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Is Aesthetic Illusion ›illusion référentielle‹?

Aesthetic illusion – or ›immersion‹ as it is also somewhat reductively called – is frequently equalled to ›referential illusion‹. This latter term implies that a recipient's feeling of being recentred in a represented world depends on his or her impression of being confronted with reality while the representation in question is actually fictional. This has two further implications: first that the reception effect under discussion is determined by a referential misperception, and second that it can only be triggered by fictional representations.

   The essay argues that these implications are misleading and stem from a reductive view of aesthetic illusion: aesthetic illusion, in its essence, does not presuppose that one actually mistakes fiction for reality and has only a loose connection with the opposition ›factuality vs. fictionality‹. In particular, the essay discusses three theses, as detailed in chapter 1:

- Aesthetic illusion is *not* co-extensive with referential illusion and must be conceived of differently.
- The emergence of aesthetic illusion is to a large extent independent of the *actual* fictionality or factuality of a representation.
- However, eliciting an *awareness* of factuality can further aesthetic illusion, and activating an awareness of fictionality can undermine or destroy it.

In order to clarify these theses, chapters 2 and 3 give a detailed explanation of the concept of aesthetic illusion, its nature and factors. Chapter 2 first defines aesthetic illusion as a hybrid consisting of a predominant impression of experiential immersion in, and a latent rational distance towards, a represented world (aesthetic illusion has thus essentially an experiential rather than a referential quality). As a consequence of this hybridity, aesthetic illusion is gradable and instable – that is, it can be undermined or ›destroyed‹ when distance becomes dominant. Second, the following factors contributing to the emergence of aesthetic illusion are discussed: the representation as the trigger of ›immersion‹, the role of the recipients (who have a decisive share in the emergence of illusion and may relativize all apodictic statements about the illusionism of given artefacts, texts or performances), and the contexts in which the act of reception takes place. Finally, the example of narrative fiction is used to decribe the following characteristic features of typically illusionist representations and the principles of illusion-making:

- The content level of illusionist artefacts and texts is the central level; the represented worlds have a certain extension and complexity, are consistent, tend to be life-like in their inventory and are interesting for the (contemporary) recipient.

- Their level of transmission remains comparatively inconspicuous, serving mainly to depict the represented worlds and to enhance their interesting quality, consistency and life-likeness.
- The contents and their transmission tend to be serious.
- The texts (or artefacts and performances) are predominantly heteroreferential.

These features are produced by fulfilling most if not all of the following six principles of illusion-making:

- the principle of access-facilitating construction and vivid presentation of the represented world's inventory,
- the principle of consistency of the represented world,
- the principle of life-like perspectivity,
- the principle of respecting and exploiting the potentials of the representational macro-frames, media and genres employed,
- the principle of generating interest (in particular emotional interest) in the represented world,
- the principle of ›*celare artem*‹.

In the third chapter, the relative unimportance of fictionality or factuality for aesthetic illusion is discussed in more detail. This unimportance may rest on a certain human predisposition to ›suspend disbelief‹ as well as on the fact that aesthetic illusion appeals more to the emotions than to distancing reason, but above all it is explicable by the fact that both fictional and factual representations can fulfil the principles of illusion-making and produce the characteristic features typically encountered in illusionist works. Aesthetic illusion is thus above all experiential illusion and as a consequence cannot be equated with referential illusion. However, where artefacts – in addition to providing the impression of being immersed in and experiencing a ›world‹ –, manage to produce the feeling of being factual rather than fictional, this may intensify the immersion.

Conversely, the fourth chapter deals with the question to what extent aesthetic illusion can be affected by eliciting an awareness of fictionality, in particular through metareferential devices. It is argued that metareference which only lays bare, or comments on, the (obvious) artificial (non-natural) status of an artefact has less effect than in addition laying bare its fictionality in the usual sense of ›inventedness‹.

In the final chapter some perspectives of future research on aesthetic illusion are pointed out. Since aesthetic illusion is a wide-spread phenomenon that is not restricted to fiction and can be said to be transmodal (embracing narratives as well as descriptions), transgeneric (extending, for instance, in literature, to drama and even to some kinds of lyric poetry) and intermedial (having relevance to literature, the visual arts, film and other media), such research should adopt a wide perspective. Moreover, it should generally be intensified, since aesthetic illusion is

among the most important reception-phenomena of texts and artefacts – in spite of the fact that it has also been vigorously opposed, most recently in postmodernism.

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