Playing Indian
Media Reception as Transfer

Winfried Fluck

Why do we expose ourselves again and again to popular culture and mass media entertainment (in the widest sense of the word), although, as a rule, we are well aware of the fact that this material is fictional? It is curious to see how media studies keep avoiding this issue. By now, we have studies of ownership, production companies, technologies, cultural politics and cultural hegemony, often discussed under the heading Americanization, of violence, media effects, and censorship, of the construction of gender identities, and so on. However, in the final analysis all of these studies deal with conditions, contexts, and consequences of objects that are of importance only because of another reason, namely the fact that they provide powerful experiences.[1] This suggests to look more closely at the aesthetic dimension, or more precisely: at the amazing power of the media to provide an aesthetic experience, because, in the final analysis, it is this power which is one of the main sources of the media's world-wide appeal. By approaching the aesthetic dimension from this perspective, I am already indicating in what way I will understand and use the term ‚aesthetic' in the following discussion: not as a philosophy of art or a theory of aesthetic judgement, but as concept for a unique form of sensuous experience whose specific nature and working principles are still in need of further clarification. It almost goes without saying that there is not enough space here to take into account differences in aesthetic experience between various media. Each medium has its own

1 *The 700-page volume* Die Wirklichkeit der Medien. Eine Einführung in die Kommunikationswissenschaft, *edited by Klaus Merten et al. (1994) provides a telling case in point. It contains lengthy entries on psychic dimensions of the media,*

aesthetic dimension, to be sure.[2] Nevertheless, it is important to consider some of the basic conditions that constitute aesthetic experience, even though they are then realized differently in different media.

The ‚In-Between‘ of Aesthetic Experience

If we want to shift the definition of the aesthetic from a philosophy of art to that of aesthetic experience, we must start by defining aesthetic experience. I have discussed this issue more extensively in other contexts and therefore want to deal here only with what I consider to be the key formative aspect of aesthetic experience, namely that it is constituted by a transfer.[3] When we start reading a book, we are confronted with abstract letters on a page. Structuralism has taught us that the words formed by these letters are arbitrary in their reference. Moreover, in the case of fictional material, the represented world is invented, at least in the particular form in which we encounter it in the text. Without any investment from our side, this invented world would not take on any degree of reality and would not make any sense. The basic fact about aesthetic objects is that, in order to acquire significance and to provide an aesthetic experience, they have to be brought to life by means of an imaginary transfer on the side of the reader. This is most obvious in the case of literature. Since we have never met literary characters such as Hamlet or Isabel Archer and do in fact know that they never existed, we have to bring them to life by drawing on our own associations, feelings and even bodily sensations. Thus, in the act of reception the text or object comes to represent two things at the same time: the world of the text and imaginary elements added to it by the reader in the act of actualizing the words on the page. It is this ‚doubleness‘ that can be seen as an important source of aesthetic experience, because it allows us to do two things at the same time: to articulate imaginary elements and to look at them from the outside.

Aesthetic experience is thus a state ‚in-between‘ in which, as result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are, in the words of Wolfgang Iser, „both ourselves and someone else at the same time".[4] This is an ingenious response to a basic problem of our existence as human beings: Phenomenologically speaking, we can never get out of our own skin and therefore we can never truly know others, especially when we encounter them in the form of media representations. The transfer through which we constitute aesthetic objects is one way of bridging that gap, although in this case only by means of the imagination. The ‚other‘ we encounter

in representations is a phantasm; nevertheless, by being challenged to constitute that imaginary being on conditions provided by the text, we have to stage our own thoughts and feelings in the context of, and under the condition of, another being's world.

Another way of describing this same phenomenon is to say that literary texts or aesthetic objects function as a host for readers who use them in parasitical fashion. After reunification in Germany, for example, there was a brief moment in which some East Germans compared themselves to the American South in the Reconstruction period. In both cases a ,better' world seemed to have been conquered by an inferior civilization with primarily materialistic values. Let us imagine for the sake of the argument that such an East German ran across the novel *Gone With the Wind* at the time. This East German had never been to the South, in fact, hardly knew anything about it, except that it was racist. Had she still read the novel in the communist German Democratic Republic, this might have been her major focus. All of a sudden, however, she sees something else in the book, namely an analogy between what she considers the cruel fate of two superior civilizations. The imaginary and emotional elements she invests in the transfer that actualizes the novel may now be dominated no longer by feelings of superiority but by the theme of how to deal with humiliation and defeat. The transfer between two worlds that are far apart – a Southern belle of the 19th century and a 20th century reader in Leipzig – becomes possible by way of a structural analogue: „In the image consciousness," writes Jean Paul Sartre in his study of the imaginary, „we apprehend an object as an analogon for another object."[5] This potential of the fictional text to function as host for articulating hidden, perhaps only half-conscious or unconscious emotional and imaginary dimensions of the self, is the only possible explanation why we read fictive texts about people who never existed. Fictional texts only gain meaning by a transfer, triggered by the text on the basis of analogies, but enacted by the reader in unpredictable ways, depending on the specific context of use. This transfer model of the text-reader relationship problematizes the currently fashionable theory of subject positioning based on Althusser's theory of interpellation. Althusser introduced the concept in order to explain the way in which ideology creates subjects:

> *I shall suggest that ideology ,acts' or ,functions' in such a way that it ,recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or transforms the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called* interpellation

5 *Sartre (2004), 52.*

or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most
commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ,Hey, you there!' –
Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place
in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere
one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a
subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ,really'
addressed to him, and that ,it was really him who was hailed' (and

not somebody else).[6]

In (mis)recognizing himself as subject, the individual is thus the product of an ideological „subject-effect".

From the point of view of the transfer model, interpellation, if we still want to use the term, can only work if it is actualized by a transfer, but in the process it is also transformed into a host for the parasitical imaginary of the reader. This transfer must also affect the interiority of the reader, because this interiority has to be attached to signs in order to be articulated, and therefore it is no longer the same interiority that strove for articulation. That is the reason why the identity constructed by the fictional text is actually more adequately described as a case of non-identity, since it puts the reader in a state ,in-between' two identities, with neither of whom she is entirely identical. This, I want to claim, is the actual usefulness fictional texts have for processes of identity-formation: They offer a provisional, experimental identity construct that can become the basis for self-extension, but ironically enough, only on the condition of non-identity. Non-identity also means, however, that the identity construct of the reader is not identical with the identity of the reader and that the identity of the reader, based on the need to provide a certain degree of coherence and continuity, must inevitably play a crucial role in the selection of identity constructs. Even where the text is effective in interpellating the individual, the individual must construe the interpellation by means of the imagination and in this process appropriates the text for his own parasitical purposes.

If one finds this hard to accept, one should consider the case of the current fascination ethnic literature holds for readers outside the U.S., among them white readers in Europe for whom this literature has at least as much fascination as for the constituency for which it is supposed to offer identity constructs. Strictly speaking, this ethnic literature cannot function as identity construct for white readers (unless the ethnic character would be gay, for example, so that a white reader could relate to this aspect). The new cultural politics of difference, with its theory of subject

positioning, cannot explain this fascination. From the point of view of a transfer theory of effect, on the other hand, the answer is easy. The experiences that are described – the melodrama of non-recognition, the discovery of a voice of one's own, the romance of heroic outsiderdom – can provide ideal points of reference for a transfer based on analogy. One may even go one step further: They provide ideal possibilities to articulate – and, at the same time, hide – these feelings in a politically correct way.

Such a description of the constitution of aesthetic experience by means of a transfer may sound plausible in the case of reading, but it seems counter-intuitive in the case of visual material in the media, because the characters we encounter there have an immediate physical presence. Before we can even begin to think about who Hamlet might be, we have already seen him in the shape of Laurence Olivier. We do no longer have to imagine him and need not come up with our own image of what Hamlet looked like. However, this does not free us from the need to bring this person to life by drawing on our own store of memories, feelings, bodily sensations and bodily memory. If the person on the screen suffers, we can only imagine what suffering is and what it may mean for him on the basis of our own experiences and memories of suffering. One may claim, in fact, that the art of a movie consists in the way in which it manages to engage us sufficiently to recall such memories. One of the reasons for the popularity of the modern mass media can be attributed to the fact that they have entirely new means at their disposal for doing this – for example, by fast editing, close-ups, montage, and by a combination of image and sound. Visual images are especially effective in drawing us into transfers without our even being aware of it. The development from print to the visual media and on to recorded music can be described as a story in which our involvement as recipients becomes more and more direct, unmediated, body-centered, and sensuously intense. In this context, it is important to note that the transfer through which we constitute an aesthetic object does not merely apply to characters. It pertains to every aspect of the text or object. We also have to bring to life the villains, emotional conflicts, spatial references, even the rain, by means of our own imagination, our feelings and our own bodily sensations. Since the visual image comes so quickly and so directly at us, this often happens without any awareness on our side, which in turn means that visual images are also especially effective in triggering imaginary transfers.

7 Cf. Belting (2001),
Boehm (1994), Böhme
(1999), and Mitchell
(1994). For surveys and dis-
cussions of the new emphasis
on the concepts of image and
picture in art history, see
Schulz (2005) and Belting
(2007).

8 This is Belting's term.
See Belting (2001), 21.

These considerations are confirmed by recent theoretical work on the image.[7] A photograph even in a documentary mode is not just a representation of an object but crucially determined by the idea the photographer has about the object. In that sense, it is also a representation of the interiority of the photographer. This picture collides with another interiority in the act of reception, that of the viewer whose interiority is in itself already defined by a whole range of images, because otherwise the self could not develop any sense of itself. We do not encounter an image „for the first time" in the act of reception, then. Rather we see it in the context of a cultural imaginary that plays a crucial part in determining what different viewers actually see in looking at one and the same picture. The image always already precedes the picture. It is the virtual background for the actualization of the meaning of the picture. Images are already there as part of the imagination before we „see" them in representation. Or, more precisely: What we actually see is shaped by the store-house of images in our imagination with which we approach the pictures. The transfer through which aesthetic experience is brought about thus entails a screening of the picture in terms of the images with which we approach it. In this process, we „de-corporealize" the image in order to be able to link it with new experiences and meanings, so that we can make it „our own".[8] The result is the construction of an image that we may all share as picture on the pictorial surface, but which is nevertheless individualized in the act of reception.

The Cultural Construction of „Indianness"

Readers may perhaps be willing to grant at this point that a text like *Hamlet*, both in its literary and filmic versions, is constituted by means of a transfer. But what about the following example of a visual image and media representation that I have chosen because it brings us closer to current debates in American Studies than *Hamlet*. The American Studies scholar will immediately realize that these are pictures taken from the series *The North American Indian* by Edward S. Curtis, published in several volumes between 1907 and 1930. Curtis was a photographer with strong ethnographic ambitions whose authentic-looking portraits of Indians established his reputation at the end of the 19th century. Over the next 30 years, he shot over 40.000 pictures of more than 80 Indian tribes. In many cases, this is the only documentary material on the subject that is available nowadays. Financial support by the wealthy financier J. P. Mor-

gan enabled Curtis to publish a representative selection of his work in 20 volumes under the title *The North American Indian*. Mick Gidley calls the series one of the most influential visual constructs of Native Americans in the 20th century, and sets it next to John Ford's Hollywood Westerns in terms of influence.[9] Curtis himself claimed that his pictures were straightforward records of Indian life. On the other hand, we know that he was influenced by the photographic pictorialism of his youth which imitated models of artistic representation established by paintings.[10] Moreover, several scholars, including Mick Gidley, have pointed out that his pictures were staged. They carefully eliminated all traces of modern life – such as, for example, clocks – as well as the dreary realities of life in an Indian reservation. Today's scholarship is still somewhat ambivalent about this fact. On the one hand, critics have to acknowledge that the Curtis collection is

9 Cf. Gidley (2003).

10 Cf. Egan (2006).

one of the few sources of visual information about Native Americans that we have and that, despite its unmistakable elements of stylization, it nevertheless contains a certain degree of ethnographic authenticity after all. On the other hand, the tension between ethnographic claims and well-crafted picturesqueness makes many scholars uneasy and hesitant to praise Curtis's work.

Let us have a closer look at one of the pictures in the collection, that of the Indian *Two*

Fig. 1: Edward S. Curtis: *Two Strike*. In: Curtis (1907-1930), vol. 3, 116.

Strike. To start with, the similarities between our first encounter with the image and the situation I have described as the starting point and trigger of aesthetic experience is striking. Like Hamlet, the Indian *Two Strike*, as we encounter him in Curtis's photograph, is also someone whom we do not know and most likely do not have any prior knowledge of. It is true that in contrast to Hamlet there obviously existed an Indian called *Two Strike*, but the actual person is not identical with the carefully constructed image of the person that we see here. However, the aesthetic stylization characteristic of the picture should not be seen simply as a lapse into aestheticism and a corresponding lack of documentary precision. The pictorialism of the picture places it in a portrait tradition in which certain elements of stylization have the function of suggesting to us that the portrait provides access not only to the character of *Two Strike* but also to something like an „essence" of the Indian. As Mick Gidley puts it:

> *In all portraiture there is a tension between the rendition of the sitter's individuality or unique being and that of his or her social role [...], but when the emphasis falls predominantly on social attributes – sometimes despite very powerful 'natural' features, whether lines of age, for instance, or delicacy of proportion – it reinforces the notion that group identity is paramount: in this case, the 'Indianness' of the 'Indian' or, just as likely, the Mandanness of the Mandan, the Siouxness of the Sioux, and so on.*[11]

11 Gidley (2001), 51.

We are, then, under the impression that the picture allows us to draw conclusions that go beyond the image itself, and this is, after all, the function of art as it was understood for a large part of the 19th century. While photographic documentation represents the exterior, art captures the soul and essence. An artistic representation was therefore considered superior to mere photographic documentation. From this perspective, it makes sense that Curtis tried to give his photographs an artistic dimension, because this dimension promised to reveal something that mere documentation could not. Ethnographers have criticized that Curtis' portraits are far too picture-conscious and thus „artificial" to provide adequate representations of Indians. But they fail to realize that, seen within 19th century artistic convention, the „artificiality" of the pictures promised a depth of insight and meaning that was supposed to elevate the object of representation to a new level of dignity. In trying to „humanize" the Indian, Curtis reconstructed him pictorially according to white, „civilized" notions of what constitutes character and humanity. Or, to put it differently: In order to

be able to establish the precondition for a transfer, we have to focus on those features that we „know".

This claim may become more convincing when we ask ourselves what kind of person we see in the portrait of *Two Strike*. For most viewers, the picture creates the impression of a strong and wise character, equipped with lots of native wisdom, heroic abilities to endure, and obviously unassailable dignity. In other words – and absurdly so in view of actual historical developments – an image of admirable (perhaps even enviable) autonomy and self-possession is created. The picture seems to condense all of these positive aspects in one image. The wrinkles signal age, how-ever not in the sense of frailness but experience and superior wisdom. *Two Strike* is the object of our look, but he accepts this situation in a mood of stoic endurance. He has had similar situations of potential humiliation before and has survived them all; in effect, the main impression we have is that of a survivor who has managed to preserve his integrity, his dignity, and his individuality in a life of hardship. Since we do not know anything about his life and since he is presented to us in a completely decon-textualized setting, all attention is focused on the face, an effect that is intensified on the visual level by a contrast between light and shadow. Clearly, the picture draws on our conventional cultural assumption that a face reflects a person's inner character. *Two Strike*'s face appears to have been exposed to all kinds of weather and, as a result, it signals a life of hardship which nevertheless strikes us as „deep" and „authentic" because it was obviously lived in direct contact with the natural elements. He may be poor and inferior in social terms but his „authentic humanity", unencumbered and undistorted by the conventions of middle-class life, provides him with the aura of a still authentic existence.

Because *Two Strike* does not look at us and averts his eyes, his dignity also results from a certain dimension of inaccessibility – an indeterminacy which can be, as we know from reception theory, a useful trigger for a transfer. Since we hardly know anything about the represented person and since the person refuses to be expressive about himself, we cannot but complement the image we see by means of our own imagination – for example, by interpreting the face as meaningful. This process, I want to claim, proceeds along the lines of doubling, not in the sense of romantic or psychoanalytical doubleness or unconscious duplicity, but in the phenomenological sense of doubleness: The wisdom, inner strength, stoicism, and dignified survivorship we read into *Two Strike*'s face – even though we are aware nowadays of the fact that faces do not necessarily

reflect any inner traits – are all qualities we think modern middle-class life is lacking, but which we would like to possess in order to give depth and substance to our existence.

In his book *Playing Indian,* an analysis of the popular American practice of dressing up as Indian (not only popular in the U.S.), Philip Deloria argues that playing Indian has traditionally held the promise of connecting with one's real Self:

> *Although these performances have changed over time, the practice of playing Indian has clustered around two paradigmatic moments – the Revolution, which rested on the creation of a national identity, and modernity, which has used Indian play to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial and postindustrial life. In the beginning, British colonists who contemplated revolution dressed as Indians and threw tea in Boston Harbor. When they consolidated power and established the government of the early republic, former revolutionaries displayed their ideological proclivities in Indian clothing. In the antebellum United States, would-be national poets donned Indian garb and read their lyrics to each other around midnight backwoods campfires. – At the turn of the twentieth century, the thoroughly modern children of angst-ridden upper- and middle-class parents wore feathers and slept in tipis and wigwams at camps with multisyllabic Indian names. Their equally nervous post-World War II descendants made Indian dress and powwow-going into a hobby, with formal newsletters and regular monthly meetings. Over the past thirty years, the counterculture, the New Age, the men's movement, and a host of other Indian performance options have given meaning to Americans lost in a (post)modern freefall. In each of these historical moments, Americans have returned to the Indian, reinterpreting the intuitive dilemmas surrounding Indianness to meet the circumstances of their times. Playing Indian is a persistent tradition in American culture, stretching from the very instant of the national big bang into an ever-expanding present and future.*[12]

As in the case of the Minstrel-Show, ethnic role-playing establishes a public image which then forces those, who have provided the inspiration for the distorting mask, to mimic the image in order to appear „authentic". Deloria seems to link the promise of „Indianness" exclusively with masquerading as an Indian.[13] However, one does not have to dress up in order to experience the liberation Deloria describes: „Almost everyone has experienced the sense of personal liberation that attends the wearing

12 Deloria (1998), 188f.

13 See Browder (2000) who explores „how, in America, ethnic passage from one identity to another is not an anomaly" (2). Browder, too, restricts this impersonation to – often amazing – real-life cases such as Griffin (1961). She never considers the possibility of an „imaginary impersonation".

of disguise, be it Halloween masks, cross-gender clothing, or garments signifying a racial, ethnic, or class category different from one's own. Disguise readily calls the notion of fixed identity into question."[14] A similar effect is achieved in the transfer that constitutes aesthetic experience. In effect, reading or watching pictures may be even more effective in achieving the same results, because through them the possibilities of imaginary self-extension are further enhanced. One day I can play Indian, the next I can slip into a black skin. Thus, Deloria's description of the „simultaneous performances of two identities" can actually also be taken as a description of aesthetic experience: „Immigrant shoemakers and aboriginal ‚Indians' existed at the same time, in the same person's body. The same physique could contain both middle-class schoolgirls and Camp Fire Indian maidens."[15] We are „both ourselves and somebody else at the same time." On the one hand – to go back to the picture of *Two Strike* – the rough, archaic look and the quaint, primitive dress, but also the averted eyes and the subdued look establish distance; on the other hand, the wrinkled face and other facial features such as the noble-looking nose, as well as the stance of meditation, all of them features that we appreciate in our own life-world and may associate with maturity, establish affinities. The hair, at least nowadays, works both ways: Together with the dress it carries connotations of primitivism, while today it also has ecological and counter-cultural associations that are too obvious to be spelt out here.

14 Deloria (1998), 7.
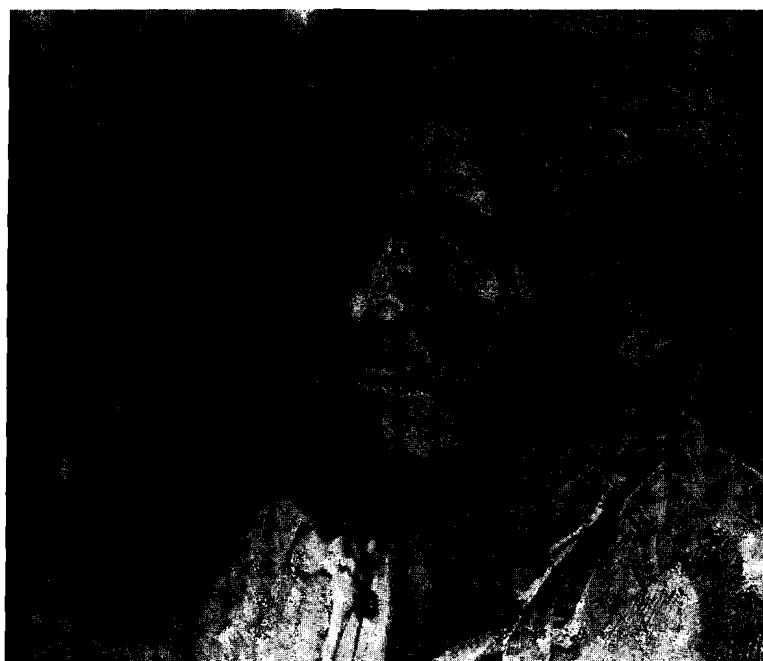
15 Deloria (1998),

185.

Fig. 2: Edward S. Curtis: *Agichíd – Assiniboin.* In: Curtis (1907-1930), vol. 17, 695.

Finally, the picture of *Two Strike* confirms my claim that visual images are especially effective in triggering and investing imaginary elements of our own life-world, because it is precisely the claim of a straightforward documentation that may hide from ourselves the fact that we are reconstructing the image as an aesthetic object. Small iconographic changes can provide different triggers in this respect. In the picture of *Assiniboin* (fig. 2), the Indian is transformed into a robust peasant with an admirable degree of stubborn resilience, which may go too far in diminishing difference, however. We don't want Indians to look like Anthony Quinn. It is therefore unlikely that this picture will be taken as a satisfactory portrait of the generic Indian. In the picture of *Chief Joseph* (fig. 3), on the other hand, the Indian is turned almost into a subcultural hero who says yes to performance and performativity, in effect, to such a degree that the picture may go too far in the direction of difference to fulfill expectations of an authentic existence. Even in playing Indian, our imaginary investment (and hence our transfer) varies all the time, depending on the changing constellations of difference and similarity.
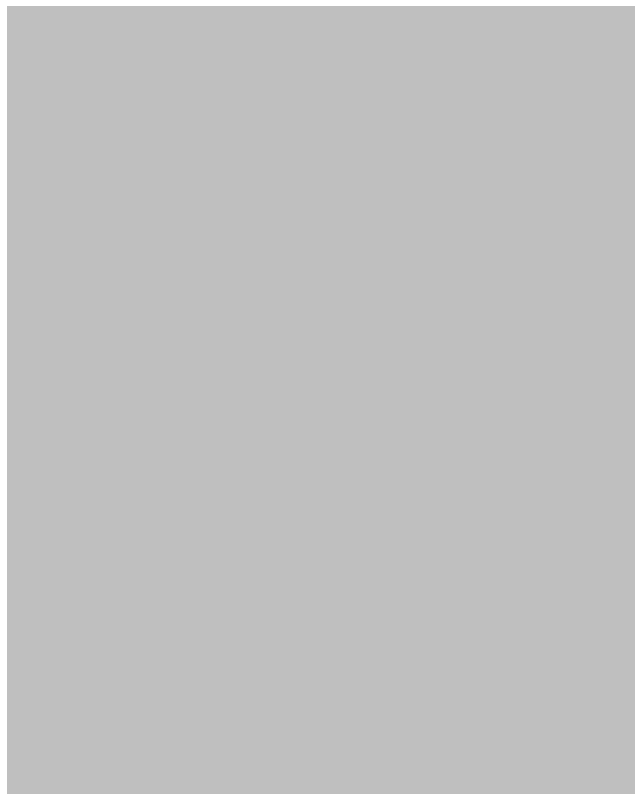
Fig. 3: Edward S. Curtis: *Chief Joseph – Nez Percé*. In: Curtis (1907-1930), vol. 8, 314.

For my argument, I have left out the Indians adorned with feathers in Curtis' series, although there are plenty of them, because such images evoke the myth of the noble savage today and thus suggest willful misrepresentation. They may therefore undermine our willingness to enter the representational illusion and to engage in a transfer. But if we are honest with ourselves, all representations of Indians, even the apparently documentary and „authentic" ones, proceed along the lines of the noble savage. Nowadays, in effect, the pictures by Curtis do this more effectively than the colorful representations of Indian lore of yesterday because, by avoiding the traditional iconography, they are much more effective as triggers for imaginary transfers. We are still playing Indians but somehow we now have a better conscience in doing so, because the documentary dimension of the picture seems to authenticate our imaginary transfer (and hence, our imaginary desires) as „reality". It is certainly true that „cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity".[16] However, at a closer look this is only half of the story. „Alterity" is not simply the „other" world that challenges our identity (and helps to stabilize it by acts of exclusion or stigmatization). Rather, alterity itself is also constructed because otherwise we would not be able to experience it as alterity. In other words: Alterity, too, depends on a transfer, both as an other that is myself and yet radically different from myself. Strictly speaking, alterity is not a word for the inaccessible other but a construct of the inaccessible other and, as such, part of a process of self-extension.

One should add at this point that such a construction by means of a transfer should not be mistaken for mere projection. In order to make the transfer satisfactory and to arrive at an experience of doubleness, we have to enter a different world shaped by different circumstances. Aesthetics is also a word for a choice of worlds we want to enter; we pick certain worlds that promise to be attractive for the purpose of a transfer. In this context of reception, the term ‚realistic' gains a new meaning and function, for it can be taken as designation of a world that is familiar enough to get us interested, so that in many instances ‚realistic' often will be only another word for fictional material or aesthetic objects that we consider suitable and promising for imaginary transfers. When somebody criticizes a media presentation as „unrealistic", on the other hand, it may actually mean that the representation provides not enough familiarity for him or her to trigger a transfer.

16 Bhaba (1994), 175.

Recognition Through Racialization

Why do we need these transfers in the first place, however? An area in which to look for an answer may be Whiteness Studies, because it deals with a similar constellation, the look of a white spectator unto an ethnic other. In contrast to identity politics it thus claims that it is not identity but difference that can determine identity. In a superb study of James, Faulkner and Toni Morrison, Patricia McKee (in her *Producing American Races*) has emphasized the dependence of this kind of identity construction on visual culture and visual metaphors – this is one of the reasons why I have chosen to discuss the matter on the basis of the portrait of *Two Strike*. Indeed, one may ask: What is the reason, in the words of Eric Lott, for „this curious dependence upon (and necessary internalization of) the cultural practices of the dispossessed"?[17] One model of explanation in Whiteness Studies is to assume that the encounter with an image like *Two Strike*'s reaffirms the difference between spectators and object and thus confirms the former in their superiority, or more precisely, constructs a superior identity precisely by representing *Two Strike* as exotic other and therefore whiteness as an unmarked norm. This is the by now well-known story of how „white people became white".[18] In the case of my interpretation of the portrait of *Two Strike*, such an explanation would fit only partly, however, because it would ignore the dimension of longing and imaginary self-extension that was part of the reconstruction of the image. Hence a second model of explanation has emerged, frequently to be found in Whiteness Studies, in which a white racial unconscious and, thus, an unacknowledged desire is at work that is seen as necessary for the making of white American manhood: „The latter simply could not exist without a racial other against which it defines itself and which to a very great extent it takes up into itself as one of its own constituent elements."[19] But such an explanation also poses a problem, because it could not explain the imaginary construction of characters, objects, or events that are not desirable. What about a white female student in Germany for whom imaginary identification with ethnic others may be neither masculinist (because she is female), nor suppressed desire (because *Two Strike* seems an unlikely candidate for this)? Racialization may be an important element of identity formation in US-American society but it may not necessarily be the only factor.

Another possible perspective is opened up by Tocqueville and his observation that the new political system of democracy with its elimination of a hierarchy based on social rank creates an entirely new need for

17 Lott (1993), 475.

18 Barrett/Roediger (1997), 402.

19 Lott (1993), 476.

recognition and self-fashioning. When one's own worth is no longer automatically determined by birth or social rank, individuals have to find new ways of demonstrating their own worth. It is one of the most interesting suggestions of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835/1840) that key features of American culture can be explained by this never-ending, inherently „restless" search for recognition. In effect, as Tocqueville's observation implies, American culture has been a pioneer culture, not only in developing advanced forms of performance and conspicuous self-presentation, but also in reinstrumentalizing culture for the search for recognition. The term is crucial not only for the acknowledgement of a person's humanity but for the formation of a person's own identity. Identities are not formed exclusively, not even primarily, by attaching one's own desire to a subject position created in discourse, but by being recognized by others, for without such recognition we literally would not know who we are. Tocqueville, in fact, may be able to provide a better explanation for the key role of race in American culture than theories of power or desire can, for in a society in which an a priori system of rank has disappeared, other elementary forms of distinction have to be established. Consequently, in an essay on „White Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century", Charles A. Gallagher speaks of an identity vacuum as an important source of racialization: „A lack of ethnic identity among my respondents has created an emptiness that is being filled by an identity centered on race."[20]

Indeed, this may also explain why class remains undertheorized and underanalyzed in American scholarship even when approaches call themselves „Race, Class, and Gender Studies". As long as class is considered the main source of inequality, economic conditions would have to be changed in order to provide full recognition. On the other hand, if race and gender are considered the main sources of inequality, recognition can be envisioned by establishing diversity as a social and cultural norm. One need not change economic and social structures to achieve this, only cultural attitudes. Walter Benn Michaels has pointed out the paradoxical logic, by which this displacement of economic inequality by an ideal of cultural equality can provide a renewed affirmation of the American Dream: „American egalitarianism – or antielitism – thus take two contradictory but surprisingly complementary forms. The first consists in thinking not that you're better because you're rich (that would be snobbery) but instead that you got rich because you're better."[21]

20 *Gallagher (1997), 7.*

21 *Michaels (2006),*
104.

Recognition Through Aesthetic Experience

What does all of this have to do with *Two Strike* and the transfer that is needed in order to make his image the source of an aesthetic experience? What is the connection between recognition and aesthetic experience in view of the fact that recognition always seems to necessitate another person, whereas aesthetic experience is, by definition, non-reciprocal? One may think of Hegel's explanation of the master-slave relationship which in Hegel's view is a consequence of a striving for non-reciprocal recognition, although, of course, his point then is that this relation produces a new form of dependency. Similarly, the usefulness of fiction and other aesthetic objects may lie in the fact that they are non-reciprocal, so that aesthetic experience, at least at first sight, seems to provide a case of asymmetrical self-recognition. However, because of the doubleness of aesthetic experience, in which we are both ourselves and somebody else at the same time, this self-recognition should not be mistaken for mere projection. Aesthetic experience can be challenging, strenuous, unpleasant, or repulsive, for in order to make the transfer successful and arrive at an experience of doubleness, we have to construct the other world as different. This is also one of the reasons why aesthetic experience can fail. Where it succeeds, on the other hand, it can be eminently satisfactory. Thus, it may be more fitting to understand the search for recognition provided by aesthetic experience as a project of imaginary self-extension. And this, in turn, may explain why fictional and aesthetic material has assumed an ever increasing importance in Western societies and has become something like a store-house of identity options, which does not only provide a variety of roles but can also be seen as a training ground for frequent role changes.

Such a model of aesthetic experience as constituted by a transfer contradicts a view of identification as it is implied in the concept of interpellation. Aesthetic experience does not fix identities, because it provides an ever new construction and performance of identity, not its fixation in a unified subjectivity. It establishes all kinds of complicated relations between myself and an other, and in doing so, it has the potential to extend and enlarge identities. Glimpses of this cultural activity can be seen – and I can only refer to two examples here, although this topic would merit a paper of its own – in the current world-wide imaginary impersonations of blacks, as, for example in Hip Hop Culture: „One of the more peculiar outgrowths of hip-hop's popularity has been the birth of the ‚wigga' – the so-called white nigga who apes Blackness by ‚acting hip-hop' in dress, speech, body language, and, in some cases, even gang

affiliation."[22] In the field of American Studies, Ann duCille already some time ago made the angry observation „that a large portion of the growing body of scholarship on black women is now being written by white feminists".[23] At my institute in Berlin, students can make thematic suggestions for the oral part of their final exams, and for many years now the list is headed by Hip Hop, Chicana fiction and Native American culture.

These students from abroad are not part of any social movement in the U. S. and even though it is possible, even likely, that their choice is influenced by political sympathies for minority groups, it is nevertheless striking how quickly and easily the minorities can be exchanged. One might claim, then, that it is not primarily political motives which determine their choices but aesthetic ones in the sense I have used the term here: as a special option for imaginary self-extension and, thus, non-reciprocal recognition. Similar developments can be observed in American Studies all over the world and perhaps even in the U. S. itself. But if this is so, we should reconsider the basic political premises and the hopes underlying current political analyses in American Studies, namely that we will be liberated from the margins. We should reconsider it, because the margins may also be an imaginary construct. If there is no longer any difference between aesthetic function and politics, then this cuts both ways. On the one hand, it means that aesthetic objects do not exist outside of politics and should therefore be interpreted in terms of their political function. I fully agree. But on the other hand, it also means that, inevitably, political topics have a tendency of becoming aesthetic objects[24], and this, in turn, could mean that instead of engaging in politics, we are playing Indian.[25]

Conclusion: From Image to Narrative

My discussion of the role of the aesthetic function in the media has taken a somewhat surprising turn. I have moved from aesthetics to aesthetic experience, described as a transfer and a constellation of doubleness which, in turn, raised the question why we are interested in having aesthetic experiences in the first place. Media theorists such as McLuhan have answered the question by referring to a promise of self-extension. In trying to provide this wish for self-extension with a more substantial explanation, I have arrived at the search for recognition as the most likely candidate. At this point, we may in conclusion return to the image of *Two Strike* for a final look. What makes this picture so effective is that it comprises image and narrative in one picture. The impression of con-

22 Tate (2003), 8. See also Rux (2003) in which the author provides a historical survey of white bohemian engagement with images of blackness; and, for a wider context, Kitwana (2005), and Wynter (2002). In a chapter called „I Want to Be the Minority': The Politics of Youthful White Masculinities in Sport and Popular Culture in 1990s America", Kyle Kusz (2007) links the „white Negro" phenomenon to a crisis of white masculinity.

23 duCille (2003), 217.

24 See, for example, my analysis of Stuart Hall's and Cornel West's „new cultural politics of difference", Fluck (2002).

25 Cf. Tate (2003), 5: „It is with this history in mind that African-American performance artist Roger Guenveur Smith once posed the question: Why does everyone love Black music but nobody loves Black people?"

26 Cf. Gidley (1998).

densation – the fact that we experience it as a summary of the essence of *Two Strike*'s life – is not only created by his face but also by the narrative implied by it. The cultural knowledge and the expectations we bring to the image will most likely link it with a familiar narrative, namely that of the Vanishing Indian.[26] Thus, the impression of profundity and dignity is produced by an imaginary which we attach to the picture. And this can confirm the major point I have tried to make about the role of the aesthetic function in the media. For a large part, the aesthetic experience provided by the media is created by a dimension which we do not see but which, precisely because it is not represented explicitly, is wonderfully effective in hiding our own investment in the image and its cultural narrativization. Because of the association of documentation which the visual image carries in its iconic facticity, it seems to deny all suspicions that the image and its implied narrative might have something to do with ourselves. But if it would not, it could not provide an aesthetic experience. And if it would not provide an aesthetic experience, we would hardly be interested in it.

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