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Illusion (Aesthetic)

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1 Definition

Aesthetic illusion is a basically pleasurable mental state that frequently emerges during the reception of many representational texts, artifacts or performances. These representations may be fictional or factual, and in particular include narratives (2.3 and 4). Like all reception effects, aesthetic illusion is elicited by a conjunction of factors that are located (a) in the representations themselves, (b) in the reception process and the recipients, and (c) in framing contexts, e.g. cultural-historical, situational and generic ones. Aesthetic illusion consists primarily of a feeling, with variable intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real life. At the same time, however, this impression of immersion is counterbalanced by a latent rational distance resulting from a culturally acquired awareness of the difference between representation and reality.

2 Explication

2.1 The Nature of Aesthetic Illusion

Aesthetic illusion is distinguished from real-life hallucinations and dreams in that it is induced by the perception of concrete representational artifacts, texts or performances. Moreover, it is distinct from delusions in that it is neither a conceptual nor a perceptual error, but a complex phenomenon characterized by an asymmetrical ambivalence. This ambivalence derives from the positioning of aesthetic illusion on a scale simultaneously influenced to varying (increasing or decreasing) degrees by its two poles of total rational distance (disinterested “observation” of an artifact as such [Walton 1990: 273]) and complete immersion (“psychological participation” [240–89]) in the represented world. Typical aesthetic illusion maintains a position that is closer to the pole of immersion rather than to the pole of distance. While aesthetic illusion is not restricted to an effect of works of art, the term "aesthetic" is justified by the fact that it etymologically gestures towards a quasi-perceptual quality of the imaginative experience involved and implies an awareness, typical of the reception of art, that “illusion” is triggered by an artifact

rather than (an, e.g., magic) reality. The etymological presence of 'playfulness' in "in-lusio" also contributes to foregrounding this important facet. Thus the term "aesthetic illusion" is arguably more satisfactory than the various synonyms used in research: “absorption” (Cohen 2001: 258); “recentering” and “immersion” (Ryan 1991: 21–3; cf. also Schaeffer 1999: 243 passim); “involvement” and “psychological participation” (Walton 1990: 240–89); “transportation” (Gerrig 1993: 12 passim); “*effet de réel*” (Barthes 1968). Strictly speaking, it is even erroneous to call aesthetic illusion simply “illusion” or “immersion” except by way of abbreviation, since by this—as in all of these alternative terms (and also in the misleading attempt to regard aesthetic illusion as a form of magic; Balter 2002)—the rational distance induced by the underlying awareness of the non-natural character of representation would be disregarded.

Illusion, to the extent it is aesthetic, presupposes the implicit acceptance of a “reception contract,” one of whose stipulations Coleridge described as “the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment” ([1817] 1965: 169). Aesthetic illusion thus involves several mental/psychic spheres and simultaneously operates within two dimensions (cf. also Walton 1990: 273): (a) in the background as a latent, rational awareness “from without,” namely that the illusion-inducing artifact is a mere representation; and (b) in the foreground as a mainly intuitive mental simulation where this awareness is bracketed out in favor of an imaginary experience of represented worlds “from within.” This simulation involves emotions and sensory quasi-perceptions (including, but not restricted to, visual imagination), but also reason to the extent that a certain rationality is required to make sense of the represented world. Owing to its dual nature, aesthetic illusion is gradable according to the degrees of immersion or distance present in given reception situations and is thus unstable. Immersion, which in many cases seems to be the default option during the reception process of representations and therefore continues to hold on subsequent readings (Walton 1990: 262–63), can be suspended or undermined at any given moment by the actualization of the latent consciousness of representationality. This “willing construction of disbelief” (Gerrig 1993: 230) can be triggered not only by the recipient, but also by the work itself, thanks to metalepsis (Pier → Metalepsis [1]) and to other illusion-breaking devices employed by metafictionality (Neumann & Nünning → Metanarration and Metafiction [2]), or due to interference by contextual factors.

Since illusionist works provide a simulation of real-life experience, aesthetic illusion always has a quasi-experiential quality about it and sometimes, in addition, a referential dimension: the tendency to credit illusionist representation with having indeed taken place in the real world. This referential aspect is not always at issue, however, for fantasy or science fiction, which make no pretense at referring to

reality, can nevertheless induce a powerful aesthetic illusion. In all cases, aesthetic illusion implies the subjective impression of being experientially “re-centered” in a represented world, whether factual or fictional, an impression that amounts to a “side-participant stance” (Gerrig 1993: 108, 239) rather than to identification with a character (Jannidis → Character [3]), the latter being a special case of feeling re-centered.

Functionally, aesthetic illusion constitutes one of the most effective ways of ensuring the reception of representations, since it can cater to various human desires and offers vicarious experience without serious consequences. The general attractiveness of aesthetic illusion also qualifies it as a vehicle of persuasion for didactic, advertising or propaganda purposes. A persuasive purpose may be seen also at work in the potential of aesthetic illusion to make the recipient accept more readily the tendency of aesthetic representations to introduce an unrealistic surplus of coherence and meaning, i.e. to present worlds whose closure and meaningfulness, through such devices as the use of coincidence, poetic justice, etc., may be regarded as deviating from the contingency of life. From a historical point of view, the persuasiveness of aesthetic illusion may even be regarded as related to the process of secularization in the Western world, for the relevance of illusion as an effect of texts and artworks created according to the principle of "matching" them "convincing[ly]" with life-like appearances appears to have increased proportionally as belief in the self-evident meaningfulness of the world has decreased alongside the "making" of schematic artifacts according to the principle of efficient readability (cf. Gombrich 1960: 131, 99). It seems that with the increase of credibility invested in individual works, "aesthetic" belief has progressively filled the place occupied by philosophical and religious beliefs as tacit basis of meaning, even though, outside deconstructionist and postmodernist circles, belief in the power of representation as such persists.

2.1 Factors Contributing to Aesthetic Illusion

Aesthetic illusion is produced by several factors, described by Gombrich (1960: 169) as elements contributing to a “guided projection.” Such projection takes place in the mind of the recipient. When it is in a state of aesthetic illusion, however, the mind’s activity is not free-floating, but rather guided by the illusionist representation, both recipient and representation being influenced by contexts which in turn also contribute to the illusionist projection. Thus the representation, the recipient and the context (situational, cultural, etc.) must all be taken into account as factors in a theory of illusion.

The individual representation is the guiding “script” that provides the raw material

for what will appear on the mental “screen” and serves to trigger aesthetic illusion. Owing to the quasi-experiential nature of this state of mind, successful illusionist representations furnish formal analogies to the structures and features of real-life experience. Moreover, they offer contents that correspond to the objects and scripts encountered in, or applicable to, real-life experience, at least to a certain extent. Generally, illusionist representations are accessible with relative facility. They offer potential recipients with material to lure them into the represented worlds and create a sense of verisimilitude, a prerequisite for the emergence of aesthetic illusion, although generic conventions may serve to counteract improbable elements.

While the illusionist representation provides the script, the recipients are called on to act as its (mental) “directors” or “producers,” using it along with their own world-knowledge and empathetic abilities for “projection” onto their mind’s “screen.” This activity, as well as the nature of the mental screen, results in the recipients and the reception process becoming decisive, albeit problematic, factors in the production of aesthetic illusion. For even if it is conceded that the principal precondition of aesthetic illusion (namely the human ability to mentally dissociate oneself from the here-and-now and imagine being somewhere else, someone else, in some other time) is an anthropological constant, a recipient’s illusionist response to an artifact remains heavily dependent on individual factors. These include range of experience, age, gender, interests, cultural background, and the ability to read works of art aesthetically, but also the situation of reception and, of course, the recipient’s willingness to “participat[e] psychologically in [a] game of make-believe” (Walton 1990: 242). As for the latter factor, immersion seems to satisfy a powerful psychological predisposition, even enabling one, under the influence of generic conventions, to integrate into the reception such blatantly non-realistic phenomena as non-diegetic film music (Cohen 2001: 254).

As for cultural and historical contexts—the “rooms” in which potentially illusionist scripts are originally located and the locations where guided projections take place—a plurality of such contexts must always be assumed, although to a lesser degree when a text, its author and its reader are contemporary and form part of the same culture. This context dependence has significant consequences, for it means that aesthetic illusion can be conceived of as the effect of a relative correspondence or analogy between a representation and essential culturally and historically induced concepts of reality and schemata of perception. It is these schemata and epistemic frameworks together with certain experiential contents that govern verisimilitude as a prime condition of aesthetic illusion. Since there is no universally valid perception and experience of reality, let alone a worldview that is generally acknowledged to be natural, any disparities between the contexts of production and

those of reception may substantially affect aesthetic illusion. Verisimilitude—and with it aesthetic illusion—is therefore to a large extent a historical and cultural variable. Another relevant and equally variable contextual factor is the set of frames, including generic conventions, that rule the production and reception of the arts and media in a given period. Most important, however, is the question of the extent to which aesthetic illusion itself and an aesthetic approach to artworks that implies aesthetic distance are practiced or known in a given culture or period or whether, for instance, a worldview that favors magic enchantment prevails, owing to which specific artifacts are regarded as numinous realities.

With the two variables recipient and context in mind, everything that can be said about the core of all text-centered approaches to aesthetic illusion, namely illusionist representation itself, becomes problematic. For these variables make it difficult, if not impossible, to decide on the actual illusionist effect of a given work, text, technique, etc. for all periods and all individuals. However, this does not mean that nothing at all can be said about the factor artifact or text, for given similar recipients and similar reception contexts, representations will appear as more or less illusionist according to intra-compositional factors. One essential similarity among recipients, contributing to the theoretical construct of an “average” recipient, can in fact be postulated, namely that the recipient is prepared and able to “willingly suspend disbelief” when confronted with illusionist artifacts, but remains distanced enough not to become enmeshed in experiential or referential delusion.

Historically and culturally, the average recipient or reader (Prince → Reader [4]) as a factor in a theory of illusion can be assumed to have existed at least over the past few centuries of Western culture, during which the evolution of aesthetic verisimilitude and responses to illusionist art are comparatively well documented. In fact, Western cultural history of this period offers an extensive corpus of primary works that continue to be read as illusionist, in contrast to works that obstruct illusionist access such as radically experimental postmodernist fictions. With this illusionist corpus and its features in mind, a number of points regarding the illusionist potential of a given representation can in fact be made. If, in the following argument, terms such as “characteristics” and “principles” are employed, they are not meant to function in the illusionist reception process as essences with fixed effects. Rather, the characteristics and principles of illusionist representation are to be regarded as deriving from prototypes that possess a particularly high degree of illusionist potential according to aesthetic theory and testimonies of reception of the past and/or of personal experience.

2.2 Typical Characteristics of Illusionist Representations and

the Principles of Illusion-making: the Case of Narrative Fiction

Aesthetic illusion can be elicited by a broad range of texts and works. There is no restriction as to their being factual or fictional, narrative or descriptive (a fact often overlooked in narratological treatments of immersion, as e.g. in Schaeffer & Vultur 2005), and they may occur in a wide variety of media and genres. Aesthetic illusion is therefore a transmedial, transmodal and transgeneric phenomenon. There is only one general proviso, namely that it be triggered by a representation. It thus is relevant to narrative fiction, drama, lyric poetry (Wolf 1998; Müller-Zettelmann 2000 : chap. 3.2.6; Hühn & Kiefer 2005), painting, sculpture, photography, film, and contemporary virtual realities such as computer games (Ryan 2006: 181–203), while excluding (most) instrumental music (Ryan 2001: 15; Bernhart 2013 is less sure in this respect) from the range of potentially illuding media. Since describing aesthetic illusion in the various media would require, at least in part, a media-specific theory in each case and also because, as will become clear below, verbal narratives are characterized by a special affinity to aesthetic illusion, the following discussion will focus on certain features and principles at work in illusionist representations with reference to narrative fiction.

In the history of prose fiction, one illusionist prototype is the 19th-century realist novel, a genre that has always been credited with a particularly high potential for eliciting illusionist immersion. Realist novels draw their readers into their worlds by maintaining a feeling of verisimilitude and experientiality while minimizing aesthetic distance. Considering illusionist texts such as these, it is possible to single out illusion-relevant textual features and link them to principles of fictional illusion-making which contribute to producing these features through specific narrative devices.

In narratological terms, typically illusionist novels (e.g. Eliot's *Adam Bede* or Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) display the following four characteristic features (Wolf 1993a: chap. 2.3): (a) their content or story level is the central text level, as their storyworlds are characterized by a certain extension and complexity, are consistent, tend to be life-like in their inventory and thus elicit the interest of the (contemporary) reader; (b) their transmission or discourse level remains comparatively inconspicuous and 'transparent,' serving mainly to depict the storyworld and to enhance the tellability (Baroni → Tellability [5]), consistency and life-likeness of the story; (c) the content and its transmission tend to be serious; (d) illusionist texts are predominantly hetero-referential.

As not all of these traits are self-explanatory, some comment is required. Highlighting of the content level (a) can be explained by the attempt to portray

(facets of) a represented world in which recipients can become experientially immersed. A certain textual extension is typical of illusionist worlds because aesthetic illusion is a state that emerges during a process in which a transition must occur from the perceptions normally experienced in everyday life to aesthetic reception. If this process is too short owing to a minimal text basis, immersion may fail to take place. This factor also accounts for the relative complexity of typical illusionist worlds. Although this may seem a special feature of realist fiction only, it is in fact in keeping with the general illusionist effect of re-centering the recipient in a world whose quality as "world" is enhanced by both extension and complexity.

The consistency and life-likeness (or probability) of realistic narratives are actually facets of a more general quality of illusionist worlds, namely their accessibility. Represented worlds can provide different degrees and types of accessibility (Ryan 1991: 32–3). It is obvious that enhanced accessibility facilitates illusionist immersion and that illusionist works therefore tend to lower the threshold of access as much as possible. In realism, this tendency is manifest in the construction and presentation of fictional worlds that seem to be an extension of the recipients' real world in terms of spatial, temporal (contemporary) and social settings but also, for instance, in terms of norms, ideals and epistemological preconceptions about the "readability" of reality.

The relative inconspicuousness of the transmission level (b), which is responsible for the mediality (Ryan → Narration in Various Media [6]) but also for the artificiality of representation and thus for potentially distance- creating factors, corresponds to the centrality of the content level and is closely related to the tendency of illusionist immersion to predominate over aesthetic distance. Therefore, typically illusionist works, and in particular realist novels, usually keep distancing elements to a minimum.

The shunning of aesthetic distance can also be witnessed in a no less typical tendency of illusionist works toward seriousness (c), although this does not exclude the comic from illusionism entirely. Comedy and laughter imply emotional distance, which runs counter to the strong affinity between emotional involvement and aesthetic illusion. The interrelation between illusion, emotions and seriousness can be seen not only in realist fiction, but also in drama: tragedy tends toward aesthetic illusion (Aristotle's catharsis presupposes empathetic immersion), while comedy frequently suspends illusion.

The predominant hetero-referentiality of realist fiction (d) is a consequence of the general fact that all illusionist artifacts, even those that ultimately play with illusion, are representational: they evoke or "re-present" (elements of) a world that seems to exist outside the artifact, and they appear to refer to something other than the

works in question. As a special, historical kind of mimesis, the realistic novel is in fact strongly hetero-referential. This does not mean, however, that mimesis alone guarantees the emergence of aesthetic illusion, nor that all illusionist texts must be either realistic (they may also be modernist) or mimetic in the sense of imitating a slice of life (science fiction, in defiance of such imitation, can also be illusionist).

The basic characteristics found at the textual level of illusionist fiction can be linked to a number of intra-compositional principles of illusion-making, the cumulative effect of which is to produce its typical features of illusion-making as detailed above. These principles regulate the predominant immersive facet of illusionist works, while the latent distance also implied in aesthetic illusion is usually regulated by framing devices (e.g. the paratextual or metatextual marking of a novel as such [Wolf 2006]). Owing to the extra-compositional factors involved in the emergence of aesthetic illusion, however, these principles can only be regarded as tendencies that enhance a potential of aesthetic illusion but cannot guarantee its realization *per se*. The following four principles, which shape the material, coherence and presentation of an illusionist world, plus two additional principles that contribute to the persuasiveness peculiar to the rhetoricity of illusionist texts, must be distinguished (Wolf 1993a: chap. 2.2; 2004).

(a) The principle of access-facilitating, detailed world-making. The main function of this principle is to provide the inventory or repertoire of an illusionist world with activating concepts, schemata and scripts stored in the recipient's mind, stemming mostly from previous real-life experience. These schemata (Emmott & Alexander → Schemata [7]) are bound mainly to concrete phenomena (story existents in the case of narratives) rather than abstract ones. This principle also ensures easy access to the worlds thus constructed and facilitates imaginative immersion by maintaining a certain balance between familiarity and novelty (cf. principle (e)) as well as by providing graphic details about this world.

(b) The principle of consistency of the represented world. Illusionist works enhance the probability of their worlds by linking their inventory according to abstract "syntactic" concepts (in narratives this includes chronology, causality, etc.) on the basis of fundamental logical and epistemological rules that are compatible with, or identical to, the rules that (appear to) govern real life. All of this produces the impression of consistency and invites meaningful interpretations while avoiding contradictions (the "natural" quality of the resulting representations is what renders the level of transmission relatively inconspicuous). Thus the overall tendency is to ensure a fundamental analogy between the illusionist world and the perception of the real world. Consistency operates according to Ryan's "principle of minimal departure" (1991: 51): it is a default option, although departures are possible and

may even remain compatible with illusion, provided they are explained or linked to generic conventions, for example, thus obtaining a secondary kind of plausibility.

(c) The principle of life-like perspectivity. The experientiality and probability of illusionist representations, which tend to provide recipients with “deictic centers” as a vantage point from which to experience the represented worlds (Zwaan 1999: 15), are the result of other principles as well. Motivated by the perspectivity of everyday experience—i.e. the inevitable limitation of perception according to the point of view (Niederhoff → Perspective – Point of View [8]) and the horizon of the perceiver—one of the noteworthy characteristics in the history of illusionism (in both painting and literature) is the development and perfection of techniques that imitate this perspectivity. In Western fiction, this development has resulted in the increasing use of internal focalization (Niederhoff → Focalization [9]) since the 18th-century first-person epistolary novel and later in modernist third-person “figural narration” with its covert narrators and effect of immediacy. On the other hand—and this illustrates the fact that aesthetic illusion is frequently the result of a fine balance between the various principles of illusion—extreme curtailment of overt narrators can also threaten textual coherence. In this way, the principle of perspectivity may come into conflict with the principle of consistency.

(d) The principle of respecting and exploiting the potentials of the representational macro-frames, media and genres employed. Representations rely on semiotic macro-frames (typically narrative and descriptive ones), and they also employ specific media and genres. All of these basic frames of individual representations have particular potentials and limits. The principle under discussion is responsible for keeping illusionist representations within these limits in order to ensure easy accessibility and avoid self-reflexive foregrounding of the means of transmission, for instance. As a result, illusionist narratives show the basic features of narrativity (Abbott → Narrativity [10]) and employ descriptions in a way that is compatible with both the medium and the narrative macro-frame. Again, certain deviations may remain illusion-compatible, but going too much against the grain of these basic frames of representation (as in the hypertrophy of description in the French *nouveau roman*, for example) would highlight mediality as such and foreground the conventionality of narrative or of certain narrative genres. As a result, the reader’s focus would shift from the represented world as the center of aesthetic illusion to the conditions and means of its construction and transmission, thereby activating aesthetic distance and undermining immersion.

(e) The principle of generating interest, and in particular emotional interest, in the represented world. This is an active rhetorical principle resulting from the use of various devices of *persuasio* that render representations attractive and keep

distance at a minimum. It imitates real-life perception in that perception is usually motivated by certain interests. The means by which the recipient's interest is elicited are highly variable. They often include moderate departures from conventions and expectations as mentioned in connection with other illusionist principles, and they may range from catering to recipients' desires by providing certain inventory-elements (e.g. sex and crime and otherwise sensationalist representations) to topical references and discursive devices intended to create suspense. In accordance with the importance of feelings for illusionist immersion, one particular area of this principle is appeal to the recipient's emotions. This principle is also responsible for the scarcity, in typically illusionist representations, of elements such as carnivalesque comedy, as this tends to reduce emotional involvement.

(f) The principle of *celare artem*. The tendency of illusionist fiction to minimize aesthetic distance and the inconspicuousness of its discourse is regulated mainly by a principle which, in accordance with the rhetoric of antiquity and post-medieval aesthetics, may be called the principle of *celare artem*. Similarly to other illusionist principles, *celare artem* contributes to forming an analogy with a condition of real-life perception, namely the tendency to disregard the fact that perception is limited owing to its inevitable mediacy. This principle favors immersion by concealing the mediacy and mediality of representation, but also, where applicable, fictionality by avoiding paradox-creating devices such as (non-naturalizable) metalepsis and abstaining from overly intrusive metatextual elements and, generally, from devices that lay bare scripts and clichés as constituents of the represented world (although in some cases authenticity-enhancing metatextual devices may be illusion-compatible).

3 History of the Concept and its Study

3.1 History of the Term

In Latin, *illusio* (from *illudere* [*in*+*ludere*]: "make fun of," "jeer," "deceive") has both a negative sense ("deceit," "jeering") and a neutral or positive sense, notably in classical rhetoric, where *illusio* is an acceptable device sometimes used as a synonym of "irony." The negative sense acquires Christian overtones in post-classical times, as in *illusiones diaboli* (the devil's deceits), and retains this negative meaning through Medieval Latin, Old French and Middle English to Shakespeare. A neutral or positive meaning re-emerges only in the 17th century, as can be seen in the title of Corneille's comedy *L'Illusion comique* (1636). Shortly afterwards, the term can be encountered as an aesthetic notion denoting dramatic illusion in French aesthetic theory (e.g. in Abbé d'Aubignac's *Pratique du théâtre*, 1657). In French

18th-century aesthetic theory from Dubos to Marmontel and Diderot, *illusion* becomes a much discussed term, and it is also in the 18th century that the term begins to be used in an aesthetic sense in German (often equated with *Schein*; Oelmüller ed. 1982). In English, Henry Home, Lord Kames called illusion an “ideal presence” (Home [1762] 1970), but Coleridge began to use the term “Dramatic Illusion” ([1804/05] 1960, vol. 1: 176). In the 20th century, it is the art historian Gombrich who, owing to his magisterial *Art and Illusion* (1960), perhaps, has done most to disseminate the term. It continues to be used in spite of Brinker’s plea that the “concept” (he actually means “term”) be “eliminate[d] from aesthetic theory” (1977/78: 191). Nowadays, “immersion” is often used in place of illusion.

3.4 History of the Concept

The beginnings of the Western tradition of aesthetic illusion (“illusionism”) were located by Gombrich (1960: 108) for the visual arts in the so-called “Greek revolution” which took place between the 6th and the 4th centuries B.C. The transition from the magical and religious use of artworks (in which representational meaning was to be “read” without recourse to an illusionist “matching” to real-life appearance) to aesthetic objects which aimed at persuasive life-likeness inaugurated the Western tradition of illusionist representation. The famous anecdote of the illusionist contest between the *trompe-l’œil* painters Parrhasios and Zeuxis is a good illustration of this new approach to art.

With reference to literature, Aristotle’s theory of tragedy, which hinges on the notion of mimesis in conjunction with the triggering of the emotional effects of *eleos* and *phobos*, also points toward aesthetic illusion while further evidence of literary illusion can be found in the form of the playful incursions in classical Greek comedy. Most important, however, is Plato’s hostility toward the mimetic arts due to the illusory nature of artistic representation. Indications of aesthetic illusion in the Middle Ages are rare (for a discussion of medieval immersion see Wolf 1993b and Bleumer, ed. 2012). Among such indications an intriguing testimony of immersive (narrative) reception concerning both reading and the viewing of pictures from *Li Bestiaires d'Amours* by Richart de Fournival (1201-1259/60) is worth mentioning: "When one sees painted a story, whether of Troy or something else, one sees the noble deeds which were done in the past exactly as though they were still present. And it is the same thing with reading a text, for when one hears a story read aloud, listening to the events one sees them in the present." (Richart de Fournival 1957: 5, quoted from, and translated by Carruthers 1990: 314). During the Renaissance, aesthetic illusion became a consciously produced effect in literature and was even the object of metatextual commentary (although not under this term), as can be seen in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* and in Shakespeare (Wolf 1993b). In the history of

fiction, *Don Quixote* is a particularly remarkable milestone, owing to its illusionist ambivalence (Wolf 1993a: chap. 4; Alter 1975): the novel is informed by both pro-illusionist elements (thanks to its realistic opposition to the improbable chivalric romances it parodies) and playful anti-illusionism (resulting from its obtrusive metafictional dimension). It can thus be said to inaugurate two antagonistic traditions: the great tradition of illusionist fiction, which found its peak in the 19th-century realist novel, and an anti-illusionist counter-tradition in which various devices of "defamiliarization" (*ostrananie*) were developed, notably in Romanticism (in texts characterized by romantic irony), in modernism and in the experimentations of radical postmodernism, the hitherto unsurpassed climax of anti-illusionism. In contemporary post-postmodernist fiction, a compromise seems to have been achieved in which an often ironic return to illusionism is combined with moderate illusion-breaking devices in double-layered ambivalent texts.

3.5 Influential Positions

Ever since it has been cognized as such, aesthetic illusion has been accompanied by controversial evaluations, the first manifestation of which can be seen in the differing stances taken by Plato and Aristotle toward immersion as an effect of mimesis. From the 17th to the end of the 19th century, the pro-illusionist position prevailed with the aesthetics of sensibility (represented *inter alia* by Diderot) and with realism (endorsed *inter alia* by Henry James) propagating an illusionism that was fuelled by an emphasis on the emotional and moral effects of literature and art as well as on a probabilistic persuasiveness rivaling non-fictional discourses. The illusion-critical position was motivated by equally diverse factors. With reference to literature, one factor was concern for the aesthetic appreciation of literature as an art (in his entry on "Illusion" in the *Encyclopédie*, Marmontel opposes Diderot's ideal of complete illusion); another factor was distrust of complacent passivity in the reception of literature, which was thought to prevent its political efficiency (cf. Brecht)—a position overlooking the fact that all reception is an active process. Yet another factor was the Romantic and, later, postmodernist diffidence with regard to the pre-condition of all aesthetic illusion, namely representation. It does not come as a surprise, however, that despite fierce opposition, particularly in recent cultural history, aesthetic illusion seems to be more alive than ever and continues to influence the development of contemporary (digital) technology for, in particular, commercial representations (resulting, e.g., in the enhanced life-likeness of films on blu-ray 3 D discs with dolby 5.1 surround sound), since immersion appears to cater well to a fundamental human need for imaginary experience.

Both aesthetic illusion and anti-illusionism (often designated by other terms such as "realism" and "immersion" for illusion, and "metafiction" for anti-illusionism) have

been discussed from various angles. Up to the 1990s, historical approaches (e.g. in part, Gombrich 1960; Strube 1971; Alter 1975), phenomenological and reader-response approaches (e.g. Lobsien 1975; Smuda 1979; Nell 1988) as well as text-centered approaches (Wolf 1993a) prevailed. More recently, aesthetic illusion has been viewed from the perspective of possible-worlds theory (Ryan 1991, 2001) as well as in the context of emotion research (Mellmann 2002, 2006; Opdahl 2002), a focus which also informs part of empirical reader response research (Miall 1995) and cognitive and/or psychological approaches (Walton 1990; Gerrig 1993; Anderson 1996; Zwaan 1999; Bortolussi & Dixon 2003). In addition, aesthetic illusion is increasingly discussed with reference to arts and media other than literature (Hedinger, ed. 2010; Cammack 2007; Krüger 2011; Wolf, Bernhart & Mahler, eds., 2013).

3.6 Relevance for Narratology

Aesthetic illusion is not restricted to narratives, as illustrated by important forms of non-narrative illusionist painting (portraits, still lives, genre scenes, landscape painting, etc.). However, there is a special relationship between aesthetic illusion and narrative and, consequently, a special relevance of this phenomenon to narratology. The link between illusion and narrative resides in the quasi-experiential quality of all aesthetic illusion and the characteristic experientiality of typical narratives. It is true that experience can relate merely to space, a moment in time or a static state, but that movement and change, especially if unexpected, have a particular affinity to experience (as the German *Erfahrung* suggests, containing *fahren*, “to move,” “to ride”), pointing to narrative as the most important cognitive macro-frame man has developed to make sense of experience in and of time. Experientiality has therefore justly been viewed as one of the fundamental elements of narrativity (Fludernik 1996). Another link, closely related, is that aesthetic illusion provides life-like experience and that illusionist works provide analogies to structures and contents of real-life experience, while life is in turn often experienced according to narrative patterns.

If there is indeed a special but not necessary relationship between narrative and aesthetic illusion, the question arises with reference to fiction as to which aspect or part of narrator-transmitted stories is most important for providing spaces for the “projection” of illusion. It has been claimed that this is the narrating process and thus the narrator (Nünning 2000, 2001). While in some cases this may be true (e.g. in *Tristram Shandy*), privileging the narrator in this general way would render stories with covert narrators or narratives without narrators (drama, film) less prone to illusion, which is clearly not the case. We may experience a single voice (including a narrator’s voice), yet a whole world usually has a higher potential of

experientiality, in particular if it is a narrative world with a high degree of tellability, and this shows that the primary center of illusion in narratives is the story, i.e. characters and events (Hühn → Event and Eventfulness [11]), rather than narration.

4 Topics for Further Investigation

In spite of the fact that aesthetic illusion is an extremely widespread phenomenon in the reception of artistic representations, it has received amazingly scant attention in research, leaving open several areas for additional research. Investigations could focus on a broader systematic search for historical evidence of aesthetic illusion, its nature and functions in the various media (narrative as well as descriptive media), and also on empirical testing of illusion-creating principles (3.3) by collecting responses of contemporary readers to certain representations and determining to what degree they reflect these principles. Cognitive psychology, together with empirical enquiries, also seems to provide a promising approach to aesthetic illusion, particularly if it is focused on the link between immersion and emotion and the analogy between real-life experience and the experience provided by illusionist works. Last but not least, owing to the dependency of immersion on the semiotic macro-frames of narrative and description as well as on the media and the genres used, a *desideratum* for future research is certainly interdisciplinary cooperation, not only between narratologists and cognitive psychologists, but also, and closer to aesthetic concerns, between narratology and drama theory, art history and film studies. For aesthetic illusion is a transmedial, transmodal and transgeneric phenomenon (Wolf, Bernhart & Mahler, eds., 2013), and if this is taken into account, a still better understanding of it will be achieved, ultimately leading, perhaps, to a general theory of aesthetic illusion that transcends individual genres, modes of representation and media.

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