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Empathy or Empathies?
Uncertainties in the Interdisciplinary Discussion

1. The Definitions of Empathy

Can you imagine putting yourself "in someone else's shoes"? This seemingly simple skill makes you able to exhibit empathy; you are endowed with it; you have an empathic personality; you are empathically disposed. The term empathy has become a linguistic commonplace in everyday communication as well as in interdisciplinary research. The core of the issue was already very well familiar to Plato (*Ion* 535e): his rhapsode knows that if he cries while declaiming his poem, he will succeed in making his audience identify with himself and make them eventually cry. In the end, Ion will laugh: he knows the audience will pay him, because everyone feels satisfied for having shared a common suffering. Aristotle (*Poetics* 1449b) repeated the scheme for the theatrical experience: the audience attending the representation of intense emotional situations (homicides, parricides and matricides, infanticides, suicides and various other horrors) identifies with the tragic hero or heroine, spectators suffer with him or her, they are deeply touched for his or her destiny and they feel pity for his or her fate. The audience feels not only pity but also terror because of the similarity of the acted situation to the experience that might occur in life circumstances. These few examples show that since the beginning of its conceptualization, empathy has been linked to the fictional and artistic dimensions.

But *how* does a person empathize? The process of empathy brings up a few questions and issues, which are yet unresolved. For instance, is it a mental or a bodily process? Is it a conscious or rather unaware and unconscious one? Is it intentional or involuntarily, direct or indirect, rational or instinctual or logical or emotional? Is it innate, inherited or acquired? Is it a talent, a gift or a skill that we can learn and improve? Is it a right, a duty, a pleasure or a pain? Who are "the others" with whom we empathize? Are the others like us, just human beings? Do we prefer to empathize only with those who are similar to us: persons of the same sex, same age, same ethnicity, who speak our language, share our skin colour and have similar jobs and who share with us the passion for a certain kind of music, sport or

book? Do the others belong to our same social class and are they raised within a similar educational model?

Rather the opposite might be true: we empathize with others because of their being *different* – unlike, heterogeneous. The ancient antipodal questions raised by the Greek philosophers – does alike attract alike or do opposites attract themselves? – become crucial once again. Do such attitudes rest on a biological basis?

Examining any online library, catalogue or even Amazon.com shows us the astonishingly high number of books about empathy published in the last decades. Beyond traditional domains concerning the constitution of intersubjectivity (in both philosophical and psychosociological sense) and the artistic experience, we now find specific studies on the crucial role played by empathy in very heterogeneous fields: evolutionary psychology and the educational sciences; ethics and politics; linguistics, communication science and media theory; cultural studies and gender studies; medicine and caregiving; law studies, criminology and victimology; neuroeconomics and neuromarketing and theology and the theory of religions. Economist Jeremy Rifkin and primatologist Frans de Waal, two established scholars widely appreciated by the large international audience, simultaneously published two large studies devoted: the title of the first one is *The Empathic Civilization* (2009) and the second one is *The Age of Empathy* (2009). According to Rifkin, not *homo homini lupus* but rather *homo empathicus* is the key to understand the authentic essence of human nature. In De Waal's opinion, *homo* is *empathicus* because in each person there is still the empathic monkey residing.

In addition to these investigations in the field of intersubjective empathy, a specific attention for objectual empathy (namely, empathy subject–object: Pinotti, 2017) has revamped in recent years, partly due to the hot debate about the notion of "animation" in the domain of cultural anthropology (Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: see Harvey, 2015) and the wide diffusion of Alfred Gell's notion of "agency" in the fields of literary studies and art theory (Gell, 1998). These lines of research attest an increased interest towards the "life of things" (that could be called an "Object Turn"). What all these research lines have in common is the rejection of an improper pan-humanization and an excessive "subjectivization of empathy".

The result of these different fundamental research questions, raised in the last hundred (and more) years, coming from different research areas, lacks in fact of a clear concept of empathy. Speaking about "uncertainties and differences in terminology in interdisciplinary research that have emerged over the last years", as mentioned in the call for paper for the present issue of *Gestalt Psychology*, empathy is a case in point. A recent paper identified up to 43 distinct definitions of empathy (Cuff, Brown, Taylor, & Howat, 2014, p. 145).

Already in 2006, de Vignemont and Singer described with a touch of irony the multiple definitions of empathy that created incomprehension and misunderstandings within the scientific community: "There are probably nearly as many definitions of empathy as people working on the topic" (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006, p. 435). An obstacle to the study of empathy is that there is no general consensus on the definition of empathy (Coplan, 2004), and therefore, many different phenomena such as sympathy, affective contagion, imitation and mind reading are mistaken with empathy. In her paper *Understanding Empathy*, Amy Coplan underlines the "conceptual confusion" and the difficulty of dealing with this concept due to "the number of competing conceptualizations circulating" (Coplan, 2011a, p. 4). In a more recent study, with the funny and meaningful title *Will the real empathy please stand up?* (2011b), she responds to the lack of a clear and agreed definition of empathy with her narrower definition. By encompassing the broader definition of empathy such as the one of Frans de Waal, who uses it as an umbrella concept to describe an array of psychological processing (such as mimicry, mirroring, bodily synchronization and emotional contagion), Coplan proposes her own definition of empathy, which should be understood as a complex, imaginative process through which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self–other differentiation (Coplan, 2011b, p. 40).

In fact, the lacking conceptualization of empathy has not yielded any agreement thus far (Batson, 2011). Fagiano (2016), who pleads for a pluralistic concept of empathy, finds De Waal's broad definition of empathy extremely useful. Contrary to Amy Coplan, he avoids to give a precise definition and appreciates the plurality of voices that have termed "empathy" throughout history within different academic disciplines. By welcoming multiple historical conceptualizations of empathy, he tries to give value to the various contexts in which these concepts were settled.

We believe that a too broad concept of empathy ends up in producing a vague or incomprehensible concept and an "anything goes" discussion. Following the attempts of Amy Coplan and Benjamin Cuff (Cuff et al., 2014) to find a shared understanding of this complex concept, the following paragraphs will serve to analyse the reasons for the lack of a clear concept of empathy and highlight two deficiencies in the research and theorization of empathy that create misleading interpretations of it.

2. The Causes for the Lack of a Clear Definition

a. The Intricate History of Empathy

The history of the concept of empathy is as complex (Pinotti, 2016) as it is the phenomenon it describes. Empathy is used in different ways, each referring to

a constellation of experiences so different that one often despairs of successfully reducing them to a common denominator.

Empathy has not enjoyed an easy path in the course of the history of ideas. Its success attracted severe, even ferocious criticism, often taking it abruptly from riches to rags. After the first seminal appearances in proto-Romantic, late eighteenth century Germany and with ever greater force in the 1870s, *Einfühlung* (this is how empathy sounds in German) gained power and became, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a veritable "Open Sesame", capable of enlightening an entire range of problems concerning our experience with things (especially, with the beautiful objects in art and nature) as well as with our relationships to others.

If in its first two phases, empathy substantially spoke German; with the English translation of *Einfühlung* into *empathy* (Titchener, 1909), a third phase was inaugurated under the dominance of the psychological researches in the Anglo-Saxon world, a dominance whose effects have been so deep that even today in Germany, the term coined on the English – *Empathie* – is preferred to the controversial and now old-fashioned *Einfühlung*. By the 1930s, the term *empathy* was a common currency in the psychological vocabulary: the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* announced a photographic device for recording empathic reactions in motor experiences (Gordon, 1934). Thanks to a growing trust in the reliability of psychological test procedures during the 1950s, the scientific measurement of empathy began in earnest. An impressive amount of psychological studies exploring empathy in every aspect followed, each analysing analogies and differences with cognate and yet not identical experiences such as sympathy, emotional contagion, affective fusion and perspective taking.

The fourth phase of empathy, the neuroscientific one, started in the Eighties of the last century and was triggered by the discovery of the mirror neurons by a team of neurologists of the University of Parma (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2008). This historical excursus highlights that during the last 100 years, empathy has moved across disciplines and cultural contexts. This mobility certainly contributed not only to its fortune but also to its conceptual vagueness.

b. The Ideological Concept of Empathy

Despite the lack of a clear distinction, in the last 20 years, literary empathy has certainly been the most discussed and studied effect of aesthetic artefacts. This "empathy hype" in the humanities has been mostly inspired by the neurocognitive wave and is also backed by strategic reasons within the academic world and specifically the humanities, as it aids in the aim of showing that cultural activities and engagement with aesthetic objects have a positive effect on social life.

Important scholars of the European cultural heritage, such as Martha Nussbaum (1997), claim that literature cultivates the human capacity for prosocial behaviour, including empathy, theory of mind, social cognition, perspective taking, altruism, as well as general cognitive abilities. For Nussbaum (1995, p. xvi), reading literature triggers an empathic involvement that is "an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own". Recent experiments showing that literary reading has a positive short- and long-term effect on our empathic abilities (e.g. Stansfield & Bunce, 2014; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Johnson, 2011, 2013; Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006) seem to confirm this viewpoint, and our educational system is widely based on this assumption. The same seems to apply to music listeners (Wallmark, Deblieck, & Iacoboni, 2018). For these authors, literature and the arts seem to enhance moral and prosocial attitudes (Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). In these studies, empathy not only describes a psychological phenomenon but is mixed up with the ideological perspective of the author of the article or theory.

This ideological perspective on empathy also produced methodological shortcomings. The texts used in these experiments "were designed to induce compassionate feelings for the characters and model prosocial behaviour" (Johnson, 2012, p. 151). The characters of these stories, e.g. an orphan girl in Botswana (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014), are not typical in the history of literature and preclude a generalization of the results. There are at least two aspects that impede their generalization: first, there are literary genres that do not demand an empathic reaction, such as obscure poetry and certain types of theatre plays demanding an "estrangement effect" in the wake of Brecht's anti-empathic alienation. Second, the history of literature offers numerous examples of amoral attitudes in novels, dramas and poems. Rebekka Kricheldorf's play *Homo Empathicus* (2017) paradoxically shows how cruel mankind can be, even in the artistic dimension.

Moreover, these studies only focus on positive emotions in art reception and positive concepts of fictional empathy. The link between literature, empathy and prosocial behaviour has been overemphasized and has occluded significant aspects of the aesthetic experience of literary texts. Although it is unquestionable that literature does enhance empathic reactions, the nature of these reactions remains uncertain, as exemplified by recent studies (Johnson, 2011, 2013; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014), which could not elucidate whether the reactions during literary reading are weaker or stronger than during other activities such as watching TV, playing video games (see Happ, Melzer, & Steffgen, 2015) and real-world communication. Furthermore, it is completely unclear how these non-aesthetic empathic reactions interfere with genuine aesthetic reactions to the literary text and its appreciation. Yet, it is uncertain to what kind of "literary"

features, such as rhetorical figures and stylistic elements, these empathic reactions can be attributed. In relation to these studies, Keen (2007, p. 99) has concluded that "the faith in the relationship between reading narratives and moral or social benefits is so strong that it remains a bedrock assumption of many scholars, philosophers, critics, and cultural commentators".

In the current psychological discussion on empathy, the link between empathy and ethics represents one of the hottest topics (Prinz, 2011). In his 2011 published book *Empathy and the Science of Evil*, Simon Baron-Cohen (one of the most important empathy theorists and the creator of the notorious test to assess cognitive empathy) has tried to redefine "evil" as an absence of empathy (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001). Through the analysis of several historical examples, Baron-Cohen attempts to substitute "the non-scientific term of evil with the scientific term empathy erosion" (Baron-Cohen, 2011, XII). Thus, he states the full equivalence between ethical and psychological concepts. Paul Bloom replied violently to Cohen's reductionist positions on ethics in a notorious article entitled "Against Empathy" on October 10th, 2014 *Boston Review* and later with a pamphlet with the same title (Bloom, 2016). The controversy on the link between empathy and prosocial or moral behaviour became widespread in the scientific community and gained also the attention of the media and the wider audience (Cameron, Inzlicht, & Cunningham, 2015).

The distinction between empathy and sympathy is a clear example demonstrating the entanglement of ethical and ideological issues in the discussion on empathy. In the terminology, one constantly slips from sympathy to empathy and vice versa: what for Batson (1991) is genuine "empathy" corresponds to Hoffman's "sympathetic distress" (1991) and to Darwall's "sympathy" (1998). Pleading for their clear separation, Wispé (1986) has remarked the affective connotation of sympathy with respect to the cognitive nature of empathy: the first would indicate an intensified awareness of the other's suffering as something that needs to be relieved; the second would refer to the attempt to understand the experiences of another subject. Sympathy, therefore, has to do with an emotional relationship to the situation of the other that tends to elicit a response in terms of action; empathy has rather to do with a knowledge of the other and the experiences, positive or negative, that he or she is living. In empathy, emphasis thus falls on the ego that activates itself to understand the other and his/her feelings. In this case, it is very important to develop the so-called "empathic accuracy", an exact precision in respectfully identifying and circumscribing those feelings that the other is living, without projecting oneself on the other. In contrast, in the case of sympathy, there is a communion in which self-awareness is reduced to the full advantage of "being-moved" from the conditions of the other. Berthoz and Thirioux (2010) consider sympathy as akin to emotional contagion (with no need to adopt the

other's point of view), whereas empathy implies a complex assumption of spatial reference frames, which are neither egocentric nor heterocentric, but rather allocentric.

For Nancy Eisenberg, too, sympathy has to be distinguished from empathy. She defines "'sympathy' as an emotional response that consists of feeling sorrow or concern for the distressed or needy other (rather than feeling the same emotion as the other person). Sympathy is believed to involve other-oriented, altruistic, motivation" (Eisenberg, 2000, p. 677). Similarly, for Coplan (2011a, 3-18), empathy is not sufficient for morality, whereas sympathy, at least on most accounts, does involve the appropriate moral motivation. An important implication in this definition is that sympathy implies concern for another's well-being (Schramme, 2017), while empathic reactions can occur with any concern for the well-being of others. However, there is no consensus on the moral nature of empathy; for Michael Slote, empathy is the "cement of the moral universe" as a *mechanism* that allows our moral approval and disapproval (Slote, 2010, p. 33).

Jolliffe and Farrington believe that both empathy and sympathy define a state of emotional congruence between two people. Nevertheless, "in the case of affective empathy, this reaction is the same emotion as the target person (emotion congruence)" (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006, p. 591), whereas for sympathy, the two people do not necessarily share the same emotion. In addition, sympathy seems to involve an additional appraisal regarding this emotional understanding. For them, sympathy implies a moral evaluation, whereas empathy, feeling with somebody, is more neutral and could even exist without identification (cf. Nussbaum, 2003, pp. 325–327).

The distinction between sympathy and empathy is crucial in aesthetics and media psychology because morally evil stories and bad heroes are typical for modern and contemporary aesthetics. These immoral figures demand a specific audience response that can trigger empathy but not sympathy, which involves a moral judgement (Salgaro & Van Tourhout, 2018).

c. Empathy Put to the Test

Given the high uncertainty and confusing vagueness in defining a radically subjective experience such as empathy, should we perhaps let "objectivity" do the job for us? In its aspiration to scientific status, modelled on the paradigm of mathematics, psychology needs numbers ("objectivity"): "psychometrics", understood as a technique of measuring psychic activity in its various aspects, is its spearhead. Empathy has not escaped the attention of this metric of the soul but has given and continues to give the measurers a hard time.

How can I measure something without knowing exactly what it is? It is difficult to try to prove the reliability of the measurement scales and tests lacking a precise and concise definition of the concept in question. If we consider the instructions given to the subjects to be measured ("Empathize this and that, and report what you feel"), the subjects may not know exactly what they should do and may end up interpreting the command in a very heterogeneous way. If the instructions are indirect, and for example make use of synonyms ("Try to identify yourself with this or that", "Try to imagine what this or that feels like" and so on), the results are conditioned by a preliminary surreptitious definition of empathy (empathy is identification or imagination of an extraneous state of mind and so on). We could mention many examples.

The Feshbach Affective Situation Test for Empathy (FASTE), developed by Feshbach and Roe in 1968 for school children, aims to measure the so-called "affect match", namely, the affective correspondence of lived feelings: it therefore conceives empathy as an identity of felt experiences. Moreover, the linguistic formulation of the answers risks privileging the cognitive and to underestimate the emotional implications (Hoffman, 1982). The 1987 Empathy Continuum Scoring System (ECSS) developed by Janet Strayer achieved a better balance between cognitive and affective aspects. The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), designed by Mark H. Davis in 1983, gained criticism because of its lack of a precise distinction between sympathy and empathy: in 2006, Jolliffe and Farrington proposed a new questionnaire on empathy by criticizing the IRI and other traditional empathy questionnaires. They highlighted that in IRI items such as "Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal" and "I am often touched by things that I see happen", empathic and sympathetic reactions are confounded (see also Singer et al., 2006).

A general problem in the elaboration of the empathy scales and the questionnaires consists of the fact that the formulation of the questions and the situations presented to the subjects is conditioned from a sociocultural point of view (characterized by this or that system of values) and can give very different results. To address such issues, the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy was developed (Wang et al., 2003): a self-assessment tool aimed at measuring ethnocultural empathy, i.e. the ability of a subject to interact emphatically with other subjects belonging to different cultures and ethnic groups.

However, if we entrust the measurement of empathy to evaluation procedures that are based on verbalization by the subjects of their moods and on the verbal description of the experiences of others, will we not be looking for empathy at a too refined and too controlled level of cognitive, predicative and conceptual processing, which is precisely what is expressed in verbal language? New questionnaires like the Multifaceted Empathy Test (MET), which consists of a

series of photographs depicting people in emotionally charged situations, were introduced to overcome the gap between real-world interactions and the written descriptions in the items of the psychology questionnaires (Dziobek et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, also the "Reading the mind in the eyes test by Baron Cohen" (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001), which assesses cognitive empathy, is based on visual stimuli of faces.

If empathy is an emotion (Bischof-Köhler, 1989), that is a movement of the soul that manifests itself in a movement of the body, should not we rather look for empathy in this body itself to catch somatic indexes (postures, gestures, facial expressions) and physiological signs (sweating and heartbeat, respiration and electrical conductance of the skin) that reveal, before words, an empathic disposition or condition? Moreover, the exploration of such factors would have the advantage of being applicable to "infant" subjects who still do not have language skills. With respect to the undoubted advantages offered by this type of measurement, however, it should be noted that precisely because it deals with primitive reactions, it is problematic to determine if their rise is specifically caused by an empathic experience or if some other cause is at stake.

Two remarks are here necessary at the epistemological level. Firstly, lacking a shared definition of the concept, this categorical indeterminacy reverberates on the measurement procedures, the construction of which obviously depends on the preliminary meaning of "empathic experience": it would perhaps be exaggerated to say that the psychometric processes find in what they evaluate what they themselves had previously put into it, but certainly, the problem is not to be underestimated. Second, one should consider such measurements in the light of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle: no observation renders the observed as it is without remnants but in rendering it at the same time that it modifies it. There is no direct access to the object of observation; this is not a transparent and neutral procedure but a selective one that is both reconstructive and constructive. Thus, an empathy test does not immediately give us back the empathic capacity of a six-year-old child, but the empathic ability of a six-year-old who answers not only to a questionnaire but simultaneously to a researcher. Similarly, brain imaging does not pinpoint only what happens in my brain when I empathize with a friend in need, but rather what happens in my brain when I empathize with a friend in need and at the same time undergo an fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging).

3. Contributions to a New Definition of Fictional Empathy

a. Empathy in Real Life and in a Fictional Context

In the field of aesthetics and literary theory, we believe that the main issue concerns the lack of distinction between empathy among human beings in everyday life and empathy within a fictional context.

In literary theory, empathy has always been considered one of the most typical reactions to a literary text, which differentiates literature from all other genres (Keen, 2007). It also played an important role in philosophical aesthetics (Pinotti, 2016). However, the abstract concept of the "implied reader" in traditional reader response theories did not allow the study of literary empathy in actual readers. Thus, empirical studies of literature have tried to shed light on the empathic reactions of actual readers (Sopčák, Salgaro, & Herrmann, 2016). Furthermore, recent findings in psychological research suggest that reading fiction is related to an increased empathic ability (Djikic, Oatley, & Moldoveanu, 2013, Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). However, instead of highlighting the peculiarities of *literary* empathy, psychological research tends to consider *literary* empathy and empathy in everyday life as equivalents (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

Keith Oatley, who participated in these experiments (see Mar et al., 2006, 2009; Mar & Oatley, 2008), seems to support this kind of misinterpretation when he claims that "fiction is a set of simulations of social worlds that we can compare, as it were stereoscopically, with aspects of our everyday world" (2016, p. 618). In contrast, Suzanne Keen underlines the fictional quality of the imaginary world elicited by the literary texts. It has no consequence in our everyday life. This fictionality has an impact also on our empathic feelings because "the perception of fictionality releases novel-readers from the normal state of alert suspicion of others' motives that often acts as a barrier to empathy" (Keen, 2007, p. 169). It is necessary to consider the aesthetic dimension of fictional empathy by studying the specific features of narrative, such as descriptions of sensations, metaphors and metonyms, which may trigger or block the arousal of empathy and identification. For example, it is still unclear whether the narrative perspective (e.g. first-person narratives or third-person narratives) is relevant in triggering the empathic reaction of the reader (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 3; van Lissa, Caracciolo, Duuren, & van Leuveren, 2016).

The above-mentioned studies on literary reading do not fully take into account the peculiar aspects of literary empathy, which include, among many others, the rhetorical figures and the aesthetic and stylistic elements. Consequently, there are still some open questions that need to be answered: which are the textual features triggering fictional empathy? What is the difference between fictional empathy and empathy in everyday life? What relation exists between a person's reading habits, his or her personality and the "empathy state" elicited by the actual reading activity? Are there links between the aesthetic appreciation of a text and its empathic potential?

Identification seems to be a concept, which is more suited to underline the distinction between the real and fictional world. For Cohen (2001, p. 251), "it is defined here as a response to textual features that are intended to provoke

identification". Unlike identification with social groups or leaders, "identification with media characters is a result of a carefully constructed situation" (ibid.).

In the domain of visual arts, a ground-breaking attempt has been made in 2007, thanks to the cooperation of an art historian (David Freedberg) and a neurophysiologist (Vittorio Gallese). Their proposal rests on the above-mentioned discovery of the mirror neurons as a possible biological basis for empathy; however, in this case, the addressee of the empathic experience is not a human being in the flesh, but rather the figure represented in a picture. We empathetically understand the situations that art presents us because, when we see actions represented in the artworks, our mirror system "fires" as if such actions were performed by ourselves. By watching Bernini's *Ecstasy of Santa Teresa*, three main axes articulate our empathic response: "i) The feeling of bodily engagement with the gestures, movements and intentions of others; ii) the identification of the emotions of observed others; iii) a feeling of empathy for bodily sensations" (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007, p. 201). According to Freedberg and Gallese (2007, p. 202), even in the case of abstract art, the observer can trace back the origin of the gesture that produced the image in the movement of the artist's body, empathizing with the motor track of the creative moment: "We propose that even the artist's gestures in producing the artwork induce the empathetic engagement of the observer, by activating simulation of the motor program that corresponds to the gesture implied by the trace". A dripping by Pollock, a cutting by Fontana and a painting by Franz Kline (Sbriscia-Fioretti, Berchio, Freedberg, Gallese, & Umiltà, 2013) are images able to raise a resonance in us and an implicit simulation of the gestures performed to produce them.

Analogous applications of the mirror neuron system have also been extended to empathic experiences with music (Molnar-Szakacs & Overy, 2006), dance (Calvo-Merino, Glaser, Grèzes, Passingham, & Haggard, 2004), architecture (Mallgrave, 2012, 2013) and cinema (Gallese & Guerra, 2012).

b. Interspecies Empathy

As human beings are able to establish empathic relations with non-human beings such as fictional characters, further questions arise. Is empathy an affair that occurs exclusively among human beings, be they similar or not? We can ask further: are the "others" really just humans? Is it an experience confined within that domain philosophically labelled "intersubjectivity", i.e. the sphere of relationships between subjects? Are we not here arrogating to ourselves the privilege of the empathic experience, guilty of the millenary propensity to consider ourselves to be the acme of the creatural pyramid – as special entities, bequeathed with competencies and abilities withheld from the realms of animal, vegetal, mineral worlds, realms with which we actually share not little from an evolutionary and phylogenetic point of

view? Should we not be perhaps more modest and at least accept the hypothesis that empathy might also be found where we least expect it: among mice, moulds, flowers and stones? We are constantly interacting with the non-human world, and it is neither a source of mystery nor of guilt that many feel closer to the existence of an animal or to an inanimate object – a room, a car, or a landscape – than to a person. Should not we at least verify the possibility of an empathic experience with such entities, including the possibility that it may be mutual?

Sacks (1995) has presented the paradigmatic case of Temple Grandin: a zoologist suffering from autism who has been able to draw on complex studies related to the emotional sphere of animals in order to elaborate a conception of man–animal relationship in which humans are invited to put themselves in the animal's perspective without reducing the animal affective world to the human model. (Grandin & Johnson, 2009). Bekoff (2007). So he collected a series of amazing cases in the animal world (young antelopes adopted by lionesses, shipwrecked men rescued by dolphins), which call for empathy not only in an *intraspecific* sense but also in an *interspecific* sense.

What should we finally say of the post-human: Of those who come "after" us and yet not "below" us but, as it were, "beyond" us? Since the 1940s, at least – when Norbert Wiener established cybernetics as the discipline exploring human interface with machines and compared automatic control procedures in both organic and inorganic realms, that is, nervous systems versus robotic devices – the exponential development of the so-called artificial intelligence and biotechnology has significantly transformed the status of the "human", implementing their operativity with more and more sophisticated prostheses that, thanks to the parallel progress in nanotechnologies, are becoming simultaneously more powerful and more diminutive. Soon we will not wear them *on* ourselves like glasses, mobile phones or tablets but rather *into* ourselves as a constitutive component of our body. Domotics, allowing us to control the functions of the "smart" home – automated heating, washing, alarm system, curtains, gates and doors through touch screens, voice recognition devices and subcutaneous RFID (Radio- Frequency IDentification) implants – is already a reality. It is a reality that science fiction brilliantly prophesized in literature and cinema, making us familiar with the cyborgs, cybernetic organisms that are no longer human but not yet inhuman. For example, in Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and in the film *Blade Runner*, the characters and their fates whirl around the crucial issue of empathy – between humans, between humans and animals (true animals and droid animals), between humans and androids, between animals and androids and, finally, between androids.

These issues raise the question of the nature of the so-called empathy in computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Rooksby, 2007, pp. 39–70): a huge research field considering the ever-increasing amount of time we daily spend

interacting with other subjects not in flesh but rather via screen or through a digital proxy, the *avatar*, which dramatically enlarges our conventional notion of intersubjectivity (Schroeder, 2002): a theme that has been brilliantly dealt with in *Her*, the movie directed by Spike Jonze in 2013.

In this regard, the android industry represents a particularly stimulating domain for a "CMC" theory of empathy: let us think of Geminoid-F, realized in 2010 by Hiroshi Ishiguro: a young woman capable of modulating facial expressions and intonations of the voice to different emotional expressions (see the website www.geminoid.jp and Sakamoto & Ishiguro, 2009). In a theatrical pièce entitled *Sayonara*, staged by director Oriza Hirata, Geminoid-F appears as a character, who takes care of a woman suffering from cancer, (repudiated by her family) accidentally met on the street: if we think that counselling and caregiving are the practices that require high empathic abilities, we immediately understand the provocative relevance of this humanoid caregiver, whose availability to human care seems to challenge the "Uncanny Valley" effect described almost fifty years ago by Mori (1970; see also Misselhorn, 2009). On the dark side of this coin, the authors of the series *Westworld* (Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy for HBO, 2016) have displayed hyperrealistic androids undistinguishable from the human beings in a theme park where the systematic trespassing of ethical norms is the rule (until the cyborg slaves decide to rebel against their human masters).

SCI-FI movies like the *Predator* saga (1987; sequels: *Predator 2*, 1990; *Predators*, 2010) and its crossing with the *Alien* saga (*Alien vs. Predator*, 2004; *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem*, 2007) interestingly pose the question of the possibility of an empathic perspective taking between humans (both intradiegetic characters and external spectators) and alien forms of life, starting from the basic problem of perception and its structural constraints: thermal or electromagnetic views must always be rendered in a way that is perceivable by the human eye, limited to a spectrum between the infrared and the ultraviolet.

Discussion

"What is this thing called empathy?" The question recently raised by Nelems (2018) seems far to be uncontroversial and definitively answered. Along the line connecting Plato's past to the future announced by *Blade Runner*, a broad spectrum of issues is deployed for which "empathy" functions as an umbrella term covering a net of categorical relationships that can be only partially overlapped: projection, transfer, association, expression, animation, anthropomorphization, vivification and fusion. Empathizing means in different contexts identifying, re-enacting, expressing compassion or consent, interiorly imitating and sympathizing. If, on one hand, such a protean constellation proves the great ductility of the notion of empathy, it risks, on the other hand, to diffuse its contours to

the point of indistinctness. There are, in fact, authors who deny the pertinence and utility of the notion of empathy for understanding the experiences of others. There are, additionally, authors who claim that, in the last analysis, nothing accountable and definable truly corresponds to the word.

Our conclusive suggestion is not so radical, but rather rests on a very simple advice: anyone referring to "empathy" as a fundamental key concept in their argumentation should not take it for granted and self-evident, but start with a crystal-clear definition and delimitation, so that the reader can identify the single star in the dozens that have historically composed the empathy constellation, because we only wonder about the stars in the sky when we share the view with someone else.

Summary
The term empathy has become a linguistic commonplace in everyday communication as well as in interdisciplinary research. The results of the research questions, raised in the last hundred (and more) years, coming from different areas, such as aesthetics, psychology, neurosciences and literary theory, lack in fact a clear concept of empathy. Not surprisingly, a recent paper has identified up to 43 distinct definitions of empathy in academic publications. By reconstructing the main research lines on empathy, our paper highlights the reasons for this conceptual inadequacy and the deficiencies in the theorization of empathy that create misleading interpretations thereof. Along the line connecting Plato's insights on empathic experiences to the present neuroscientific experiments, a broad spectrum of issues is deployed for which "empathy" functions as an umbrella term covering a net of categorical relationships – projection, transfer, association, expression, animation, anthropomorphization, vivification, fusion, and sympathy – that only partially overlap. Our paper therefore recommends that "empathy" should not be assumed as a self-evident notion but instead preliminarily clarified in its definition every time we decide to have recourse to it.
Keywords: Definition, history of empathy, interdisciplinarity.

Empathie oder Empathien?
Unsicherheiten in der Interdisziplinären Diskussion

Zusammenfassung
Der Begriff "Empathie" ist sowohl in der alltäglichen Kommunikation als auch in der interdisziplinären Forschung ein linguistisches Allerweltswort geworden. Den wissenschaftlichen Forschungergebnissen aus unterschiedlichen Bereichen, wie Ästhetik, Psychologie, Neurowissenschaften, Literaturtheorie, aus den letzten hundert (und mehr) Jahren fehlt tatsächlich ein klares Konzept von Empathie. Wenig überraschend hat eine jüngere wissenschaftliche Publikation bis zu 43 unterschiedliche Definitionen von Empathie in akademischen Beiträgen identifiziert. Unser Beitrag vollzieht die wesentlichen Forschungslinien über Empathie nach und beleuchtet die Gründe für diese konzeptionelle Unzulänglichkeit sowie die Defizite in der Theoriebildung, die zu irreführenden Interpretationen von Empathie führen. Es wird, entlang der Linie von Plato´s Einsichten

über Empathie bis zu aktuellen neurowissenschaftlichen Experimenten, ein breites Spektrum an Themen entfaltet, für die "Empathie" als Regenschirm-Begriff ein ganzes Netz an kategorialen Beziehungen abdeckt – Projektion, Übertragung, Assoziation, Ausdruck, Animation, Vermenschlichung, Belebung, Verbindung, Sympathie – die sich nur teilweise überschneiden. Unser Beitrag empfiehlt daher, dass "Empathie" nicht als selbsterklärender Begriff vorausgesetzt wird, sondern im Vorfeld jedes Mal, wenn wir meinen, auf ihn zurückgreifen zu müssen, in seiner Definition geklärt wird.

Schlüsselwörter: Definition, Geschichte der Empathie, Interdisziplinarität.

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