The Imaginary and Its Worlds

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Published by Dartmouth College Press

Bieger, Laura, et al.
The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies after the Transnational Turn.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/26905.

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The Conflict of Interpretations

One of the most puzzling aspects about literary criticism and literary scholarship is that critics and scholars never seem to be able to agree on the meaning and significance of a literary text. This strange phenomenon is by no means restricted to notoriously difficult, ambiguous, or enigmatic texts like *Hamlet* or *The Turn of the Screw*. It can be observed throughout literary studies, and includes such apparently transparent modes of representation as realism, naturalism, and even documentary texts. The same conflict of interpretations can also be observed in other fields of the humanities, such as, for example, cultural studies, film studies, or art history, where the interpretation of fictional texts and other aesthetic objects stands at the center.¹ These disagreements over meaning and value never seem to subside and are rekindled with every new interpretation. This is even more puzzling in view of the fact that the academic institutionalization of literary studies promised to put the interpretation of literary texts and aesthetic objects on more professional and “objective” grounds. Yet the professionalization of literary and cultural studies has led not to a reduction of interpretive conflicts but, quite on the contrary, to their proliferation.

One answer to the problem of never-ending interpretive conflicts has been surveys of competing approaches or “literary methods,” often in the form of an introduction to major theories and methods of the field. Until the arrival of poststructuralism, these surveys were based on the assumption that literary and cultural studies are still in need of more rigorous methods and that a comparison of approaches would lead to a distinction between true and false, better or worse. Recently a more pluralistic
view has come to prevail in which every method has a potential of its own, so that different approaches can happily complement one another: formalist approaches focus on form, ideological analyses on the text’s ideology, gender studies on the role of gender in identity construction, and so on. Such a well-intentioned pluralism, however, merely obscures the problem. Two Marxist or two feminist critics may be in complete agreement about the desirability of a Marxist or a feminist approach, and they may even agree about what it consists of, and yet they may nevertheless offer different interpretations of one and the same text. Similarly, a reader’s views (and interpretations) of texts can change, although his or her theoretical position and methods are still the same.

Another frequent response to the challenge of interpretive conflicts is the call for historical contextualization. Meaning undergoes changes in history, and thus it seems reasonable to argue that the best way of getting at the “true” meaning of a text is to reconstruct the historical context in which it was produced and by which it was shaped. This is the starting point of a variety of society- and history-focused approaches, ranging from Marxism and the sociology of art to (new) historicism and even systems theory. Indeed it is reasonable to insist that we should know as much as possible about the historical context of a text and the social and political factors that shaped its meaning and form. In the final analysis, however, such historical reconstructions cannot be sufficient, because they cannot explain the fact that literary texts and aesthetic objects can continue to provide an aesthetic experience although the historical situation has changed. What historical contextualizations (of whatever kind) cannot explain is why texts like *Huckleberry Finn* can still affect us, although we live in different times and circumstances. Yet it is reasonable to assume that the way in which they affect or interest us today will influence our interpretation decisively. Thus, even if we may agree on the interpretation of the historical context itself (by no means a given), we have not yet explained the conflict of interpretations, because, depending on different views of the text, the historical context will also be interpreted differently. To “always historicize” thus cannot solve the problem of interpretive conflicts.

One reason for never-ending disagreements about the interpretation of literary texts and other aesthetic objects is that critics hold different views about their political, social, and aesthetic functions and uses. At first sight, the term *function* may raise the suspicion of a throwback to sociological functionalism, or, if the term is narrowed down to political function, to a search for direct political consequences of literature. In
this sense, the term appears ill-applied to literature, however, because it will hardly ever be possible to establish causal links between a literary text and concrete social or political effects. And yet I want to claim that the term *function* is useful nevertheless and, in effect, indispensable for literary and cultural studies. Since any interpretation of a literary text or aesthetic object must go beyond a mere replication of the object, we must make decisions about what we consider important or unimportant in a text. But on what grounds do we decide what is important? The only way in which we can make sense of a text that has a “fictive” referent is to assume that texts are designed to do something and that their textual elements have been arranged in the way they are in order to achieve this goal. In other words, we can make sense of the texts’ elements only by postulating that they are “functional” with regard to a particular effect we ascribe to them. Or to put it differently: it is our hypothesis about the text’s (political and/or aesthetic) function that makes a text’s structure “readable.” A structure is meaningless if it is not seen as being created for a reason (or as following a certain logic, for example, that of language). As interpreters, we do not encounter a fictional text first and then try to determine its function. On the contrary, we cannot interpret a fictional text without already implying a function. To use the term *function* in this sense thus means to use it as a heuristic category, not as a word for directly traceable social or political effects.

Even if the concept of function is used heuristically, however, and not in naïve sociological fashion, two objections may still be raised. Is it not reductive to work on the assumption of a single function when any literary text can obviously have several different functions at the same time? And even more pertinently, is literature, in its inherent referential ambiguity, rhetoricity of language, and imaginary surplus of meaning, not exactly the opposite of a text that is “functional” in its organization, so that any heuristic assumption of an implied function must unduly homogenize the text? The argument is valid, but it conflates two levels that should be kept apart logically. To employ the term *function* as a heuristic category does not yet determine whether my hypothesis entails homogenization or heterogenization. It all depends on the function implied. If I assume the function to be a deconstruction of logocentrism, then my attention will be drawn to those operations of the text that are “functional” for the purpose of deconstruction, such as constant slippages in signification, but this will by no means homogenize the text in the “functionalist” sense of one unifying principle. Similarly, the contrast between mono- and multifunctionality confuses two levels. If we speak about historical functions
of a particular text, then we may indeed encounter a variety of functions. But this is different from employing the term as a heuristic category, because in terms of interpretation, hypotheses about several functions will not work differently from hypotheses about a single function. They, too, will become the foundation for interpretive choices based on the hypothesis that certain textual features are designed to achieve certain effects.

Even those approaches that position themselves in open opposition to “functionalism” and value literature as counter-realm to the iron grip of rationality cannot escape this logic. Formalists, for example, who insist that the special value of literature lies precisely in its potential to be “without function” can attribute special significance to this functionless dimension of Zweckfreiheit (disinterestedness) only because it promises to serve an important function on another level, namely, the liberation of culture from the alienating effects of materialism and instrumental reason. Similarly, the poststructuralist valorization of heterogeneity and difference is generated by a belief in their social, cultural, and political desirability. The disseminative power of language would not be considered important—so much so, in fact, that all interpretive energy is spent on demonstrating it—if it did not play a crucial role in the social theories of the Paris May by which deconstruction was strongly inspired. As a power analysis that no longer posits any “outside” from which the system could still be critiqued, deconstruction remains one of the few options of resistance. Again, it is precisely the resistance to being “functionalized” by invisible power effects that opens up a new function for literature and shapes all subsequent methodological decisions. No matter what we think of these claims, in each case a hypothesis about the function that literature has within a larger system will determine the interpretive choices the interpreter makes.

A Theory of Aesthetic Experience

Questions about the function of literature are posed in almost all of Wolfgang Iser’s work in literary studies, including his seminal contributions to reception theory, The Implied Reader and The Act of Reading. Doggedly he returns to the question why human beings expose themselves to fictional texts again and again, although as a rule they are well aware of the fact that these texts are invented and in most cases practically useless. Iser has coined the term Fiktionsbedürftigkeit (a need for fictions) to describe this phenomenon, and the development of his own work in three major stages—a modernist aesthetics of negation, reception aesthetics, and the
project of a literary anthropology—can be seen as a renewed attempt to find a convincing explanation. These three stages of his work are linked by a basic starting point: trying to find out why human beings need fiction means having to focus on the specific potential that fiction has as a form of communication. We search out fictional texts not primarily for information or documentation but for a special experience with the text or aesthetic object. We read not “for meaning” but in order to have the kind of experience we call an aesthetic experience. Seen this way, the aesthetic function of the text is the basis for the realization of other functions, because political or social functions of fictional texts can be realized only through an aesthetic experience. How can we define aesthetic experience, however?

When a text or an object is considered as fiction, we cannot regard the object as simply referential, because when we read a fictional text, even a realistic novel, reality is created anew. Since we have never met a character named Hamlet and 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, on our imaginary. These imaginary elements can gain a Gestalt, however, only if they are connected with discourses of the real. As Iser has argued, literary representation is thus not a form of mimesis but a performative act. The double reference of fiction creates an 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. As a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are, in Iser’s words, “both ourselves and someone else at the same time.” Iser writes:

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. (Iser 1989b, 244)
It is important to note that this transfer is not to be confused with a mere projection of our own desire into the text. Our reading experience remains tied to the text and depends on what the text offers. When the text provides a characterization of Hamlet or Huck Finn, our imagining them will be shaped by the description. Critics do not disagree that Huck Finn is about twelve years old, illiterate, and speaks a colorful colloquial vernacular. Nevertheless, despite this factual basis, the Huck Finn imagined by Wolfgang Iser will be different from the Huck Finn imagined by Winfried Fluck, because both of these readers will draw on different imaginary resources in order to endow, as Iser puts it, “a figment with a sense of reality.” Or as Rita Felski reminds us, “The work only comes to life in being read, and what it signifies cannot be separated from what readers make of it” (Felski 87).

The basic point about fictional texts and aesthetic objects is, then, that in order to acquire significance and to provide an aesthetic experience, they have to be brought to life by means of an imaginary transfer on the side of the reader. When we start reading a book, we are confronted with abstract letters on a page. Structuralism has taught us that the words formed by these letters are arbitrary in their reference. Moreover, in the case of fictional material, the represented world is invented, at least in the particular form in which we encounter it in the text. Without any investment from our side, this invented world would not take on any degree of reality and would thus not make any sense. Bärbel Tischleder has provided a number of simple but helpful illustrations for the indispensability of such transfers when she says, “When a figure in a film rubs against a cat’s fur, or burns herself, or simply walks in the snow, or carries a heavy suitcase, this representation can take on meaning for us only if we draw on our own experiences and memories in order to imagine what it means to be in such a situation” (Tischleder 78; my translation).

No matter how well crafted a literary text is, it cannot solely determine its meaning. It always needs a reader in order to become actualized (and thus “meaningful”); the reader, however, can actualize a literary text whose reference is “fictionalized” only by drawing on his or her own associations, mental images, and feelings as an analogue. Since, as a result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are, in Iser’s words, “both ourselves and someone else at the same time,” we can be inside and outside a character at once. On the one hand, the fictional text allows us to enter another character’s perspective and perhaps even his or her body; on the other hand, we cannot and do not want to give up
our own identity completely. In reading, we thus create other, more expressive versions of ourselves. This is achieved, however, in a much more complex way than is suggested by the term identification. One may assume, for the sake of the argument, that it may be possible to “identify” with a character, but one cannot identify with a whole text. It is the text, however, that provides an aesthetic experience, not just single characters in it. Clearly, in actualizing the text in the act of reading, the reader has to bring all characters to life by means of a transfer, not merely the good or sympathetic ones. The “more expressive version of ourselves” is thus not a simple case of self-aggrandizement through wish fulfillment but an extension of our own interiority over a whole (made-up) world.

Iser’s “performative” theory of aesthetic experience is supported by a number of works on the psychology of reading and the transaction between reader and text. In Becoming a Reader, J. A. Appleyard argues that 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.” 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” (Appleyard 39, 53–54). We become observer and participant at the same time. In similar fashion, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt write in their Practicing New Historicism, “In a meaningful encounter with a text that reaches us powerfully, we feel at once pulled out of our own world and plunged back with redoubled force into it” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 17). In her study Reading Cultures: The Construction of Readers in the Twentieth Century, Molly Travis conceives of reading as a process of going “in-and-out” and emphasizes the compulsive dimension of the act: “I conceive of agency in reading as compulsive, reiterative role-playing in which individuals attempt to find themselves by going outside the self, engaging in literary performance in the hope of fully and finally identifying the self through self-differentiation. Such finality is never achieved, for the self is perpetually in process” (Travis 6). And Gabriele Schwab, a student of Iser’s, has pointed out: “Literature 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” (Schwab 10). Literature enables readers to enter other worlds.
that are different from their own but remain, strangely enough, their own worlds at the same time.\textsuperscript{11}

\textit{The Articulation Effect of Fiction}

In aesthetic experience, then, the transfer needed to give meaning and significance to the text in the act of reception allows us to give expression to associations, feelings, moods, impulses, desires, or corporeal sensations that otherwise have not yet found any satisfactory expression—either because of censorship, or social or cultural taboos, or simply because society has not been interested so far. I call this the “articulation effect” of fiction.\textsuperscript{12} Because of fiction’s status as a made-up world that can transcend reality claims, fictional texts and aesthetic objects can employ “official” discourses of the real as a host for the expression of as yet unformulated and possibly “unsayable” things. The conceptualization of this articulation effect should not be restricted to narratives of transgression or negation, however, or to the idea of a liminal state (\textit{Schwellenerfahrung}).\textsuperscript{13} For example, the popularity of the sentimental novel in the mode of Richardson may be explained by its skillful evocation of the “guilty pleasures” of illicit affairs, and thus by the articulation of socially tabooed associations.\textsuperscript{14} We could, in this case, apply categories such as desire or the unconscious for that which is articulated. Nevertheless, as a name for the flow of diffuse, decontextualized, and protean associations, sensations, and sentiments that are always a part of us, but at the same time “unrepresentable” because these elements possess no inherent structure, the phenomenological concept of the imaginary goes beyond definitions of the unformulated or unsayable as the culturally tabooed. The unformulated dimension that fictional texts articulate should thus be sought not primarily or even exclusively in a repressed, other side of ourselves, cut off from consciousness and self-awareness, but in the more fundamental fact that there exists a dimension of interiority—ranging from psychic structures and diffuse affects to bodily sensations—that can never be fully represented and expressed. Because fictional texts require a transfer in order to be actualized, they can provide the gratification of articulating something radically subjective while at the same time representing this dimension in a “public” version that appears to provide recognition.

Literature gives a determinate shape to imaginary dimensions, ranging from fantasy elements to affective dimensions, by linking these elements with a semblance of the real. The fictional text emerges out of the combination of the two. Without imaginary elements, the text would be a
mere duplicate of discourses of the real; without semblance of the real, the imaginary would not have any form and thus would not be able to appear in representation. As Iser writes:

The act of fictionalizing is therefore not identical to the imaginary with its protean potential. For the fictionalizing act is a guided act. It aims at something that in turn endows the imaginary with an articulate *gestalt*—a *gestalt* that differs from the fantasies, projections, daydreams, and other reveries that ordinarily give the imaginary expression in our day-to-day experience. . . . Just as the fictionalizing act outstrips the determinacy of the real, so it provides the imaginary with the determinacy that it would not otherwise possess. In so doing, it enables the imaginary to take on an essential quality of the real, for determinacy is a minimal definition of reality. This is not, of course, to say that the imaginary *is* real, although it certainly assumes an appearance of reality in the way it intrudes into and acts upon the given world (Iser 1993, 3).

As a representation of yet unformulated and indeterminate imaginary elements, the fictional text goes beyond discourses of the real; as a form of representation drawing on a semblance of the real, it is more than a mere fantasy or daydream; as a combination of the two elements, it places the reader in a position “in between.” This creates the need for a constant movement between the real and the imaginary elements of the text. Iser writes elsewhere:

A piece of fiction devoid of any connection with known reality would be incomprehensible. Consequently, if we are to attempt a description of what is fictional in fiction, the time-honored opposition between fiction and reality has to be discarded and replaced by a triad: the real, the fictional and the imaginary. It is out of this triadic relation that I see the literary text arising. Within this context, the act of fictionalizing is seen as a constant crossing of boundaries between the real and the imaginary. By transforming reality into something which is not part of the world reproduced, reality’s determinacy is outstripped; by endowing the imaginary with a determinate gestalt, its diffuseness is transformed (Iser 1986, 5).

This “duplicity” can explain fiction’s usefulness for an articulation of the imaginary: “As an agglomerate of diffuse feelings, images, associations, and visions, the imaginary needs fiction to be translated into a coherent, comprehensible, and culturally meaningful expression” (Fluck 1996, 423). Fictional texts are especially useful, for they can link the subjective and the social by means of an analogue. Because readers
have to draw on their own associations, feelings, and bodily sensations in the transfer process, the actualization of the text establishes analogies between elements that may be far apart historically but linked by unforeseen and often surprising resemblances. This articulation effect is, I think, one of the major gratifications that fictional texts and aesthetic objects provide, and it can be seen as one of the reasons for the increasing role that fictional texts and aesthetic experience have come to play in modern societies. For modern society, this articulation effect serves an important purpose, because it contributes new elements to the ongoing conversation of a culture and thus functions as a source of constant redescription and reconfiguration. For the individual, the articulation effect is welcome, because it can provide a cultural recognition of her own interiority. Again, however, this “empowerment” through fiction should not be falsely construed as self-aggrandizement, or as a fantasy of imaginary strength, but should be seen as a form of imaginary self-extension.

Another way of describing this phenomenon is to say that literary texts or aesthetic objects function as a host for readers who use them in parasitical fashion. After reunification in Germany, for example, there was a brief moment when some East Germans compared themselves to the American South after the Civil War. In both cases, a “better” world seemed to have been conquered by an inferior civilization with primarily materialistic values. Let us imagine for the sake of the argument that such an East German ran across the novel *Gone with the Wind* at the time. This East German had never been to the American South, in fact knew hardly anything about it, except that it was racist. Had she still read the novel in the communist German Democratic Republic, this might have been her major focus. All of a sudden, however, she sees something else in the book, namely, an analogy between what she considers the cruel fate of two superior civilizations. The imaginary and emotional elements she invests in the transfer that actualizes the novel may now be dominated no longer by feelings of superiority but by the theme of how to deal with humiliation and defeat. This potential of the fictional text to function as host for the articulation of hidden, perhaps only half-conscious or unconscious emotional and imaginary dimensions of the self provides the only plausible explanation for me of why we read fictive texts about people who never existed.

The important point here is that the transfer between two worlds that are far apart—that of a southern belle of the nineteenth century and that of a late-twentieth-century reader in Leipzig—becomes possible by way of analogy: “In the image consciousness,” writes Jean Paul Sartre in his
study of the imaginary, “we apprehend an object as an analogon for another object” (Sartre 52). This analogy can be constituted by different points of reference, ranging from structural similarities to affective affinities. In principle, any element of the text—word, image, figure, scene, event, deictic references, descriptions of space, narrative perspective—can become a point of departure for establishing an analogy, often in entirely unexpected and unforeseen ways. To acknowledge this key role of analogizing means to grasp an important aspect of the act of reading, namely, that as a rule, it takes place in segmented form. Although we may faithfully read every line of the text, we nevertheless read selectively by focusing on certain segments and skipping or disregarding others. The imaginary that seeks analogies for the purpose of articulation can take its point of departure from any aspect of the text and zoom in on any segment without considering the larger context.

For example, we can attach imaginary links to the heroic dimension of a gangster or outlaw figure (Bonnie and Clyde dying in slow motion) while ignoring the criminal context. This, in effect, is the reason why one and the same text can be praised as either subversive or ideologically affirmative, depending on the segment to which the imaginary is attached. Even in the ideologically most conformist text, such as, for example, a domestic novel of the American antebellum period, there may be rebellious acts by characters that the reader can activate for a transfer, although these characters may in the end submit to the patriarchal order. The effect of the novel may thus be the opposite of its ideological project. This can provide one of the explanations for the gratifications of popular culture and the striking, seemingly contradictory phenomenon that popular culture is regularly criticized for its ideological nature and at the same time praised for its subversive force. The ongoing debate in feminist criticism about whether the domestic novel is deeply compromised by a Victorian gender ideology or whether it can be seen as a cunning form of female self-empowerment can be attributed to the fact that these arguments take different segments of the text as their point of departure for the establishment of analogies. The possibilities for discovering analogies in the act of reading are indeed unlimited. Analogies between text and reader can be established on every level of the text. They can be established between the recipient and potentially all characters in the text (not only the ego-ideal; villains can also offer aspects that invite a transfer, such as strength or stances of rebellion), between the reader and single traits of a character, between kinetic, haptic, and other sensuous dimensions of the text and the reader’s body schemata, and even between a setting and an inner
mood of the reader. Analogies can be established between parallel feelings or moods or sensations, but they can also be based on associations created by language.

This potential of fictional texts and aesthetic objects to suggest ever new, potentially unlimited imaginary analogies can explain major aspects of literary and cultural studies to which I drew attention at the beginning of this essay. For one thing, it can provide an explanation for the fact that texts offer gratification for readers who live in worlds that are entirely different from the world of the text and its historical context. Taking into account the possibilities of segmentation and analogizing, we can understand not only why a text like Gone with the Wind is still popular in contemporary America, although this contemporary America is far removed from the plantation wonderland of the text, but also that it is popular in other countries where southern plantations have never been part of the cultural imaginary. Second, the key role of imaginary analogies in the transfer process can provide an explanation for the fact that different readers can read one and the same text differently: at a closer look, it turns out that they take their point of departure from different segments of the text, so that their readings are based on different analogies. Finally, the fact that aesthetic experience is constituted by a transfer based on imaginary analogies that emerge in the act of reading can explain why we may read one and the same text differently at different times: simply put, the difference is produced by the discovery of new analogies in the transfer process. Ambiguous or enigmatic texts produce a larger number of disagreements, because they also open up new, increased possibilities for analogizing. Moreover, since establishing analogies by means of a transfer often happens spontaneously and in unforeseen ways in the act of reading because of the diffuse and “creative” nature of the imaginary, aesthetic objects are often seen as exemplary models of creativity, for what is creativity other than finding unforeseen linkages? Seen this way, it is not only avant-garde texts that may be considered as manifestations of the experimental but also fictional texts and aesthetic objects in general, because their realization in the act of reception will have a “creative” dimension of unpredictability.

By representing reality in a fictional mode, the literary text restructures reality. This doubling is repeated by the reader in the act of reading. In this reception, the reader produces a second narrative that constitutes, in fact, a second text. In the Gilded Age, Mark Twain faced the problem of racial relations, and one of his responses was to redefine the issue in terms of the moral struggle in chapter 31 of his novel Adventures of Huckle-
In his famous interpretation of the novel, 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.25 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 fictional texts can enable us to express and authorize our own need for articulation drives us back, again and again, to literature and other aesthetic phenomena.

An analysis of aesthetic experience by means of a transfer may appear plausible in the case of reading, but it seems counterintuitive in the case of visual material in the media, because the characters we encounter there have an immediate physical presence. Before we can even begin to think about who Hamlet might be, we have already seen him in the shape of, say, Laurence Olivier. We no longer have to imagine him and need not come up with our own image of what Hamlet looked like. This does not free us, however, from the need to bring this person to life by drawing on our own store of memories, feelings, bodily sensations, and bodily memory. If the person on the screen suffers, we can only imagine what suffering is and what it may mean for him on the basis of our own experiences and memories of suffering. Clearly, the perception of a picture involves an imaginary activity too. No less than literature, although with different modalities, the aesthetic experience of the image, including pictures and motion pictures, is one for which non-identity and doubleness are constitutive. One may claim, in fact, that the art of a movie consists of the way in which it manages to engage us sufficiently to draw on such imaginary associations.

One of the reasons for the popularity of the modern mass media can be attributed to the fact that they have entirely new means at their disposal for engaging the viewer—for example, by fast editing, close-ups, montage, and by a combination of image and sound. Visual images are especially effective in drawing us into transfers without our even being aware of it. The development from print to the visual media and on to recorded music can be described as a story in which our involvement as recipients has become more and more direct, unmediated, body-centered, and sensuously intense. In this context it is important to recall again that the transfer through which we constitute an aesthetic object does not
merely apply to characters. It pertains to every aspect of the text or object. We also have to bring to life the villains, emotional conflicts, spatial references, even the November fog, by means of our own imagination, our feelings, and our own bodily sensations. Since the visual image comes so quickly and so directly at us, this often happens without any awareness on our side, which in turn means that visual images are also especially effective in triggering imaginary transfers. A theory of aesthetic experience developed in the analysis of the reading process is thus not restricted to literary studies but can be useful for cultural studies at large.

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

What these observations all add up to is that a subject positioning by interpellation or a discursively produced reader or spectator position cannot determine the second narrative produced by the reader or spectator in the act of reception. In the transfer process that constitutes aesthetic experience, we can take up multiple identificatory positions. There is the possibility of “identification based on difference and identification based on similarity” (Stacey 171). While there are masculine and femi-
nine spectator positions, viewers do not have to assume these positions according to their assigned genders. Moreover, we may identify with characters at one point but distance ourselves at the next when they act against our expectations. Filmic apparatus theory implies a far-ranging power of interpellation over the spectator, while the actual experience of watching movies is one of moving in and out of characters, switching sides and sympathies, getting angry or disappointed with characters or plots (which we usually express by calling a film “unrealistic”), of unexpected crossover identifications, and, altogether, a constant readjustment in response to the film and the way it affects us. As a result, we can be both object and subject of the act of seeing at the same time. The pleasure of the imagination, and also of the movies, is that we do not “necessarily identify in any fixed way with a character, a gaze, or a particular position, but rather with a series of oscillating positions” so that “the pleasures of watching a movie are also the pleasures of mobility, of moving around among a range of different desiring positions” (Williams 57). This is possible because in the transfer model our relation to the aesthetic object is established not by identification with a particular figure but by analogies between a potentially wide range of textual elements and the recipient’s imaginary. If identification were the main mode of reception, then responses to fictional texts and aesthetic objects should be fairly predictable. Yet the history of reception of any fictional text reveals ever new possibilities for analogies. In consequence, there will always be new readings emerging.

The Imaginary and the Inadequacy of Interpretation

It is important in this context to be clear about the source and function of the fictional articulation effect. It should by no means be conceptualized as driven by a prediscursive, “authentic” residue of experience, nor should the transgressive potential of avant-garde texts be seen as its privileged manifestation. The reason for a constantly renewed drive for articulation is not a prediscursive desire or unconscious drive but an inherent inadequacy of representation. We can speak only through the signs and cultural patterns that are available to us, but these will never completely express the full range of associations, feelings, and bodily sensations that seek articulation. Hence our imaginary perpetually exceeds the cultural script. We can articulate our interior states only through language, and yet we are constantly striving for new expressions of this interiority, because the imaginary that we articulate by attaching it to
conventional signs is no longer identical with the imaginary that strove for expression. On the one hand, the imaginary has found a possibility for articulation, but on the other hand, this articulation is possible only at the cost of reduction. We may articulate our desire by saying “I love you,” but by attaching our feeling to such a conventional formulation that seems “safe” from misunderstanding, we also reduce the imaginary and full emotional dimension that may be connected with the experience of love. Paradoxically, then, articulation by means of fiction constantly refuels our need for articulation; this, in effect, provides another reason why we return to fictional texts again and again, although we are well aware of their practical “uselessness.”

Fictional texts are ideal means for the articulation of an interiority that seeks representation. What makes them so wonderfully effective for this purpose, however—their ability to link imaginary elements with a semblance of the real—is at the same time also the reason for the insufficiency of representation and, consequently, for ever newer attempts to fill the gap. Since articulation can be achieved only by analogy, it remains indirect, provisional, and temporary, and since it can never fully express an interior state, it must stimulate an ongoing search for analogies that promise a fuller expression. Thus one analogy will be quickly replaced by another, often from one sentence to the next or from one image to the next. Barbara Maria Stafford captures this inherently provisional dimension when she says: “Analogy, born of the human desire to achieve union with that which one does not possess, is also a passionate process marked by fluid oscillations. Perceiving the lack of something—whether physical, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual—inspires us to search for an approximating resemblance to fill its place” (Stafford 2).

And yet what may appear as weakness from the perspective of adequate representation is also something that can provide the act of reading with special interest. On the one hand, the reader is driven to a search for ever-newer analogies because of the failure of representation to articulate the imaginary fully. On the other hand, it is precisely this shortcoming that may lead to the discovery of surprising, unexpected new affinities. Reading can be an adventure because it always holds the promise of unexpected encounters and discoveries. This, in effect, may explain the phenomenon of a hunger for fiction (Lesehunger), including the amazing fact that we expose ourselves again and again to fictional texts although we are aware that the fictional world is “unreal.” The reason for our constant desire for articulation lies in the inability of representation to articulate our imaginary and express our interior states fully. Fictional
texts and aesthetic objects can provide the illusion of fulfilling our wishes for articulation, but they can do so only by stimulating our desire for articulation ever anew.

But why do we experience the limits of representation as frustrating and as a challenge to try again? Once more, Iser’s work can be taken as a point of departure. Ultimately, all hypotheses about the function of aesthetic experience must postulate an anthropological need. Iser’s phenomenological approach in *The Act of Reading*, developed to give an account of aesthetic experience that would not be restricted to an experimental, modernist mode, is insufficient to deal with this question. Thus it made sense for Iser to return to a reconsideration of the function of literature and, by doing so, to move from reception aesthetics to the project of a literary anthropology. Iser’s anthropological turn addresses two problems in particular: it helps to do away with a still lingering modernist bias of reception aesthetics by shifting the point of emphasis, more consistently than before, from the category of literature to that of fictionality as a mode of representation characterized by doubleness. And it does this by reconceptualizing the basic interplay that constitutes the “in-between” state of aesthetic experience through a new set of concepts, the real and the imaginary, the latter defined not in psychoanalytical terms as the source of an illusion of wholeness, but phenomenologically, as an indeterminate, diffuse, and protean flow of impressions and sensations.30

A significant problem remains, however. In Iser’s reception aesthetics, the doubling structures of literary fictionality can be described only as potential, that is, in terms of their various doubling operations, because any attribution of a more specific meaning or function would arrest the ceaseless play of negativity.31 And although Iser’s anthropological turn promised to provide a more concrete description of the function of literary texts, it does not really enlarge the descriptive range, because the anthropological reason given for why we need fiction is another version of the experience of non-identity, namely, the “unknowability” of the self and the “inexperienceability” of the end (Iser 1989b). But do we really seek out fictional texts again and again in order to be confronted with the unknowability of the self? 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 different and diverse ways. Why so many different genres and media, then? Why comedy, tragedy, romance, and melodrama, historical novel and realistic novel, why literature, film, comics, and painting?
The Search for Recognition

I want to suggest a different explanation and postulate a different anthropological need that can link my argument with an important recent development in critical theory, namely, a shift in criteria of social justice from distribution to recognition. For American studies, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* is especially suggestive in this respect. What limited Tocqueville’s analysis of American democracy, the Olympian perspective of a French aristocrat, can also be regarded as a major strength of his analysis, because it allowed him to grasp a fundamental transformation that the new political system of democracy brought about, which he subsumes under the term “equality.” From the large-scale perspective of a comparison between aristocratic and democratic society, Tocqueville’s understanding of equality refers not to ideals of social or economic justice but to the (then revolutionary) idea of an equality of rank. Equality of rank means that in principle, nobody can claim to be better or more worthy than anybody else in a democratic society. This, however, puts social and cultural life on an entirely new basis, for it creates a need to find new sources of recognition. As Amy Gutman has summarized the challenge in her introduction to Charles Taylor’s “Politics of Recognition”: “In the ancient regime, when a minority could count on being honored (as ‘Ladies’ and ‘Lords’) and the majority could not realistically aspire to public recognition, the demand for recognition was unnecessary for the few and futile for the many. Only with the collapse of stable social hierarchies does the demand for public recognition become commonplace, along with the idea of the dignity of all individuals. Everyone is an equal—a Mr., Mrs., or Ms.—and we all expect to be recognized as such” (Gutman 6).

In his own plea for a politics of recognition, Taylor uses this point of departure to argue for a multicultural politics of recognition. For Taylor, recognition means acknowledgment of the other person’s dignity and leads to a demand for mutual respect. My reading of Tocqueville (who actually does not use the term recognition) points in another direction and starts on a more basic level: since rank no longer indicates the worth of a person, the individual is forced to take it upon herself to demonstrate her worth to others, because nobody else will do it for her. This is especially true in a society of immigrants with great cultural diversity and great mobility, because this mobility will increase the frequency of encounters with strangers and will create a need on the side of the individual to develop commonly understandable forms of self-presentation.
This new condition created by democracy must also affect the role of the aesthetic. One consequence of Tocqueville’s starting premise, in contrast to Taylor, is that the problem of recognition is discussed not as an issue of moral philosophy but as a problem of identity formation under new social conditions. If everybody is considered an equal, then the problem must arise for the individual how to distinguish oneself from all the others who are equally equal: “They have swept away the privileges of some of their fellow creatures which stood in their way, but they have opened the door to universal competition: the barrier has changed its shape rather than its position. When men are nearly alike, and all follow the same track, it is very difficult for any one individual to walk quick and cleave away through the dense throng which surrounds and presses them” (Tocqueville 537).

In an essay on changing perceptions of America in Europe, called “American Studies and the Romance with America” (Fluck 2009), I offer a new version of the history of American studies: no longer as the response to knowledge gaps but as a sequence of changing imaginary attachments to objects of desire that pose a special imaginary attraction. In literary American studies in Germany this sequence is easy to trace: the attraction first to American modernists (a strong alternative to a discredited German culture) and then postmodernists (for a while the new avant-garde in international literature). Then, earlier than in other disciplines in the humanities, popular culture and the media (above all film) became preferred objects of analysis and pushed American studies in the direction of an extension into cultural studies. Finally, and most important for understanding the present situation, it was ethnic and African American literature that proved especially attractive and, paradoxically enough, continued the romance with an America in which these groups are, or had been, marginalized.

Why that special focus? What is the attraction that steers students and younger faculty in the direction of ethnic and African American studies? For most commentators, it seems that the phenomenon can be best explained, on the one hand, as a search for recognition on the part of the ethnic or racial groups themselves, and on the other hand, as a gesture of loyal political support on the part of those white middle-class Americanists who live in Bamberg or Braunschweig and may be far removed from the political struggles of ethnic or racial minorities in the United States. If, however, the main motive for focusing on this literature is a politics of recognition in Taylor’s sense, how can that motive explain the fascination (“desire”) of readers in Bamberg or Braunschweig who are not part
of the group and thus cannot use this literature for their own search for recognition? Or can they?

At this point it is useful to recall that aesthetic experience does not rest on direct identification but that it is based on a transfer that can open up a field of analogies. The question would then be what analogies ethnic and African American literature offer to white readers outside the group. If one looks at it from the perspective of reading as transfer, a major point is that this literature takes its departure from experiences of misrecognition or the denial of recognition (as in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*) and that the ensuing narrative is that of a transformation of inferiority into (moral) superiority, of discrimination into empowerment. Or to put it differently, ethnic and African American literatures can be especially attractive because they dramatize exemplary scenes of misrecognition. And since, as we have seen, reading by means of a transfer is selective and therefore segmented, these scenes of misrecognition can be taken out of their context and can function as an analogy for readers who consider lack of attention and recognition the major injustice they are experiencing under democratic conditions. In this case the ethnic and/or racial groups’ search for recognition would become the host for articulating the reader’s own imaginary longings for increased recognition in a politically correct manner. For a critical analysis of interpretations, such a reading would have consequences: it would mean having to look at competing interpretations in terms of the analogies on which these interpretations are based.

Transfer as Narrative Reconfiguration

But if it is one of the major functions of literary texts to provide individuals with an opportunity to inscribe themselves into cultural discourses in their own, highly subjective way, how can we say anything meaningful about this process at all? How is it possible to discuss a reading, if this reading acquires meaning only by means of a transfer in which an “invisible” imaginary dimension is articulated? We can characterize the structure of the transfer that constitutes aesthetic experience, but we cannot come up with a ready-made formula to describe its content or psychic function. The whole point about aesthetic experience is that it goes beyond such formulas and particularizes them in entirely unpredictable ways. The obvious problem is, however, that we have no direct access to that which is added in transfer. Strictly speaking, aesthetic experience is untranslatable. The only “document” we have is the reader’s or interpreter’s redescription of the aesthetic object that has functioned as host. In this redescription,
the interpreter produces a second narrative that provides clues for that reader’s encounter with the fictional text. For reasons discussed at the beginning of this essay, none of these readings or interpretations will ever be identical. But the difference can be instructive where certain patterns of reception emerge. The cultural history of literary texts thus cannot be separated from their varying uses in the act of reception; it is a history of second narratives. Literary history and the history of reception cannot be separated. As articulation of an imaginary that seeks articulation, the second narratives through which the literary text is actualized have their own historically distinct patterns, and a history of the second narratives through which literary texts are actualized and appropriated at different times is therefore one of the logical follow-up projects of any attempt to understand the changing functions of fiction. Seen from this perspective, the phenomenon of interpretive disagreement and conflict, which provided the point of departure for this essay, is no longer an irritating problem but, quite the contrary, an indispensable resource.

NOTES

1. In this chapter, literature and the literary text are thus taken as paradigms for aesthetic objects.
2. This argument has been developed in a number of my publications; see Das kulturelle Imaginäre; “The Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Literature: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, Funktionsgeschichte”; “Aesthetic Experience of the Image”; “Playing Indian: Media Reception as Transfer.”
3. The various approaches to literary interpretation are therefore based on different assumptions as to what provides the (minimum of) textual coherence that is the precondition for the possibility of interpretation. In New Criticism, for example, this coherence is provided by the text’s structure, understood, however, not merely as a set of rules for the production of texts but as an intertextual pattern that transforms everyday language into the language of art—and thereby creates the aesthetic experience of an object without “extrinsic” purpose. Inevitably, interpretations based on these premises will focus on the identification of this pattern. But even in poststructuralist approaches, in spite of the valorization of heterogeneity and difference, the single sign is of interest only if it can be shown to be part of a disemminative trace, for only in this way can its deconstructive function be demonstrated. Again, a hypothesis about what function literature has—in the case of American deconstruction, for example, to provide telling instances of rhetorical self-deconstruction—determines the direction interpretation will take.
4. Iser confirms the logical priority of function over structure, but on different grounds. In the literary text, he writes, “the order and the formation of structures depend on the function that the text has to fulfill” (Iser 1979, 11). Such a formulation still seems to imply that we can determine the “real” function first and then explain the text’s structure. Clearly, however, just as critics will differ on the text’s meaning, so will they hold different hypotheses about the text’s function. To introduce the term function as a heuristic category of analysis is thus an attempt not to anchor interpretation on “real” grounds but to draw attention to underlying assumptions that guide and govern every interpretation.

5. For a detailed analysis and discussion of the development of Iser’s work, see my essay “The Search for Distance: Negation and Negativity in Wolfgang Iser’s Literary Theory.”

6. On this point, see my essay “Aesthetics and Cultural Studies.”

7. See also Bruce Wilshire, Role Playing and Identity, from which Iser may have taken his Hamlet example: “It would follow, then, that the character Hamlet is real just insofar as we constitute ourselves by experiencing ourselves and speaking about ourselves through him—both as stage actors and as audience, or life actors; that is, when we experience ourselves and speak about ourselves through the proxy of Hamlet. The character’s reality is a function of our own reality as playing, experimenting, self-knowing beings” (Wilshire 93).

8. On the role of images in this process, see Ellen Esrock’s study The Reader’s Eye.

9. This is the reason “why the identity constructed by the fictional text is actually more adequately described as a case of non-identity, since it puts the reader in a state in-between two identities, with neither of whom she is entirely identical” (Fluck 2007, 70).

10. As Carol J. Clover writes in her essay on horror movies, “We are both Red Riding Hood and the Wolf; the force of the experience, the horror, comes from ‘knowing’ both sides of the story” (Clover 1989, 95). The argument that fictional texts can dramatize and enact inner conflicts, for example, between the open expression of a desire and its disciplining, finds support here. In this respect, too, Clover offers an interesting comment: “Observers unanimously stress the readiness of the ‘live’ audience to switch sympathies in midstream, siding now with the killer and now, and finally, with the Final Girl” (Clover 1989, 113).

11. See also on this point Wilshire: “Together with the actors we alienate ourselves as characters so that we can return to ourselves as persons. Hamlet is ourselves speaking to ourselves about our essential possibilities” (Wilshire 99).

12. For this term and a more detailed version of my argument, see my history of the American novel, Das kulturelle Imaginäre: Eine Funktionsgeschichte des amerikanischen Romans, 1790–1900.

13. Thus my concept of aesthetic experience differs significantly from two
models that can be found in current debates: a concept of aesthetic experience as intensified experience, if not “epiphany” (Gumbrecht), and as a mode of experience that provides a liminal experience and can thus transform our perception (Fischer-Lichte). In both cases, aesthetic experience is rather conventionally equated with a modernist aesthetic. There are, however, many instances of aesthetic experience that do not have any dramatic effects of transformation; in fact our daily exposure to fictional texts and aesthetic objects (such as films or television series) that do not fit the transformative model is the rule and not the exception. But in this case, too, audiences seek these experiences again and again.

14. Famously, Ian Watt called Richardson’s novel *Pamela* “a work that could be praised from the pulpit and yet attacked as pornography, a work that gratified the reading public with the combined attractions of a sermon and a striptease” (Watt 173).

15. See in this context Josué Harari’s reference to the “duplicity” constituted by the imaginary: “The imaginary world is always with us, as a parallel world to our world; there is not a single moment of our existence which is not imbued with the imaginary. . . . In like manner, the real cannot be separated from the imaginary or the imaginary from the real” (Harari 57).

16. The recently renewed interest in the concept of the imaginary has put special emphasis on the social imaginary. See, for example, Charles Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries*; and Paula Moya and Ramón Saldívar, who provide a “transnational” reconsideration of the concept: “The trans-American imaginary is ‘imaginary’ to the extent that it figures a very real but fundamentally different syntax of codes, images, and icons, as well as the tacit assumptions, convictions, and beliefs that seek to bind together the varieties of American national discourses” (Moya and Saldívar 2). Cornelius Castoriadis calls the social imaginary “the radical instituting imaginary” (Castoriadis 1994, 136). It is important to note in this context that for Castoriadis the radical imaginary is the source of the self-creation of society ex nihilo and, hence, a counter-term to the idea of interpellation and subjection, whereas some recent uses of the term *social imaginary* seem to move the concept precisely in that direction.

17. This process must not take place consciously: “Our education, our upbringing, our social position predisposes us to certain cultural choices, yet there is often an unpredictability and surprise in the way that we feel ourselves claimed by some texts and left cold by others” (Felski 76).

18. As a basic form of literary representation, metaphor is already a form that works by analogy: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 5).

19. As Richard Slotkin has pointed out in his analysis of a composite heroic type in nineteenth-century American dime novels, in combining detectives with the style of outlaws and vice versa, popular culture derives its effectiveness at cultivating a seemingly contradictory range of choices: “This consensus, which
is national in its scope and in its concerns, finds its clearest and most pervasive expression in the mythology developed and purveyed by the media of mass culture. The commercial prosperity of those media depends on their power to incorporate a wide range of social and political referents and to entertain fantasies that express all sides of the public’s contradictory desires and beliefs” (Slotkin 154).

20. See my essay on the aesthetic experience of space, “Imaginary Space; or, Space as Aesthetic Object.”

21. Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora describe a case taken from their empirical reader research: “For example, one respondent reflecting on an orange colored patch was reminded of a medicine once taken and . . . was capable of fusing the emotional memory with the present color-impression. . . . In both cases, resonance occurs between explicitly recalled personal memories and some portion of the world of the aesthetic object” (Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora 181–182).

22. Rita Felski speaks of the possibility of an “emotional, even erotic cathexis onto the sound and surfaces of words” (Felski 63). A whole new field is opened up when we extend these considerations to images: “This brings me to the additional, novel claim that the visual arts are singularly suited to provide explanatory power for the nature and function of the analogical procedure” (Stafford 3).

23. On this point, see Stafford: “Since no form of organization, no matter how encyclopedic, can give complete access to the diversity of existing or imagined things, analogy provides opportunities to travel back into history, to spring forward in time, to leap across continents” (Stafford 11).

24. See the criticism of “classical” empirical reception studies by Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora: “Studies of reader personality . . . and gender . . . have examined the activities of actual readers to show how their sense of self influences the course of reading. However, they have been primarily concerned with the influence of enduring character traits—and less with the influence of fluctuations in the sense of self that occur during adult life. Moreover, because of their concern with stable personality characteristics, investigators in this tradition have seldom addressed changes in the sense of self . . . that may occur through literary reading” (Kuiken, Miall, and Sikora 174).

25. Lionel Trilling, introduction to Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. For an analysis of Trilling’s reading, see Jonathan Arac’s study “Huckleberry Finn” as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time. For Arac, the “hyper-canonization” of Twain’s novel begins with Trilling’s introduction.


27. This is Belting’s term (Belting 2001, 21).

28. The assumption of an insatiable longing for the undifferentiated whole-
ness of the womb is one of the most problematic premises of Castoriadis’s theory of the imaginary.

29. See Castoriadis’s characterization of the, as he calls it, radical imagination of the singular human being in his essay “Radical Imagination and the Social Instituting Imaginary,” where he writes: “This ‘inside’ is a perpetual, truly heraclitean, flux of representations *cum* affects *cum* intentions, in fact indissociable. . . . [F]or all we know, this stream of representations *cum* affects *cum* desires is absolutely singular for each singular human being” (Castoriadis 1994, 143–144).

30. The distinction between psychoanalytic and phenomenological definitions of the imaginary is important. For Lacan, the imaginary is the source of the subject’s misrecognition and self-alienation; for Iser—as for Castoriadis in *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, a book that was influential in Iser’s anthropological turn—the imaginary is the source of a creative energy that escapes the control of systemic power effects and can therefore function as a source of cultural and social change. Although Castoriadis took his point of departure from a psychoanalytic position and was influenced by Lacan, he broke with him in the 1960s and “wrote several critiques of Lacanian theory and practice. . . . According to Castoriadis, if the subject-to-be (mis)recognizes its reflected image in the ‘mirror’—or mirroring other—it must already possess certain imaginary capacities for representation and identification” (Elliott 153–154). Thus Castoriadis can claim: “The imaginary does not come from the image in the mirror or from the gaze of the other. Instead, the ‘mirror’ itself and its possibility, and the other as mirror, are the works of the imaginary, which is creation *ex nihilo*” (Castoriadis 1987, 3).

31. Thus a shift of interpretive emphasis can be noted in Iser’s transition from reception aesthetics to literary anthropology. While the former deals primarily with the phenomenology of text processing and highlights the role of textual blanks, the latter focuses on various manifestations of the text’s doubling structures and their interaction. This “play of the text,” however—exemplified, for instance, in Iser’s book *Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy*—can only lead to a typology of play movements, because any further concretization would undermine the conceptualization of the play of the text as a manifestation of negativity. This, however, leaves only one route open, namely, “to grasp different modes of negativity that are in play with one another” (Iser 1989c, xiv). To me, this is the most sterile and disappointing aspect of Iser’s approach.

32. See especially Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”; and Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. Although varying in their philosophical premises and argumentative approaches, all three authors are primarily interested in the concept of recognition as a normative term in order to establish a new and more comprehensive criterion of justice than that of liberal rights or economic equality. All three are not interested in fictional texts and other aesthetic objects

*Reading as Transfer*  •  261
(although Honneth has referred to Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* as an extreme case of misrecognition). For literary and cultural studies, these approaches therefore remain limited in their usefulness.

**Works Cited**


