

WERNER WOLF

Is Aesthetic Illusion ›illusion référentielle?‹

Aesthetic illusion – or ›immersion‹ as it is also somewhat reductively called – is frequently equalled to ›referential illusion‹. This latter term implies that a recipient's feeling of being recentred in a represented world depends on his or her impression of being confronted with reality while the representation in question is actually fictional. This has two further implications: first that the reception effect under discussion is determined by a referential misperception, and second that it can only be triggered by fictional representations.

The essay argues that these implications are misleading and stem from a reductive view of aesthetic illusion: aesthetic illusion, in its essence, does not presuppose that one actually mistakes fiction for reality and has only a loose connection with the opposition ›factuality vs. fictionality‹. In particular, the essay discusses three theses, as detailed in chapter 1:

- Aesthetic illusion is *not* co-extensive with referential illusion and must be conceived of differently.
- The emergence of aesthetic illusion is to a large extent independent of the *actual* fictionality or factuality of a representation.
- However, eliciting an *awareness* of factuality can further aesthetic illusion, and activating an awareness of fictionality can undermine or destroy it.

In order to clarify these theses, chapters 2 and 3 give a detailed explanation of the concept of aesthetic illusion, its nature and factors. Chapter 2 first defines aesthetic illusion as a hybrid consisting of a predominant impression of experiential immersion in, and a latent rational distance towards, a represented world (aesthetic illusion has thus essentially an experiential rather than a referential quality). As a consequence of this hybridity, aesthetic illusion is gradable and instable – that is, it can be undermined or ›destroyed‹ when distance becomes dominant. Second, the following factors contributing to the emergence of aesthetic illusion are discussed: the representation as the trigger of ›immersion‹, the role of the recipients (who have a decisive share in the emergence of illusion and may relativize all apodictic statements about the illusionism of given artefacts, texts or performances), and the contexts in which the act of reception takes place. Finally, the example of narrative fiction is used to describe the following characteristic features of typically illusionist representations and the principles of illusion-making:

- The content level of illusionist artefacts and texts is the central level; the represented worlds have a certain extension and complexity, are consistent, tend to be life-like in their inventory and are interesting for the (contemporary) recipient.

- Their level of transmission remains comparatively inconspicuous, serving mainly to depict the represented worlds and to enhance their interesting quality, consistency and life-likeness.
- The contents and their transmission tend to be serious.
- The texts (or artefacts and performances) are predominantly heteroreferential.

These features are produced by fulfilling most if not all of the following six principles of illusion-making:

- the principle of access-facilitating construction and vivid presentation of the represented world's inventory,
- the principle of consistency of the represented world,
- the principle of life-like perspectivity,
- the principle of respecting and exploiting the potentials of the representational macro-frames, media and genres employed,
- the principle of generating interest (in particular emotional interest) in the represented world,
- the principle of ›*celare artem*‹.

In the third chapter, the relative unimportance of fictionality or factuality for aesthetic illusion is discussed in more detail. This unimportance may rest on a certain human predisposition to ›suspend disbelief‹ as well as on the fact that aesthetic illusion appeals more to the emotions than to distancing reason, but above all it is explicable by the fact that both fictional and factual representations can fulfil the principles of illusion-making and produce the characteristic features typically encountered in illusionist works. Aesthetic illusion is thus above all experiential illusion and as a consequence cannot be equated with referential illusion. However, where artefacts – in addition to providing the impression of being immersed in and experiencing a ›world‹ –, manage to produce the feeling of being factual rather than fictional, this may intensify the immersion.

Conversely, the fourth chapter deals with the question to what extent aesthetic illusion can be affected by eliciting an awareness of fictionality, in particular through metareferential devices. It is argued that metareference which only lays bare, or comments on, the (obvious) artificial (non-natural) status of an artefact has less effect than in addition laying bare its fictionality in the usual sense of ›inventedness‹.

In the final chapter some perspectives of future research on aesthetic illusion are pointed out. Since aesthetic illusion is a wide-spread phenomenon that is not restricted to fiction and can be said to be transmodal (embracing narratives as well as descriptions), transgeneric (extending, for instance, in literature, to drama and even to some kinds of lyric poetry) and intermedial (having relevance to literature, the visual arts, film and other media), such research should adopt a wide perspective. Moreover, it should generally be intensified, since aesthetic illusion is

among the most important reception-phenomena of texts and artefacts – in spite of the fact that it has also been vigorously opposed, most recently in postmodernism.

References

- Leon Balter, Magic and the Aesthetic Illusion, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Society* 50:4 (2002), 1163–1196.
- Roland Barthes, L'effet de réel, *Communications* 11 (1968), 84–89.
- Jean Baudrillard, La Précession des simulacres, *Traverses* 10 (1978); rpt. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacre et simulation: Débats*, Paris 1981, 9–68; engl. transl.: The Precession of Simulacra, in: Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art after Modernism*, New York 1984, 253–281.
- Jay David Bolter/Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, MA, 2000.
- Frederick Burwick/Walter Pape (eds.), *Aesthetic Illusion: Theoretical and Historical Approaches*, Berlin 1990.
- Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice* [1865], ed. Martin Gardner, Harmondsworth 1970.
- Annabel J. Cohen, Music as a Source of Emotion in Film, in: Patrick N. Juslin/John A. Sloboda (eds.), *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, Oxford 2001, 249–272.
- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* [1817], ed. George Watson, London 1965.
- Julio Cortázar, Continuidad de los parques [1956], in: J.C., *Ceremonias*, Barcelona 1983, 11–12, engl. transl.: Continuity of Parks, in: J. C., *Blow-up and Other Stories*, New York 1985, 55–57.
- Lucien Dällenbach, Abyme, mise en, in: François Nourissier/Pierre Marc de Biasi (eds.), *Dictionnaire des genres et notions littéraires*, Paris 1997, 11–14.
- Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* [1719], ed. Angus Ross, Harmondsworth 1965.
- John Dryden, An Essay of Dramatic Poesy [1668], in: D. J. Enright/Ernst de Chickera (eds.), *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th Century*, London 1962, 50–110.
- John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* [1969], London 1977.
- Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading*, New Haven 1993.
- Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* [1960], Oxford 1977.
- Herbert Grabes, Wie aus Sätzen Personen werden... Über die Erforschung literarischer Figuren, *Poetica* 10 (1978), 405–428.
- Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. Rev. exp. ed. of *Virtuelle Kunst in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Visuelle Strategien*, Berlin 2001, transl. Gloria Custance, Cambridge, MA/London 2003.
- Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* [1887], ed. Patricia Ingham, Harmondsworth 1998.
- Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* [1762], rpt. ed. Robert Voitle, Hildesheim 1970.
- Eckhard Lobsien, *Theorie literarischer Illusionsbildung*, Stuttgart 1975.

- Jean-Francois Marmontel, Illusion, in: Denis Diderot/Jean le Rond d'Alembert (eds.), *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire des arts et des métiers* vol. 18, Geneva 1778, 353–357.
- W. J. Thomas Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago 1995.
- Eva Müller-Zettelmann, *Lyrik und Metalyrik: Theorie einer Gattung und ihrer Selbstbespiegelung anhand von Beispielen aus der englisch- und deutschsprachigen Dichtkunst*, Heidelberg 2000.
- Ansgar Nünning, ›Great Wits Jump‹: Die literarische Inszenierung von Erzähllillusion als vernachlässigte Entwicklungslinie des englischen Romans von Laurence Sterne bis Stevie Smith, in: Bernhard Reitz/Eckart Voigts-Virchow (eds.), *Lineages of the Novel: Essays in Honour of Raimund Borgmeier*, Trier 2000, 67–91.
- , Mimesis des Erzählens: Prolegomena zu einer Wirkungsästhetik, Typologie und Funktionsgeschichte des Akts des Erzählens und der Metanarration, in: Jörg Helbig (ed.), *Erzählen und Erzähltheorie im 20. Jahrhundert: Festschrift für Wilhelm Fieger*, Heidelberg 2001, 13–47.
- Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*, Bloomington 1977.
- Michael Riffaterre, Interpretation and Descriptive Poetry: A Reading of Wordsworth's ›Yew-Trees‹, *New Literary History* 4 (1973), 229–256.
- Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington 1991.
- , *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Baltimore 2001.
- Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?*, Paris 1999.
- Jean-Marie Schaeffer/Ioana Vultur, Immersion, in: David Herman/Manfred Jahn/Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London 2005, 237–239.
- Manfred Smuda, *Der Gegenstand in der bildenden Kunst und Literatur: Typologische Untersuchungen zur Theorie des ästhetischen Gegenstands*, Munich 1979.
- Werner Strube, *Ästhetische Illusion: Ein kritischer Beitrag zur Geschichte der Wirkungsästhetik des 18. Jahrhunderts*, PhD Diss. Bochum 1971.
- , Illusion, in: Joachim Ritter/Karlfried Gründer (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* vol. 4, Darmstadt 1976, 204–215.
- Graham Swift, *Waterland* [1983], London 1992.
- Dorothy Walsh, The Non-Delusive Illusion of Literary Art, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (1983), 53–60.
- Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge, MA, 1990.
- Werner Wolf, *Ästhetische Illusion und Illusionsdurchbrechung in der Erzählkunst: Theorie und Geschichte mit Schwerpunkt auf englischem illusionsstörenden Erzählen*, Tübingen: Niemeyer 1993 (Wolf 1993a).
- , Shakespeare und die Entstehung ästhetischer Illusion im englischen Drama, *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 43 (1993), 279–301 (Wolf 1993b).
- , Aesthetic Illusion in Lyric Poetry?, *Poetica* 30 (1998), 251–289.
- , Aesthetic Illusion as an Effect of Fiction, *Style* 38 (2004), 325–351.
- , Introduction: Frames, Framings and Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media, in: Werner Wolf/Walter Bernhart (eds.), *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam 2006, 1–40.

- , Illusion, in: John Pier/Wolf Schmid/Jörg Schönert/Peter Hühn (eds.), *Handbook of Narratology*, Berlin 2008 (forthcoming).
 - (ed.), *Metareference in the Arts and Media: Theory and Case Studies – Dedicated to Walter Bernhart on the Occasion of his Retirement*, Amsterdam/New York 2009 (forthcoming).
- Rolf A. Zwaan, Situation Models: The Mental Leap into Imagined Worlds, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 8 (1999), 15–18.

Full-length article in: JLT 2/1 (2008), 101-128.

How to cite this item:

Abstract of: Werner Wolf, Is Aesthetic Illusion ›illusion référentielle‹?
›Immersion‹ in (Narrative) Representations and its Relationship to
Fictionality and Factuality.

In: JLTonline (03.03.2009)

Persistent Identifier: urn:nbn:de:0222-000071

Link: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0222-000071>