

The X. Prague Interpretation Colloquium

# THE AESTHETIC ILLUSION in Literature and the Arts

April 20–22, 2015, Villa Lanna, V Sadech 1, Prague.



## Abstracts

### Reading for the Mind: Aesthetic illusion, Fictional Characters, and the Role of Interpretation

Marco Caracciolo

My point of departure in this paper is that the aesthetic illusion can involve a specific mode of interaction with characters, which I call the “cognitive illusion”. When under a cognitive illusion, we judge the psychological life of characters to be convincingly portrayed; characters seem to think and behave in ways that are, in some relevant ways, life-like. Scholars affiliated with cognitive literary studies—for instance, Lisa Zunshine (2006), Blakey Vermeule (2010), and David Herman (2011)—have theorized this phenomenon by positing an analogy between how we make sense of other people’s minds (“folk psychology”) and how we attribute mental states to characters. This account has come under criticism because of its mimetic bias (McHale 2012; Iversen 2013). I argue that one way of deflating the tension between mimetic and non-mimetic approaches to character is to keep in mind that, phenomenologically, there is a difference between illusion and delusion (Wolf 2004, 328–329). Audiences’ understanding of characters’ minds is, first, mediated by the more or less latent awareness of their fictionality; second, it is projected against a background of interests that are not just psychological but metacognitive and thematic. This paper explores the implications of these ideas by mapping the interpretive strategies through which audiences of fiction may connect the cognitive illusion with broader values and interests.

## Aesthetic Illusion and the Nature of Austerlitz's Impulse

Josep E. Corbi

In *Austerlitz*, we go through a detailed report of Austerlitz's life as delivered by him to a narrator about whom we know very little. The story includes *an attempt to make sense* of a wealth of events and situations that at the time were experienced as strange or episodic, like Austerlitz's concern for railway stations and the emotional turmoil that often assaulted him in those places. There is *a constant impulse* that, in hindsight, unifies all those events and situations. This is, at least, what I intend to defend. Before a certain event in his life, Austerlitz was relatively unaware of existence of this unifying impulse; only on some occasions he claims to have sensed the strength and robustness of an impulse even though he had no grasp of what its nature and ultimate direction could be. In this paper, I will approach the story in *Austerlitz* mainly as a description of the process by which Austerlitz discovers the direction of this impulse and the extent to which this discovery shapes his life and transforms the impulse itself.

More specifically, I will argue that the way in which fact and fiction interrelate in *Austerlitz* play a crucial role in the dynamics by which the nature of this impulse is presented and discerned. There is, for instance, a photograph of the five-year old page that is presented as picture of Austerlitz himself, even though this is a conceptual impossibility because Austerlitz is a fictional character and a photograph of a person points to an actual referent. I will argue, though, that this transgression of the limits of fiction within the fiction itself favours in more than one way our understanding of Austerlitz's impulse as constituted by a certain articulation of a particular and a more universal concern. Austerlitz is presented as the referent in the photograph, we know he can't be but we also know that it *must* be the picture of a *certain* boy and, by this means, it seems then that our concern for Austerlitz's fate leaving Prague at the age of four spreads and is projected upon all boys of a similar age that had to go through related tribulations and there is no reason why this process of projection should stop within the boundaries of fiction.

## **La Comédie humaine and the Illusion of Reality**

Lubomir Dolezel

My paper consists of two parts. In the first part, analytical, I study Balzac's cycle of fictions, a major source of the illusion of reality. On the basis of recurrent narrative constituents (characters, settings) I derive the concept of fictional superworld which binds together the fictional worlds of individual works. The superworld is "inserted" between the individual fictional worlds and the actual world. The illusion of reality is thus made more complicated and sophisticated.

In the second part, theoretical, I try to contribute, in critical exchange with E. H. Gombrich, to the clarification of the concept of aesthetic illusion. On the basis of Gombrich's massive research I propose that the illusion generating power of aesthetic artifacts is not a constant, but a historical variable. I outline a scale between the highest and the zero power, with main points marking trompe-l'oeil, sfumato, realist illusion and no illusion (non-illusionist and antiillusionist art). I conclude that there is no aesthetic norm requiring art and literary fictions to create illusion of reality.

## **Aesthetic Illusion between the Prague School and Fictional Worlds Theory (With a Detour to Realist Fictional Narratives)**

Bohumil Fort

The notion of aesthetic illusion encompasses certain phenomena which can be (and have been) observed and examined from various literary theoretical points of view. Taking into consideration subterms such as immersion and reference, which are used within the aesthetic-illusionist inquiry, aesthetic illusion can be demarcated by the system of functions developed in the framework of Prague structuralism, from one side, and by the framework of the fictional worlds, from the other one. This paper thoroughly examines the notion of aesthetic illusion and its subterms from the point of view of the two above mentioned literary theoretical approaches. In addition, I will consider the connection between aesthetic illusion and realist fictional narratives.

## **Aesthetic Illusion and the Analogy Principle**

Tomas Koblizek

It is commonly presupposed that aesthetic illusion is elicited by means of analogy (or correspondence) between the fictional and the actual world. According to this view, a text induces an illusion as the imaginative world resembles or copies the world we experience in our everyday lives. The paper will focus on two points closely related to the issue: 1) I will advocate an idea that the analogy underlying the aesthetic illusion does not concern primarily the represented objects but rather the *form* (or scheme) of their representation. 2) I will also argue that besides the aesthetic illusion based on analogy another type of illusion is possible. Generally speaking, a text can elicit a strong illusive effect although it presents a world considerably *different* from ours. In such a case the role of rhetoric strategies becomes crucial.

## **Propositions, Images and Fictional Worlds**

Petr Kotatko

Do the aesthetic functions of a text of narrative fiction depend on generating the illusion that „what is actual is a story-world“ (Gregory Currie), i.e. fictional world created by the author, or rather on producing the illusion that „the story takes place in the actual world“? I will argue that the latter is the case and that the required kind of illusion has the form of believing (in the *as if* mode) that the text is a record of utterances of a real person (the narrator) telling us what happened in the actual world.

The next question is whether the aesthetically productive illusion requires not only approaching (in the *as if* mode) the propositional contents of these utterances as true (until the narrator proves to be unreliable) but also „fulfilling“ these contents with *images* of the states of affairs conceptually specified in them. I will critically discuss Felix Martínez-Bonati's account of this „fulfillment“ as required by aesthetic functions of a literary text and his claim that it must have the form of „dissolution“ (or: „alienation“) of propositions in images. Among other things, I will point out that this would eliminate the communicative scheme within which the interpretation of a text of a narrative fiction takes place. For similar reasons, I will argue that

the notion of *belief*, as it appears in the analysis of the interpretative attitude to narrative fiction, cannot be replaced by the notion of *alief*, as defined by Tamar Gendler.

## **The Novel and the Aesthetic Illusion**

Jiri Koton

The paper deals with the problem of aesthetic illusion from the perspective of poetics. It focuses on specific techniques that produce or disrupt aesthetic illusion in novelistic narrative. The varying occurrence of these techniques in different historical periods and literary movements will be examined. In terms of methodology, the paper draws on the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism.

## **Nudging the Embodied Reader: Immersion, Metafiction and Predictive Processing**

Karin Kukkonen

Recent work in the cognitive sciences and philosophy has drawn attention to the embodied and situated aspects of thinking. What does this mean for literary texts? Do readers experience embodied resonances of the movements, emotional states and experiences that they read about? Cognitive literary study has begun considering the role of readers' "virtual bodies" (Caracciolo 2011), of "presence" in fictional worlds (Kuzmicova 2012) and of the expressive power of "gestures" in literature (Bolens 2011).

The present paper considers the role of metafiction in the embodiment framework, in particular the interaction between immersive, embodied modes of narration and (seemingly) distancing, self-reflexive metafictional comments. Through the framework of predictive processing (Clark 2013; Hohwy 2014), as well as notions of expert learning (Sutton 2007), I propose to develop previous models of the mutually supportive relationship of immersion and metafiction (Schaeffer 1999).

## **Aesthetic Illusion and the Forms of Literariness**

David Miall

When and in what ways does an experience of literariness (Jakobson 1921: Eichenbaum 8; Miall in press) depend upon the creation of aesthetic illusion? Or, conversely, is it possible for illusion to occur during response to a text without calling on the forms of literariness? Following the postmodern dismissal of the possibility of literariness as a distinctive experience (e.g. Pratt 1974), perhaps literariness merely names a collection of linguistic features (ranging from phonetic parallelism to expressions of the sublime), emotional vectors (empathy to terror), and processing techniques (defamiliarization, text worlds), and that out of this medley readers construct their own entertainment. In this paper I arbitrate between these conflicting views with the help of empirical evidence from readers and findings from cognition and neuropsychology. I also mention the version of this problem created by the early promoters of hypertext narratives: immersion vs. interaction (Ryan 2001); and I consider how this view licensed repeated interruptions of the reader. Does literary text call for sustained illusion, the state that Lord Kames (1762 I, 81) notably termed “ideal presence”? Or as Johnson declared, referring to illusion in the theatre, is it that “the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players” (Johnson 276). Could readers enjoy an aesthetic literary experience if it offered no component of illusion? I conclude that for an experience of literariness, illusion proves to be not just nice but necessary.

## **On Literature and Illusion**

Anders Pettersson

I must confess that I am uncomfortable with using the word “illusion” in connection with the normal adult response to literature. Readers’ approaches to literature can no doubt vary considerably depending on personal preferences, but I do not believe that entertaining any kind of illusion is necessary for a literary experience to arise.

In my talk I will explain how I myself understand literary communication and literary experience (in that connection I will also reflect on the problems of delimiting literature and,

by extension, art). While certainly aware of the distinctiveness of much of what we call literature, I will play down the differences between literature and non-literature to a certain extent in my account. The distinction between the analytical and the empirical in the study of literary experience will play a part in my presentation, and also the distinction between the descriptive and the normative.

## **Justification and Empathy in Fiction**

Martin Pokorny

The paper will offer a characterization of fiction via justifiability, along the lines of: an utterance is fiction-making if it presents itself as justifiable -- i.e. as assessable by the criterion of justified/unjustified -- with respect to what it explicitly or implicitly describes. Aesthetic illusion can then be characterized as the going along with the claim of "justness", raised by the fiction-making utterance.

## **Narrative Illusion?**

Göran Rossholm

This paper will relate some features of literary narratives and, in particular, some kinds of reader responses to literary narrative to well known examples of visual illusion. This part of the presentation will result in a provisional typology of narrative "illusion". The quotation marks and the question mark in the title indicate that the term illusion is misleading with respect to most discussed narrative response in this area: the reader's feeling of "being there", and of being "directly perceiving" what is stated in the text. The second half will address the question how to analyse this phenomenon.

## **A Puzzle of Fiction and Cognitive Impenetrability**

Fredrik Stjernberg

Radford (1975) held that there is something puzzling, even paradoxical, about our emotional engagement with fiction. On the one hand I can be deeply moved by Anna Karenina's death,

on the other hand I know full well that Anna is just a fictional character, and there is no point in grieving fictional characters. There is no point, because either they don't exist at all, or else they are some kind of abstract entities, and grieving the non-existent or the abstract looks pointless. We could call this a paradox of fiction. A more careful formulation of this conundrum than the one I gave now will retain at least some of the apparent paradox. One such formulation is from Radford, as presented in Tullman and Buckwalter (2014):

(PF1) We are genuinely moved by fictions.

(PF2) We do not believe that fictional entities exist.

(PF3) A genuine emotion in response to fictional entities implies that one believes that fictional entities exist. We are only genuinely moved by what we believe is actual.

Radford's reaction to the puzzle:

I am left with the conclusion that our being moved in certain ways by works of art, though very 'natural' to us and in that way only too intelligible, involves us in inconsistency and so incoherence (Radford 1975, 78).

My talk concerns to what extent this apparent irrationality really is irrational. Our attitudes towards fictional events display characteristics of a phenomenon seen in other areas, namely cognitively impenetrability. Roughly, a mental state is cognitively impenetrable if knowledge cannot "penetrate" into the state, and influence it. But pointing to cognitive impenetrability doesn't by itself tell us all too much about how we should explain our attitudes towards fiction here. Something more will be said.

## References

Radford, C. (1975), "How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplement 49, pp. 67-80

Tullman, K. & W. Buckwalter (2014), "Does the paradox of fiction exist?", *Erkenntnis* 79, pp. 779-796

## **Neither Here nor There, but Now. Perception of Films and the Aesthetic Illusion**

Enrico Terrone

Does the aesthetic illusion in film rest upon a perceptual illusion? Following Lowe (1996), I consider standard perception as a sensory experience whose experienced object (i.e. the



intentional object) matches the object that has caused the experience (i.e. the real object). And I conceive of perceptual illusion as a sensory experience whose intentional object does not match the real object. Seeing a picture is a case of standard perception, not of perceptual illusion, inasmuch as we normally experience the picture's surface, not the depicted scene, as being in front of us, in our egocentric space. Indeed, the pictorial experience supplements the primary intentional object (the picture's surface), which matches the real object, with a secondary intentional object (the depicted scene), which instead does not match the real object. In this sense I agree with Wollheim (1980) that the pictorial experience is a twofold experience, and I think that twofoldness, so understood, grounds the aesthetic illusion that pictures can offer us precisely because it does not involve a perceptual illusion of presence.

Still films, as moving pictures, also have a temporal dimension in virtue of which they can make us perceive not only objects but also their changes. In watching a film, what we primarily experience as now changing is not the screen, but the depicted things. Thus films, unlike static pictures, involve a perceptual illusion inasmuch as we are inclined to attribute the change that we experience as now unfolding to the depicted scene instead of to the real object of our perception. We are not perceptually deceived in respect of space, but we are somehow perceptually deceived in respect of time. Our experience of the depicted scene involves a sense of (temporal) presentness even without a corresponding sense of (spatial) presence. I argue that this is the key feature of a distinctive kind of aesthetic illusion that only film can offer.

## **A Moral Life of Things: Making and Breaking of Aesthetic Illusion in Lyric Poetry**

Karel Thein

The paper defends and illustrates the claim that lyric poetry, despite "a certain resistance to aesthetic illusion" (Werner Wolf), can create aesthetic illusion by specific means that escape the narrative framework most often connected with aesthetic illusion in philosophy of literature. My main contention is that every fiction is, first and foremost, fiction of *a life*, and that only as such it actually produces what we call illusion. The specific quality of lyric illusion follows from the stated or implicit impossibility to reduce the poem's linguistic expression – and its emotional impact – to narrative structure, thus revealing some universal structures

different from all particular contents of a world. Simply put, by projecting us into this timeless heart of transience, lyric poetry suggests that there is a deeper and unbreakable *epistemic* illusion under the breakable *aesthetic* illusion. – Besides evoking some Kantian themes including the relation between aesthetic illusion and morality, I intend to analyze examples ranging from Wordsworth to Louise Glück or John Ashbery.

## **Individual Illusions**

Emily T. Troscianko

Most discussions of the aesthetic illusion in literary contexts treat ‘the reader’ as a monolithic entity whose responses to textual prompts are established either via (usually unacknowledged) inference from the critic’s own personal responses to a specific text or, at best, through an investigation of how, in general terms, textual and cognitive factors interact to shape the experience of ‘immersed’ reading. Most approaches to these phenomena are also primarily theoretical, and even when empirical work is conducted to test and refine the theoretical claims made, its aim is usually to establish general principles across a cohort of participants rather than to tease out individual differences. But cognitive processes of course always operate in individual embodied minds with individual histories and personality traits. Using empirical work-in-progress on reading and mental health (specifically eating disorders) as a case study, this paper explores the potential effects of personal history and personality on readers’ engagement with literature. The relationships between emotion (including empathy and identification) and thematic interpretation on the cognitive side, and narrative perspective and metaphor on the textual side, will be discussed with a view to elucidating the significance of individual variation in the aesthetic illusion and in literary studies more broadly.

## **Aesthetic Illusion: The Phenomenon, General Factors and Intracompositional Aspects of Its Production, Possible Functions**

Werner Wolf

This lecture, which is a revision of the "Introduction" to Werner Wolf/Walter Bernhart/Andreas Mahler, eds. *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013, deals with some basic issues of the phenomenon under discussion: its ambivalent nature as the combination of a predominant imaginative immersion in (parts of) a represented world with a latent distance (derived from the metareferential awareness that we are confronted not with life but a life-like representation); the factors of its emergence (with reference to the cultural contexts, the predispositions of the recipient, and the respective illusionist work or performance). Using the example of realist fiction I will place special emphasis on the general features of illusionist representations and principles of illusion making. In conclusion, some important functions of aesthetic illusion will be named. All of this should shed light on aesthetic illusion as one of the most powerful attractions which representations in various media can unfold, an attraction which goes far beyond the mere evasion from reality which some of the detractors of 'illusionism' sometimes mention.