foregrounding

Identifying response strategies to deviation in absorbing narratives

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The experience of deviation is often referred to as foregrounding and contrasted with the experience of feeling absorbed in a narrative. However, instead of simply assuming that foregrounding and absorption are mutually exclusive, they should also be considered as co-occurring: being absorbed as a result of a deviating aspect of a story. In the present paper we examine the co-occurrence of responses by means of a data-driven qualitative approach. The analysis of interviews about absorbed experiences with written and cinematic fictional narratives focused on occurrences of and responses to perceived deviation. We identified seven strategies in response to deviation that may be described through three underlying dimensions: absorption, agency, and valence. Findings suggest that perceived deviation, rather than obstructing absorption, is associated with intense and meaningful engagement with narratives.

Keywords: foregrounding, narrative absorption, qualitative approach, narratives, deviating style

Some definitions of literary experience seem to imply that reading a literary text cannot be a particularly absorbing activity – and that if it is, it is probably not very good literature (e.g., Levine, 1990; Smith, 2012). Similarly, artfulness in movies is assumed responsible for the fact that arthouse films seldom attract large audiences. Why would this be? One explanation lies in foregrounding theory, which assumes that literature and arthouse film make use of deviations from conventional ways of telling a story. Generally speaking, these deviations are assumed to decrease processing fluency (cf. Kuijpers & Hakemulder, in prep; Sanford &

Emmott, 2012; Sandford, Sanford, Molle & Emmott, 2006). The use of unconventional metaphors might complicate understanding rather than providing helpful communicative short-cuts (Stockwell, 2002); ungrammatical sentences will compel readers to read more slowly (Miall & Kuiken, 1994); distortions of the order of story events necessitate readers and spectators to figure out what actually happens in the fictional world (Bordwell, 1985; Hakemulder, 2007; Tynyanov, 1978); and uncommon cinematic style aspects delay rather than facilitate viewers' understanding (Tan, 1996). Such stylistic oddities can obstruct the processing of narrative information and prevent recipients from getting into a flow, impede them from being captivated by characters and their experiences, or hinder their feeling of being transported into the story world (Braun & Cupchik, 2001; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994). Even though these experiences might seem to elude a sense of absorption, they are still engaging narrative experiences. Reading a Proust novel or watching a Tarkovsky movie is assumed to lead to a different type of involvement than, say, reading Grisham's *The Client* or watching Spielberg's *Jaws* is believed to offer (cf. Schrott & Jacobs, 2011; Jacobs & Lüdtke, in prep.). The aim of the present article is to explore the nature of the relationship between experiences of foregrounding and absorption in order to further the conceptualization of these two notions. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews, we applied a bottom-up approach geared towards identifying participants' responses to deviations they experienced during absorbing narrative experiences, both while reading books and watching movies.

Definitions of foregrounding

Responses to deviation are often referred to as foregrounding, with the latter being a well-established concept in literary and film studies, as well as in empirical research (see for a review Hakemulder & van Peer, 2015). It is important to distinguish three different definitions of foregrounding: (1) Foregrounding seen as *textual features* (in the present paper referred to as deviations); (2) Foregrounding seen as perception, that is, instances in which recipients *perceive* an element in the text as a deviation; and (3) Foregrounding seen as an *experience*, that is, how recipients sense or undergo the perceived deviation. This third definition will be the focus of the present investigation.

In the first conceptualization of foregrounding as textual features, scholars concentrate on stylistic devices used for the purpose of increasing the artfulness of a text (or any other object; Dissanayake, 1992; Ramachandran, 1999), and presumably for additional effect on top of narrating the basic story (e.g., implicitly communicating something about a character; Culpeper, 1996; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983).

Deviation can be seen as a statistical notion, as Leech & Short (1981) proposed, comparing normal frequency of a text feature with the frequency of that feature in a target text or corpus. The common characteristic of deviations is that they violate conventions of communication (e.g., linguistic, grammatical conventions), of art (e.g., genre conventions), or of a society (e.g., moral conventions). Stylistic deviations can be detected within an art work (i.e., internal deviation, for instance a change in the rhyme scheme within a poem), or between a text and its genre (i.e., external deviation; e.g., a parody on a well-known film script, such as the formula of the James Bond movies; Erlich, 1969; Leech & Short, 1981).

General audiences may not be aware of all those departures from the norm that scholars' close readings may identify in a text (cf. Leech & Short concept of 'prominence', 1981, p. 56). Therefore it is important to distinguish foregrounding as textual features (deviations) from the second way of approaching foregrounding, which pivots on examining whether researcher-identified deviations appear to have become prominent in readers' and spectators' perception (e.g., Hoorn, 1997; van Peer, 1986; van Peer, Hakemulder & Zyngier, 2007). An important theoretical concept in this second understanding of foregrounding is Jakobson's (1961) poetic function: foregrounding as the moment of surprise, or as a disruption of the dominance of other functions of communication (e.g., the referential), causing a shift of attention to the form of the message rather than its content. This then requires that recipients are aware of the 'background,' that is, the rules and conventions that are violated.

The present study focuses on how such *perceived* deviations are *experienced* however. Shklovsky (1965) proposed that in foregrounding experiences we see things as if we see them for the first time, and often, what is (over)familiar in the world of the recipient becomes strange when foregrounding is experienced. This process of de-automatization or defamiliarization of perception may lead to renewed awareness and new insights (Leech & Short, 1981). Furthermore, defamiliarization may be followed by *refamiliarization*, a process in which the new/renewed insights are incorporated in recipients' perceptions of the world around them (Fialho, 2007; Miall & Kuiken, 1995). These renewed sensations may have political implications, as Brecht (1976) argued. *Verfremdung* (alienation or estrangement) in Brechtian theatre aims at making spectators aware of repression and the possibilities for social change. Rather than presenting an immersive, illusionary, escapist world as a given, that is, as something stable and unchangeable (parallel to how a political 'status quo' can be presented), alienation techniques attune spectators to the constructedness or fictionality of textual or audiovisual materials.

The present study is not concerned with how readers and spectators *can* (let alone *should*) interpret deviations, or whether they notice the same deviations that

scholars detect. Instead, it explores what appears to happen in recipients' own experiencing when they notice an aspect they perceive as a deviation, irrespective of this instance is statistically also identified as being a deviation. An important reason to take experiences of participants as a starting point is the very fact that experiential instances of foregrounding depend on an awareness of the background. This implies that perception is dynamic: it changes over time (Tynyanov, 1978) and may differ per reader (or reader group), as well as per media format and genre. For example, an unconventional stylistic device may become trite with frequent use (Mukařovský, 1964). Studying deviation requires analyzing linguistic and stylistic text qualities, but in addition, or even primarily, exploring *how* these deviations are experienced. Through our bottom-up approach to these issues we hope to build a theory that contributes to furthering understanding of these experiences.

Foregrounding and absorption

As Brecht's theory illustrates, the experience of foregrounding has been often contrasted with the experience of absorption (Kuijpers, 2014). Absorption is an umbrella term for all kind of states of immersion into the world of a fictional story accompanied by a reduced awareness of self, surroundings, and the passage of time (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009; Kuijpers, Hakemulder, Tan & Doicaru, 2014). Studies showed that absorption influences audience members' susceptibility to persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000). Absorption has been investigated in relation to different forms of media under the term transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), or story world absorption in literary narratives (Kuijpers et al., 2014); narrative engagement with cinematic narrative (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009), or presence with virtual reality and video games (Lee, 2004; Slater & Wilbur, 1997).

The sharp distinction Brecht (1976) made between art that absorbs and art that estranges seems to imply that foregrounding and absorption are mutually exclusive experiences. More recently, Jacobs (2011) identified two forms of reading: background reading that is associated with immersive processes and foreground reading that he relates to aesthetic feelings. It seems then that they are competing with one another: the involvement with style and the feeling of absorption (cf. Kuiken, Phillips, Gregus, Miall, Verbitsky & Tonkonogy, 2004). Relatedly, Braun and Cupchik (2001) distinguished two levels of aesthetic distance. In close orientation readers tend to identify with characters, whereas in far orientation to search for literary meaning.

Kuijpers (2014) proposed, however, that foregrounding and story world absorption can co-occur in the experience of one narrative, that is, a reader or viewer may "weave in and out" of complete absorption (p. 157). This does not mean, of

course, that foregrounding and absorption should somehow be merged in either notion, but it might be that they do have some relation. The present study investigates how these moments of perceived foregrounding during absorbed reading or watching are experienced. What is that “weaving out” experience like? And what consequences does this have for the subsequent “weaving in?” The weave in and out metaphor suggests a kind of fluidity within a reading or viewing experience that, we suggest, stems from the fact that the two experiences – foregrounding and absorption – do not exclude each other and may share some characteristics. The next section describes four shared characteristics of foregrounding and absorption, namely increased attention, self-modifying feelings, affect and positive valence.

First, foregrounding theory suggests that deviation does not diminish recipients’ focus but rather shifts their attention from content to form, that is, from story-world events to some aspect of the artifact (Jakobson, 1960; van Peer & Hakemulder, 2006; Hakemulder & van Peer, 2015). This shift of attention from *what* is told to *how* it is told may result in readers’ increased awareness of the artifact. As a consequence, recipients may involve themselves in a different kind of interpretation: Why is this story told in an unusual way? Does the deviation have an additional communicative purpose? Solving questions of this kind might lead to absorption deepening rather than diminishing. In addition, the processes of de-automatisation and refamiliarization that occur during a foregrounding experience may in and of itself be absorbing. In other words, the object of absorption might change, when a reader or viewer “weaves in and out.”

Second, Kuiken et al. (2004) have found that the trait absorption facilitates foregrounding and self-modifying feelings. This does not mean, of course, that foregrounding causes absorption (or vice versa), but it does suggest the possibility that the two are not simply opposites, but may also affect one another in some way.

Third, research showed that both deviation and absorption are associated with emotional responses. Neurological evidence suggested that encountering unexpected textual features is related to stronger activities in cortical areas associated with affect (Miall, 1995). In addition, Miall and Kuiken (1994) showed that highly foregrounded text segments are read slower (which would indicate more cognitive processing) than segments that scored low in foregrounding, but readers also scored these passages higher on affect. Finally, Hakemulder, Fialho, and Bal (2016) asked one group of participants to underline passages in literary stories that they found striking. A second group was asked to underline sentences they found emotionally evocative. The results showed that sentences that were considered striking had a good chance of being underlined as being emotionally evocative. We do not know what types of emotions were evoked (e.g., fiction or artifact emotions; Tan, 1996), but these results do suggest that foregrounding is related to narrative absorption through its effects on emotional engagement.

Finally, foregrounding and absorption have been both associated with positively valenced experiences such as enjoyment and appreciation (Van Peer, Hakemulder, Zyngier, 2007; Green, Brock, & Kaufman 2004). Exactly for this reason, they may also both inspire a wish to revisit a book, to reread passages, or to see a movie again (Dixon, Bortolussi, Twilley, & Leung, 1993; Hakemulder, 2004, 2007; Kuijpers & Hakemulder, in prep.).

In sum, absorption and foregrounding have been defined as mutually exclusive or alternating engaging experiences with narratives. However, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to assume that they co-occur in narrative experiences in a manner that suggests they not only alternate, but also affect one another. The present study explores how perception of deviation occurs in absorbed narrative experiences and how such an experience looks like.

Method

Overview

The present study aimed at exploring the relationship of foregrounding and absorption experiences through the analysis of transcripts of interviews in which interviewees were invited to articulate absorbed reading and viewing experiences. To this end, an approach informed by grounded theory was employed. Grounded theory is a qualitative method suitable for exploratory research where the goal is to develop theoretical understanding as suggested by the analysis of the materials (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Payne, 2007).

Data collection

Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Gillham, 2005; Seidman, 2006). The semi-structured interview questions pertained to the context of the narrative experience, the plot, the subjective experience, the most memorable scene, the perceived salient elements, and the perceived after-effects (Table 1). Formulating our questions, we took care not to introduce theoretical concepts, (e.g., estrangement, foregrounding, deviation, absorption, identification, etc.) that might have affected participants' responses. The interview protocol was tested in three trial interviews and questions were clarified on the participants' feedback. To increase the quality of the data collection we conducted two interview sessions (on average one week between sessions) with each participant, as it allowed us to clarify participants' utterances further when necessary.

Participants

Twenty-five people participated in the study (12 female). The mean age of the sample was 36.1 years ($SD = 11.7$), ranging between 21 and 72 years. Fifty-two percent of the sample reported formal education in literary, film or media studies at a BA, MA or PhD level. Participants were native or near native English speakers.

Following common practice in qualitative research the current study employed a purposeful sampling (Charmaz, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Payne, 2007), which is a frequently used type of non-probability sampling when investigating the experience of a specific construct. Instead of population representativeness, the sampling procedure was aimed at obtaining participants who most likely experience narrative absorption, and who could provide us with rich descriptions of, and in-depth insight into their experiences with fictional narratives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The ramification of this particular sampling procedure is that it does not allow for generalization. On the other hand, it is quite suitable for generating new testable ideas on foregrounding. The sampling criteria were stated in the call for participation, namely that we were looking for native English participants who engaged with fictional narratives on a frequent basis, and were willing to share their personal experiences in a 3-hour long in-depth interview. The call was posted on pages of special interest groups (e.g., groups having regular book or film club meetings).

Research material

In order to increase the ecological validity of the study, the interviews were based on participant-selected fictional narratives. Prior to the interview the participants were asked to list the ten most engaging fictional stories (books and films) they ever read or watched. There was 1.5 weeks to prepare this list before the interview. The term “engaging” was not defined any further. Three participants asked us to explain the term. They were suggested to list the “most affective stories, the stories you perceive being engaging.” For the purpose of our study it was essential that we did not ask the participants to bring narratives that they perceived as deviating in some way, as we intended to capture the spontaneously and naturally emerging responses to potential deviations in absorbing narratives.

Procedure

Respondents participated in two individual in-depth interview sessions. The interviews were conducted in English by the first author. After a short introduction participants signed an informed consent form. Next, some warming-up questions

were asked regarding the participants' favorite engaging everyday activities in order to facilitate participants' shift of focus to their inner experience. At the beginning of the interview section that focused on narrative experiences, the participants were asked to select two stories from their own list: the story they "had the most memorable or most intense experience with," and the story they "had the most difficult experience with." The story experiences were explored by the open-ended questions of the interview protocol (Table 1). At the end of the first session the participants were asked to choose two excerpts from their list of ten stories. No instruction was given as to what kind of excerpts the participants should select. The participant and the interviewer watched or read the excerpts together. After each excerpt the interviewer asked questions to elaborate on the experience.

Table 1. Protocol of the two in-depth interview sessions

Interview protocol	
First session	
Warming up questions	
1.	What activities do you find engaging in your everyday life?
2.	How would you describe your experience during [name of the activity]?
3.	What was in your mind, body, whatever when you [name of the activity]?
Describing the experience of an engaging fictional narrative	
1.	Where, when, with whom did you meet this story?
2.	What is the story about?
3.	What happened to you while you were reading/ watching this story? ; What was in your mind, body, whatever when you watched this film/ read this story? What did you feel, think, whatever...? What else happened to you?
4.	Which moment in the story was the most important for you? What happened to you?
5.	What was in the story that made you feel and think that way? What was the most important characteristic in this story affecting you? How was the story presented?
6.	What was it like after this film/ book? What happened to you? What was its short and long-time effect on you?
Second session	
Rereading/ reviewing a story segment, and concurrently describing the experience.	
1.	What is this segment about?
2.	Where is it in the whole story
3.	What do you find important in this segment?
4.	What is happening here?
5.	What is in your mind, body, whatever at this moment?
6.	What is it in the segment (shot, scene, paragraph, sentence) that makes you say that?

At the end of the second interview session all participants were debriefed and paid 30 euros for their contribution to the study. Interview sessions lasted from about 60 to 100 minutes. To ensure the quality of the data collection all interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim by professional transcribers and the transcripts were checked against the recordings. The qualitative software NVIVO 10 was used to manage the analysis of the resulting large volumes of textual data. After each interview, we wrote case based memos that enabled us to capture initial ideas and make comparisons between participants' accounts. These memos assisted the open coding stage of the analysis.

Data reduction

Those interview materials were selected in which a participant expressed that she or he perceived a narrative element as being deviating "not typical," "unique," "new," "weird," or "strange" as compared to other more typical narrative elements. (Examples: I had never read anything quite that detailed about that type of situation before." (P12); "The artistry was not cartoonish at all, it wasn't like the outlined drawings and there were fewer pictures than the regular picture book." (P16); "And a lot of writers actually don't use this technique of saying, giving actually a negative so it's really quite strange." (P19)). In total, thirty-four occurrences of the deviation category were identified in the interview set; twenty-three of them in literary experiences, eleven in cinematic experiences. Some of the experiences contained references to more than one deviation (more information on the titles of the chosen experiences in the Appendix).

Data analysis

The data analysis was informed by grounded theory that is the selected interviews were submitted to open coding (i.e., identification of meaningful categories), axial coding (i.e., interconnecting of categories) and selective coding (i.e., establishing core categories; Charmaz, 2006).

Open coding

In the first step the authors identified and labeled meaningful units in the transcriptions. The labels reflected the manifest meaning identified in the units and were discussed among all authors. Recurring labels were grouped together into categories and the categories were clustered into higher-order categories. This process resulted in an initial hierarchic taxonomy that was applied and refined in the next phase of the analysis. The decision making process of the open coding stage was documented in memos (Charmaz, 2006).

Axial coding

The coding procedure was followed by axial coding in order to connect categories, as well as refine and reduce the coding system (Payne, 2007). The first author and a trained undergraduate research assistant independently coded the interviews using the initial coding category system. Reliability checks were conducted periodically in NVIVO 10. The inter-coder reliability over the 25 interviews was acceptable (Cohen's Kappa = 0.68) (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002). Using constant comparison technique old categories were revised, and the new emerging codes, and disagreements were discussed until saturation of categories appeared to have taken place (Charmaz, 2006; Payne, 2007). This stage resulted in a final category system that served the basis of the next step in the analysis.¹

Selective coding and data synthesis

The coded interviews were submitted to selective coding through the following steps (Payne, 2007). Interview units that were coded for an explicit perception of a deviating element in the story were selected. Each unit was examined for other coding categories and organized into flowcharts by the first author to see how the coding categories connect to each other and how the participants' meaning making of a deviating element unfolds (i.e., to see which response categories surround the deviation coding category). The flowcharts were compared with each other, and similar processes were grouped together. Emerging patterns were described as *response strategies to deviation*. The first author and the second author re-read the interviews and looked for cases that may contradict the findings.

The first two authors led the data synthesis, and the end result was reviewed and refined by the other three authors. To improve quality and validity a regular meeting of the research team was convened to discuss and contextualize emerging interpretations, introducing a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. We tested the understandability and explanatory power of the emerging conceptualization of foregrounding at international conferences.

Results

The grounded theory based analysis of the interviews led to the identification of response strategies that appeared to have been adopted to perceived deviating elements in a narrative (from now on response strategies). Each response strategy reflects a distinct way of how participants responded to a perceived deviating element in the absorbing story. The response strategies differ in kind of function

1. The introduction of this comprehensive category system is beyond the scope of this article, and can be obtained from the first author.

participants ascribed to these deviating elements, as well as type of processes and experiences reported. The following section explores the differences and similarities among the response strategies (summary in Table 2).

Table 2. Response strategies to a perceived deviation in the narrative.

Response Strategy	Description
Striking/ Novelty	Deviation is a striking novelty in the language of the medium that triggers surprise and amazement in the recipient.
Uncertainty/ Disambiguation	Deviation is an ambiguity that causes an urge for disambiguation. Disambiguation requires extra attention and effort that may lead to emotional insight and prolonged mental connection with the narrative.
Symbol/ Insight	Deviation is a symbol that evokes interpretation, emotional insight or self-reflection.
Blank/Imagination	Deviation is an explicit blank that has to be filled in by the recipient's imagination. It is accompanied by appreciation and higher absorption.
Obstruction/Adjustment	Deviation is an obstruction that hinders the reception process, causes frustration, and has to be adapted to by an extra effort of the recipient.
Forceful Absorption	Deviation forces intense absorption into the narrative that is accompanied by the sense of lacking agency, and the attempt for down-regulating the intensity of the experience.
Forceful Character Engagement	Deviation is a force that coerces into character engagement experienced as unpleasant or conflictous.

Striking/ Novelty response strategy

In the category Striking/ Novelty Response Strategy participants expressed surprise and amazement upon encountering a new and unique way of presenting a story. The detected deviations were most of the time at the formal level of the narrative, i.e., novelty of the vocabulary, visual language, etc. Here is an example (the emphasis in the quotes is ours):

There was some **very unique ways how it was telling** things that **spoke to me differently** than other films here per se. [The film] is very video game influenced, **unlike pretty much anything else** that's come before it, and so there's lots of little sound effects or icons, little graphics popping up on the screen.(...) it kind of **tapped into me in a different way**, it **accessed a different part of my brain** that's not usually **engaged** by the movie (...) when you find a **new technique like this**, using the video game stuff, **it catches you off guard** and it's a bit more **surprising**, it's like a **fresh route**.
(P19, film, *Scott Pilgrim vs the World*)

It is neither the narration nor the style itself that caused the powerful effect on this viewer; it was the fact that the use of the video game style is new, unusual, unexpected, and surprising that led to the strong response. It seems to be a classic example of a foregrounding experience (foregrounding seen as perception of a deviating element), with a good fit to the theory (e.g., Tynyanov, 1978). In the following response we might recognize Jakobson's poetic function: "When you play with something as sort of obscure as the frame rate, you're doing it because **you're trying to make art, not trying to tell a story**. I think it was actually to **focus the attention and change the style**." (P7, film, *Moulin Rouge*).

In sum, typical characteristics of the Striking/ Novelty Response Strategy were amazement, surprise, and focusing attention on the form of the narrative and the creators' intention.

Uncertainty/ Disambiguation response strategy

In the Uncertainty/ Disambiguation Response Strategy participants isolated an element in the narrative as being uncertain in its meaning (i.e., bearing several possible meanings) and they expressed the urge to disambiguate it. Participants often felt that the key to clarify the ambiguity was hidden in the text. They reported that this motivated them to review the story several times, and pay extra attention to the details of the narrative. The uncertainty was perceived both at the formal level (e.g., an inserted photo that is unrelated to the text), and at the content level of the narrative (e.g., an utterance or an act of the protagonist was ambiguous).

Typical for this response strategy was that recipients invested extra cognitive effort to be able to understand the narrative. This resulted in more intense engagement with the narrative, focused attention, detachment of actual surroundings, and emotional intensity. The following quote shows the participant reaction to a character, who unexpectedly swallows a puzzle piece during an important conversation with his son:

It's not something you expect him to do with the puzzle piece, it's something really **unexpected** and it really kind of makes you sort of again sit up even further, and think **whoa, okay, that's strange, why would he have done that?** (...) I feel, I think at this point **it's really difficult to be distracted** (...) I have to continue on and I have to make sure that I've read this passage and that's why I go back and read it, but it's a **physical feeling of needing to be absolutely sure that I've read every word**. (...) I'm suddenly seeing things from a different angle.

(P22, book, *Canada*)

Within this response strategy the recipients' success in finding a satisfactory closure for the uncertainty varied. The sense of closure was often associated with deeper

emotional understanding or the sense of reward: “Okay now the **connection is made**. And then going back and reading again. It’s still not about facts but because you already have this connection, then you can emotionally tie the two things together in a way that you couldn’t before” (P22, book, *Austerlitz*); “The word play engages you too because you have to think about it, you can’t just run past it. But you have to be able to unpack it. (...) You feel like **you’ve been rewarded, I give myself a mental award**” (P19, book, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*).

These two examples show that the sense of closure while processing a deviation can be pleasurable, both emotionally and cognitively. However, the following example shows how a lack of closure does not necessarily lead to frustration, but may lead to new insights: “I didn’t know what to make of it, yet once I’m **beyond that first level of not knowing** what he’s saying, I really feel that **the words themselves at that moment don’t matter**” (P18, film, *Winter Light*); “I don’t think you can ever say I’ve answered the questions that this story has raised, but **it raises all sorts of questions in your head about how you relate to society**” (P21, book, *A Perfect Day for Banana Fish*). In other cases lack of closure was associated with frustration and irritation, rather than challenges that may characterize interpretive efforts:

I couldn’t catch the reference of what it was alluding to. (...) Then it sort of **irritates me** because if I don’t get it am I dumb, why is it there? **It makes me feel stupid** as if I should know. Any intelligent reader reading this book should know who Wallace Stephens is or be able to interpret that sentence. I guess it’s because I didn’t care, **it left me cold and didn’t do anything for me except irritate me**.

(P20, book, *Let the Great World Spin*)

Presumably due to the increased cognitive effort invested in disambiguating the text, a common characteristic of this response strategy was a prolonged mental involvement with the narrative. Participants felt that they had to return to the narrative, or that the experience (and the story) stayed with them longer than usual:

What it does is it digs deeper in, in to you now that the connection is made. (...) **It stays. It sticks. I remember it.** (...) it sort of **buries itself into your life**, so you remember this detail and you use it five years later, you apply it to your own life somehow.

(P22, book, *Austerlitz*)

Yet at the same time the fact it’s not explicit **it leaves you with a sense of longing**. It’s a strange sense that’s **what makes me attached to the film**, I can’t fully get **closure with the film**, the film doesn’t offer an explicit ending that is doubtless, it’s always open to doubt. So I’m left with the feeling of questioning.

(P18, film, *Winter Light*)

The sense of prolonged mental connection with the narrative was sometimes connected to viewers’ and readers’ personal lives, and co-occurred with self-reflection.

In the following case the reader was struck by lack of explanation for the suicide of the protagonist, taking place in the last sentence of the short story:

You can just keep asking yourself questions of but why, and why now and really was there no other way around it and you know why were you carrying a gun on your honeymoon and was this pre-planned or was it not, like it's just this you know all these questions keep coming out and you're just not going to get an answer to them, you can make up your own answers; so you're working to, to try and figure that out, answer the questions that are being raised as you're reading (...) how does suicide work, I mean do you think about it, do you plan it, do you not, is it spontaneous, my father suicide so maybe it raised questions about that like why, how, if you just stood the moment through, if you just passed through that moment would you have come out the other side thinking alright, somehow I will see this through, so maybe there were resonances because of that.

(P21, book, *A Perfect Day for Banana Fish*)

Reliving the pain of losing her father, the participant seemed to seek an answer from the writer for why he killed Seymour, the main protagonist: “[A]nd you think you’ve killed off Seymour, you are never going to read about him again, that’s it, you’ve just got rid of Seymour, how could you do that?” (P21, book, *A Perfect Day for Banana Fish*).

In short, specific for the Uncertainty/ Disambiguation Response Strategy was the participants’ perception of uncertainty, the allocation of extra cognitive effort to come to a disambiguation, seeking for closure in the text, a sense of fulfillment upon closure and the prolonged mental connection with the story.

Symbol/ Insight response strategy

In the Symbol/ Insight Response Strategy deviation was perceived as symbolizing something more than one would initially assume. In general, here the function of deviation here was perceived as facilitating recipients to interpret the narrative in a wider context. This interpretation of deviation may contain an emotional insight reaching beyond the presented fictional world towards understanding the real world:

The sound is off and you can only hear the environmental sounds of the park. I really like this effect, that they put away the voices and you can only hear the environmental sounds like birds, and I think it makes you think that the rest of the world is quiet, the birds are singing, everything is normal. It’s a normal morning in everyone’s everyday life but in this bubble, under this bridge, there is something dramatic that cannot be communicated to the rest of the world. (...) [I]t’s like you have an insight, it’s like a revelation that everything goes on despite personal tragedies the rest goes on. I think it contributes to this feeling of loneliness, of isolation.

(P13, film, *25th Hour*)

In other cases the interpretation of the instance of deviation resulted in an insight about the self, as the following example illustrates. The participant noticed that the gender of the main character in the novel is unknown. Rather than approaching it as an uncertainty and trying to find out whether the narrator was a male or a female (as would be typical of the Uncertainty/ Disambiguation response strategy), the participant's strategy was to deal with the deviation as a symbol that carries a meaning: **"It highlighted the universality, you know how it is just universal, love is universal and it doesn't really matter if this is between a man and woman, which was something I'd always felt"** (P16, book, *Written on the Body*).

The following case illustrates that the interpretation process can have a strong affective component. P7 selected a scene from an episode of *Angel*, a popular television show. The scene presented a dying female protagonist and the suffering of a male protagonist witnessing her death and agony. The deviation was recognized at the level of frame composition: "[T]he main viewing point is off to the right, completely useless stuff is in the center with the light on it." The participant contextualized this violation of conventions by saying "normally when you watch a show it's framed in the middle, what you're looking at is always in the middle of the screen" – and by attributing an intention to the deviation: "when you're trying to produce art and not just tell a story, you violate those rules because it makes it prettier, it gives a different impression." Interesting is that he perceived the deviation as "disruption of the natural viewing." "And what that does" he continues, "is that breaks you out of your passive attitude and it sort of reinvests you in the scene and shows how broken everything is." The disruption led to a renewed engagement with the story. Furthermore, typical for this response strategy, the participant saw a symbolic meaning in the decentralized composition, that is, signifying the emotional negativity and hopelessness of the situation ("how broken everything is").

In short, central to the Symbol/ Insight Response Strategy is the perception that the deviating formal element is ascribed with a symbolic meaning for the story, but that may also reach beyond, in the sense that it facilitates emotionally loaded reflections on the world or the self.

Blank/ Imagination response strategy

In the Blank/ Imagination Response Strategy participants perceived the deviation as obvious blanks or gaps in the narrative. This recognition stimulates imagination. The incompleteness of the narrative was expressed by terms such as "impressionistic," "half-described, half-executed brush strokes," "lack of details." Some of the wordings expressed the visual-imaginary modality of the reading experience, "it's so half, half done, it's like one of those line drawings with one squiggle and

then you have a perfect portrait,” or “you don’t really know what is going on, a lot of stuff has happened behind the camera, out of your vision” (P21).

The main characteristic of this response strategy was neither searching for a clue in the text (as it would be in Uncertainty/ Disambiguation), nor ascribing a symbolic meaning to the blanks (as it would be in Symbol/ Interpretation), rather participants actively completed the missing information through imagination: “you have to put the work in to complete the picture as opposed to everything being there for you” (P24).

Participants often appreciated that their input was required for filling in the gaps:

It intrigues me because it **leaves things up to my imagination; I have to fill in between the dots**, between the dabs. I can develop my own pictures. It’s not described in tedious detail, but with a few impressions **I can build up my own image**. So for me it’s a **very vivid description** and very surprising choice of words. (..) So, **that was surprising**, it would never occur to me to do something like that, but it **does catch the attention**.
(P20, book, *Let the Great World Spin*)

Another source of appreciation was readers’ sense of agency: “I think that’s good writing, sort of let the writing process be a **co-creation between author and reader**” (P20, book, *Let the Great World Spin*). It can also lead to a sense of deeper absorption: “It kind of sucks you in because you have to add the sound to the film and so it requires greater attention on the part of the viewer” (P24, film, *City of God*).

Sometimes appreciation was related to the economy of style:

Like saying that “the roof looked like a hat pulled down” (...) That you know it wasn’t really a hat on the house, and of course **they could have gone on at length to say** that the roof stretched down nearly to the ground and it was brown tiles and it went all the way round, and so you could go on and on, and there was no windows in the roof or whatever. **But in your mind you just have, you can see immediately what she was trying to say** (...) Sometimes the lack of detail is what **gives the picture the power**.
(P15, book, *God of Small Things*)

The blank/ imagination process may result in emotional insight that goes beyond the fictional world. Participant 20, when reading *Let the Great World Spin* ran into a list of things found in a garbage can, “like empty toothpaste things, dental floss and, stuff like that,” but also with casually added items like “youth, and then grief, in between the nail clippings and dental floss, it sounds as if it’s all of an order.” His response was partly filling in the gap by imagination partly seeking a symbol, which illustrates that the categories presented here sometimes overlap:

It sort of **raises a question for me**, along with all the junk we throw away, **we’re throwing away bits of our life too**, so we’re paying more attention to that than to ourselves, memories, joys, do we keep them or do we dispose of them along with everything in the little foot flip garbage can.(P20, book, *Let the Great World Spin*)

The response strategies of Uncertainty/ Disambiguation, Symbol/ Insight, and Blank/ Imagination were all characterized by the active contribution of the recipients in response to a perceived lack of information in the story. However, the strategies for dealing with these gaps were different. In Uncertainty-Disambiguation recipients tried to find a clue for the missing information by close (re)reading of the text, in Symbol/ Insight participants interpreted *why* the gap was left in the text, and the Blank/ Imagination-recipients completed the missing information using their own imagination, *without* the assumption of a symbolic meaning.

Obstruction/ Adjustment response strategy

In the Obstruction/ Adjustment Response Strategy participants found their reading process hindered by a certain feature of the text. A common response was that readers attempted to overcome the challenge in order to keep the reading fluent and smooth. Participants felt that they had to make a conscious effort in order to adapt their reading style to the writing style. The effort was perceived as being successful when the deviation was no longer slowing down the reading. Experiences varied in the degree to which participants found the challenge posed by the deviation difficult and in the degree to which they felt they were successful. An effective adjustment, in the eyes of the participants, led to an interpretation in which the obstructive technique was understood as being meaningful in one way or another. For example, in the following case the narration of one of the characters contained an encrypted way of writing (e.g., some of her sentences were spelled backwards). The participant described an experience consisting of three stages: the first stage of irritation was followed by adjustment, which led to more fluent reading and to understanding:

Certainly in the beginning you'd think 'oh what is this', and then **it was a bit annoying because you just wanted to read, you didn't want to have to work out** what was this silly backward language. But once you got into it, and once you were able to sort of read it more **fluently and quickly**, then it **became part of that character**, who was a really interesting character in the book.

(P15, book, *Poisonwood Bible*)

In other cases participants were constantly making an effort, but failed to integrate the formal deviation of the writing into an interpretation. P12 sensed that the book she read required a "different response style," which was characterized by the fact that it took her a longer time to read the book and she required more time between readings. The reward of fluent reading seemed insufficient for true enjoyment though:

It's quite difficult because **he doesn't use proper punctuation at all**. And it's just very long sentences, and he just keeps talking and talking and then he changes topic but he never ends the sentence. It's a bit **hard to read** and so it **takes a while to sort of get into the rhythm** of the story and understand how he writes. Then after that it's a bit easier to follow, but it's still a bit challenging. (...) It's as if **you are running along somebody who is actually on a bicycle and he is going much faster and then you have to run to catch up to stay with him**. (...) [I]t's as if you have been **running a marathon with your brain** and I guess the full stop is useful because it shows an end." (P12, book, *Blindness*)

Finishing the book was a "relief" for this participant. She said it's not something she would re-read just because "it took a lot of energy to read it in the end."

Summing up, characteristic to the Obstruction/ Adjustment Response Strategy was that an instance of deviation was perceived as an obstacle that made processing slow and effortful. Participants sought ways to adjust their reading (or watching) to the challenge. In some successful cases this led to more complex interpretation of the text. This response strategy is similar to Uncertainty/ Disambiguation and Blank/ Imagination in terms of the active contribution that is required from the reader. However, the strategies differed in the subjective experience of exertion: Obstruction/ Adjustment was associated with a high level of invested mental energy, whereas Uncertainty/ Disambiguation felt to be less arduous, and the active contribution had a natural fluency and immediacy in case of Blank/ Imagination.

Forceful absorption response strategy

In the Forceful Absorption Response Strategy the perceived deviation had a strong absorbing quality. Central was a sense of being overpowered by intensity of absorption to the degree that respondents try to down-regulate the level of it. In all cases the deviation was seen in formal aspects of the narrative.

The author doesn't have paragraphs, it's just all one 400 pages of a continuing story that just **flows and flows and flows** (...) and it's **very difficult to put down** because, at some point you have to sleep or eat or pick up the phone or something and it's **just going so smoothly that you don't want to leave the story**. (...) you don't want to tear through it, (...) one thing I did find was that **I was slowing myself down a lot from finishing the book** (...) you know, read a couple of pages over again just to delay the end. (...) It doesn't feel like writing, **it feels like someone telling a story**. (P22, book, *Austerlitz*)

The lack of grammatical interruptions resonated in a strong sensation of fluency, flow, and smoothness. The reader tried to regulate the speed of her reading and she expressed the illusion of non-mediation. Also, it appeared that a particular type of deviation (e.g., missing punctuation in *Blindness*, as well as in *Austerlitz*) can lead

to different response strategies (e.g., obstruction or absorption, respectively), but it was also found that different types of deviation may also lead to *similar* kinds of response. For example, absorbed reading may involve both very long and very short sentences. The following quote refers to latter, whereas the next quote makes mention of the former:

[The author] uses very short sentences and they're almost always in the present tense. (...) I think as a reader **brings you right there immediately**, he's not talking about something that happened in the past that you have to slowly sort of get, you know, drawn into (...) if he put it in the past tense it takes you longer as a reader to get you into it. So for what he wants to accomplish in his stories, which is **having you right there and being present** that is hugely critical.

(P22, book, *What we Talk About when we Talk about Love*)

The irresistibility of the absorption and the sense of passivity on the part of the recipient was a prominent aspect of this response strategy:

Visually it's completely out of this world, there's nothing, it came out of nowhere. (...) I **get very pulled into it, to the fact that they almost, they really kind of like swell up in my head**, they take out like almost all my thought, like it's just me in the movie and I'm **not really contributing a lot**, I'm just really really enjoying it.

(P19, film, *Scott Pilgrim vs The World*)

In sum, in the Forceful Absorption Response Strategy the deviation evoked an intense absorption into the narrative that was accompanied by a sense of passivity, in contrast with other response strategies, where recipients took on an active role.

Forceful character engagement response strategy

The Forceful Character Engagement Response Strategy was characterized by participants' sense of intense character engagement caused by a deviation in the narrative. It is somewhat related to the previous response strategy, the Forceful Absorption Response Strategy, as both strategies involve participants sensing a force that they find difficult to resist. Relatedly, participants expressed an attempt at regulating the felt closeness with the characters. An important aspect of this response strategy was the ambivalent valence of the engagement. It was not experienced as undividedly pleasant, but rather as somewhat disconcerting.

Two subgroups were identified in this response strategy, based on the perceived source of the engagement experience. Typical for the first was that participants attributed their intense engagement to a higher level of access to the protagonist's consciousness. The following quote illustrates that the valence of character engagement can be rather negative:

I'd never read in such detail about somebody being attacked. It sort of made me feel really defensive. I think I probably even curled up a little bit and was just sort of a bit protective of myself even. Like a bit, when you are scared you sort of curl up to protect yourself, so I felt a bit like that also.

(P12, book, *The Ministry of Pain*)

In the second subgroup participants expressed a sense of conflict or struggle in their engagement with the character. They felt forced to identify with a character they did not find attractive, and experienced the identification with them as disturbing:

Rob represents the antithesis to what is considered a classical masculine character. And so as much as I didn't want to see the world through Rob's eyes, because that means I would also have to take on that vulnerability, it was just inevitable.

(P24, book, *High Fidelity*)

Due to the unique perspective of the novel, reading *Lolita* made one of our participants experience intense character engagement with a morally highly ambiguous fictional character:

This tells you about a man who you cannot help but like. (...) she is a 14 year old victim and this 40 year old predator who you shouldn't like. In every TV it would be sleazy and nasty with scary music playing under him every time he appeared on camera and who you would be trained to dislike from the very beginning. Here you read about his background, he's cultured and he's educated, you see him through other people where he's handsome and educated and articulate and sensitive and he's this predator of his own stepdaughter. (...) it's so tragic, so you're looking from his eyes and you're looking from outside at the same time and you don't know which side is winning.

(P21, book, *Lolita*)

Central to the Forceful Character Engagement Response Strategy was participants' sense of lacking agency, as well as a feeling of conflict. Participants felt that the perspective the narrative offered was unusual – either because of the level of detail or the atypicality of the character – yet, it made them engage with a character in a powerful manner.

Discussion

The present study explored the relation between experiences of foregrounding and absorption. Selecting from a larger group of interviews, we concentrated on narratives in which participants identified a deviating formal or content element. Our analysis has resulted in the articulation of seven distinct strategies that recipients adopted in responding to deviating elements. Each of these strategies is characterized by a different level of absorption. As discussed in the introduction, it is often

assumed that only narratives that make use of an inconspicuous and accessible style without any obtrusive elements would absorb their readers or viewers. Our results suggest, however, that foregrounding and absorption can go hand in hand. In each of the seven strategies experienced deviations in a film or text led to some form of absorption. Although we did see instances of dissociation (e.g., frustration), estranging devices do not necessarily estrange audiences. On the contrary, they may deepen their involvement. In the following, we shortly summarize the main features of the response strategies.

Response strategies to deviation

In the Striking/ Novelty Response Strategy deviations are perceived as striking or novel and hence generate surprise, without any active contribution on the part of the recipient. In terms of absorption, the recipients are captivated by the deviation in a new and therefore, in their experience, an effective way. They feel it has a stronger impact than what they see as the 'old ways'. This response strategy has the closest connection to the classical foregrounding theory: as this was the most classic instance of foregrounding in the sense of 'noticing a deviation' (see Introduction).

In the Uncertainty/ Disambiguation Response Strategy, recipients are preoccupied by questions posed by some kind of deviation in the text. Deviation is experienced as an uncertainty that calls for disambiguation. Participants report a prolonged mental connection with the narrative, often coinciding with rereading, reviewing, and re-immersion in order to find an answer to the questions that the uncertainty leaves unanswered. In our data involving this response strategy, we have found instances of what might be called emergent effects, that some argue are the hallmark of literariness (Dixon et al., 1993; Hakemulder, 2004). Appreciation of a literary text arises over time, in rereading or reflecting on a text, for instance in response to ambiguity (Dixon et al., 1993) or linguistic deviation (Hakemulder, 2004). An increase in appreciation from first to second reading is assumed to be atypical for readers of popular literature. This response strategy also seems to illustrate how foregrounding devices facilitate deeper processing as opposed to shallow everyday processing of language (Sanford & Emmott, 2012). Deviations might stimulate readers and viewers to linger a bit longer on the text. This extended exposure time allows for more cognitive elaboration and stronger emotional impact (cf. Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015).

In the Symbol/ Insight Response Strategy the deviation is seen as having a symbolic meaning, and is experienced as causing a break in the flow of the reception process. This does not seem to work against absorption, however; rather, it leads to a shift in awareness to higher complexity interpretations. Deviation calls for interpretation in this response strategy, and it prompts affective reactions. This

component of the experience can be associated with feelings of ‘self-modification’ discussed by Kuiken, Miall and Sikora (2004), who showed that understanding of the text may lead to altered understanding of the reader’s self.

In the Blank/ Imagination Response Strategy deviations are seen as gaps to be filled in by use of one’s imagination (cf. Iser, 1980). The deviation is less interruptive, and the response is more fluent and immediate than in the previous strategy. It is characterized by a reengagement and heightened interest, followed by what is experienced as an appeal to the imagination. The technique of leaving blanks in the text can be associated with the economy of style, a concept appraised often by literary authors that ascribes the power of writing to succinctness rather than richness in details (King, 2010; Spencer, 2009; Twain, 2014). In Iser’s (1980) theory a blank in the fictional text “induces and guides the reader’s constitutive activity” (p. 118).

The Obstruction/ Adjustment Response Strategy includes recognition of deviations as obstacles that slow down reading. The deviation in this response strategy taxes cognitive resources for a longer stretch of time than in the Blank/ Imagination Response Strategy. Recipients report processes of adjustment, for instance to linguistic deviations or other obstacles that need to be overcome to enable narrative comprehension. The experience of being slowed down in reading echoes Shklovsky’s (1965) technique of ‘retardation,’ the slowness of perception, that he considered as the general law of art. It also corresponds with research showing that textual foregrounding is associated with increased reading time and depth of processing (e.g., Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Sanford & Emmott, 2012). There is a cut-off point, however, for the positive relationship between complexity, deeper processing and appreciation; when a text becomes too complex, appreciation also decreases (cf. Berlyne, 1971; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Sanford & Emmott, 2012). This was echoed by our participants’ responses in this category.

The Forceful Absorption Response Strategy clusters experiences in which deviation is perceived as irresistibly absorbing. We see references to feelings of transportation and the sense of being immediately present – experiences that were fluent rather than interruptive. Recipients also talk about instances of rereading here, as in the Uncertainty/ Disambiguation Strategy, but for a different reason: they are attempting to slow down their reading to prolong contact with the narrative.

Finally, the engagement with characters in Forceful Character Engagement Response Strategy also features a strong and (again) irresistible form of absorption. The sense of struggle, of not finding the absorption unambiguously pleasant, was characteristic for this response strategy. The experienced absorption is different from the other variations, as it involved a high level of identification, which was sometimes experienced as too intense.

In sum, each response strategy is triggered by a deviating element in the story, leading to specific forms of absorption. Another salient aspect in this overview is the sheer range of responses to deviation. The interviews have offered concrete examples of how recipients respond to novelty, strikingness, or strangeness, which are key elements in foregrounding theory (see the works of the Russian Formalists and their discussion of novelty and obstruction (Shklovsky, 1965). In addition, the bottom-up approach of the present study revealed how readers respond to other kinds of perceived deviation, such as symbols, blanks, uncertainty, or some kind of force in the text. These are issues not addressed by foregrounding theory proper, even though they do occur in literary theory (e.g., the notion of blanks features prominently in Reception Aesthetics, Iser, 1970).

Suggestion for future research: Identifying the core features of foregrounding

We propose that the next research step in the conceptualization of foregrounding should be the identification of underlying core features in these response strategies. The present study does not allow for precise predictions in this regard, therefore here we can only recommend a certain strategy for moving forward.

A possible way to proceed in further the understanding of foregrounding is to test whether we can locate these response strategies in the three dimensional model of emotional experiences established in previous research (e.g., Bradley & Lang, 1994; Kätsyri, Kinnunen, Kusumoto, Oittinen & Ravaja, 2016). These studies typically find similar three-factor solutions comprised of intensity, valence and dominance, explaining large portions of the variance in semantic and affective aspects. For example, Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum's (1957) potency, activity, and evaluation, as well as Bradley and Lang's (1994) arousal, dominance and pleasure, and Wundt's (1896) *Beruhigung* (inhibition), *Spannung* (tension), and *Lust* (pleasure) concepts. In future research it should be tested whether these re-occurring three dimensions indeed provide an explanation for the variance that characterizes responses to deviation. Considering previous work (e.g., Bradley & Lang, 1994), it is plausible that a three-factor solution for absorption, agency and valence will be found (see a provisional model in Figure 1), capturing the core characteristics of the phenomenon.

We propose for further testing that the response strategies can be organized according to the intensity of *absorption*, varying from highly focused engagement with the narrative on the one end to disengagement. For example, the highest level of experienced absorption was found in the Forceful Absorption and Forceful Engagement response strategies. The expressions used by the participants, such as "being pulled into it," or the story "swelling up" in one's head" seem to suggest strong feelings of absorption. Less intense absorption was present in other

Figure 1. Underlying Dimensions of Foregrounding Experiences: Absorption, Agency, Valence

expressions participants use are that the story “sticks” to them, or that it leaves them with a “sense of longing,” or that they feel “attached” to the story (Uncertainty/Disambiguation Response Strategy). Expressions a little less intense on this dimension pertain to attention being caught by an instance of deviation and a subsequent sense of surprise. This is central in the Striking Novelty response strategy.

Agency, varying from the feeling of being in control to the feeling of being overwhelmed or overpowered by the narrative, also seems to be a good candidate for capturing a core feature in these response strategies. In Uncertainty/Disambiguation, Symbol/Insight, and Blank/Imagination there appeared to be a high level of perceived agency. Participants reported feeling rewarded for their accomplishment of “making the connection,” or “tying things together,” or filling in gaps, or seeing things immediately. On the other hand, in the Obstruction/Adjustment Response Strategy participants reported a lower level of agency, as they needed to adapt their reading style to the writing style of the narrative. Response strategies such as Forceful Absorption and Forceful Character Engagement were described as overwhelming, overpowering experiences with low level of perceived agency. Future studies would need to test whether agency is independent from the absorption dimension, meaning that both low and high level of agency could be accompanied by a high level of absorption.

The dimension of *valence*, ranging from negative to positive experiences, also appears to be applicable as an underlying feature. As empirical aesthetics and flow theory suggest, valence of the experience may be the result of a balance between effort and reward. With an imbalance, valence will be lower or negative

(cf. Berlyne, 1974; van Peer, Hakemulder, Zyngier, 2007; Zyngier, Hakemulder & van Peer 2007; compare Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It seems that the Obstruction/Adjustment, and to a lesser extent the Uncertainty/Disambiguation response strategies are subject to that pattern. However, in some of the response strategies, for instance in Powerful Character Engagement, levels of complexity or novelty seem to be irrelevant in determining valence. It needs to be tested whether valence is independent of the dimensions of absorption and agency.

A systematic research of this kind would in all probability lead to adjustments in the categorization of the response strategies as it might become possible, for instance, to identify subcategories of reading strategies.

Suggestion for future research: Deviation and the search for meaning

Based on our findings the assumption that foregrounding inspires a search for meaning has to be reevaluated. Instances were unequally distributed across the response strategies. They were most pronounced when recipients saw the deviation as a symbol or (to a lesser degree) when the deviation is considered as an uncertainty that needs to be disambiguated. In Symbol/Insight Response Strategy the interruptive deviation led to reflections, for instance about the human condition. In the Uncertainty/Disambiguation Response Strategy we have often found that the questions that kept the recipients occupied did not go beyond the fictional world. Typical, here, was an emotional understanding of the events in the fiction world, or an understanding of the character's personality. The search for meaning was notably absent in three response strategies, that is, when the deviation was interpreted as 'novelty' (Striking/Novelty Response Strategy), as an obstacle that needs to be overcome (Obstruction/Adjustment Response Strategy), or as something irresistibly absorbing (Forceful Absorption Response Strategy). Note that the first two response strategies seem relevant to Russian Formalist thinking about foregrounding, and were assumed to lead to new insights. It seems that this then is not necessarily the case. Instead of reflection these three response strategies all included emotional effects, aesthetic appreciation, transportation-like states, or frustration due to a surplus of effort in the absence of closure.

Many of the response strategies entailed a search for meaning beyond what is told, fulfilling higher-order needs that some refer to as eudaimonic (Oliver & Raney, 2011, p. 989). Research suggests that such eudaimonic experiences are often assumed to be triggered by content rather than formal features. As Wirth, Hover and Schramm (2012) formulated it, we find "moving and thought-provoking narratives" in "sad films or tragedies that often have a dreadful, disastrous, deplorable conclusion" (p. 406). However, it seems that content (such as a bad ending) is not enough to generate eudaimonic experiences (Wirth et al., 2012). We propose that

foregrounding is more readily considered as one of the possible candidates for stimulating reflection on meaning, or in other words: eudaimonic experience.

As we have seen in the interviews, during moments when readers are interrupted in their flow of reading or watching, they “weave” out of story world absorption. The interruption may lead to irritation or provides an opportunity to take a step back and reflect. These moments of pauses, we suggest, may fulfill an important function (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). They may give rise to awareness of all sorts: of something in the narrative world or of something in our own lives, of the human condition, or of something in the way style affects us (e.g., how overpowering it can be). Far from spoiling the experience, we have seen that each of the seven strategies of dealing with deviations lead to its own sense of being absorbed, often more intense, profound and meaningful than prior to the “interruption.” It seems to us, therefore, that the domain of foregrounding offers what we often lack or even avoid in our daily life: an opportunity for reflection. This is not to say of course that every instance of foregrounding is utilized by readers and viewers for that purpose. It may also simply be ignored or seen as an unwelcome interruption.

Our personal aim for future studies is to explore what makes narratives significant and meaningful and how to elicit meaningful narrative experiences. To this end, we need to find out how people’s willingness to cognitively engage with narratives can be stimulated, for instance in literary education, or projects for the promotion of reading. This requires a cooperative endeavor of psychologists and educationalists, as well as scholars of the empirical study of literature and film.

Limitations and challenges

The present study suffers from some limitations. First of all, we only analyzed interviews in which the detection of a deviating component was explicit. Hence, capturing *subconscious* influences of deviation is beyond the scope of our study, especially since the data consist of self-reported reconstructed memories. However, the present study may lead to a number of hypotheses to be tested to that effect in future research. One finding that was central in the present study is that distinct forms of absorption occur in response to a particular set of deviations, often evoking responses that are meaningful to recipients one way or another. Because our qualitative data do not allow for causal conclusions or generalizing statements, the next step would be to conduct controlled experiments, preferably using implicit measures to assess whether certain deviations reliably lead to certain response strategies, and subsequently to certain forms of absorption.

In addition, moderating variables should also be taken into account, such as the readers’ or viewers’ individual differences in reading or viewing aptitudes and

attitudes. One possible candidate we propose is recipients' willingness to actively participate in co-creating the narrative as appeared to happen, for example, in the Blank/ Imagination Response Strategy. Contributing in an active manner is reflected in the agency dimension of foregrounding experiences. A second factor of importance is literary competence, which in the study reported here has remained under-explored (cf. Bortolussi and Dixon, 1996).

Conclusion

To conclude, foregrounding can be conceived as readers' or spectators' response to a deviation from a norm. Based on the present qualitative bottom up approach we propose a reconceptualization of foregrounding. We suggest extending the range of responses to deviation to also include experiences such as surprise, amazement, focused attention, effort, imagination, frustration, adaption, emotional insight, self-reflection, and prolonged mental connection with the narrative. Investigating the links among these responses we identified seven response strategies that are driven by different perceptions of instances of deviation. We also propose that foregrounding experiences can be characterised through three underlying dimensions: the intensity of absorption, the level of perceived agency and valence.

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Appendix

Participants	Gender, Age	Story-experience	Medium
P7	Male, 32y	<i>Moulin Rouge</i> (Luhrmann, 2001)	Film
		<i>Angel: A Hole in the World</i> (Whedon, 2004)	Film
P12	Female, 33y	<i>The Ministry of Pain</i> (Dubravka, 2006)	Book
		<i>Blindness</i> (Saramago, 1995)	Book
P13	Female, 30y	<i>25th Hour</i> (Lee, 2002)	Film
P15	Female, 52y	<i>Posionwood Bible</i> (Kingsolver, 1998)	Book
		<i>God of Small Things</i> (Roy, 1997)	Book
P16	Female, 32y	<i>Written on the Body</i> (Winterson, 1993)	Book
P18	Male, 28y	<i>Winter Light</i> (Bergman, 1963)	Film
P19	Male, 28y	<i>Scott Pilgrim</i> (Wright, 2010)	Film
P20	Male, 72y	<i>Let the Great World Spin</i> (McCann, 2009)	Book
P21	Female, 50y	<i>Perfect Day for Bananafish</i> (Salinger, 1948)	Book
		<i>Lolita</i> (Nabokov, 1955)	Book
P22	Female, 40y	<i>Austerlitz</i> (Sebald, 2001)	Book
		<i>What We Talk About When We Talk About Love</i> (Carver, 1981)	Book
		<i>Canada</i> (Ford, 2012)	Book
P24	Male, 28y	<i>City of God</i> (Meirelles, 2002)	Film
		<i>High Fidelity</i> (Hornby, 1995)	Book

Summary of story-experiences as they appear in the present paper; participant identification, the story title (author, year of publication) that was discussed in the quote; the medium of the story as it was referred in the interviews. NB the table contains only the titles that were referred to in the present paper. An exhaustive list of stories can be obtained from the first author.

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