Comment on Zoran Kuzmanovich, "'I am hopelessly in love with this porcelain pig': Nabokov and Currie on Empathy for Objects"

Brian Boyd, University of Auckland
May 23, 2021

In responding to Akiko Nakata's paper, I thought I was expected to be more formal than was actually the case; after learning that from Akiko, I became a little less formal in responding to Tora Koyama's comment on my paper, although since I do not know Professor Koyama or the decorum of Japanese philosophical discussion, I couldn't unbend much; I will try to be still less formal now, because I have known Zoran Kuzmanovich, as I have known Akiko, for many years. But not informal enough, as I see today from Zoran's fascinating response to my own paper.

Zoran contrasts philosopher of art Gregory Currie's 2011 paper "Empathy for Objects" (and Currie's generally sceptical attitude to what we can learn from fiction) with writer Vladimir Nabokov's 1928 talk or essay "Man and Things" in order to examine their contrasting attitudes to the way objects can "affect the sensibilities of those who engage with them" (1). His sympathies in this contrast clearly lie with Nabokov rather than Currie. I grant that Nabokov on his feeling for objects is much more convincing than Currie on empathy, simulation, or emotional response to fiction or art in general; but I don't think Nabokov's subject is *empathy with* things but *feelings for* things, so to me his essay and his ideas seem not to relate closely to Currie's argument.

I will challenge Currie as Zoran presents him more than I question Zoran directly; but I will refer to Zoran as Kuzmanovich, to equalize the terms in which I refer to the philosopher, the critic, and the writer, Nabokov.

I apologize for the length of this comment, but there seems little in Currie as presented here that does not deserve robust challenge all along the way.

Kuzmanovich's first quotation from Currie includes this: "One thing that people have said is valuable in literature is that we can learn about the human mind from it. But why wouldn't psychology lectures be a better way of learning that? I suggest we think about our relation to literature not in terms of learning but in terms of sharing an experience with the author" (2).

There are many reasons why psychology lectures are not a better way than fiction of learning about the human mind. Unlike the best fiction, psychological findings are often not "ecologically valid": that is, appropriate to real-life situations, as when subjects in a psychology experiment are asked to indicate their preference for one of two individuals represented by two photographs and rather pointedly different prose character descriptions or histories of the individuals, rather than people met directly in person and discovered gradually through interaction. Psychological findings are often disconfirmed in later

replication studies; they often focus on things like reaction times and peripheral vision, of less interest to readers of fiction than engaging with human social and ethical predicaments as fiction invites. In a recent essay I have offered many more arguments against Currie's latest claims that we cannot learn about human nature from fiction.[1]

After Currie's question above, he suggests that "we think about our relation to literature not in terms of learning but in terms of sharing an experience with the author" (2). This seems most unhelpful. An author's experience in returning to her desk to continue a story, sharpening a quill or a pencil, inventing a new scene to develop the plot, finding the words needed, in a dictionary or thesaurus or the recesses of memory, revising them if they can be improved, and so on, has very little in common with a reader's experience of reading and inferring from an already-established written text. Imagining on cue is very different from inventing from scratch and refining cues to prompt imagination in others.

In Kuzmanovich's next inset quotation from Currie, Currie writes: "When people read action-related words, the motor homunculus is activated in appropriate ways, moving its feet at the sound of the word 'feet'" (4). If this were true, then my phrase "Currie writes" should have activated your motor homunculus either to move a pen or pencil or to type out words. Unlikely. If this were true, too, then when Austen's characters, whom she does not invite us to imagine with physical vividness, say something, prefaced or interrupted or followed by a verb of speech, the speech production region of our motor homunculi should be activated as we read, but not whenever in a dialogue mere quotation marks indicate a new speech, without a verb of speech. I find these implications so implausible I will not wait for replication studies to show them wrong.

In general, Currie is misled here by the over-enthusiasm in the 1990s for the implications of the discovery of mirror neurons at the end of the 1980s. There is now doubt among psychologists about whether humans (as opposed to the monkeys of the original experiments) have mirror neurons, about what role they play within human neural processing, about whether they are evolved mechanisms or develop through associative learning, and so on: a good illustration why we might prefer to learn about human nature from fiction rather than from the fashions and fallible hypotheses of psychology.

In 1997, Kuzmanovich notes, Currie introduced the "hypothetical reader of fact" (5) to explain how we respond to fiction. As readers of fiction, we know characters are unreal, so, Currie argues, we cannot respond to their unreal situations, actions, and reactions, and instead simulate the reactions of a hypothetical reader who does not know the text is a fiction. This is psychologically and philosophically muddled and aesthetically disastrous. As we encounter fictions, our knowing that characters do not exist as part of the history of the real world is less salient than our monitoring what the characters are doing and feeling, that's all. Even when we hear true reports about real others we do not know, we have to imagine them (as shown by philosopher Derek Matravers in the case of all factual as well as fictional narrative, and by linguist Daniel Dor in the case of all language referring beyond the here and now),[2] and we respond accordingly to the accounts of these others' predicaments (a cancer diagnosis, a discovery of infidelity, and so on).

We have default responses to the situations of those we hear or read about, and that includes fictional characters, even if we know they are fictional, particularly as expert storytellers are expert at stimulating our imaginations to envisage characters in their situations. But we have those default responses even when there is little attempt to appeal to our sensory imaginations. There is a famous 1944 psychological experiment by Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, in which viewers are shown without cues an untitled 90-second silent black-and-white film of two triangles and one circle moving about a plane (have a look at it on YouTube now, before reading on).[3] Nearly all viewers construe this as a story about the smaller triangle and the circle, friends or more likely lovers, being cornered by the larger, bullying triangle, and viewers are pleased when the pair escape the frustrated bully. No viewer supposes these shapes are real individuals, nor do they suppose a "hypothetical reader of fact" or a "hypothetical viewer of fact" who thinks the shapes are real 2-D individuals, yet almost all viewers feel empathy for the threatened pair and relief at their fortunate outcome.

Kuzmanovich adduces Currie's conclusion that "fiction-generated emotions, even when productive of empathy, are not genuine since they are not action-prompting beliefs" (5). But there are many cases where even true narrative generates emotions but does not prompt action: when a friend tells us, for instance, of another friend we do not know who has discovered their partner to be unfaithful. We may feel for the betrayed partner, but we do not act. The feeling of concern nevertheless remains real. On the other hand, we *can* have sensorimotor responses to fiction: we can laugh at an absurd situation, we can cry or gasp with emotion at an affecting outcome, we can tense up at a moment of risk for characters we care about.

Kuzmanovich then introduces, as a way of showing Currie's treatment of his response to objects in art, Currie's analysis of his reactions to Rubens's painting *Descent from the Cross*: "When I look at Rubens' *Descent from the Cross* with the right kind of attention I am made directly, non-inferentially aware of the heaviness of Christ's represented body, and of the sense of strain represented in the bodies of the mourners as they lower the body" (7). Currie seems to underestimate drastically the amount of inference, even if unconscious, the mind makes in interpreting sense data, a psychological fact well known from optical illusions (the Muller-Lyer illusion, the Ames room, and the like). To disambiguate visual arrays our minds have to interpret a scene as three-dimensional (or as a two-dimensional representation evoking a three-dimensional scene), even if the impacts on the retina are two-dimensional. Oddly, although Currie invokes psychology lectures or textbooks against fiction, he seems to forget what psychology textbooks actually say.

And to infer effort in the personages depicted in the Rubens painting we have to infer much more: the weight of Christ's body, the number of people supporting that weight, the likely proportion each of those figures takes of the total weight, to judge by their position, their physiques, and their degree of contact with the corpse and the shroud, and the stability of their support on the ladder or the cross. And, as Kuzmanovich notes, we also need to infer, from the cultural context of the story of Christ's crucifixion, and of its

depiction in other paintings, that those present are mourning a particularly acute loss—a point he illustrates wonderfully by his example of the very different context of Winnie-the-Pooh's reaching up for the honeypot. Moreover, motoric simulation of the kind Currie appeals to simply does not work, since there are eight live figures handling or about to handle Christ's body, and in one simulatory system we cannot simulate eight bodies at once. Or do we sequentially simulate each mourner's effort as we focus on each? But that does not seem to be what Currie suggests, in his "I am made directly, non-inferentially aware . . . of the sense of strain represented in the bodies of the mourners as they lower the body."

Kuzmanovich notes that Currie's "'Empathy for Objects' concludes with the claim that empathy for aesthetic objects does not differ from empathy for all other objects like chairs, trees, sculptures, and buildings" (8), and quotes Currie: "We need not be looking at a chair with aesthetic attention in order to activate a motor simulation of sitting on it" (8). In fact although we can readily imagine ourselves or someone else sitting on a particular chair we see, we do not usually engage a motor simulation of sitting on it whenever we see a chair. If that were the case our simulation system would be wildly overloaded when we entered a furniture shop or an auditorium with hundreds or thousands of chairs. And when we see chairs we could also imagine kicking them over, or simply moving them along the floor: if motor simulation were an automatic part of perception, why would these motions too not come into play? Once again Currie seems to be vastly overreaching with his appeal to mirror neurons and simulation.

Moreover I simply do not understand what Currie means when he writes of "empathy for objects." Empathy is a sharing of feeling with others: in the words of Suzanne Keen, in her tough-minded *Empathy in the Novel*, "a spontaneous sharing of feelings, including physical sensations in the body, provoked by witnessing or hearing about another's condition," "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect [that] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading."[4] Unless we are animists we will not assume that a chair or another inanimate object has any feelings to empathise with. We can, if not as a routine concomitant or instant element of perception, imagine ourselves, say, sitting down on or sitting in a chair, but we do not tend to imagine the chair's sensation on being sat on by ourselves, or a cat, or a sumo wrestler, because we assume the chair will feel nothing, although we can imagine that it may compress or creak differently under different sitters. We may feel something *about* a chair—its elegance, perhaps, in a museum of design, its inferred or experienced degree of comfort or discomfort for a sitter, its age and condition, in a second-hand shop. But that is not "empathy" in any normal usage, and to equate such attitudes with what we may feel about a frail old woman, or a cat, or a sumo wrestler seated or about to sit down on the chair can only confuse.

Kuzmanovich writes: "Currie seems to be invoking Wittgenstein of *Zettel* to explain the difficulty: '§§627. It is just because forming images is a voluntary activity that it does not instruct us about the external world'" (8). Wittgenstein is no help. Images often arrive not voluntarily but spontaneously, most strikingly in involuntary memory, but also in dreams or

hypnagogia or reverie. Kuzmanovich adds: “Wittgenstein reasons that because imagination, unlike perception, is controlled by our will, the imagery it provides can be only what we have put there and therefore such imagery cannot be productive of new information about the world” (9). Wittgenstein’s conclusion is wrong. If images do arrive voluntarily, that does not mean that we cannot learn from them, as Einstein’s thought experiments enabled him to reason about light, time, and frames of reference. And chemist August Kekule could also learn about the structure of the benzene molecule, if the story is true, from the *in*voluntary image of his famous dream.

Kuzmanovich continues: “Of course, Currie (and Wittgenstein) are right: artworks are *objects* and they *represent* things, so our empathic responses to such objects are really responses to our own bodily-simulation-aided mental representations of such objects” (9). I challenge these claims. A Bach fugue or sonata may be an object, but it does not represent a thing or things. And I doubt that bodily simulation aids much our responses to many a static painting, like a Vermeer, with its exquisite balance and interaction of light, shade, gleam, and reflection, or a Caravaggio, Kalf, Liotard, or Matisse still life. I doubt that bodily simulation aids at all in responding to most of Austen, whose fiction mostly pays little attention to physical detail or movement. And our mental representations are not “of such objects,” of the works of art, but of details and situations within them.

Midway through his essay, Kuzmanovich shifts to Nabokov’s description of his feelings toward objects, including works of art, in “Man and Things.” I feel an immediate release from Currie’s confusions and untenable conclusions to Nabokov’s clear understanding, of, for instance, the variety of reactions four different individuals could have to the one painting, according to their dispositions, histories, and circumstances. As Kuzmanovich comments, “Neurophysiology cannot tell the whole story here without perspectival subjectivity of the sort Nabokov enumerates” (11).

Kuzmanovich reports Nabokov’s other examples of objects, not works of art, for which he has or might have strong feelings. One technical aside, here: Kuzmanovich refers repeatedly to “Nabokov’s narrator” (12, 13, 14, 16). Despite recent narratological dogma, there are strong grounds for not positing a narrator in fiction, unless the author has specifically created a narrator distinct from himself,[5] and nothing Nabokov reveals of the “I” referred to here distinguishes the writer from the sensitive, imaginative, reflective Nabokov. And “Man and Things” is not a fiction: it is an essay, a form that since its invention by Montaigne has foregrounded the author’s individuality, feelings, and reflections. This makes irrelevant Kuzmanovich’s claim that “if we apply [Currie’s] theory of reading to Nabokov’s story about the porcelain pig, we must posit a hypothetical reader of fact who must in turn conclude that Nabokov’s narrator is either pretending to be in love with a porcelain pig or simply deluded” (13).

Nabokov’s feeling for the porcelain pig he won and abandoned and now laments abandoning do involve a whole complex of experience, a narrative of gain and loss or neglect and regret that, as Kuzmanovich insists, cannot be reduced to the kind of neurophysiology Currie wishes to emphasize. Kuzmanovich writes: “While it is possible that

the love for the porcelain pig emerges strictly out of chemicals within the nervous system, it may also be possible that art records events and their meanings in the language of emotions whose cognitive dimension will emerge in due time" (13). I would simply note that "emerges strictly out of chemicals within the nervous system" seems to me simply the wrong level of analysis: I do not doubt that brain activity accompanies the feelings Nabokov has for the porcelain pig, but would emphasize that the succession of feelings depends on Nabokov's dispositions and experiences, reflected in but not caused, in a bottom-up way, by the neurophysiological activity within his brain.

For reasons I do not quite understand, Kuzmanovich brings in the idea of delusion in the feeling of Nabokov (as I see it) or his narrator (as Kuzmanovich sees it) toward the porcelain pig, and compares it with the delusions of the young man in Nabokov's story "Signs and Symbols." He writes: "The reader of 'Signs and Symbols' would be a good candidate for an fMRI scan of her brain's pre-frontal and anterior cingulate regions, where the deluded young man would presumably be experiencing functional disconnections in his hyperdopaminergic activity." I do not think introducing technology or technical terms from neuroscience helps here in the least. The reader of "Signs and Symbols" does not feel or simulate the son's delusions, and is not invited to feel or simulate them, but simply to understand them in a summary sense.

Kuzmanovich agrees with my attitude, I think. He writes: "Explanations of the way our nerves act leave out many features of our mental lives. What exactly is the immediate feeling of love for an abandoned porcelain pig?" (14). The "immediate feeling of love for an abandoned porcelain pig" is easy enough to imagine, simply in these very terms, especially as provided in the more detailed narrative in Nabokov's essay, and especially if one has some knowledge of Nabokov's sensitivity and sense of pity at loss. I don't think it would be problematic in principle to specify such an "immediate feeling of love for an abandoned porcelain pig" in neuroscientific detail, although no doubt it is technologically well beyond our current capacity. But it wouldn't be very interesting, in fact, except as proof of the progress of our understanding of brain circuitry: it would reveal a process way more computationally complex than we could readily assimilate, with hundreds of excitatory and inhibitory flows and feedback loops, and wouldn't tell us as readers, empathizers, and imaginers of the experience of others much more than, or probably even nearly as much as, "the immediate feeling of love for an abandoned porcelain pig."

I must confess that I am mystified by Kuzmanovich's citations, without objection, from philosophers: from Currie, from Wittgenstein, and now from Jaspers and Langer. First, Karl Jaspers: "Delusion proper […] implies a transformation in our total awareness of reality" (14). I do not know Jaspers's grounds for this improbable assertion. Kuzmanovich then quotes Suzanne K. Langer: "The very existence of 'things' is modeled on [man's] own inward expectation of strains, directions, and limitations of his felt actions; the wholeness and simplicity of molar objects is that of his own soma" (15). This seems highly implausible to me: it is much more likely that the ability to manipulate, for instance, a piece of stone (as a

projectile or a handaxe, say) or a piece of fruit provides a first image of "the wholeness and simplicity of objects."

I am again with Kuzmanovich when he returns to Nabokov. He writes that Nabokov "also notes that the empathy generated by 'lend[ing] things our feelings,' that is, by projecting our own fears, hopes, desires, or griefs onto objects, also generates some risks" (15). Nabokov's description "lending things our feelings" seems much more accurate than the word "empathy" (a word he does not use at all in "Man and Things"), and Kuzmanovich's "projecting our own fears, hopes, desires, or griefs onto objects" (15) seems more accurate still. But when Nabokov writes "It is as though I am surrounded by little monsters, and it seems to me that the little teeth of the clock are gnawing away at time, that the 'ear' of the needle stuck into the curtain is eavesdropping on me, that the teapot spout, with a little droplet poised on its tip, is about to sneeze like a man with a cold" (15), it does not seem, as Kuzmanovich describes it, that "Nabokov presents us with the case where we prefer not to be imagining but cannot help it" (15), but rather that Nabokov is enjoying the challenge of deploying an anthropomorphization taken for granted in language as the basis for whimsical and deliberate imaginative, imagistic, extrapolation: not something we cannot help, but something that needs an especially fresh and alert imagination to activate, unlike the dulled common sense blandly accustomed to taking routine terms for granted.

Kuzmanovich offers a sharp contrast between Currie's and Nabokov's views of narrative. He cites Currie and Jon Jureidini's "one implication of this paper ["Art and Delusion," 2003] is that the best example we have of a life pervasively experienced as narrative is the life of madness" (15). Not knowing their argument, I cannot challenge it, but the conclusion seems preposterous, even if I do not believe experience is narrative in form.[6] Kuzmanovich proposes that Nabokov suggests that narrative allows experience continuity and emotional depth. Nabokov imagines a neighbor's boots, to which he is indifferent: "But were my neighbor to die tonight, what human warmth, what pity, what live and tender beauty would these two old, shabby boots, with their eyelet flaps sticking out like little ears, left standing at the door, radiate over me" (16). Kuzmanovich writes: "The dead man's absence becomes an act of abandonment no different than the abandonment of the porcelain pig" (16). I do not read Nabokov's paragraph this way. Rather, I would cite Nabokov's famous "*Beauty plus pity*—that is the closest we can get to a definition of art. Where there is beauty there is pity, for the simple reason that beauty must die: beauty always dies, the manner dies with the matter, the world dies with the individual."[7] Or, conversely, where there is pity, there is beauty, as in the boots of the now dead owner.

Wittgenstein comes to the fore in the closing section of Kuzmanovich's paper, and to me, quite untenably. I simply do not understand what Wittgenstein attempts to imply in the conditional in his second sentence: "'Grief' describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life. If a man's bodily expression of sorrow and of joy alternated, say with the ticking of a clock, here we should not have the characteristic formation of the pattern of sorrow or of the pattern of joy" (17). Kuzmanovich then cites Wittgenstein's next fragment: "'For a second he felt violent pain.'—Why does it sound

queer to say: ‘For a second he felt deep grief’? Only because it so seldom happens?” (18) No, only for the reason that grief is a long process. “For a second he felt deep grief” is absurd for exactly the same reason as it would be absurd to say “For a second he grew up,” “For a second she lost weight,” or “For a second he aged.” And I do not understand when Kuzmanovich writes “Wittgenstein’s insistence that the world is all that is the case also suggests that to the degree it gives us access to other minds language functions as a form of empathy” (18): how does that famous assertion imply this? Kuzmanovich speculates in a note that “Grief is also one more possible impulse for the invention of language, a not quite sufficient tool to share and decode chronobiological and emotional disturbances caused by human attachments to that which is no longer present but feels as if it is. Even now, language does poorly with uncontrollable physical grief over the mourned objects still felt to be present” (n22, p. 25). The idea that grief is an impulse for the invention of language seems implausible. Intense emotions from wild laughter or gut-wrenching grief are never reducible to language. These emotional intensities predate the invention of language and are both experienced deeply and witnessed clearly enough to render language both inadequate and superfluous, and in the case of grief the emotion is particularly allayed by *physical* sympathy (hugs, touches) of a primal primate kind and, in the case of laughter, amplified by sociophysical contagion (again, as in primate choruses).

In his final significant move, Kuzmanovich, arguing against Currie’s more positivistic reading of our response to art, writes “one psychological truth literature teaches us is that it requires acceptance of the magical and the paradoxical” (18-19). I am not sure that the idea that literature “requires acceptance of the magical” is a truth, and I am sure that it is not one of the things that some great literature, like Austen and Chekhov, for instance, teaches us. Kuzmanovich continues: “If there is such a mental state as a hypothetical reader of fact, it may very well be the means by which we simultaneously trigger and repress our consciousness of our own death” (19). I doubt not only that Currie’s “hypothetical reader of fact” exists in readers’ minds, but also that Currie himself thinks that it is a mental state. In discussing how we simultaneously trigger and repress our consciousness of our own death—certainly an issue in Nabokov—Kuzmanovich might have cited the so-called Terror Management Theorists, and perhaps physicist Brian Greene’s *Until the End of Time*.[8] Kuzmanovich concludes the paragraph: “fiction may very well be a form of magic that ushers death onstage while pretending that it is also possible to chase it off.” I prefer not to see literature as magic, although it can have extraordinary effects. And while some fiction (and indeed much poetry) ushers death onstage while pretending that it is also possible to chase it off (an elegant formulation), much does not, like Austen and Chekhov, again, or the Shakespeare of *King Lear* or the Beckett of *Malone Dies* or much else.

I sympathize with Zoran’s doubts about the adequacy of Currie’s account of artistic response, although my own doubts would be much more frequent, at almost every formulation of Currie’s cited here (but Currie has written work with much of value, especially, to my taste, *Narratives & Narrators*),[9] as well as at almost every formulation cited from other philosophers—all dubious assertions or pointless speculations, it seems to

me. But I would not offer magic as a solution, even if Nabokov in particular has his magical side. Imaginative feeling-for, though, of the kind Nabokov showcases in "Man and Things," would seem much more promising, as I think Zoran agrees.

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[1] Brian Boyd, "Learning from Fiction?" (review essay focused around Gregory Currie, *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, 5:1 (2021), 57-66. DOI: 10.26613/esic/5.1.210

[2] Derek Matravers, *Fiction and Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Daniel Dor, *The Instruction of Imagination: Language as a Social Communication Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[3] Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel, "An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior," *American Journal of Psychology*, 1944 (57: 2), 243-259; see the film at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTNmLt7QX8E&t=22s. For more background, see Bart Keunen, "Plot, Morality, and Folk Psychology Research," in Lars Bernaerts, Dirk de Geest, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck, *Stories and Minds: Cognitive Approaches to Literary Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 175-97, pp. 175-76.

[4] Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xx, 4.

[5] Brian Boyd, "Does Austen Need Narrators? Does Anyone?" *New Literary History*, 48:2 (Spring 2017), 285-308 (see n2, p. 304, for a long list of similar critiques), and "Implied Authors and Imposed Narrators, or Actual Authors?," in Sylvie Patron, ed. *Optional-Narrator Theory: Principles, Perspectives, Proposals* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021, 53-71), and that volume as a whole.

[6] Brian Boyd, "Prompting Monopods: Or, The Options and Costs of Narrative," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, 3:1 (2019), 33-35, doi: 10.26613/esic/3.1.114.

[7] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / Bruccoli Clark, 1980), 251.

[8] Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015); Brian Greene, *Until the End of Time: Mind, Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe* (New York: Knopf, 2020).

[9] Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).