Empathy and Materiality in Pixar’s *Inside Out*

By Macarena García González

*Inside Out* was praised as a thrilling return of the reputed Pixar Studio in 2015 after a year in which they did not release any film. The story takes place mostly in the head of 11-year-old Riley who has just moved with her parents from Minnesota to San Francisco. What happens to her on the outside is pretty standard: a dinner-table argument with Mom and Dad, a rough day at school, a disappointing hockey tryout. But anyone who has been or known a child Riley’s age will understand that such mundane happenings can trigger a major interior drama. Most of the movie, as said, takes place in her mind where her feelings—five major core feelings that would structure everyone’s lives: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Disgust, and Fear—struggle to cope with the new events in her life. Apart from moving to a different city, missing her friends, and her pastimes (hockey), Riley has entered the preteen years, those that entail the loss of childhood. The film approaches this crucial moment in a child’s life, by building up a parallel world inhabited by feelings and numerous animated objects that feel and remember.

*Inside out* is a movie about emotions and about the relationship between memory and emotion, a topical matter that filmmakers approached consulting with neuroscientists and psychologists. In this article, I explore how the film encourages a “feeling with” the characters. In the last decade, empathy and narrative have sketched an interdisciplinary field of research in which aesthetics borrow perspectives from cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind.¹ In this article, I analyze the narrative production of empathy inspired by that post-hermeneutic (or non-hermeneutic) turn in literary and media studies that follows Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s proposal to liberate these disciplines from their quest for meaning to acknowledge and explore the affective dimensions of texts and the readers/viewers encounters with them.² Gumbrecht calls for reading the *Stimmung*, the mood or atmosphere present in a work.³ Here, I look at how empathy is represented and elicited in the film by paying special attention to some ‘material’ features of the film: the ways objects are anthropomorphized, the rhythm of interventions and, very importantly, the texture and tangibility of animated objects and characters.

**Empathy and narrative**

In the groundbreaking book *Empathy and the novel*, Suzanne Keen explores the complex relationship between narrative fiction, empathy, and altruism arguing that the novel-reading experience involves

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¹ Harrison 2008, 256.
³ Gumbrecht 2008.
“the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition”⁴. Keen concluded that it couldn’t be demonstrated that reading makes us more altruistic, yet fiction prepares us to understand others. Since her book was published, in 2007, the relationships between narrative fiction, emotions, and empathy have received increased attention in the humanities research generally supporting the claim that ‘quality’ fiction leads to an improvement of ‘theory of mind’, that human capacity to comprehend that other people hold beliefs and desires that may differ from one’s own.⁵

The advances from literary theory have revolved mostly around the importance of perspective taking as a mean to create intimacy and trust with the characters. A question that stands out in the current debate is if first person narratives are less conductive to empathy responses than third-person internally focalized narratives.⁶ The studies on narrative focalization have been also applied to audiovisual narratives with attention at how perspective may be evoked even if internal focalization is quite rare in these cases: the internal perspective of characters, their thoughts and feelings, are not easily rendered in films. Third person focalized narratives appear to be the main textual strategy of films to promote viewer engagement and identification.⁷

Another perspective on how focalization may foster empathic responses postulates that it is the gap between perspectives the one that trains the mind to understand other minds. Two psychologists, David Kidd and Emanuele Castano, published a commented paper in Science providing experimental evidence that people who read quality literary fiction—books that received the National Award—in comparison to nonfiction or Amazon bestsellers performed better on tasks on theory of mind. Castano and Kidd explain the division between the literary and the popular texts following Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of literary fiction in its emphasis on polyphonic voices: literary texts would not have that single authorial perspective that would be common in popular fiction. This study is one of a number of approaches arguing that the reading of quality fiction makes us better in the capacity of understanding other world visions by training the reader to fill in the gaps of the narration.⁸

I shift here the focus from focalization to the materiality of the film to propose that not only identification plays an important part in eliciting emphatic responses, but also material aspects such as tangibility, rhythm, and anthropomorphization, which may awake emotional and physical references for the viewer. I propose to look at the material evocations in the film as means that build up an atmosphere in which complexity needs to be acknowledged and subjectivities are presented as highly interdependent. This analysis takes the form of an open-ended exploration, which could be complemented with further research on viewer responses.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht post-hermeneutic approach claims that we need to inquire into the “production of presence” of aesthetic texts. By this he refers to the spatial relationship to the world and its objects, the tangibility or evocation of tangibility in artistic production that has an impact on our senses and our bodies.⁹ This may be related to what Jennifer Barker calls a “textural film analysis”, an attention to the tactile surfaces and textures involved in the film experience that might illuminate

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⁴ Keen 2015, 155.
⁶ van Lissa, Caracciolo, van Duuren, & van Leuveren 2016, 43.
⁷ Bálint & Kovács 2016, 192.
⁸ Kidd & Castano 2013, 1.
⁹ Gumbrecht 2004, xiii.
complexities and significance that are overlooked when focusing on visual or narrative aspects. This perspective illuminates this analysis in which the question of focalization and character identification is left aside to inquire into a material production of empathy in *Inside Out*.

**Crossover animation**

*Inside Out* is an animated film addressed to children that was very well received by the media, ranking 98% in the review website Rotten Tomatoes. This film, as most of Pixar’s, not only evidences that obsolete division between popular films and those praised by critics but also complicates the divide between child and adult audiences. With the release of their first major blockbuster *Toy Story* in 1995, Pixar triggered a craze for animation that differed from previous films on the technical realm—*Toy Story* was the first completely computer-animated feature film. In their book *Animating Difference* Richard King, Carmen Lugo-Lugo and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo note how in the last years animation has changed enormously both from technological and narrative perspectives: “Full of fantastic computer-generated images and special effects, the characters in these films depart from the simpler, two-dimensional designs in earlier (mostly Disney) films and provide viewers with more sophisticated, three-dimensional, emotion-displaying characters”\(^{11}\). Since *Toy Story*, Pixar has positioned itself as the maker of thoughtful and thought-provoking films that target adults too\(^{12}\). The films released by Pixar, and other well reputed animation studios such as Dreamworks, are watched by audiences of all ages—in non-English speaking countries they are frequently showcased in original language for those who are able to follow subtitles. The film reviews in mainstream media also speak of the gained position of the genre. *Inside Out* was celebrated in the New York Times with the promise that “youngest viewers will have a blast, while those older than Riley are likely to find themselves in tears”\(^{13}\). This phrase is informed by the view that even if adults and children will watch the same film, their experiences of it will be modeled by their age.

**Joy and Sadness**

The film has been praised as being quite accurate to developments and discoveries of cognitive, developmental and clinical psychology. *Inside Out* shows how five universal emotions—personified as the characters Anger, Disgust, Fear, Sadness and Joy—grapple for control of the mind of 11-year-old Riley during the tumult of a move from Minnesota to San Francisco. The psychologists consulted by Pixar, Paul Ekman and Dacher Keltner, leading scientists in the study of emotions, explain that in the film: “Riley’s personality is principally defined by Joy, and this is fitting with what we know scientifally. Studies find that our identities are defined by specific emotions, which shape how we perceive the world, how we express ourselves, and the responses we evoke in others”\(^{14}\). Joy is the

\(^{10}\) Barker 2009, 25.  
\(^{11}\) King, Lugo-Lugo, & Bloodsworth-Lugo 2010, 34.  
\(^{12}\) Arnold 2016, 237; Booker 2010, 50; Mínguez-López 2012, 89.  
\(^{13}\) Scott 2015.  
\(^{14}\) Keltner & Ekman 2015, 10.
boss in Riley’s mind and takes control of the board that mandates Riley’s actions (see figure 1). At her side, we find the other four emotions that eventually press a button, pull a switch, or take over the board leading Riley to lose control: Anger, a bright red inverted trapezoid, male; Disgust, a green mean girl with big eyelashes; Sadness, blue, slow-moving, dressed as in winter and wearing glasses, female; and Fear, purple, very slim with just one hair, male.

Male characters, such as the father and the hockey mate she meets at the end, have all five emotions characterized as male figures — Riley’s mother, on the contrary, has them all presented as female and ruled by Sadness. Yet Riley, the protagonist and focalizing character of the movie, has some portrayed as female and others as male, voiced by well-known actors. This is not exactly surprising as non-human characters tend to be portrayed as male by default.15 This may also be explained by how male perspectives have been so culturally dominant that we could assume that girls have them nevertheless acquired, while boys would be mainly exposed to male subjectivities.16

Figure 1: Joy is summer, while Sadness is Winter. Joy has an aura.

The film shows a quite accurate depiction of how memory works, specially the conversion of short memory— that is kept in the headquarters of Riley’s mind— into long-term memory. The events of the day are shipped to endless rows of shelves where mind workers organize the archive and are prepared to send back those memories that are recalled later. Only when they arrive back to the headquarters, Riley may access them with her conscious mind and remember. Moreover, the most important events in her life are the core memories that power the so-called Personality Islands — Goofball Island (all things considered to be goofy), Friendship Island, Hockey Island (Riley’s favorite sport), Honesty Island (Riley’s inclination towards truth and integrity) and Family Island (this last one is the center of all). Memories are so powerful and profound that they shape personality. The movie goes about the difficulties Riley faces to maintain her personality as a joyful girl after her family moves to San Francisco. The father struggles to settle down a business in the new city, they live in an old house, she misses her friends and bursts into tears when introducing herself to the new school class. Riley has trouble keeping Sadness at bay and her mother puts additional pressure when she asks her to “keep smiling” for her dad.

The interactions between Riley, her parents, and the environment take only a small part of the movie. The real action takes place inside her mind, where these five characters embodying emotions fight for manipulating that board that allows them to stir with anger, fear, disgust, or sadness the girl’s acts and reactions. Joy—who used to be commander-in-chief—does her best to cheer Riley and all others up but fails continuously. Very soon the movie is taken by this opposition between Joy and Sadness: while the first struggles to bring Riley to be enthusiastic about her new life, the latter messes up things in the headquarters by shifting joyful memories into sad ones and intervening in moments like that first day at school when Riley cries in front of her new class.

Spectators are led to root for Joy. She is the protagonist of the mind’s headquarters and was the first emotion appearing in Riley’s. There are, therefore, some plot cues that present her as the favorite and main protagonist, yet I am interested here in how this operates in the visual and material depiction: she moves gracefully around, she is the only character that has an aura (she casts a yellow light around her), wears a summer dress and runs bare foot, she is pale/white skin, with a modern haircut, and is the tallest of all five emotion characters. All others are rather weird figures easily associated with a particular color: blue (Sadness), red (Anger), purple (Fear), red (Disgust). Joy is also the most anthropomorphized figure. Disgust may be the girliest, with those long and wide eyelashes and a lot of lipstick, but Joy looks feminine and easy-going, natural.

As the film advances, the spectator is invited to feel with Sadness. I want to make here the point of the importance of this move to “feeling with” — even if the perspective remains that of Joy, we are invited to open up to the other world vision of Sadness. I see this move as enabled by those material evocations.

Joy embodies what we culturally value while Sadness what we do not. As mentioned before, Joy wears a light summer green dress with flowers, while Sadness wears a white turtleneck sweater and is depicted as a short, fat girl with an emo haircut who wears glasses. Joy is summer and Sadness is winter. She does not embody the romantic white winter, but rather those dark rainy days. In the first minutes of the movie, we are told that she likes rain—though not evoking a singing in the rain kind of moment, but rather one in which the water gets inside of the rubber boots. Who may like that? Or, to ground this question in relation to significant cultural texts: where do we find images that celebrate that feeling of the water getting into our rain boots? No singing under umbrellas, says Sadness, but rather what may come, nevertheless, with that moment: getting your feet wet.

**Joy:** Rain. Rain is my favorite too! We can stomp around the puddles, you know? There’s cool umbrellas, lightning storms.

**Sadness:** More like when the rain runs down our back, and makes our shoe soggy. And we get all cold, shivery and everything just starts feeling droopy.

*Sadness falls onto her face crying*

**Joy:** Oh. Hey, hey, hey. Easy. Why are you crying? It’s…it’s like really the opposite of what we’re going for here.

**Sadness:** Crying helps me slow down and obsess over the weight of life’s problems. (14:30 –15:12)

We may have all experienced those soggy shoes and most probably relate them to a rather uncomfortable experience. A better image for sadness and rain may have been one of rainy days that make people stay inside and drink hot chocolate or, rather, if we think about wet shoes, that moment in which you finally manage to take them off and warm your feet by a fire.
In the opposition between Joy and Sadness, all emotion characters take Joy’s side and we could argue that the spectator is also led to do so. But soon Sadness and Joy are lost together in the long-memory storage of Riley’s struggling to come back to the headquarters. In this struggle, Sadness plays a key role. While Joy’s energetic and upbeat response to difficulties leads the mission, it is Sadness’ attention and slowness that opens up the path. Interestingly, Sadness is the character that incarnates knowledgability: she is the one that is able to read and has read tons of manuals about how memory works. Yet this information is not what helps them out, but rather her internal rhythm that allows her to feel with others, to connect with failures, and to realize that things do not always function the way we expect. Sadness is the one able to understand complexity and how it needs a new tempo. Joy, in opposition, is so set up for success that she appears to be unable to spend time in considerations. We could say that Joy is moved by action while Sadness is into sensory-aesthetic perceptions, into that “tangible, immediate impact on human bodies and their senses”\textsuperscript{17}. Joy talks about the rain in relation to what we can do when it rains, while Sadness recalls how do our bodies feel and, even more specific, about that moment in which the water touches our skin.

Against abstraction

Also lost in the aisles of the long-memory storage, is Bing-Bong, a sweet pink creature that mixes up elements of an elephant, a dolphin, and a cat. His body is made of that sticky sweet cotton candy which wakes up memories of childhood and amusement park snacks. Bing-Bong tells us that he used to be Riley’s imaginary friend, but that she has forgotten him now. At the very beginning of the movie, in a quick sequence that shows how Riley grew up, we could see him drawn, on a wall of the family home (see figure 2).

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.jpg}
\caption{Riley draws her imaginary friend on the wall.}
\end{figure}

The girl is portrayed as a toddler, two or three years old, yet she has impressive drawing skills and is able to portray him with great detail. Bing-bong is imaginary but he has been drawn gaining material existence. Later, when depicted wondering around Riley’s mind, his appearance has gained in

\textsuperscript{17} Gumbrecht 2004, xiii.
complexity from that first sketch. He has a very tangible material body. Bing Bong is actually the only character allowed to inhabit that Long Term Memory Storage, the place where Riley’s past is archived in aisles with shelves of crystal balls to which only mind workers have access. Sadness and Joy are thrown to the Long Term Memory storage after quarreling for a memory ball. The quest of the movie is to get them back to the headquarters where they can control Riley’s acts. Bing Bong meets them there and promises to guide them back: he proposes to get into a shortcut tunnel that would take them to a train station where they can catch a train back to the headquarters. At the entrance, we can read a “Danger” sign. Sadness adverts Joy not to get in, but she does not have time for considerations, action and movement guide her. Sadness has no other option but to follow them. Once inside, their bodies begin to change. They have gotten into the tunnel for Abstract Thought, Sadness tells us, and they have to go through four phases: first, they are modified by “non objective fragmentation” — changed into crude animated shapes recalling cubist depictions —, then “to deconstruction” — they fall apart —, two-dimensional (2D), and, finally, to non figurative images (see figure 3).

This scene has no obvious relation with the rest of the movie; it is rather a “supplementary event” of the plot with no causal relationship with the overall argument. As soon as they get out of the tunnel, their bodies are again ‘concrete’, and they can continue chasing that train that would take them back. The scene operates rather as playful reference to the craft of animation and appears to be key in the material evocations of the movie. Losing their shapes, their bodies, their figurativeness, is life threatening. Abstract thought is dangerous because it may erase who we are, complex and embodied beings, it strips us of our “deepness” — as Bing Bong cries. The three characters fear to become just a color or a form and achieve to get out of the tunnel by dragging their highly abstract and disembodied bodies out of there. Then they realize that the tunnel was really “dangerous”. Abstract thought appears, therefore, to be useless to recount the complexity of a life, even if imaginary. Cognition is to be textured, material.

Once the three characters are able to regain control over their bodies, they start a journey through the Imagination Land, a theme park inside Riley’s mind. There they find the so-called French Fries forest, the Lava Pits, and the House of Cards, among others, all places that are what their names tell.

Figure 3: Bing Bong in the tunnel for Abstract Thought in the first phase of disembodiment.

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Bing Bong calls himself the mayor of this place and brings the two girls to the Trophy Town where everyone is a winner: he kicks a soccer ball into a giant soccer net and mind workers come running to him with lots of medals and trophies to award him. Joy gets one as well—even if she has done nothing—, but Sadness—whose aptitudes are not recognized—gets only a blue ribbon, a “Participation Award”. Again, the cultural value of joy and lightness is reproduced, and the contributions of Sadness are mocked.

Part of Imagination Land is getting demolished when the three characters walk by. The Graham Cracker Castle has practically disappeared, and a wrecking ball hits Princess Dream World in front of their eyes. Bing Bong witnesses how the mind workers discard his beloved cart/rocket ship: a bulldozer throws it into the deepness of what is to be forgotten. The imaginary friend cannot cope with this. He comes to realize that if it has been thrown down there it signifies that Riley can do without it and, therefore, without him. He is demoralized and sits down by the cliff. Joy comes quickly to the fore and with her cheerful voice promises him that they will “fix it”. As he does not react, she starts tickling him, making funny faces, and finally proposes to play a game that would make him run to the train station. They are in a hurry and cannot lose time moaning. But he completely ignores her. Then Sadness approaches. She is slow, she does not say much, but she is able to speak out Bing Bong’s feelings: “They took something that you loved. It is gone. Forever” (see figure 4). She sits by his side. She is not pressed by the time. Bing Bong then reacts and starts remembering and sharing all the great adventures he had with Riley using that rocket. And then he bursts into tears.

This is the second scene in which Bing Bong cries. This imaginary friend cries nothing but candy, candies that fall hard on the floor and rebound. They cannot be ignored or washed away: they bring into full presence the sweet pleasures of childhood. The camera zooms in, and we may feel like touching his cotton candy skin in which every thread seems to be animated. His visual depiction is complex and this complexity brings him into presence: a checkered jacket with different shades of grey, woolen-stripped pants, a tiny little hat, a purple silk bow tie with pink dots, a six-colored flower on the jacket. As discussions on internet forums reveal, making a Bing Bong costume for Halloween is very challenging because of all these details.
The viewers are invited to feel with Bing Bong (see figure 5). The pace of the movie still follows what we identify as contemporary Hollywood animation\(^\text{19}\), it just slows down a bit as Sadness does not have that hectic rhythm of Joy. Yet the material evocations bring into the movie a whole set of meanings and suggestions that indicate other directions than that of Joy, the enthusiastic and easy-going leader that will always walk forward. The visual depiction of the imaginary friend is complex and textured in opposition to the much simpler lines used for the emotion characters and even for the human characters.

\[\text{Figure 5. Fans of Bing Bong have created all sorts of alternative ‘merchandising’.} \]

This scene has been preceded by numerous material evocations that relate Bing Bong’s loss with the vanishing world of childhood to which both adult and young viewers would relate. What the three characters witness is the destruction of a child’s creative imagination, the mind’s movements in the passage to adolescence. A teddy bear is removed from a pedestal and its head is tore apart, the castle made of crackers has been demolished, the so-called Princess Dream World disappears and only glitter remains in the air. The computer-animated images are very dense and provide a lot of information in each pixel what speaks of that underlying narrative of the movie that argues against simplicity, against missing and reducing that complex world of emotions that guide action. Abstractions are threatening simplifications. Joy is too simple, too straightforward, to be able to succeed in a world of interdependent subjectivities. By this point of the movie, a ‘feeling with’ Sadness and Bing Bong is elicited. The world is still depicted as Joy would, but the material presence of Sadness and Bing Bong are not to be overlooked anymore. Joy’s light summer dress cannot just disdain the presence of that woolen turtleneck pullover Sadness is wearing.

After having witnessed the destruction of the imaginary and material (toys) of childhood, we are confronted with this character that cries candy tears. Sadness does not try to make them stop, but rather reaffirms the reason for them: “They took something that you loved. It is gone. Forever”. Again, materiality plays a main role here: they have taken something he loved. Sadness’ words call to attention on how everything and everybody is interrelated and interdependent and how we feel also for things, and for imaginary friends, and for feelings themselves. “I’m ok now”, says Bing Bong after some crying. He has been comforted precisely because Sadness was not cheering him up, because she had no agenda, she was just sitting by his side. Bing Bong stands up and indicates the way

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\(^\text{19}\) Beckman 2016, 125.
to the train station. He still sobs a bit. His voice is sad. Bing Bong has become a very endearing character and his death in a later scene has been compared to Bambi’s mother’s death, a reference of a heart breaking moment\(^{20}\). Later, they do find this magical cart/rocket again but he jumps off and falls into the abyss of memory dump. He sacrifices himself in order to save Joy and, ultimately, Riley. Once in the nothingness he says goodbye to Joy and fades out. This sequence was to be much longer, but the producers decided to shorten it because it was too sad. When this happens, Joy has already understood the importance of Sadness: every time Riley has been sad and cried, someone has come to comfort her. Joy understands, therefore, how being sad connects us with others and reveals our deep interdependence. We need to experience all our emotions even if painful at times. *Inside Out* is a movie about the emotional challenges posed by the end of childhood and the passage to adolescence, from being highly dependent on the parents and nuclear family, to that illusionary autonomy of the adolescent. Psychologists have long described adolescents as cognitive egocentrists\(^{21}\); in this story, neglecting emotions would lead the preadolescent to act as the center of a world. As Riley has not been able to communicate how much she misses her friends and past life in Minnesota, she has not gotten any help. Moreover, she feels pressed by her parents to keep up with a high spirit. The neglecting of sadness takes Riley to leave San Francisco on a night bus to Minnesota. She does not tell her parents, who are desperate trying to find out where she is. But just when the bus is leaving town, Joy and Sadness return to the headquarters and the first persuades the second to take over the controls. Sadness’ maneuvers are very different from the impulsive moves of her four colleagues. She just touches calmly the board, which by then has stop functioning. She puts both hands over the place where a light bulb—which symbolizes the crazy idea of leaving—is stuck. All other emotions are impatient, but Sadness has patience and another tempo. She closes her eyes, breathes and removes that bulb. They all celebrate: Riley stands up from her seat in the back of the bus and calls the driver to stop. She walks back home. Sadness is still in charge and moves quietly around, very quietly. Sadness and Joy collaborate but no words are said: it is all about how to touch that board full of colorful buttons. Joy brings some memories that they send to Riley: they were all happy memories of her childhood in Minnesota that now make her sad as both—childhood and Minnesota—have been left behind. It is only after they are ‘mindcasted’ that Riley begins to cry. The parents do not know how to react. Again, words are spared for a while. And, then, Riley says she misses Minnesota, she wants to go back. They miss it too. The mother and the father tell her things they also miss. They are, finally, able to ‘feel with’ Riley. They do not attempt to picture a colorful future in San Francisco, to cheer her up. Instead, they allow her and themselves the mourning and embrace her.

The movie does not give us a happy ending neither: in the last scene we see Riley finally playing hockey with a local team, but, at the same time we witness the change in her mind’s headquarters where the emotions receive a new board that includes the puberty button. Riley has officially entered adolescence. Things, therefore, will not be easier now, but easy does not appear to be the goal. A narrative closure for this movie would be that life is about dealing with complexity, with interdependent emotions from highly interdependent people.


\(^{21}\) Elkind 1967.
Works Cited

Primary Sources

References


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Figure 5: Fans of Bing Bong have created all sorts of alternative ‘merchandising’, http://skreened.com/migsmedia1/bing-bong-shirt, retrieved 02.06.2017.

Summary

Inside Out takes mostly place in the head of 11-year-old Riley who has just moved with her parents from Minnesota to San Francisco triggering a major interior drama. Five major core feelings that would structure everyone’s lives—Joy, Sadness, Anger, Disgust, and Fear—struggle to cope with the new events in Riley’s life. Apart from moving to a different city, missing her friends, and her pastimes (hockey), she has entered the preteen years, those that entail the loss of childhood. The film approaches this crucial moment in a child’s life, by building up a parallel world inhabited by feelings that have feelings themselves. In this article, I explore how this film about feelings encourages a “feeling with” the characters. The theoretical developments on empathy and narrative fiction stress the importance of perspective taking and have revolved mostly around the question of (multiple) focalization. In this article, I focus on what we may call the ‘material evocations’ of the animated film, which I relate to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s notion of “production of presence” as that spatial relationship to the world and its objects, the tangibility or evocation of tangibility in aesthetic production. I look at how empathy is represented and elicited in the film by paying special attention to some ‘material’ features of the film: the ways objects are anthropomorphized, the rhythm of interventions and, very importantly, the texture and tangibility of animated objects and characters. An analysis informed by material poetics allows us to think empathy and emotions as embodied cognition and as an acknowledgment of interdependency.