

Immersion and Distance Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media

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On the Emergence of Aesthetic Illusion An Evolutionary Perspective

Katja Mellmann

This contribution outlines the evolutionary history of aesthetic illusion, drawing on both its biological and its cultural evolution. Unlike other ‘biocultural’ accounts of human behaviour, however, the present considerations strictly distinguish between these two processes by resorting to the system-theoretical reformulation of evolutionary theory as offered by Niklas Luhmann. After introducing the theoretical framework, two core elements of aesthetic illusion are described as biological predispositions: the ability to become ‘illuded’ (as deriving from a biological adaptation for play behaviour in mammals) and the ability to take an interpretive, quasi-communicative attitude toward artifacts (which might be a by-product of the human capacity for symbolic cognition). Particular emphasis is given to the competency for cognitive metarepresentation which emerged together with play and other capacities in fundamentally intelligent animals, and which, in combination with the evolution of language in the human species, has developed into a complex cognitive apparatus called ‘scope syntax’ by Leda Cosmides and John Tooby. In the last part of the present article several cultural processes are pointed out which have influenced the cultural concepts that, as a cognitive ‘scope’ tag, guide the experience of aesthetic illusion, the most important among them being the idea of autonomous art as brought about in Western modernity.

Taking an evolutionary view of the experience of aesthetic illusion might be a problematic endeavour. For ‘evolutionary’, in the first instance, refers to Darwin’s idea of natural history as a process of variation and natural selection, and to take an evolutionary perspective on something usually means to view it as adaptation to a particular selection pressure. The experience of aesthetic illusion, however, appears to be a variable and “complex phenomenon” (Wolf 2009: 144; 2008: 101) which involves a cluster of diverse cognitive capabilities rather than being the result of one particular cognitive program designed to reliably produce exactly this mental state. It thus seems improbable that the capacity for aesthetic illusion is a ‘hard-wired’

adaptation of the human mind¹. However, even if aesthetic illusion might not have been the answer to a specific biological selection pressure it may heavily rely on several cognitive abilities that were. It then would not be a specifically evolved adaptation itself but the side-effects of several biological adaptations, which can be used and exploited in a rather culturally defined manner. Thus, if in what follows I try to answer the question of how this complex mental faculty of aesthetic illusion could have come into existence, I will have to consider both the biological and the cultural levels. In the first part of this chapter, I shall therefore introduce a *theoretical framework* that permits such a multi-layered reconstruction. In the second part, I shall be concerned with the general cognitive abilities that can be assumed to be *biological prerequisites* for the experience of aesthetic illusion. And in the final part, I will briefly discuss the *cultural processes* that might have built upon them.

1. Biological Versus Socio-cultural Evolution

In many of the evolutionary accounts of aesthetic phenomena which came out in recent years, authors do not differentiate clearly between biological and cultural evolution². This might seem legitimate at first glance since we have come to understand that we cannot empirically *segregate* what in human behaviour is driven by ‘nature’ from what originates in ‘nurture’³. Both elements are deeply entwined with one another in many ways. Not only in humans, but also in many other animals, ‘culture’ from the very first moment intrudes into the innate

¹ This might sound surprising for those who conceive of art and aesthetic behaviour in general as an evolutionary adaptation of the human species; see Dutton 2009, Carroll 2008, and Boyd 2009 as recent examples. I criticize several of their arguments in my review of Boyd (see Mellmann 2010) and in a more general essay on evolutionary approaches in literary studies (Mellmann 2011); see also Eibl 2012.

² See note 1. For a good counter-example see Verpooten/Nelissen 2010. Dissanayake (1992; 2008; 2011) sometimes gives the impression of considering art as a biological adaptation, but in fact describes aesthetic behaviours as combinations of biologically evolved predispositions (including their side-effects) on the one hand and early cultural motivations for their intentional use on the other. Menninghaus (2011) in principle takes a similar road, but because of his predilection for the original Darwin risks falling back into occasional 19th-century lamarckisms.

³ For a biological perspective on culture see Voland 2007 and Eibl 2009.

programs by context-sensitive ontogenetic development, including a wide range of phenomena from simple ‘imprinting’ to cognitively demanding social learning. However, although this is true, it is still reasonable to conceptually *distinguish* between ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’. In fact we need a theoretical framework that includes and incorporates this critical nature/culture difference if we do not want to fall prey to the simple either/or logic of both biological ‘reductionism’ and radical social constructionism when explaining human behaviour.

And we do have such frameworks. A very apt one is the combination of neodarwinian theory of evolution with systems theory, as it was adopted and elaborated in Niklas Luhmann’s theory of socio-cultural evolution⁴. In Luhmann’s theory, the distinction between biological and socio-cultural evolution appears as a difference in the ‘system’ referred to as the evolving subject: while biological evolution is defined as the evolution of ‘living systems’, socio-cultural evolution is defined as the evolution of ‘communicating systems’ (cf. Luhmann 1997/2001: 436f., 452f.; Stichweh 2007: 536). Both are taken to be ‘operatively closed’, that is, discrete and non-interfering processes. Unlike other (assumed) evolutionary-theoretical models of cultural change, Luhmann’s theory does not offer a simple analogy to biological evolution (like, for instance, the multiply flawed gene/meme analogy). Instead, his concept is that of a *general* theory of evolution which principally applies to various domains of reality, but always needs to be specifically adapted because the three neodarwinian mechanisms of variation, selection, and stabilization manifest themselves differently according to the specific properties of the evolving ‘system’.

The different domains of reality which can become subject to a process of evolution are not ad libitum, however, but historically specified phenomena that can be sorted chronologically. Luhmann has thus provided a multilayered⁵ model of human evolution. In this

⁴ The last and most exhaustive version can be found in Luhmann 1997/2001:413–594; for a survey see also Mellmann (2012). – Not all of Luhmann’s works have been translated into English. For non-German-speaking scholars the introductions by Moeller (2006; 2011), Borch (2011) and himself (Luhmann 2012) might be useful.

⁵ This is not to be confused with the so-called “multi-level selection theory” in sociobiology (see Wilson/Wilson 2007). That theory distinguishes between gene, individual, and group as different selection levels within natural selection, that is, within the evolution of living systems.

model, the slow process of biological evolution forms the groundwork from which, under certain circumstances, new autopoietic and distinctly evolving systems can emerge (cf. Luhmann 1997/2001: 437f.), namely consciousness ('psychic systems')⁶, communication ('social systems'), and semantics ('systems of ideas')⁷. Each of these stages builds upon the last in that consciousness requires a living organism, communication presupposes consciousness, and ideologies, cultural discourses and social conventions rely on communication.

The emancipation of communication as a self-referential, operatively closed system of its own – that is, the beginning of 'society' in Luhmann's definition – can be said to happen together with the emergence of human language (cf. Luhmann 1997/2001: 440–443; 1984/2002: 207–212; 1984/1995: 150–154). While the human language faculty itself can be considered a biological adaptation (see Pinker 2003), at the same time it works as a kind of breeding ground for all the things that today we view as non-biological, 'merely cultural'. This is because of the many far-reaching consequences the emergence of language has had for human sociality and cognition, such as the simple increase in communicative events (cf. Luhmann 1997/2001: 416), the mutual enhancement of communication and cooperation (see Tomasello 2008) and, most importantly, the growing legacy of exosomatically preserved knowledge and symbolic traditions enabled by the extended referential function of human language (cf. Eibl 2004: 209–275; see also Eibl [forthcoming]; Deacon 1998: 401–410; Mithen 2006; 2007: 15–23). This complex cultural revolution in early humans (presumably 250,000 – 100,000 years ago) is often referred to as the human species' adaptation to the "cognitive niche" (Tooby/DeVore 1987). From there on, human behaviour is no longer co-extensive with phenotypic manifestations of genotypic traits, as it is in other animals.

⁶ Cf. Luhmann 1984/2002: 354–359; 1984/1995: 262–265. Luhmann, as a sociologist, does not dwell on this topic. For a compatible neuropsychological account of consciousness see Damasio 1999.

⁷ Cf. Luhmann 1997/2001: 536–556; 1980/1993: 9–71; 1984/1995: 162f. The autonomous evolution of ideas – slowly emerging with the development of scripture and letter press – is where the history of genres, literary motifs etc. would have its place. Luhmann's theory of socio-cultural evolution provides a much more thoroughly elaborated theoretical framework for an evolutionary model of literary history than, for instance, Moretti 2005 (for critiques see Mellmann 2009 and Goodwin/Holbo, eds. 2011).

It now also includes new forms of information and social interaction, which more and more unfold a distinct, self-dynamic logic of ‘culture’ that, like a ‘second nature’, overlays the biological heritage of behavioural dispositions.

So, in examining complex forms of behaviour, such as aesthetic illusion, we always have to ask which of that behaviour’s characteristics are the results of such self-dynamic socio-cultural processes, and which of them are the results of biological adaptations in pre-human or early human times. My suggestion here is that the basic precondition for our ability to become ‘illuded’ is the biologically fixed capability of play, which is typical for mammals in general. What is different about humans, while still being biologically rooted, is their extended dependence on cognitive competencies and, consequently, an increased significance of cognitive forms of play, which help to fully develop and organize these competencies ontogenetically. Another biological precondition is the faculty of cognitive meta-representation, that can explain the “latent rational distance” (Wolf 2009: 144) in aesthetic illusion. This faculty is not unique to humans but, presumably, also present in some other primates and perhaps other species not yet tested in that regard. However, in humans this basic capability obviously has been extended to a complex cognitive “scope syntax” (Cosmides/Tooby 2000: 59f.), which allows for the incorporation of abstract cultural concepts (such as ‘mythic’, ‘fictional’, ‘aesthetic’) and has thus enabled humans to cognitively deal with an increasingly fine-grained variety of possible worlds. I suppose that what makes aesthetic illusion special as compared to ordinary forms of playfully being ‘illuded’ is the fact that aesthetic stimuli are taken as communication, that is, as symbolic messages the meaning of which must be interpreted. And I suppose that this act of interpretation is guided by cultural ‘scope’ concepts (such as ‘worship’, ‘tradition’, ‘conjunction’, ‘incantation’, ‘instruction’, ‘courtesy’, etc.), among which a distinct concept of ‘art’ did not exist until the beginning of Western modernity.

2. Biological Prerequisites of Aesthetic Illusion

2.1. Play and Metarepresentation

The fundamental characteristic of aesthetic illusion is the mental state of ‘immersion’, that is, of having one’s attention caught by a stimulus which is not co-extensive with the actual situation but, for instance, only with a single object or action⁸, or the content of one’s own imagination. The ‘immersed’ person thus drops out somewhat from the pragmatic context. Furthermore, aesthetic illusion is a “basically pleasurable mental state” (Wolf 2008: 107) that tends to make subjects forget about actual time⁹. Interestingly, focused attention, depragmatization, pleasure, and forgetfulness of time are characteristics which are also typical of playing. Play is a biologically programmed behaviour observed in mammals, predominantly, and in some birds, reptiles and fish. It is a way in which nature intrinsically motivates immature organisms, and in some species also adult animals, to develop and maintain their motor skills and cognitive abilities (including emotions and social cognition) through exercise. As humans – the species adapted to the ‘cognitive niche’ – are particularly dependent on cognitive information processing, they should have evolved a great variety of specialized cognitive play mechanisms. The “task of organizing the brain both physically and informationally over the course of the lifespan” can indeed be regarded as “the most demanding adaptive problem posed by human development” (Tooby/Cosmides 2001: 14), and we may assume that most of what we observe as aesthetic activities in humans is ultimately due to such innate motivational systems for cognitive play (see *ibid.*). If this is true, the similarity between aesthetic illusion and play (as well as the etymological relationship between ‘illusion’ and ‘ludus’) would not be accidental but the result of a substantial coherence between these two phenomena; then contemplating an oil painting, being absorbed by a novel or TV show, or devotedly listening to a piece of music would be activities similar to children’s playing in the street or a cat’s playing with a ball of wool.

⁸ I guess this is what we mean by ‘taking an aesthetic attitude’ towards something, namely to single it out from the whole of the pragmatic situation and to concentrate on it in a more or less immersive manner.

⁹ Cf., for instance, the self-reports by readers and movie viewers quoted in Holland 2009: 41f.

We do not know if the cat knows that the ball of wool is not a mouse; maybe it does in some sense. But we do know that even very young children are to a certain extent aware that they play when they play, that they do not mistake, for example, the imaginary world of their pretend play for the real world (e. g., the building brick for a telephone, or the box for a garage). This is because of a cognitive capacity for secondary representation ('metarepresentation'), minor forms of which we also find in other primates (see Whiten/Suddendorf 2007). To metarepresent a proposition means to make it the subject of another proposition (as we constantly do when we form sentences like "He says that {Jill would come along}" or "It is not true that {Jack has already left}"). A gorilla that is able to deceive a conspecific about the hidden presence of a goody, for example, must be able to represent the conspecific's state of knowledge without confusing it with its own knowledge about the given situation; and this means, the gorilla must be able to have a metarepresentational "He knows/He does not know that {...}" kind of thought. In humans, this basic capability of cognitive metarepresentation must have become particularly significant with the evolution of language; because since we are able to socially exchange information on a larger scale, we need to roughly monitor the diverse sources from which we derived our knowledge, otherwise we could not decide, in cases of conflicting information, which information we would rather trust. Moreover, in the course of their adaptation to the 'cognitive niche', humans constantly had to deal with vast amounts of context-dependent information ("this is true in summer but not in winter"; "this is true only if ..."; "this works good for two people but not so good for three and not at all for more than three"; "this is a good ingredient in small amounts but lethal in higher dosage"; "this is what some persons want me to do but others would hate me for"; and so on). Cosmides and Tooby have thus concluded that humans must have evolved a complex cognitive machinery for source tracking, scope tagging, and information management, which they labeled "scope syntax" (Cosmides/Tooby 2000: 59f.).

While those cognitive scope notations are likely to be of a more implicit kind in other animals and also in small children, with human language they can now be made explicit and become more and more refined and differentiated. This is how humans began to live with entire mental libraries of contingently true information, the applicability of which always has to be determined in the first place by means of intelligent deduction systems. I believe that the rational distance and

awareness of artificiality that is typically maintained in the immersive state of aesthetic illusion can be explained in terms of this linguistically refined human scope syntax.

The evolution of the cognitive competency of metarepresentation (in contexts as various as play, modeling other minds, experiential learning, cognitive planning processes, communication, or the increased use of contingent information) gave rise to a new mode of thinking which we might call conditional reasoning, a ‘decoupled’, ‘off-line’, ‘as-if’ mode of thinking, or simply imagination (see also Boyer 2007). Animals capable of metarepresentation thus have an intuitive ontology which is not onefold (like that of most species, as we may assume) but twofold, that is, encompassing not only the real (what is true here and now) but also the conditionally-hypothetical (what might be true under certain circumstances). I propose that what makes the language using human species different from any other species capable of metarepresentation is, first, that their intuitive ontology is basically threefold, because they can linguistically represent, and thus keep in mind, also what is rejected as not true, and, second, that this basically threefold ontology is open to unlimited extensions by cultural concepts. For example, it is common-sense knowledge that ‘fictionality’ is a rather late concept in human history, which refers to an utterly different ontological status than, say, the ancient concept of the ‘mythic’ or premodern ideas of the ‘novel-esque’. And what do we know about the many gradations of truth in prehistoric cultures? What is it that the secret knowledge of a shaman makes a part of, what kind of reality is manifest in ritual dances, and what is it that is not true in this world but in another? My point is that the ontological spectrum between the two poles of the real and the unreal, once opened, can be endlessly divided into subcategories as of special ‘kinds’ of truth¹⁰, and that these subcategories, sacral and profane, are products of social convention, that is, of communication.

Likewise, to know that ‘it’s only a film’ that I cry over, and to simultaneously see both the actress and the character she plays, is the result of roughly knowing what a film is, how it is produced, and so on, and of using this conventional knowledge as a metarepresentational ‘scope’ description for the mental simulation stimulated by the artifact. The cat that might have a hunch that the ball of wool is not a

¹⁰ This was described as the human discovery of a complementary world (“Entdeckung der Nichtwelt”) by Eibl 1995: 11–34.

mouse surely does not know what a ball of wool is, or – as you can watch in several examples on YouTube now – what the graphical representation of a mouse running to and fro on an iPad screen is. We would not assume the cat to have an awareness of artificiality, even if we were to concede that it might have a presentiment that it is ‘only playing’. And this is because the cat does not dispose of a symbolic sign system in which such knowledge about artifacts and their specific properties could be articulated and mentally recorded.

Accordingly, the experience of ‘aesthetic illusion’ presupposes a notion of ‘the aesthetic’ – as of a special quality of ‘artworks’ – to be used as a mental scope description. Unlike some scholars who think art to be a biological adaptation of the human species, I do not think it plausible that this notion of ‘the aesthetic’ is a natural category (like, for instance, the animate/inanimate distinction very presumably is a natural one). Rather I believe that we have to focus on very complex (and typically Western) cultural processes (labeled ‘functional differentiation’ in Luhmann’s theory of modernization) in order to explain the special source tag of aesthetic mental simulations. But before I move on to this topic I would like to first highlight another biologically rooted structure in the human psyche, which as far as I can see has not yet been viewed as playing a crucial part in the experience of aesthetic illusion, but which I think is a constitutive element indeed.

2.2. The Symbolic Animal and Its Interpretive Compulsion

David S. Miall once found it “questionable whether interpretation is, or has ever been, the primary aim of reading literature” and substantiated his doubts with an equally questionable argument, saying that the “ordinary reader [...] is more likely to stay close to the text itself, its character predicaments, plot turns, and stylistic textures; her aim is to experience these rather than ask what the text might mean.” (2006: 35f.) Is this so? I would agree that it might not be her aim to interpret the consumed artwork in the detailed manner literary scholars do, but the preparedness with which even naive audiences are ready to extract a moral from a literary or filmic representation or to identify a more philosophic topic behind the story shows that they basically do interpret the work of art while consuming it, regardless of whether they feel like participating in any explicit aesthetic meta-discourse afterward or not. I believe that the ordinary just like the hyper-informed reader, while captured in aesthetic illusion, will

contemplate the artwork not only in respect of its referential dimension (if applicable) and its artistic workmanship but also in terms of its abstract ‘meaning’. And I believe that in doing so they obey a predisposition as biologically prewired as their capacity to become ‘illuded’.

This biological predisposition can be stated as a propensity to take things for signs, as if in communication, by reflecting on the intentional meaning they convey. According to Terrence W. Deacon (cf. 1998: 435f.), this propensity is best understood as a by-product of the human brain’s adaptation for symbolic cognition. The way in which language represents things seems to have generally shaped the way we think and how we perceive the world so that we often take an interpretive attitude toward the world as if it were composed of signs that somebody wants us to ‘read’. Take for instance theological ideas of divine revelation like that in Augustine’s ‘book of nature’ metaphor (cf. van Berkel/Vanderjagt 2006: ix), in Alain de Lille’s “*omnis creatura significans*” (see Ohly 1958/2005), or in the “*natura loquax*” conception (see Harms/Reinitzer 1981: 7–16), all of which make particularly explicit the perceived call for symbolic reasoning. Some facets of animism and totemism, practices of oracle, reading tea leaves and other forms of clairvoyance and superstition, astrology, numerology, or, last but not least, the expectation of finding truth in artworks is also a case in point. They can all serve as examples of how certain aspects of the world are perceived in terms of symbolic communication: as if somebody were using these world elements as a signifying medium in order to tell us something. We can, of course, escape this “symbolic compulsion”, as Deacon calls it (1998: 435; 438), and switch to more rational or secularized forms of reasoning, but the omnipresence of its symptoms across times and cultures demonstrates clearly that it is a psychic predisposition that manifests itself spontaneously if not consciously avoided.

In some cultural domains it is not only not avoided but deliberately chosen as the adequate attitude (and perhaps even especially sustained by techniques of “making special”; see Dissanayake 1992; 2008; 2011). This is surely true in modern contexts of ‘art’ (as introduced in the next paragraph) and in the contexts of some of its predecessors in this respect, such as ritual and religion. Indeed, the consciously taken interpretive attitude is what marks the difference between regular playful engagement and aesthetic illusion. This is how dancing, for example, as performed by a child is categorically different from

dancing as a ritual performance in tribal societies. The latter is, and shall be taken as, a form of communication, as conveying meaning (for the onlookers as well as for the dancers themselves), while the first is not more than a self-satisfying, intrinsically motivated exercise of rhythmic and motoric skills. The bifurcation between symbolic and non-symbolic modes of play might have been the first step in the long history of the emergence of the phenomena we call art and aesthetic behaviour today, long before we developed those cultural concepts. If so, it certainly was the last step in this history that was achieved completely within biological evolution. The ability to play, and to discern the play context from the actual situation via scope syntax, as well as the ability to take an attitude of symbolic communication toward such a playful engagement, are altogether effects of our biological inheritance, whereas everything that built upon them in the further development of aesthetic activities should be understood as results of cultural processes.

3. Some Spotlights on the Cultural History of Aesthetic Illusion

Considered as culture, art and religion appear to be *universals* of human society, but only on the basis of the *specifically* European and *specifically* historical point of view that is interested in such comparisons and constructs comparative viewpoints. As a result, one now finds art in places where neither the producer nor the viewer knew that art was at stake. (Luhmann 1995/2000: 211)

On the level of our biological predispositions, art does not have a clear-cut Darwinian ‘origin’ but rather emerges from a multitude of biological traits and their side-effects. Thus, the prehistory of art is made out of many more particular ‘histories’ than most of the existing literature on that topic suggests. We find protoforms of aesthetic behaviour in behavioural domains as diverse as mother-infant interaction (see Dissanayake 1999), coping with uncertainty and stress (cf. Dissanayake 2008: 254–256; Eibl 2004: 310–319), play, toolmaking, courtship, and status battle, to name just a few. Early cultural exploitations of those predispositions might be summarized in categories like *ceremony/rite* (e. g., dance, body painting, scenic host ceremonies, song duels [see Lehmann 2009], ritual wailing), *ornamentation* (e. g., adornments of the body; ornaments in weaving and pottery, in weapon and tool craft; rhythmic coordination of collective actions; singing and musical instruments), and *representation* (e. g., figurines,

cave painting, narration as a mixture of diegesis and mimesis, including sound imitations). In all these early cultural, near-biological contexts, art can be said to originate, albeit “under conditions that imply no awareness of a corresponding concept” (Luhmann 1995/2000: 216).

Such a unifying concept of art has indeed emerged very late in human history. Even within the period since the beginning of the historical record, visual, verbal, and acoustic arts for a long time were not seen as three facets of one and the same phenomenon. Similarly, different poetic text types were not necessarily considered different ‘genres of poetry’, or different musical forms different ‘genres of music’, respectively. Rather, humans have long been content with open lists of traditions, styles, and exemplars. The quest for systematic genre categories is an utterly recent development in Western societies. And, interestingly, the emergence of a cultural concept ‘art’ did not at all start as an umbrella-term for aesthetic behaviours but rather for a quite diverse range of cultural activities and erudite traditions. The so-called liberal arts in antiquity and medieval times, for example, still comprised elements that are not included in our concept of the arts today, like logic and mathematics. And until very recently, even the arts in a narrower sense did not exist *as arts* but as defined conventions within specific social contexts like religion (cathedral architecture, devotional tableaux, sacred music), politics (courtly ceremonies and pastimes), or education (rhetoric, school drama). The recent idea that art is primarily art before being anything else has first emerged together with the transition from stratificatory to functional differentiation as which Luhmann describes the successive transition to modernity in Western societies. Like economy, law, science, politics, etc., art also differentiated itself as an autonomous communication system in the 16th to 19th centuries (cf. Luhmann 1995/2000: 133–184, 211–243), and only since then we have also been able to use the word as a *singulare tantum*. This newly emerging conception of art could of course build on and integrate former art-like practices and make it appear “as if art had existed at all times” (Luhmann 1995/2000: 218), but this deceptive impression is only due to the retrospective self-description of the art system. To give an example: we might well call Shakespeare’s or Molière’s plays ‘art’, for in today’s categories they are; but we should be aware that for their first audiences they were not. Shakespeare’s and Molière’s contemporaries were just ‘going to the Globe’ or ‘attending a theatrical presentation

for the society of *la cour et la ville*, both of which had very specific socio-semiotic implications (some of them perhaps even being identical with today's implications of the 'art' concept) but did not bear any apriori relations to, for instance, playing the lute, reading a novel, or attending the king's ballet.

Now, what does all this mean for the cultural history of aesthetic illusion? My assumption is that the different historical concepts of art, or of its antecedents, work as cognitive scope tags to the pertinent 'illuded' states of mind and thus guide the way in which recipients decode and reflect on the meaning of the meditated object. For example, the fact that we still do not really know what exactly Aristotle meant by 'catharsis' might be a hint that we are simply not familiar with the cultural 'scope tag' pertinent to the experience of ancient Greek tragedy. Again, we might well call this experience an 'aesthetic illusion' in the general sense of the term within modern aesthetic theory; but we should also be aware that someone living today and someone living at Sophocles's times would make completely different experiences in watching a performance of *Oedipus*, just because the (presumably rather ritualistic) notion of tragical performance in ancient Greece implies fairly different interpretive cognitions than the modern notion of 'art' (as which today we perceive of Sophocles's play). Thus, as the theoretical term of aesthetic illusion in its prototypical sense depends heavily on the modern concept of art and of 'the aesthetic', it is worthwhile asking what specific consequences that modern concept has for the interpretive activity of the art recipient.

The first aspect I would like to highlight is that the modern concept of art implies that interpretive activities on the part of the recipient take place. Modern arts surely stand in the tradition of meaningful forms of play in that they provide a special kind of 'doubling' of the world which, according to the systems-theoretical approach in sociology, gains significance precisely from the *difference* between the 'duplicate' and the (thereby newly conceived) original (cf. Luhmann 1995/2000: 140–150; Nassehi 2011: 310–336). The ideal-typical attitude of art reception that was established in the bourgeois era is therefore an eminently contemplative attitude, which means that it affords the time necessary for an intense, largely explicit and often well-educated act of reflection on that difference. Modern arts participate in what Karl Eibl has dubbed a "secondary severity" of originally playful behaviours (see 2007; 2012; forthcoming): people engage with the arts

not so much for the intrinsic pleasure they derive from it (as a side-effect of play's ultimate biological function of organizing the brain) but for the cultural significance they are trained to see in those activities, and they employ a detailed and complex knowledge about what art is (e. g., how it makes 'shine through' an 'idea' in the sense of idealistic philosophy, or how it 'criticizes society' in the sense of politically engaged art concepts, and so on).

This ideal-typical receptionist attitude might have changed a bit in the course of the further evolution of the art system. Starting in the late 19th century, an increasing amount of predominantly entertaining forms of art emerged, more and more sharply contrasting with the 'avant-garde' forms of art, and finally segregating into a subsystem of another newly emerging communication system, that of mass media (see Luhmann 1996/2000). In the 'non-serious' entertainment arts, the focus is put on the pleasure aspect and the immersive illusion, while the reflective aspect, which relies on pertinent cultural knowledge, tends toward zero. In other words, the scope tag 'entertainment' reduces the recipient's interpretive activity to its minimal form of a basic artifact awareness and a basic recognition of meaning (as in detecting the 'moral of the story', and the like), and it lets go of erudite reflections on the meaning of art in general.

A second point I wish to highlight is the importance of the 'author' in modern art contexts. To be sure, if we define art as a principally symbolic form of play, then the idea of 'originator' is latently there from the very beginning. It derives as another side-effect from our ability for symbolic cognition, as does the propensity to conceive of various things as of communication. In this sense, the conception of an 'author' can well be said to be a biological predisposition (cf. Eibl 1999: 51–54), and this might explain the coherence-providing function (cf. *ibid.*: 55–57) of (oftentimes fictive) author names through the ages like, for instance, Homer, the evangelists, medieval cathedral builders and troubadours, all of which we do not know for sure whether they represent historical persons, let alone whether those really were the creators of the works ascribed to them. Be that as it may, these names form an important part at least of our modern, historically informed understanding of those artifacts and presumably, albeit in a rather different manner, also in former time's reception of them. The main reason for the historical discrepancy between nowadays and premodern art receptions lies in the 'art as expression of individuality' conception (cf. *ibid.*: 57–59), which has become a con-

stitutive component of the modern art concept. For the interpretive activity in aesthetic illusion this means that the recipient typically forms an implicit idea of the artist as the ‘sender’ of the artistic ‘message’, of his/her intention in making the artwork look the way it does. It might be revealing that even in respect of films (where we hardly have an author in the classical sense) we form a concept of *cinéma d’auteur* when referring to the artistic character of certain films.

More aspects of aesthetic illusion of this general kind can hardly be mentioned, simply because of its heavy dependence on cultural concepts. What I was trying to contribute from my mainly biological point of view is to show where exactly ‘culture’ comes in in this process. I tried to show that (1) all the core elements of aesthetic illusion are abilities that derive from our biological inheritance – including the ability to become immersively ‘illuded’, to nevertheless track and administer the right source domains to those illusive states by means of a cognitive scope syntax, and to take a quasi-symbolic attitude toward various instances as if they were part of communicative acts –, even if we have no reason to assume that the ability for aesthetic illusion itself is a specifically biological trait. And I tried to show that (2) the descriptive scope syntax can incorporate almost unlimited cultural concepts together with the pertaining cultural knowledge they comprise, and that we have to resort imperatively to cultural evolution if we want to qualify these cognitive ‘brackets’ and frames around aesthetic illusions. Thus, my chapter in the present volume, besides being a contribution to the theory of aesthetic illusion, is also meant to be a criticism of two trends in the recent literature that I have been observing with increasing concern: one is the rash unification of many diverse things into a quasi-natural concept of art (which all too often is then made the starting point of a – completely ill-guided – adaptationist analysis); the other is the notable ignorance of elaborated theories of cultural change (like the one by Luhmann which I have used here) with people who rightly choose to take an evolution-biological perspective on cultural phenomena but then overdo it by either disregarding the nature/culture difference or suggesting insipid cultural analogues of biological evolutionary theory instead of consulting the respective (and quite well-advanced) literature from the humanities and the social sciences.

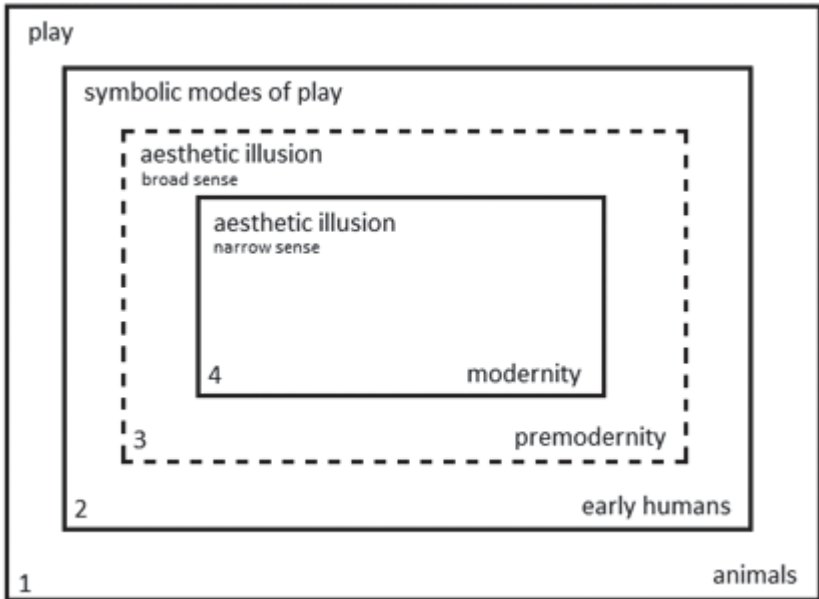
In what regards the theory of aesthetic illusion, I have tried to sketch the multi-layered, biocultural history of emergence of the

phenomenon we might call ‘aesthetic illusion’ today, but I have so far refrained from deciding to which of the various cultural stages or combinations of the biological substrates this term might best apply. In fact, I think this is a question of definition, and different definitions of this concept might be useful in different contexts. For example, I included the experience of non-representational art (such as a piece of music) in my broad-based history of aesthetic illusion, but there might be reasons to confine the notion of aesthetic illusion to the experience of representational forms of art (see Bernhart, in this volume). My starting point, however, was not the referential notion of illusion (as ‘illusion of something’) but a biologically grounded concept of illusion (immersively ‘illuded’ states of mind as a consequence of play behaviour). This notion of illusion certainly comprises many more things than we normally subsume under aesthetic illusion, and this is why I introduced the distinction between symbolic and non-symbolic modes of play, the first opening the way toward aesthetic illusion, the latter sorting out phenomena which do not form a part of this tradition (such as rough-and-tumble play, rule-based games, games of skill and bodily exercise).

With these symbolically loaded states of playful immersion (in the sense of the human ‘compulsion’ to take on an interpretive attitude, as observed by Deacon, see 1998), we have entered the stage of early humans and their competency for culture, that is, for a sheer endless variety of behaviours. In order to reduce the great number of potential forms of symbolically meaningful play (including such diverse things as ritual dance, stone carvings, athletic performances, and animal imitations) to more specifically ‘aesthetic’ activities, one might focus on those forms of art-like behaviour that show a purely secular meaning and thus distinguish themselves from archaic rites as well as from religious art (see the “Introduction” to this volume). However, as I hope I could show above, this would mean to retrospectively apply the modern concept of art and make it the anachronistic guideline for deciding what in former times ‘is’ art and what not. I think this is in many contexts a completely legitimate and unproblematic procedure, but it nevertheless is a stark generalization. As the cognitive scope syntax plays such an important role in human cognition, artifact-

oriented illusionary states of mind differ greatly depending on whether the experiencing subject has a notion of ‘the aesthetic’ or not¹¹.

Taking into account this cultural difference one could distinguish between aesthetic illusion in a narrow and in a broader sense and delineate the different types of ‘illuded’ experience discussed in this chapter as follows:



As I hope I could show in the preceding paragraphs, the categories of (1) play, (2) symbolic modes of play, and (4) aesthetic illusion in the narrow sense accord with distinct stages in human history, delineated by biological evolution in the case of (1) and (2), and by socio-cultural evolution in the case of (4). In contrast, the group of phenomena demarcated by the dashed line (3) is an artificially formed category, the phenomenological reference of which varies depending on the

¹¹ At least, I cannot see why *modern* and *premodern* aesthetic illusions should be less different from one another than immersive attitudes toward *sacred* and *profane* objects in premodernity or prehistoric times. To argue that religious and ritual experiences lack the ‘aesthetic distance’ constitutive of aesthetic illusion again imports a concept from the autonomous-art discourse of modernity; a concept, moreover, which I have always had trouble relating to any defined psychological process (cf. Mellmann 2006: 228f.).

definition of ‘aesthetic illusion’ chosen in a particular context. In the standard case, (3) includes all ‘illusive’ experiences with objects that can be conceived of, or received, as ‘art’ in the modern sense of the word, regardless of whether this experience dates from modern times and actually refers to ‘high art’ works. In other cases, (3) might be adjusted to other selections of phenomena in order to serve as a theoretical concept in a given context of aesthetic theory; for example, it can be blended with the referential notion of illusion and be defined as exclusive of non-referential experiences. Whatever the terminological decisions might be (and might be rightly so) in a certain context, we have, as I want to point out, no reason to assume that the concept of aesthetic illusion thus defined automatically corresponds to any distinctive cognitive program, natural group of phenomena, or the like.

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