WINFRIED FLUCK

Pragmatism and Aesthetic Experience

The function of an aesthetic object goes beyond the mere communication of meaning or a message.[1] To be sure, any aesthetic object may express views and value orientations that we also find in other discourses. Nevertheless, there is a difference. We are not exposing ourselves to aesthetic objects, at least not primarily, for the informations they carry, the arguments they make, or the opinions they express, because such meanings can be communicated more directly and less ambiguously by other discursive forms. We are exposing ourselves to aesthetic objects because they provide an experience that goes beyond the mere communication of meaning. This additional dimension is usually called aesthetic experience or aesthetic effect and regarded as major source of the special interest people have in literature, film, the fine arts or musical performances. Logically speaking, the question of aesthetic experience thus stands at the center of the field of literary and cultural studies. Aesthetic experience makes all the difference. It constitutes the objects on which literary and cultural studies are focusing. Hence, it also provides an – explicit or implicit – legitimation for this field of study as a discipline in its own right and plays a crucial role in discussions about the discipline's "relevance."

It remains one of the central challenges for literary and cultural studies to clarify in what way we can talk about that dimension of our encounter with fiction and art which is called aesthetic experience. One of the striking shortcomings of current forms of literary and cultural criticism is that, as a rule,

1 In the following argument, I consider "fictionality" as a constitutive characteristic of the material with which literary and cultural studies are dealing. To start with, fictions – in the sense of an as if-statement about reality that is not required to observe established truth-criteria – form the bulk of the material. But even where objects of study are not fictions, such as, for example, buildings, dresses, cultural practices, or political speeches, an act of depragmatization and dereferentialization takes place in which the referential and practical functions of these objects are bracketed for the time being. This does not mean that they do no longer have any relation to reality, only that they establish this relation on communicative conditions of their own. Aspects such as style, form, structure, textuality, language, rhetoric, or the performative dimension thus become crucial points of analysis even for a sociological or political approach. Depragmatization and derefentialization are therefore preconditions for constituting objects of study in literary and cultural studies, whereas the term art refers not to all, but only to specific aesthetic objects that people value highly for certain reasons. Or, to put it differently: the term fictionality refers to aesthetic function, the term art to aesthetic value.

there is little interest in taking up the question of aesthetics, because the aesthetic dimension is seen as mere evasion of history, politics or the project of a cultural criticism. But the aesthetic dimension is not the more or less decorative wrapping of a core meaning to which we ought to penetrate as quickly as possible. The term aesthetic denotes a distinct mode of communication and experience without which we would have no object in literary and cultural studies and no good reason for the existence of a separate field of study. As I will try to show, it is logically impossible not to base a discussion of fiction and art on certain aesthetic premises, and, more specifically, on a theory of aesthetic effect. For a discussion of the possible contribution of pragmatism to literary and cultural studies, it is thus of great interest to find out what pragmatism can contribute to an understanding of aesthetic experience.

I.

Any discussion of the topic pragmatism and aesthetic experience has to start with John Dewey – especially in view of the current Dewey-revival which has made us see his amazing modernity. In James Kloppenberg's recent *Companion to American Thought*, Peter Hansen, in fact, calls Dewey's *Art as Experience* "the most complete American aesthetic theory developed in the twentieth century" (18). Indeed, in reading *Art and Experience* today, one is struck to see in how many ways Dewey anticipated positions and developments in literary and cultural studies that became influential only in the 1960s or even more recently. The first chapter of Raymond Williams' seminal book *The Long Revolution*, for example, which is one of the founding texts of the cultural studies movement, is based largely on arguments first developed in Dewey's *Art and Experience* in which Dewey claims that aesthetic experience is not tied to the encounter with a beautiful object but emerges from an intensified experience of qualities that characterize everyday objects, so that aesthetic experience is something we encounter as ever-present potential in our life-world. It has become customary to point to the Marxist influences in Williams' approach. But nobody seems to have realized so far to what extent pragmatism, directly or indirectly, also played a crucial role in the development of his perspective.[2] Williams' influential argument for an elimination of the hierarchy between high

2 The same applies to the work of Kenneth Burke whose arguments on symbolic action do not only bear striking similarities to Dewey but also to Raymond Williams in his early phase.

and popular culture and his redefinition of the discipline of English as the study of both, are already anticipated in *Art as Experience*.[3]

A crucial step in this direction was Dewey's redefinition of traditional aesthetics from a substantialist aesthetics to an experiential one in which the aesthetic is no longer defined as inherent quality of an object but as a specific experience with that object. In Dewey's view, the aesthetic is constituted by an attitude which we take toward an object. The argument has become familiar to us through the Czech structuralist Jan Mukařovský who argued in his essay on aesthetic function, norms and aesthetic value that any object of the life-world can, in principle, be approached (and interpreted) from a variety of perspectives which Mukařovský classifies as referential, pragmatic (by which he means practical uses) and aesthetic. A building or a dress serve primarily a practical function. But, at the same time, we can also look at them as aesthetic objects and we might even reflect upon the possible relations between these two aspects. This argument, however, can already be found in *Art as Experience* (published in 1934, while Mukařovský's essay came out in 1936) in which Dewey illustrates the point by the example of a group of people approaching the Manhattan skyline on a ferry: "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. 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). All of these different observers see the same object but only by taking a certain attitude the Manhattan skyline is turned into an aesthetic object which provides the basis for an aesthetic experience.

3 Cf. Dewey's radical rejection of a categorical difference between art and popular culture: "The arts which today have most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts: for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip, and, too frequently, newspaper accounts of love nests, murders, and exploits of bandits" (11–2).

This argument was more systematically developed by Mukařovský who, in turn, was rediscovered in the 1960s by the Constance school of reception aesthetics. Reception aesthetics is one of the few of the so-called "Continental theories" of the recent theory boom in literary and cultural studies in which the name Dewey functions as an important point of reference. In the search for theoretical support of their own emphasis on the reception process, both Hans Robert Jauß and Wolfgang Iser refer to Dewey as an influential predecessor and ally. In his book *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik (Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics)*, Hans Robert Jauß begins a chapter on the difference between aesthetic and other possible functions of an object of perception by referring to Dewey whose *Art as Experience* he calls "a pioneering achievement in analyzing aesthetic experience" ("eine Pionierleistung auf dem Feld der ästhetischen Erfahrung" 162).

Similarly, Wolfgang Iser, in his study *The Act of Reading*, draws on Dewey's *Art as Experience* at one point of his argument as a welcome authority for affirming the necessary relation between the structures of the literary text and their actualization in the act of reading. However, he then parts company with Dewey by emphasizing the discrepancies produced by the reader during the gestalt-forming process, because, for Iser, these experiences of discrepancy are an important source for transcending the reader's previous range of orientation: "It is at this point that the discrepancies produced by the reader during the gestalt-forming process take on their true significance. They have the effect of enabling the reader actually to become aware of the inadequacy of the gestalten he has produced, so that he may detach himself from his own participation in the text and see himself guided from without" (133–4). For Iser, this ability "to perceive oneself during the process of participation is an essential quality of the aesthetic experience; the observer finds himself in a strange, halfway position: he is involved and he watches himself being involved" (134).

Dewey's *Art as Experience* serves reception aesthetics as a welcome point of departure for stressing the experiential dimension of our encounter with literature against mimetic theories of literature. On the other hand, Dewey's "pioneering achievement" is considered a crude forerunner for an approach that has described the processes of reception and the "acts of reading" at greater length and in much greater detail by focusing on concepts such as the implied reader or the meaning-generating function of a text's constitutive blanks. In terms of actual usefulness, Dewey thus remains marginal in reception aesthetics as well. For Iser and Jauß, the interest generated by Dewey's aesthetics lies in the role he attributes to experience as a central concept of aesthetics. However, for both critics Dewey's description of the specific nature of aesthetic experience remains incomplete or inadequate. This raises an interesting question: why has an author like Dewey had so little influence on the field, although he has been so progressive in his aesthetic theory and has anticipated so many recent developments in contemporary literary and cultural studies?

Jauß provides a clue for understanding the astonishing neglect of Dewey in literary and cultural studies when he claims that for Dewey notions of Aristotelean unity remain the necessary condition for an aesthetic experience.[4] We are here, it seems to me, at the heart of the problem contemporary literary and cultural theory has had with Dewey's aesthetics. The problem lies in Dewey's latent organicism. However, it would be more fitting to speak of a tacit, involuntary organicism, because, clearly, Dewey does not conceive of the work of art as a closed structure in the sense of the New Criticism and its contextualism in which the pressures of the literary context transform the ordinary linguistic material into an autonomous and self-referential object. Instead, Dewey emphasizes the processual character of all experience, including aesthetic experience. Still, he faces the problem that he has to distinguish aesthetic experience from other forms of experience and to mark it as a distinct and unique form of experience, as, for example, in the following "strong" but characteristic assertion: "In a work of art, different acts, episodes, occurrences melt and fuse into unity, and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so – just as in a genial conversation there is a continuous interchange and blending, and yet each speaker not only retains his own character but manifests it more clearly than is his wont" (43–4).

The fact that Dewey draws on organicist vocabulary in order to describe the distinctiveness and uniqueness of aesthetic experience reflects, in my view, not an organicist conviction on Dewey's part but a problem arising from his own insistence on the continuity between everyday experience and aesthetic experience. As a heightened, enhanced sense of ordinary experience, art functions as "development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience" (53).[5] Art gives unity to an experience not yet sufficiently clarified and coherent: "[...] man uses the materials and energies of nature with intent to expand his own life, and [...] he does so in accord with the structure of his organism – brain, sense-organs, and muscular systems. Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action characteristic of the live creature"

4 "In dem Maße, wie Dewey den Blick auf das Ästhetische außerhalb der Kunst eröffnet und seinen Bereich beschreibt, als ob er sich unbegrenzt erweitern lasse, werden unvermerkt klassizistische Bestimmungen des Kunstschönen wie Ordnung, Form, Harmonie zu Eigenschaften einer ästhetisierten Dingwelt umgemünzt und aristotelische Bestimmungen der Einheit der epischen Fabel zur Bedingung der Möglichkeit von Erfahrung überhaupt" (Jauß, 162–3).

5 Dewey adds: "This fact I take to be the only secure basis upon which esthetic theory can be built" (53).

(31). Thus, "[m]utual adaptation of parts to one another in constituting a whole is the relation which, formally speaking, characterizes a work of art" (140). Hence, the confirmation of wholeness must be the goal of interpretation: "analysis is disclosure of parts as parts of a whole" (314). Consequently, Dewey's description of aesthetic experience abounds in metaphors like balance, proportion, development, growth, fulfillment, wholeness, unity, fusion, synthesis, and harmonious merging.

Still, the matter is more complicated than it may look at first sight. In fact, as Richard Shusterman has reminded us in his book on *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, the charge of organicism may not be justified in Dewey's case: "However correct this charge might be against the organicism of classicist aesthetics and the New Criticism, it simply misses the mark with respect to Dewey, who repeatedly insists that the unity of aesthetic experience is not a closed and permanent haven in which we can rest at length in satisfied contemplation. It is rather a moving, fragile, and vanishing event, briefly savored in an experiential flux rife with energies of tension and disorder which it momentarily masters. It is a developing process which, in culmination, deconstructively dissolves into the flow of consequent experience, pushing us forward into the unknown and toward the challenge of fashioning new aesthetic experience, a new moving and momentary unity from the debris and resistance of past experiences and present environing factors" (32). In many cases when Dewey speaks of a unified experience, it seems to me that he refers to what may be called a gestalt experience by which we make sense out of the continuing flow and chaos of sensory impressions. Often, when he speaks of aesthetic perception he means a perception of the total organism which "binds parts together into a single whole" (61).

In the final analysis, however, Dewey's organicist terminology goes beyond the description of a gestalt, because the link of perception and experience to the needs of the organism does not only point to the organization of perception but, to quote the title of one of the central chapters of *Art as Experience*, to "the organization of energies." Thus, aesthetic experience is not merely constituted by the perception of wholeness but by an experience of tension, a rhythm of conflict and adaptation: "The factor of resistance is worth especial notice at this point. Without internal tension there would be a fluid rush to a straightway mark; there would be nothing that could be called development and fulfillment"(143). It is thus not the gestalt perception of wholeness itself but the experience of development and growth generated by it which stands at the center of aesthetic experience for Dewey: "Esthetic experience is always more than esthetic. In it a body of matters and meanings, not in themselves esthetic, *become* esthetic as they enter into an ordered rhythmic movement toward consummation" (329).

But even if one grants that, at a closer look, Dewey's idea of wholeness is really that of a rhythmic processing of tension, resistance, and adaptation, it seems hard to deny the tacit normative dimension in this conceptualization of aesthetic experience: if there is tension, it is crucial that the experience and enactment of this experience follows a certain sequence or rhythm and that the conflicting elements are finally brought together and "consummated": "There is an element of passion in all esthetic perception. Yet when we are overwhelmed by passion, as in extreme rage, fear, jealousy, the experience is definitely non-esthetic.[...] The material of the experience lacks elements of balance and proportion" (55). There clearly is an ideal of successful integration at work here that lies at the bottom of Dewey's view of aesthetic experience. In fact, there has to be. If aesthetic experience clarifies ordinary experience, then one has to be able to recognize it as such, and since all experience is characterized by processes of resistance and adaptation, doing and undergoing, there must be a criterion of intensity or successful integration in order to distinguish aesthetic experience from other experiences. The case can be illustrated by going back to the example of the Manhattan skyline where mere multiplicity leads to confusion: "Still another [man], 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 playing" (140). In contrast, Dewey awards only the following integrated image the attribute of the aesthetic: "Finally the scene formed by the building 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).

Dewey's conceptualization of aesthetic experience in terms of such categories as unity or successful consummation reflects a pragmatist dilemma, as Wolfgang Iser has pointed out in his introduction to the reader *Theorien der Kunst*: "If experience is a final horizon of knowledge, then there cannot be any transcendental ground for theorizing experience itself. Consequently, pragmatism needs a distinguished and paradigmatic manifestation of experience, namely the aesthetic, in order to be able to make experience itself the object of knowledge in the context of a philosophy of experience. Dewey has taken this step. For him, aesthetic experience becomes the privileged object of inquiry for gaining insight into the nature of experience itself, into modes of acquiring experiences and into the experiential accessibility of that which happens in the process of experience. Art becomes a transcendental ground which permits him to round off a theory which is based on the negation of transcendental premises. Thus, his philosophy of art does not really provide us with an explanatory tool for interpreting art. Instead, the major insight it yields is to what

object that is never stable and identical with itself. And it is this non-identity 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 with a certain amount of distance. As a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are, in Iser's words, "both ourselves and someone else at the same time": "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" (*Prospecting* 244).

Iser's "performative" theory of aesthetic experience is supported by a number of works on the psychology of reading and the transactions between reader and text which are summarized in J.A. Appleyard's study *Becoming a Reader*, and, especially, in his chapter on "The reader as player." In reading, we experience a double state of mind, "we both identify ourselves with the characters, incidents, and themes of the work, but also keep them at a safe distance [...]" (39). One of the main sources of attraction in our encounter with fiction and art is that we can be both participants and observers at the same time: we can simultaneously enact and observe certain experiences; we can indulge in a temporary "abandonment to the invented occurrences" and yet also take up "the evaluative attitude of the onlooker" (53–4). In order not to be overwhelmed by the imaginary dimension, "an important part of growing up is to learn to enter the world of fantasy safely" (49). We do this by learning to balance participant and observer roles which is, in fact, the main skill we have to master in becoming a reader.[10]

10 Another description of the doubleness of the reading process is provided by Rachel M. Brownstein in her book *Becoming a 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 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" (xv).

"Staging oneself as someone else": Iser's characterization of aesthetic experience evokes the theory of self of a thinker who by now seems to have become the forgotten man of pragmatism, George Herbert Mead. However, one should add immediately that to take the attitude of the other is not the same as choosing an imagined other for the purpose of self-articulation and, perhaps, self-fashioning. The difference becomes clear when we go back to the metaphor of acting employed by Iser. For Mead, although his central concept of taking the attitude of the other seems to suggest a mode of acting, if not a staging of the self, the situation of acting is "not a natural situation" (MSS, 147), because the interaction is not real and the fictive other does not really influence the actor's behavior. For Iser, on the other hand, it is exactly this fact which opens up entirely new possibilities, for, ironically enough, the anthropological urge for self-enactment and self-confrontation is encouraged by the fictionality of the imagined other.

For Mead, taking the attitude of the other is part of a process of socialization. It means setting the individual on the way to becoming a "complete self," whereas an individual that takes the attitude of the other in order to merely stage him- or herself remains a narrow self for Mead. For Iser, on the other hand, taking the role of an imagined other opens up the possibility of articulating imaginary dimensions of the individual that cannot be expressed otherwise. It is thus not primarily a means of socialization but a means of articulation that may set in motion an endlessly supplementary sequence, for whenever one imaginary element is articulated and hence socialized, another one takes its place. In fact, it is this anthropological lack which may explain our need for fiction. This would explain why art, contrary to certain pragmatic visions of successful socialization and integration, has actually developed in exactly the opposite direction in Western societies and has become primarily a means of individual self-expression, functioning more as a force of subversion and perhaps even social disruption than as an agent of successful socialization.

Iser would agree with Dewey that the description of a fictional text or an aesthetic object in terms of textual structures alone is insufficient, no matter whether these are, as in New Criticism, formal patterns, or, as in the case of deconstruction, effects of writing, because the aesthetic potential of the text or object has to be realized by the recipient. But the conceptualization of the reception process itself is different in both cases and so is the description of the nature and function of aesthetic experience. While Dewey looks for experiences of unity and successful integration, Iser insists on an unbridgeable gap between text and reader and identifies the movement between involvement and distance as an important source of aesthetic pleasure. But Iser's description of the act of reception as staging oneself as somebody else, so that we are ourselves and yet also another person at the same time, raises the interesting question of

extent certain cognitive theories need references to the experience of art in order to gain plausibility and coherence."[6]

For Dewey, aesthetic experience connects an organism with its environment. The successful integration of parts can become a metaphor for the successful integration of the individual into society: "A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. [...] This whole is then felt as an expansion of ourselves. For only one frustrated in a particular object of desire upon which he had staked himself, like Macbeth, finds that life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Where egotism is not made the measure of reality and value, we are citizens of this vast world beyond ourselves, and any intense realization of its presence with and in us brings a peculiarly satisfying sense of unity in itself and with ourselves" (199).[7]

6 "Der Pragmatismus sieht das Kunstphänomen als eine seelenhygienische Notwendigkeit in einer arbeitsteilig gewordenen Welt, in der die vom Menschen erstrebte Weltbeherrschung mit der Verödung seiner Vermögen bezahlt werden muß. [...] Wenn für den Pragmatismus die Erfahrung ein Letztes ist, dann kann es keinen transzendentalen Ort geben, um Erfahrung zu theoretisieren. Folglich rekurriert der Pragmatismus auf eine ausgezeichnete Form von Erfahrung: die ästhetische, um durch sie im Horizont der Erfahrung Erfahrung selbst zum Gegenstand der Erkenntnis zu machen. Dewey hat diesen Schritt vollzogen, indem für ihn die ästhetische Erfahrung zur Möglichkeit wird, eine Einsicht in die Struktur der Erfahrung, in den Erfahrungserwerb und in die Erfahrbarkeit dessen zu eröffnen, was durch Erfahrung geschieht. Hier wird die Kunst zu einem transzendentalen Ort, der es erlaubt, eine Theorie zum Abschluß zu bringen, die sich aufgrund ihrer Basisannahmen Transzendentalien nicht leisten kann. Damit ergibt sich im Pragmatismus nicht ein Interpretationspotential für Kunst im engeren Sinne, sondern ein solches, das die Kunstbedürftigkeit bestimmter kognitiver Theorien aufdeckt, die gerade durch die Kunsterfahrung den geforderten Grad ihrer Geschlossenheit gewinnen" (*Theorien der Kunst*, 51–2). See also Iser's recent book *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, in which the only reference to Dewey consists in the following remark: "If experience is to be dealt with in the framework of pragmatism, it can be done only by means of a distinct experience like that of art, since pragmatism, like constructivism, precludes any transcendental standpoint" (322n.).

7 Cf. also the following statement: "But by dwelling unduly on a fact that is always present in any complex significant whole, I may appear to make a mystery out of a thing that is our most familiar experience – that no whole is significant to us except it is constituted by parts that are themselves significant apart from the whole to which they belong – that, in short, no significant community can exist save as it is composed of individuals who are significant" (207–8).

II.

In contrast to Dewey's visions of successful integration and a temporarily achieved identity, almost all approaches in contemporary literary and cultural studies, including the various forms of negative aesthetics that we have, are based on the idea of non-identity. In the current cultural radicalism, this non-identity is attributed to elements such as writing, rhetoric or representation,[8] whereas Iser considers the fictional dimension of the literary text or aesthetic object as the primary source of non-identity. He therefore links the concept of the aesthetic with that of fictionality in order to describe the specific nature of aesthetic experience. In Iser's version, aesthetic experience is no longer attributed to the intensity and unity of experience but to "the doubling structure of fictionality" (*Prospecting* 236). Since fiction is an invention, it brings something into the world that does not yet exist in this particular form. Although fiction makes use of existing forms of the life-world for the purpose of representation, it thus cannot be identical with reality.

When a text or an object is considered as fiction, we thus cannot regard these as simply referential, because in reading a fictional text, for example, even a realistic novel, reality is created anew. 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 image of him. Inevitably, this mental construct will draw on our own feelings and associations, or, to use a broader, more comprehensive term, our imaginary. These imaginary elements can only gain a gestalt, if they are connected with discourses of the real. Thus, a fictive character like Huckleberry Finn emerges as combination of a bad boy-discourse and our imaginary additions to it.[9] If it weren't for the bad boy-discourse, there would be no reference and thus no object that can be commonly shared and discussed, while, on the other hand, the imaginary elements are the reason for the puzzling and often frustrating phenomenon that we can come up with ever new interpretations of one and the same book – interpretations that are, in fact, not only different from those of other critics but also from our own prior readings. Or, to put it differently: a fictional text brings an object into our world, but it is not identical with that object.

As Iser has argued convincingly, literary representation is thus not a form of mimesis but a performative act. The double reference of fiction creates an

8 For an analysis of the dominant themes and arguments of the current cultural radicalism, cf. my analysis of "The Humanities in the Age of Expressive Individualism and Cultural Radicalism."

9 In his entry on "representation" in the critical handbook *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, W.J.T. Mitchell speaks of "the complex interaction between playful fantasy and serious reality in all forms of representation" (12).

how we can talk about that part which we bring to the act of reception. Iser solves the problem by the assumption of an anthropological lack, a search for origins, which allows him to talk about the recipient in terms of universal human needs and to remain on the level of such abstract concepts as the indeterminacy of human existence or the insurmountable finiteness of man.

However, are all our aesthetic experiences reenacting the same diffuse search for knowledge of an inaccessible origin or end? Even if this were the case, this diffuse longing for articulation and self-awareness is obviously articulated in historically, culturally, and psychologically very different and diverse ways – as the reception history of any art object or fictional text reveals. In Iser's literary anthropology, there is no individual at play, only a representative of the human race whose individual responses need not really concern us, because it is of interest only insofar as it illustrates a never-ending search for the unknowable. In contrast, Iser's student Gabriele Schwab has tried to address the question of emotional and psychological subject-structures more concretely in her books *Subjects Without Selves* and *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen. Otherness in Literary Language*. Schwab, too, takes her point of departure from a "double movement" of the reader: "If we understand readings as a negotiation across cultural and historical boundaries and a form of making contact with otherness, then we perceive a double movement toward the culture of the text/play and back to the culture of the reader. As readers of Shakespeare, for example, we usually do not try to become a Elizabethan [...], but rather to encounter in the otherness of Elizabethan culture something to which we respond and may import into our own culture or our own selves" (*Mirror* 4–5).[11]

Why and how do we respond, however, to Shakespeare's plays? Schwab tries to provide an answer by replacing the Iserian model of a transfer between text and reader with the psychoanalytical notion of transference. By doing so, her theory of reading as a form of cultural contact can include psychic and emotional dimensions that are certainly part of any aesthetic experience. Although Iser presupposes an anthropological need, he describes our encounter with an aesthetic object as a cognitive and ideational activity. In contrast, Schwab can point to our often strong emotional involvement by describing reading as an act of transference of the internal otherness of the unconscious. Whatever is repressed from consciousness will be perceived as other and will thus determine our relation to the otherness of the aesthetic object. How can we talk about this dimension, however, since it appears to be a highly individual, idiosyncratic dimension of the interiority of a person that is hidden from view even to the person itself?

11 See also Schwab's description of the tension between otherness and familiarity in the reading process: "In general, changes are often provoked by encounters with otherness that challenge familiar assumptions or open up new perspectives. Literature, however, requires a specific dynamic between familiarity and otherness, or closeness and distance, in order to affect readers. The old cliché that we 'find ourselves' in literature refers to the fact that unless literature resonates with us we remain cold to it. On the other hand, complete familiarity would never engage our interest but leave us equally indifferent" (*Mirror* 10).

Schwab's answer consists in a projection that characterizes much of the current cultural radicalism: the projection of "internal otherness" unto whole cultures, nations, or groups. Since we are part of the same culture or subculture, we are linked to the writer or to other readers by the same configuration and phantasms of internal otherness. But, again, this raises the question of the individual dimension of the reception process. Although we may be formed, or rather: deformed, by similar configurations of a socially or culturally produced internal otherness, we nevertheless come up with surprisingly different experiences and interpretations of one and the same text or object.[12] No matter how effective the establishment of a subject-position may be in a fictive text: because of the non-identity of the fictional world and the ensuing need to bring it to life through a mental construct of one's own, there exists always an individual difference in realization and, hence, in aesthetic experience.[13]

III.

At this point, it may be useful to return to pragmatism – not, however, to a particular classical position but to some general pragmatist premises. So far, my argument has been that, as a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, literary representation – here taken as model for other aesthetic objects – can be seen as a performative act. By representing reality in a fictional mode, the text restructures reality according to certain goals. This act is repeated by the recipient in the act of reception. In this reception, the recipient produces a second narrative that constitutes, in fact, a second text. Mark Twain faced the problem of racial relations and one of his responses was to redefine the issue in terms

12 In response to recent theories in which the reader or spectator is conceptualized as an effect of discursive regimes, Appleyard thus maintains: "Against this objection I would argue that although the culture and its system of meaning are certainly prior to the reader in a historical and epistemological sense, nonetheless the construction of any particular meaning (and hence the incremental restructuring of the culture) requires an interaction between an individual reader and the culture" (15–6).

13 This is not to reject analyses of aesthetic objects in terms of internal otherness but to point to their limits. Clearly, in constructing imaginary worlds, we draw on an existent cultural imaginary but this cannot explain with any certainty the meaning such images or stereotypes hold for the individual reader and the function they have for him or her.

of the moral struggle in Chapt. 31 of his novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Lionel Trilling in turn experienced this scene as especially meaningful, because he saw it in (and transformed it into) categories that reflected his own struggle for independence against a Stalinist left. Such a redescription should not be seen as solipsism. On the contrary, it is the beginning of an act of articulation that makes Trilling's experiences intersubjectively accessible. The prospect that other texts can enable us to articulate and authorize our own need for articulation drives us back, again and again, to fictional material. It also makes us interpret and redescribe these texts again and again in order to assess how plausible the analogy is and whether it can be shared.

Now, at first sight it would seem that if an aesthetic experience is generated by the doubling structure of fictionality, that is, by its ability to generate two interacting narratives at the same time, then Dewey's description of aesthetic experience in terms of such concepts as unity and consummation seems to be entirely inadequate. But perhaps it is not, for if we try to link the idea of transfer to Dewey's terminology, then one might say that temporarily – and for a precious moment of convergence – we are experiencing the two narratives as one.[14] This wonderful sense of identity, of a confirmation of our whole existence as identical with itself, should not be the end of our analysis of aesthetic experience, however. As Dewey and Shusterman point out, an experience of fusion is only empowering when it remains part of a process in which tensions are not eliminated but experienced. But in terms of our model of transfer this would have another consequence than the one described by Dewey: if the two narratives are cast against each other in order to throw light upon one another, so that we retain a sense of their difference, then staging oneself as someone else can become an object of self-observation and self-reflection. An intense aesthetic experience means that a transfer has taken place, although it is part of the effectiveness of such an experience that it can make us forget this fact. As soon as we try to describe or analyze this experience, however, our redescription of it in terms of a "second narrative" refers us back to the transfer that is triggered by our taking an aesthetic attitude.

There is a tendency in current revisionist criticism to imply that critics may have enacted such role-plays in the past for ideological reasons but that the current historical and political criticism is no longer in need of such "disguises,"

14 And insofar as an aesthetic effect can be taken, as it often is nowadays, as authorization or even "evidence" for the superiority of an argument, Dewey's apparently old-fashioned aesthetics takes on a surprisingly postmodern dimension. For a discussion of the way in which critical performance has become a major source of authorization in literary and cultural studies, cf. my analysis of "The 'Americanization' of History in New Historicism."

because it talks openly about its own interests and politics. In contrast, I have argued that such processes are inescapable because of the radicalized form of non-identity by which fictional texts are constructed. This is confirmed by the current interest in the racially other, for example, in the massive self-africanization, or rather, self-afroamericanization of whites that characterizes not only American culture at large, as illustrated by the popularity of the white negro movies of a Quentin Tarantino, but literary criticism as well. Such transfers are not only at work in cultural crossovers, however. They are also at work in identity-criticism and identity politics themselves, for the identity which a black critic affirms through a literary text is a creation, a construct of an imaginary black who does not exist in this form in the real world. This imaginary construct of a black is an aesthetic object and can thus become the object of an aesthetic experience. As should be clear by now, such role-plays are not a misuse but an inevitable part of aesthetic experience. The roles change but not the imaginary role play itself. This also means, however, that even political criticism cannot avoid creating an aesthetic object when it interprets a fictional text. There is nothing wrong with that, in fact, it is, in one way or another, inevitable. But, in the spirit of pragmatism, we should be clear about what we are doing.

As I have tried to show, aesthetic experience is constituted by a transfer between an aesthetic object toward which we take a certain attitude and the recipient. This transfer becomes the basis for the articulation of otherwise inexpressible dimensions of the self. In this process of articulation, up to then inarticulate elements can gain a gestalt and open themselves up for inspection. The theoretical challenge that arises from this description of aesthetic experience for literary and cultural studies is how we can talk about the part which we bring to this transfer between aesthetic object and recipient. Dewey talks about this part in terms of the needs of the organism, Iser in terms of basic, universal anthropological needs, Schwab in terms of a transference of internal otherness. Pragmatically speaking, one might also talk about it functionally, that is, in terms of the role the transfer plays for the individual reader or spectator in a process of self-fashioning and imaginary self-empowerment. But, ironically enough, this appropriation is also the beginning of a movement of the individual towards intersubjectivity. Fiction and art allow us to become actors and aesthetic experience is another word for the fact that we have been successful in linking first and second narrative, cultural narrative and individual narrative.

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