

Imaginary Space; Or, Space as Aesthetic Object

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Although there is an instinct in all of us to assume that space is simply there as a given of our perception of the world, we are, at the same time, quite aware of the fact that all perceptions of space are constructs, so that two viewers may look at the same object, room or landscape, and yet see something entirely different. Physically speaking, a room or a landscape consists of an aggregate of physical matter; experientially speaking, it consists of a number of sense impressions. In order to arrive at a meaningful shape, the viewer has to link these physical particles and sense impressions by means of an ordering principle, that is, a principle that provides it with some kind of meaning (if only that of representing a "chaotic" world). Or, to put it differently: in order to gain cultural meaning, physical space has to become mental space or, more precisely, imaginary space. It is, then, highly interesting to consider for a moment what processes take place when physical space is culturally appropriated as imaginary space.

The crucial issue here—crucial, I think, for literary and cultural studies in general—is that of representation, understood in the double sense of the German words *darstellen* and *repräsentieren*, which are often conflated in the use of the English term representation. One traditional claim in the discussion of the arts is that art should represent reality truthfully or, to include a more recent version of this mimetic aesthetics, that it should represent reality in a politically correct way. For an analysis of the literary representation of space, for example the artistic representation of a particular region, this would imply comparing image and reality in order to criticize distortions of reality. But it is also possible to argue that literary or pictorial representations will, by definition, always be distorting, because it is the whole point of their existence that they do not simply reproduce something that is already there but that they redefine (and thereby recreate) it in the act of representation.¹ Wolfgang Iser therefore calls representation a per-

1 See my essay on Kate Chopin and the representation of Louisiana in her work, "Kate Chopin's *At Fault*: The Usefulness of Louisiana French for the Imagination."

formative act ("Representation: A Performative Act"). This does not mean that we cannot and should not note the romanticizing tendencies in the representation of the American South in a movie like *Gone With the Wind*. But it does mean that such a critique should only be the beginning, not the end of our interpretation of the film, for if we merely register its failure to reproduce our current consensus on what the historical South was really like, we fail to deal with the object of interpretation as an aesthetic object. This, however, is only another way of saying that the nature and function of verbal or pictorial representation changes once an object is considered as aesthetic object.

By introducing the term aesthetic I do not want to evoke a traditional view of the aesthetic as a philosophy of art or of the beautiful. Such a traditional understanding of aesthetics is, at least partly, to blame for the fact that contemporary critics often resort to explicitly or implicitly mimetic models in interpretation, because they think that this is the only way in which the object can be assigned some political or social relevance. Properly understood, however, the term of the aesthetic describes not a quality of an object—so that some objects, called art, possess this quality and others do not—but a possible function of an object, so that, by taking an aesthetic attitude toward an object, any object or, for that matter, any spatial representation—building, subway map, landscape or a picture—can become an aesthetic object. This redefinition as aesthetic object changes the object's function: we do not look at it any longer in terms of its referential representativeness but regard it as a form of representation that has the freedom to redefine and transform reality or even to invent it anew.²

To the best of my knowledge, it was the American pragmatist John Dewey in his book *Art as Experience*, published in 1933, who first replaced a concept of the aesthetic as inherent quality of an object by the idea of the aesthetic as potential function of an object. Interestingly, Dewey makes the point in the description of a spatial object when he describes possible views from a ferry on which commuters approach the Manhattan skyline:

Some men regard it as simply a journey to get them where they want to be—a means to be endured. So, perhaps, they read a newspaper.

2 For a more detailed outline of this "de-ontologized" view of the aesthetic in terms of the taking of an attitude, cf. my essay "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies."

One who is idle may glance at this and that building identifying it as the Metropolitan Tower, the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and so on. Another, impatient to arrive, may be on the lookout for landmarks by which to judge progress toward his destination. Still another, who is taking the journey for the first time, looks eagerly but is bewildered by the multiplicity of objects spread out to view. He sees neither the whole nor the parts; he is like a layman who goes into an unfamiliar factory where many machines are plying. Another person, interested in real estate, may see, in looking at the skyline, evidence in the height of buildings, of the value of land. Or he may let his thoughts roam to the congestion of a great industrial and commercial centre. He may go on to think of the planlessness of arrangement as evidence of the chaos of a society organized on the basis of conflict rather than cooperation. Finally the scene formed by the buildings may be looked at as colored and lighted volumes in relation to one another, to the sky and to the river. He is now seeing esthetically, as a painter might see. (140)

The problem with Dewey's—in all other respects remarkably advanced—redefinition of the aesthetic is that it is still based on a latent organicism. We only see aesthetically when we overcome heterogeneity and link our sense impressions in such a way that we have an experience of wholeness.³ The Czech structuralist Jan Mukařovský, who develops his concept of aesthetic function at about the same time, goes one step further. Again, the case is made with reference to spatial objects. In an essay entitled "On the Problems of Functions in Architecture," Mukařovský argues, for example, that

there is no object that could not become the carrier of an aesthetic function, just as, on the other side, there is no object which inevitably has to be its carrier. Even where objects are created primarily with the purpose of achieving an aesthetic effect, the object may completely lose this dimension in another time, space or social context.⁴

We can, in principle, look at any object of perception or experience as an aesthetic object. As Mukařovský claims: "The aesthetic is neither

3 For a more detailed discussion of Dewey's aesthetics, see my essay "John Dewey's Ästhetik und die Literaturtheorie der Gegenwart" and my summary of the discussion in "Pragmatism and Aesthetic Experience."

4 Cf. Mukařovský, "Zum Problem der Funktionen in der Architektur" 224 (my trans.). In the essay, Mukařovský argues that wherever other functions, for whatever reasons, are weakened, dropped or changed, the aesthetic function may take their role and become dominant.

the property of an object, nor is it tied to particular qualities of the object" (29, my trans.).

In even more radical fashion than Dewey, for whom aesthetic experience marks a culminating moment in which fragmented elements of daily experience are successfully reintegrated, the aesthetic, for Mukařovský, is created by a temporary and, possibly, fleeting shift in a hierarchy of functions that is in constant flux, so that each of the functions remains present and can, at every moment, regain dominance.⁵ Consequently, the aesthetic cannot be defined as separate sphere or ontologically separate object. Mukařovský's description is almost postmodern in this respect: "The border lines of the aesthetic realm are thus not firmly drawn in reality. On the contrary, they are highly permeable. [...] In fact, we know from our own personal experience, that the relations between the realm of the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic [...] may shift with age, health or even our current mood" (14, my trans.). In his essay on architecture, Mukařovský employs images of special plasticity in order to determine the shifting relations between aesthetic function and other functions. He describes the aesthetic function in terms of air and darkness which creep into an empty room and fill out the spaces that have been vacated by taking away an object or by switching off the light.

Referential and aesthetic dimension thus do not occupy ontologically separate planes. Or, to draw on Mukařovský's argument: as an—in comparison with other functions—"empty" function, the aesthetic function depends on other functions in order to manifest itself. Many forms of recent art, such as pop art, junk art or abject art, therefore declare everyday objects or, increasingly, thoroughly "profane" objects to be art objects in order to dramatize the redefining power of shifting attitudes that can transform even the "lowest"—the most vul-

gar, junkiest or most repulsive—materials into aesthetic objects.⁶ Similarly, to take a recent example from literature, in Donald Barthelme's experimental postmodern story "The Glass Mountain," the dogshit on the streets of Manhattan, in its subtle color shadings, can take on an almost sublime aesthetic quality.⁷

Taking an aesthetic attitude toward an object thus does not mean, or, at least does not necessarily mean, that we disengage the object or ourselves from reality. What exactly does it mean, then, to take an aesthetic attitude? The concept refers to the capacity of any system of signification to draw attention to itself as a form of expression and to refer to itself as a sign, thus foregrounding the organizing and patterning principles by which the object is constituted.⁸ For this purpose, the object is temporarily de pragmatized and dereferentialized. We do no longer insist that reality is truthfully represented, because only in this way can we concentrate on other aspects and possible functions of the

5 Cf. the summary of Mukařovský's position by Raymond Williams in the chapter on "Aesthetic and Other Situations" in his book *Marxism and Literature*: "Art is not a special kind of object but one in which the aesthetic function, usually mixed with other functions is *dominant*. Art, with other things (landscapes and dress, most evidently), gives aesthetic pleasure, but this cannot be transliterated as a sense of beauty or a sense of perceived form, since while these are central in the aesthetic function they are historically and socially variable, and in all real instances concrete. At the same time the aesthetic function is 'not an epiphenomenon of other functions' but a 'codeterminant of human reaction to reality'" (153).

6 Harold Rosenberg was one of the first art critics to draw attention to this development. Cf. his description of the movement toward the "de-aestheticization" of art in the 1960s: "Ideally, art *povera* strives to reach beyond art to the wonder-working object, place ('environment'), or event. It extends the Dada-Surrealist quest for the revelatory found object into unlimited categories of strange responses. Redefining art as the process of the artist or his materials, it dissolves all limitations on the kind of substances out of which art can be constructed. Anything—breakfast, food, a frozen lake, film footage—is art, either as is or tampered with, through being chosen as fetish" (37). As Rosenberg indicates, de-aestheticization paves the way for re-aestheticization. It does not do away with aesthetics, it paves the way for a new aesthetics.

7 I am referring to fragment No. 30 of Barthelme's description of New York: "The sidewalks were full of dogshit in brilliant colors: ocher, umber, Mars yellow, sienna, viridian, ivory black, rose madder" (68).

8 In his essay "Die Bedeutung der Ästhetik" ("The Importance of Aesthetics"), reprinted in the collection *Kunst, Poetik, Semiotik*, Mukařovský provides the example of gymnastics. As long as our perception of physical exercise is dominated by practical functions (gaining strength, strengthening certain muscles etc.), we will focus on aspects which are helpful for achieving those goals and will judge the single exercise in relation to how well it helps to realize the desired result. Once the aesthetic function becomes dominant, on the other hand, the exercise takes on interest in itself as a performance or spectacle. The various movements, the sequence of movements, and even the "useless" details of the periods between different exercises may now become objects of attention for their own sake. The signifiatory dimension of reality is foregrounded and the sign is of interest *sui generis*. Even the "wrong" movements may now be of interest as movements with a logic of their own, not just as "wrong" movements.

object. In this sense, the aesthetic function can be seen as an "experimental and experiential epistemology" (Peper 296). At the same time, the dominance of the aesthetic function does not mean that the reference of the object is cancelled. On the contrary, the new perspective on the object can only be experienced in its various possibilities of revelation, criticism, intensification of experience or pleasure as long as the reference is kept in view, so that we are constantly moving back and forth between the newly created world and the reference which has served as a point of departure for this reinterpretation.⁹

In principle, I have argued, any object can become an aesthetic object where an aesthetic attitude is taken toward it and its aesthetic function becomes dominant. This shift to an aesthetic attitude can be encouraged by the object, however, in suggesting that we should take such an attitude. This is especially obvious in the case of fictional texts (in the broadest sense of the word as any form of "invented" representation, including literature, paintings or film). Once we classify a representation as fictional, we can no longer regard the object as predominantly referential. Rather, we have to recreate the object mentally. Since we have never met a character named Huckleberry Finn and do, in fact, know that he never existed, we have to come up with our own mental representation of him. We may take our cues from the literary description of the character but, inevitably, we also have to invest our own emotions, draw upon our own associations, and create our own mental pictures in order to imagine a character like Huck Finn and make him come alive, so that we can become interested in his fate. These imaginary additions can only acquire a *gestalt*, however, if they are connected with discourses of the real.¹⁰ As Wolfgang

9 Peper thus states that "aesthetic effects can only unfold against and into the non-aesthetic. [...] The aesthetic pleasure in the free play of cognitive powers is most intense where—far from empty arbitrariness—it has to be gained within a given conceptual structure, making us aware of this level of cognition as the reflexive play of forces" ("Democratizing Principle" 314-315).

10 Cf. Rachel Brownstein's description of the doubleness of a novel heroine: "In one sense this doubleness of a novel heroine is perfectly obvious. Every good reader recognizes a heroine as a representation of an actual woman and, at the same time, as an element in a work of art. She does not regard a woman in a novel as if she were one of her acquaintances; she experiences how the context of the fiction limits a character's freedom and determines her style. [...] The reader identifies with Elizabeth, and as she does so accepts the rules involved in being Elizabeth, and at the same time she sees how the rules determine that

Iser argued, a fictional text comes into existence as a combination between the real and the imaginary: on the one hand, the imaginary—defined by Iser in a phenomenological sense as a set of diffuse, formless, fleeting moods, feelings, and images without clear object reference—needs a discourse of the real in order to manifest itself in a perceptible form, and, on the other hand, the discourse of the real requires imaginary elements in order to be more than the mere replication of something that already exists.¹¹

Fictional forms of representation, including the representation of space, bring an object into our world but they are not identical with that object. They create an object that is never stable and identical with itself. Fictional representation is thus, to draw from Iser again, a performative mode: "Representation can only unfold itself in the recipient's mind, and it is through his active imaginings alone that the intangible can become an image" ("Representation" 243). This means that in order for a representation to acquire cultural meaning, a transfer has to take place and this transfer is intensified by fictional representations. As Iser puts it:

In this respect the required activity of the recipient resembles that of an actor, who in order to perform his role must use his thoughts, his feelings, and even his body as an analogue for representing something he is not. In order to produce the determinate form of an unreal character, the actor must allow his own reality to fade out. At the same time, however, he does not know precisely who, say, Hamlet is, for one cannot properly identify a character who has never existed. Thus role-playing endows a figment with a sense of reality in spite of its impenetrability which defies total determination. [...] Staging oneself as someone else is a source of aesthetic pleasure; it is also the means whereby representation is transferred from text to reader. (244)

Iser's description of the fictional text as a mode of representation that only comes into existence by means of a transfer may appear plausible as far as fictive characters are concerned. But does it also apply to the representation of space? One could argue that, in contrast to character, space in fiction often functions as discourse of the real designed to

Elizabeth be as she is—not merely the rules of the society Jane Austen's novel represents, but also the rules that govern the representation of it, the novel" (xxiii).

11 For a short, succinct summary of his argument, see his essay "Fictionalizing Acts."

provide a context of plausibility or authenticity for an imaginary character. This argument, however, is concerned with instances in which space becomes a central source of meaning and aesthetic effect. Secondly, Iser's argument is not based on the possibility of recognition of an object, that is, on its reality effect. It refers to the mental processes that are necessary to translate abstract letters on a given page into an imagined world. This, in fact, is one of the problems of his approach, for in the way he presents the argument it only appears to work with literature, so that pictorial representations of space would not seem to qualify.

As I have tried to show so far, aesthetic experience is constituted by a transfer between the recipient and an aesthetic object (constituted as such by taking a specific attitude toward it). This transfer can become the basis for the articulation of otherwise inexpressible dimensions of the self. However, can this mode of explanation also be applied to our perception and experience of an image, such as, for example, the pictorial representation of space? It is at this point that we have to distinguish between two forms of images: mental constructs, for example of the literary character Huckleberry Finn, and pictures. Obviously, the image as mental construct forms an important part of aesthetic experience, because it plays a crucial role in the actualization of the literary text. The image as picture, on the other hand, seems to work exactly against such engagement, because it replaces mental activity by optical perception, as Iser himself points out in *The Act of Reading*:

The image, then, is basic to ideation. It relates to the nongiven or to the absent, endowing it with presence. [...] This strange quality of the image becomes apparent when, for instance, one sees the film version of a novel one has read. Here we have optical perception which takes place against the background of our own remembered images. As often as not, the spontaneous reaction is one of disappointment, because the characters somehow fail to live up to the image we had created of them while reading. However much this image may vary from individual to individual, the reaction: 'That's not how I imagined him' is a general one and reflects the special nature of the image. The difference between the two types of picture is that the film is optical and presents a given object, whereas the imagination remains unfettered (in reading). Objects, unlike imaginings, are highly determinate, and it is this determinacy which makes us feel disappointed. (137-138)

Iser's contrast of an indeterminate form of literary representation and the determinacy of a picture or visual object appears plausible insofar

as, in the perception of a painting or a film, the picture seems to precede mental construction. Before we can construct a mental picture we have already seen the image we are supposed to construct. But what do we actually see when we look at pictures? Gestalt theory and, more recently, constructivism have rejected naive empiricist notions of perception as the mere registering of sense impressions. In order to make sense of what we see, our perception has to have a focus that gives structure and meaning to the object. Landscape painting provides an obvious case in point. Not every piece of nature is a landscape. On the contrary, in order to qualify as landscape, certain iconographic and cultural criteria have to be met. In other words, we do not first register and then interpret what we see. Quite on the contrary, we already interpret what we see in the act of registering it.

On what grounds is this interpretation-in-the-act-of-perception based? Some critics refer to the role of schemata which help to order a bewildering array of sense impressions, so that what we are transferring to the image is a set of culturally inherited cognitive structures that successfully affirm their functionality. As David Bordwell puts it: "To recognize an object or event is to possess a schema for it and to have a procedure for judging it a member of some class" (146). However, theories of cognition and image comprehension can only explain why pictures are intelligible, not why they might be experienced as significant or provide an aesthetic experience. To be sure, picture comprehension depends on the recognition of the iconic dimension of the sign, but recognition is not yet the same as "making meaning," as Bordwell claims, and certainly not identical with aesthetic experience. Moreover, as Vivian Sobchack points out, vision is meaningless, "if we regard it only in its objective modality as visibility" (290). We must acknowledge subjective experience and the invisible as part of our vision—that part which does not "appear" to us, "but which grounds vision and gives the visible within it a substantial thickness and dimension" (290). In making her point, Sobchack, too, draws on a spatial example:

The back of the lamp is not absent. Rather, it is invisible. It exists in vision as that which cannot be presently seen but is yet available for seeing presently. It exists in vision as an *excess* of visibility. [...] The most forcefully felt 'presence' of such invisibility in vision is, at one pole, the unseen world, the *off-screen space*, from which embodied vision prospects its sights and, at the other pole, [...] the *off-screen sub-*

ject, who enacts sight, revises vision, and perspectively frames its work as a visible image. (292)

Vision thus emerges in an interplay between the visible and the invisible: "The visible extends itself into the visibly 'absent' but existentially and experientially 'present.' And the invisible gives dimension to the visibly 'present,' thickening the seen with the world and the body-subject's *exorbitance*. The visible, then, does not reveal everything to perception" (294-295).

This doubleness of perception is intensified in the perception of objects that we classify as aesthetic objects, because these objects invite us to emphasize their non-identity as representation and to reconstruct them mentally anew as objects, much in the same way that we have to construct literary characters like Hamlet or Huckleberry Finn in order to constitute them as objects of aesthetic experience. This description of the act of seeing may appear counterintuitive at first. How is it possible to say that we have to construct an object in order to give it meaning although we see the object represented right before our own eyes? The analogy to Iser's example of the actor may be of help here. The picture can be seen as equivalent of the actor in Iser's example whom we also see before our very eyes, whom we recognize, in many instances, as a familiar character easily to be identified as type, but whom we really do not know, so that the typical or familiar aspects of classification only become a resource for triggering and feeding our own mental activities.

Both, literary as well as pictorial, representations of space thus create not only a mental but an imaginary space; even where this representation may appear life-like, truthful or authentic, its actual status is that of an aesthetic object that invites, in effect, necessitates a transfer by the spectator in order to provide meaning and to create an aesthetic experience. Inscribed into the reception of a narrative or a picture is always a second narrative or a second picture constructed by the reader or spectator. This, in turn, raises the interesting question whether we can say a bit more about the nature of the transfer that takes place between recipient and aesthetic object. For what purposes can the fictional representation of space be used by the recipient? Or, to put it differently and more specifically, what is the usefulness of imaginary space for a reader or spectator? Why does it engage us, interest us, or even provide an aesthetic experience at times, although we know quite well that it is "invented"?

The crucial question arising at this point is what the recipient brings to the transfer that constitutes aesthetic experience. Is this transfer generated by the articulation of "internal otherness" which is then projected into "the other," as scholars such as Gabriele Schwab suggest who have tried to redefine Iser's concept of transfer as psychological transference in order to give Iser's reader an emotional and psychological dimension?¹² Schwab's concept of internal otherness remains a very broad term designed to characterize the psychological structure of a whole group, nation or period; hence, it cannot explain the fact that responses to fictional texts are varied and multi-faceted. In contrast, I have suggested to speak of a second narrative or a second image that is inscribed into the aesthetic object in the act of constituting it. This second narrative or image is both similar to, and different from, the representation by which it is generated. It is similar because it is based on a semblance between the text and the imaginary needs of the recipient; it is different because the emotion invested can have entirely different sources and can be causally unrelated to the representation itself. This is the only possible explanation for the fact that a narrative or an image which deals with issues far removed in time and thus may no longer have the same daring, explosive connotation which it might once have had, can nevertheless still fascinate and engage present-day audiences.

Why does the representation of the South in a movie like *Gone With the Wind* still have such amazing appeal today? The film's viewers have never met Scarlett O'Hara; in effect, most must be aware of the fact that she never existed. Moreover, most contemporary viewers may know little and care very little about the historical South and its regional identity. Ironically enough, however, this is exactly the point and the actual source of usefulness for the film's viewer. For in order to make the fictional representation come alive, a transfer has to take place in which the viewer invests her or his own emotions, for example, through affectation such as the experience of social humiliation, or a trauma of loss, to the film. We have, in fact, a recent example for this: the temporary identification of some East Germans with the fate of the American South right after German unification when historical

12 See Schwab's book *The Mirror and the Killer Queen. Otherness in Literary Language* and my discussion of her argument in "Pragmatism and Aesthetic Experience."

phenomena like the carpetbagger or the myth of a lost cause appeared as plausible concepts to make sense of present-day developments. Although the feudal social structure of the Old South and the ideology of socialist egalitarianism of the GDR are miles apart, the representation of the Old South in *Gone With the Wind* could thus function as host for the articulation of feelings of loss and historical defeat. This means that the aesthetic object, including the representation of space, is of interest exactly for what it does not represent but what, on the other hand, it permits to articulate. Or, to relate this insight to the issue of imaginary space: paradoxically, its major appeal rests not on what is visible but exactly on what is not visible. In both cases, the whole point of representation is to articulate something that cannot be represented itself and therefore has to find a host.¹³ Fictional texts are wonderfully effective in mobilizing individual affects and, at the same time, in hiding them behind the immediate experience and sensuous impact of representation.

The immensely popular paintings of Edward Hopper can serve as an illustration of this point. Whenever critics or students try to explain their amazing appeal, they describe a world of alienation, melancholy or isolation, presented in paintings where isolated human beings are often placed in wide empty spaces and the viewer is placed in front of enigmatic surfaces. But why should the depiction of alienation or isolation have so much of an appeal that copies of these paintings have become almost ubiquitous? We find them not only in bars and cafés but also on calendars, picture postcards, in dentist's waiting rooms, university offices, business offices, and government buildings. The only possible explanation is that these paintings are not taken literally, but as an aesthetic experience, so that a thematic interpretation will fail to provide a convincing explanation of their appeal. This appeal is related to spaces or, more precisely, to the empty spaces of Hopper's pictures, because it is this empty surface, in its often colorful barren-

13 Of course, one may claim that the view that the collapse of the GDR presents a deplorable instance of defeat can also be expressed outside of fiction, but in order to give that defeat a grandiose dimension of tragedy, one needs narrative and fiction. Generally speaking, there is a broad spectrum of the "unsayable" that strives for articulation by means of fiction: on one end of the spectrum, there are—politically or culturally tabooed—ideas or feelings that can only be expressed under cover of fiction, on the other end, there are ideas or feelings that can gain an additional impact by transforming them into an aesthetic object.

ness, that is ideally suited to function as a host for aestheticized emotions or moods.¹⁴

In his study *Bewusstseinslagen des Erzählens und erzählte Wirklichkeiten*, as well as in subsequent elaborations of his theory of the dehierarchizing thrust of Western cultural history, Jürgen Peper has provided a useful sketch of this gradual liberation of space and time from moral, social, and other contexts to which they were originally subordinated. In their focus on the wide, empty spaces of nature, romantic philosophy and literature liberate space from typological meaning or from the illustration of universal laws of creation and transform it into a source of individual revelation. Space begins to take on a subjective dimension. At the turn of the century, impressionism's representation of space as primarily an effect of sense impression radicalizes this "subjectivation" of space. While nature in romanticism can become an aesthetic object only as a unified *gestalt* (called landscape), single impressions of space are now foregrounded in order to draw attention to themselves as components as well as constituents of sensuous experiences. And the more radical the liberation of time and space has become in modern and postmodern culture, the stronger the tendency to cut off representations of space from any semantic reference. In effect, this accelerating logic of liberation ("Verselbständigung") has by now gone beyond space as a self-contained entity of representation and has proceeded to dissolve this entity into single components such as line, color, shape, and, finally, mere canvas in order to foreground the potential of these components to become aesthetic objects in themselves. Starting with Abstract Expressionism, contemporary painting has constantly reminded us that we do not need characters or even faces to initiate the kind of transfer that makes aesthetic experience possible. Space, including empty space, can do the job as well, and, for certain purposes, even better.

One conclusion that can be drawn from this development is that the importance of space as a host for the transfer processes through which an object is constituted as aesthetic object is increasing. One

14 The phenomenon that space can represent something that is not visible is effectively illustrated in Otto Preminger's film noir *Laura* where the main character, who is trying to solve the riddle of the mysterious disappearance of the beautiful Laura, moves through her rooms and uses the objects he sees as triggers for the imaginary construction of an image with which he falls in love.

reason is that the importance of visual culture is growing. In reading a literary text, characters as well as descriptions of space retain a dimension of indeterminacy that has to be overcome by the reader through her own imagination. In paintings, photographs, and especially in film and television, this indeterminacy is reduced because of the iconic nature of the sign. We see the object in front of us and do not have to imagine it. Consequences are different, however, for character and space. The visual representation of characters also foregrounds their difference: whereas in reading a novel, we can create the image of a person along the lines of our own imaginary, a character in film is not entirely open to this kind of reinvention. The filmic character can invite identification but can also be a barrier to it: either we like what we see or we don't. Hollywood tries to neutralize this risk by choosing actors that either represent a mainstream consensus (and thus signify sameness) or are so attractive that they invite an upgrading identification (and thus make difference exotic and desirable). Upgrading identification is the easiest and most effective way of overcoming the possible barrier created by the physical appearance of characters on screen.

For space, on the other hand, the consequences of visualization are different. While the visualization of characters creates new possibilities but also new risks, space profits from visualization: on the one hand, it gains determinacy through visual representation and thereby achieves solid object-status; on the other hand, it retains a certain degree of indeterminacy, because its representation is not directly linked, as the representation of a character is, to a specific identity. A certain degree of semantic openness is preserved even in visualization. It is representation without focus on an identity, so to speak. Directors such as Douglas Sirk have taken advantage of this by employing space as externalization of their character's interiority. Whereas transfer processes with regards to characters may depend on sympathy for physical appearance etc., space invites a much more directly somatic—and therefore "unconscious"—transfer. This transfer can also be described as a form of embodiment. Because the transfer process does not have a human *gestalt* as its point of reference, it does not have to be mediated with another person's identity and personality profile and therefore can take place in direct, somatic fashion. As Peper, among others, has demonstrated, this move to ever more "embodied," somatic forms of reception is a general characteristic in the

development of Western art. Hence, it is not surprising that (imaginary) space has become more and more important as a source of aesthetic experience. In effect, it has played a crucial role in paving the way for an aesthetics of embodiment.

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