

Questioning Illusion

How Should We Talk About Reading Experiences? Arguments and Empirical Evidence

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I love immersing myself in fictional stories and other worlds and my favourite genre is science fiction. After reading sci-fi my mood is raised and I tend to feel more at peace with the Universe, cognitively and imaginatively stimulated and inspired.

(a reader)

Aesthetic illusion can thus be described as a synthesis of dominant immersion and residual distance—a distance which keeps it from turning altogether into delusion. (Wolf 2013a: v)

1. Introduction

In the epigraphic quotations, an “ordinary reader” and a literary scholar are writing about the experience of reading fiction. For one, being immersed in fictional worlds is a profound cognitive, even spiritual experience. For the other, immersion is, when not countered by “residual distance,” a delusion. The size of the gap between the nonexpert and the academic terminology is undeniable. The question is how to respond to it. My response will build both on argumentation and on empirical evidence from nonacademic readers.

The experience of engaging with fiction as fiction—being drawn into fictional worlds, or losing oneself in a good story—is one of the primary objects of cognitive literary study: first, because the reading of texts has typically had priority over the writing of them in the cognitive literary field, and secondly because this feeling of being drawn in seems to encapsulate something crucial about why we read and care about reading. Thus, even inquiries into other aspects of the reading experience—mental imagery, say, or emotional engagement with characters—are often framed in terms of how they help illuminate that central question: why and how fiction engages us at all.

Because the experience in question is so broad and ill-defined, it's unsurprising that a plethora of terms have long been competing for priority in the critical lexicon. Currently, the main contenders are probably "immersion" (the least technical and most widespread), "aesthetic illusion" (Wolf, e.g., 2013b), and "transportation" (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000), with others including "storyworld absorption" (Kuijpers et al. 2014), "presence" (which has migrated from virtual-reality research, e.g., Troscianko et al. 2012, and "narrative engagement" (Busselle and Bilandzic 2009).

All but aesthetic illusion and narrative engagement are overtly metaphorical, and the thing about metaphor is that—whether or not you sign up to all the specifics of accounts of conceptual metaphor like Lakoff and Johnson's ([1980] 2003)—it structures our thoughts often without us even being aware of it. If you speak of argument or debate in terms of violent conflict (his claims are hard to defend, their criticisms hit the mark, that claim can be easily demolished), you make it harder for yourself to conceive it as reciprocal give and take, or mutual enrichment, or mental agility training, or performative dance—and you often don't even realize you've shut down these possibilities. Even once you turn an eye to the metaphors themselves, though, it's hard to describe the engaged fiction-reading experience without favoring one metaphorical field or the other by accident: both parts of my opening description, for example, used metaphors of transportation (being "drawn" away from the real world, "losing" oneself in the fictional one). Even the apparently more neutral bits, like "world," push us in one direction or another: the idea of fictional world-creation probably aligns us more closely with immersion or transportation, whereas adding the qualifier "storyworld" might direct our attention more toward plot, and moving all the way to "narrative" makes the textual discourse level more salient.

The point is, we start to predefine the experience as soon as we start to talk about it, and although this is always true of the relationship between experience and language, it's

something that, in the academic study of a phenomenon, we need to acknowledge and counter with careful reflective practice. Part of the job of being an academic is to take reasonable measures to ensure that our language is a help rather than a hindrance (or at the very least fit for purpose) in our investigation of what it refers to.

Before being part of the Prague colloquium on aesthetic illusion last spring, I hadn't given this particular terminological competition much thought, and certainly didn't have strong feelings about any of the rival terms. Immersion was the most familiar to me, and the one I was most likely to use by default, but I wrote about readers being drawn into fictional worlds without much concern for which theoretical framework I might or might not thereby be allying myself with. The meeting was a helpful prod to reflect on the ins and outs of at least some of the main terms, and to ask which might best fit the reality of readers' experiences.

More specifically, it was also a valuable opportunity to get to grips with the presuppositions and implications bound up with "aesthetic illusion," which are numerous and complex. I don't think I'd ever really quite understood what was meant by the term—or rather, why it goes by the name it does. By the end of the event I felt I had clarity on the things that make aesthetic illusion both an interesting and a problematic term and concept. In this chapter, I'll start by outlining what I see as the interest and potential of aesthetic illusion. Then I'll consider its problems (based largely on Werner Wolf's presentation of the concept, at the colloquium and in earlier publications, but also considering others' uses of it). Then, broadening out, I'll present some empirical evidence on the terms and metaphors used by one subpopulation of readers when writing about their reading experiences, with the aim of showing how valuable a corrective such data can be to forms of thought that may have started to lose touch with their objects.

My broad argument will be that there are both theoretical and empirical reasons to ask whether “aesthetic illusion” is an appropriate term to be using to talk about experiences of reading fiction. Not that I have a perfect alternative to propose—far from it. Maybe, though, there are others—existent or still to be coined—that can deal with this particular set of challenges better than aesthetic illusion can.

Before I begin, I’d like to say a few more words about the relationship between theory and data. As I’ve said, terminology—and especially metaphorical terminology—shapes our thought so effectively that once we have a term or set of terms in place it can be hard to think outside them. This is where empirical data come in. The data I’ll be relying on are qualitative, self-report, survey data: they benefit from no experimental control conditions, no indirect measures or concealment of investigator intentions. That is, they are in essence simply the results of asking people to write about their reading. Those people represent a particular population—they are primarily women, primarily with experience of disordered eating and now in their teens, twenties, or thirties—and, as I’ll discuss in more detail later, this specificity has its pros and its cons in serving a useful function in the current inquiry. More broadly speaking, the differences between their statements and what I or any other lone literary scholar might say about literature lie primarily in their type and degree of expertise (none of the respondents reported doing literary studies for a living), and, most notably, in their numbers: 885 people (the total number of survey respondents) are considerably more than one.

This is not to say the 885 must be “right,” and the one cannot be; just that relying on more than isolated examples of reflection from experts in a certain style of institutionally encouraged fiction reading can be helpful in the endeavor of remaining self-critical in our disciplinary practices. We claim to talk about “the reading experience,” to be delving into the

mysteries of “why people read fiction,” so we need to make sure that our claims are based on more than our own experiences, which are unrepresentative *by definition*.

Especially once debate emerges around a particular technical term, empirical data are an appropriate way of offering an evidence base and moving past theoretical stalemate. Beyond the arguments for aesthetic illusion or any of the alternatives, empirical work is important in giving us the means to repeatedly recalibrate our assumptions and, where necessary, break up entrenched communities of support for inherited terminologies.

2. Aesthetic illusion: Some definitions

Aesthetic illusion (AeI) is the current incarnation of a long tradition of thinking about the effects of art in terms of illusion, a tradition formalized by Ernst Gombrich’s ([1960] [2002](#)) book *Art and Illusion*. The literary critic Werner Wolf gave the term its aesthetic prefix, and has published extensively on its definition, entailments, and manifestations ([1993a](#), [1993b](#), [1998](#), [2004](#), [2006](#), [2011](#), [2013a](#), [2013b](#), [2013c](#)). In what follows, I’ll draw most heavily on his most recent exposition in which the definition and its implications have been refined beyond their earlier incarnations, but I’ll also refer to earlier discussions by him, and on other researchers’ applications of the term, where they help make a particular point more clearly.

Aesthetic illusion is defined by Wolf as “a hybrid consisting of a predominant impression of experiential immersion in, and a latent rational distance towards, a represented world” (2008), or “a synthesis of dominant immersion and residual distance” ([2013a](#): v), or, more extensively:

Aesthetic illusion consists primarily of a feeling, with variable intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world and of experiencing this world in a way similar (but not identical) to real life. At the same time, however, this impression of immersion is counterbalanced by a latent rational distance resulting from a culturally acquired awareness of the difference between representation and reality. ([2011](#))

3. Aesthetic illusion: Points of interest

AeI is the only common critical term at our disposal that makes complexity, duality, and ambivalence central. For this reason alone, it deserves our attention. There are several ways in which these characteristics might helpfully guide our thinking about responses to fiction.

First, the idea of responses to aesthetic objects being in some way illusory foregrounds the nature of our engagements with fiction as a capacity for feeling, perceiving, responding, *as-if*: as if we lived in nineteenth-century Russia, as if we could see the alien lurking in the shadows, as if this man we're crying for had really lived and died. These cognitively complex layers of mediation and of seeming merit further exploration, and could also be profitably connected with scientific and philosophical debates about whether perception itself is in some way illusory (see, for example, the book *Is the Visual World a Grand Illusion?*, edited by Alva Noë [2002]) and whether we can ever be mistaken about the nature of our own experience.

The dual quality of immersion and distance on which AeI is founded also encourages us to think beyond easy assumptions about emotional engagement with characters, which can fall unreflectively into strong and undifferentiated claims about “identification” and “empathy.” This aspect of AeI offers points of contact with other theories that focus on the complex, stratified, sometimes ambivalent nature of engagement with fiction, such as models of shared attention (Polvinen 2013) or the side-participant stance (Gerrig 1993). These possibilities have already started to be capitalized on in discussions of the shifting relations between perceptual and conceptual understanding in film (Cammack 2013) and the paradoxical doublings that happen when we have an illusion of watching ourselves having an illusion, or get involved in “tilting games” in which the mimetic and the performative are alternately foregrounded and backgrounded (Mahler 2013, e.g., p. 176). But in an interesting irony, even though Jocelyn Cammack is exploring why immersion should be exchanged for something more complex and bistable, she seems to treat the term AeI as equivalent to

immersion. That is, the complexities are explored despite her understanding of AeI, not thanks to it (see point (f) in the following section).

More generally, the dual foundation of AeI has the potential to structure critical reflection on the complexities of responses to multiple forms of text and performance, including how these responses manifest evolved capacities for play, for symbolic interpretation, and for cognitive metarepresentation (Mellmann 2013). It seems likely that awareness of mediality will always play some kind of role in such responses, with varying levels of salience and varying effects on other elements of the reading or viewing or listening experience. This potential is arguably lacking in all other available frameworks for thinking about engagement with fiction, meaning AeI could be an important tool in our critical armory. However, I'll explain in the following section why this important potential isn't yet fully realized in AeI, and why we may need to develop an alternative—or overhaul AeI itself—so as to preserve its dual structure but avoid its current pitfalls.

4. Aesthetic illusion: Some problems

The definitions previously quoted, even the shortest one, raise quite a few questions. I'll now address the main ones, first to get to grips with what AeI actually is, and secondly to ask whether it's the most appropriate way of designating what goes on when we engage with fiction. (AeI is presented as a transmedial theory, and as broadly “*indifferent to the opposition fictionality/factuality*” (Wolf 2013b: 12; original italics), but prose fiction is described as one of the prime elicitors of AeI (4). So although many of the points I'll be making are unrelated to the question of medium, (prose) fiction will be my go-to test case.)

a. Illusion

Let's start with the kernel of AeI, the idea of *illusion*. This is for me the first and perhaps the most obdurate sticking point of all: for both my past self, coming to it with nothing but general literary and linguistic instinct, and my present self, after

months of thinking on and off about AeI, it just doesn't seem like the right word. An illusion is something that is not as it seems. What, in the experience of engaging with fiction, is not as it seems? Does anyone think they're actually *in* the fictional world when they read about it? Probably not. But even if they did, this wouldn't, in the AeI framework, be the right kind of illusion to qualify: it would be a *delusion*—in Wolf's terms, "a state of erroneous perception" (2013b: 16), and one of the "delusionary states that are ... nonaesthetic because they are involuntary and nondistanced" (2004: 328). (I'll come back to the concepts of distance and voluntariness later. In his 2013 book, Wolf no longer explicitly includes the latter, and it is "distance" alone that "keeps it [AeI] from turning altogether into delusion", 2013a: v.) For Wolf, then, "illusion" is not just distinct from "delusion"; it's unquestionably preferable to it. Although the reason why is never made clear, Wolf attaches consistently negative value judgments to his notion of delusion: "aesthetic illusion has degenerated to delusion" (2013b: 14), the average recipient "is distanced enough not to become the victim of an experiential or referential delusion" (31); "we remain in fact in our right minds" if we stay in the realm of AeI (15), and so on. This places him in the uncomfortable position of having to call full immersion a (regrettable) delusion, even though (as I'll discuss later) at other times he is happy to see immersion used as a synonym for AeI itself. Here already we start to see the tangles the term gets us caught in.

Meanwhile, the trouble is that "[t]he meaning of 'illusion' in ordinary language is not clearly distinguished from that of 'delusion'" (Brinker 1977: 191). Illusion has, in everyday English, weaker connotations of the same thing as delusion, so if we want it to mean something quite different (for example, to denote certain things about distance and/or agency), we're committing ourselves to a losing battle

against natural language use. We can say repeatedly that we take illusion to mean something like immersion, or a willing suspension of disbelief, but in nonspecialized uses of language, it simply doesn't mean these things. Ordinary usage gently prods us into associating illusion with negative qualities like deception: Cammack (2013), for instance, speaks of "Film's illusory capacity, that is, its capacity to give rise to a deceptive appearance" (311). But does an immersive film really do anything *deceptive*?

In response to this problem, Wolf has acknowledged that because of the "rational distance" involved, "an 'aesthetic illusion' is actually not an 'illusion' but an 'experiential pseudo-illusion'" (2004: 328). That is, there is the potential for illusion to arise, but it doesn't. *Pseudo* isn't totally unambiguous either, poised between a *false* or *non*-illusion and an *apparent* illusion, but the meaning is ultimately clear enough: precisely the absence of illusion is a defining quality of the engagement with fiction. This seems pretty important: the term's intellectual proprietor remarks that the experience denoted by the term in fact involves the non-presence of what the term normally means.

In discussion in Prague, Wolf noted that he often finds himself fighting against the negative connotations of illusion, like error or the deliberate intention to deceive, and hence has to insist all the more strongly on the "aesthetic" prefix. In his 2013 book, similarly, he says that "[i]f we use 'illusion' without a terminological qualification, there is always the danger of reverting to the old negative connotation ... of 'illusion' as a state of perceptual or conceptual error which should best be avoided" (2013b: 20)—a meaning he wishes, as we've seen, to reserve for "delusion." Relying on one half of a term to undo the unwanted connotations of the other half, as well as doing definitional work of its own, doesn't seem like a strategy one would

choose if creating appropriate terminology from scratch. In Prague, we kept being brought back to resigned or impatient agreement that no, the illusion isn't "literal," but after a while all those reiterations start to raise the question of why we keep using the term that makes them necessary.

b. Aesthetic

The word *aesthetic* is used to show that this is a particular kind of illusion distinct from the general case. This seems unremarkable at first—after all, in the central case we are talking about fiction, that is, about art, that is not about cognition operating under normal circumstances. However, quickly an ambiguity arises: is the illusion aesthetic because its stimulus is an aesthetic object (e.g., a novel), or because the illusion itself has aesthetic qualities regardless of its stimulus? Wolf's answer seems to be the latter: "'illusion' points to 'immersion,' while 'aesthetic' does not only mean 'sensory' in the original etymological sense, but implies—admittedly in an unetymological way—a certain attitude in the recipient" (2013b: 21). AeI is not limited to responses to works of art, but merely presupposes a disposition that is typical of the reception of art (though it's found elsewhere too)—what Wolf calls a "reception predisposition" (22). He notes, too, that there's no particular need to label this predisposition "aesthetic": a good alternative, if we didn't mind adding yet another new term to the repertoire of options, might be "medial illusion" (21–2).

The trouble is that as soon as you call something aesthetic (or medial), you're saying that it is qualitatively different from the nonaesthetic (or non-medial): that at some point a dividing line can be drawn. This may or may not be the case with the experience AeI denotes; it's an empirical question. We may or may not be confident that questions about processing and about experience can in general be addressed through observation and experimental manipulation (a question on which the future of

empirical literary studies hinges, as well as the future of many areas of psychology). But if we believe that currently available methods of inquiry have at least some purchase on some questions about human experience, then this one should be resolvable: we can study a wide class of responses that are hypothesized to fall within or without the “aesthetic” category, on the range of variables expected to be relevant to the aesthetic/nonaesthetic distinction, and see whether there are any qualitative or quantitative differences justifying it. Given that it seems implausible that we could ever establish a quantitative boundary between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic (beyond x amount of emotional engagement with a fictional character, a response starts or stops being aesthetic), the differences we would have to find would need to be qualitative (variable x exists or is absent in aesthetic responses only).

For Wolf, variable x is apparently “distance.” As we’ve seen, he says that delusion is nonaesthetic because it’s nondistanced (and in some statements also involuntary). So the reasoning runs as follows: delusions are nonaesthetic because they are nondistanced, therefore AeI must involve (partial) distance, therefore an illusion (as thus defined) is necessarily aesthetic. This circularity means that the phenomenon in question must be the way it is because that’s how it has already been defined: there is no scope for the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic to be found to be qualitatively equivalent, because with respect to distance (and possibly voluntariness) they are required to be opposed. Empirical investigation could not impinge on this schema, since if we found “distance” where we weren’t expecting it, or didn’t find it where we were, that would result in a recategorization of the response in question rather than a challenge to the categories themselves.

This preclusion of meaningful empirical exploration is all the odder given that one of the planks of the AeI argument is the “analogy thesis”: the idea that there is an

analogy or correspondence between aesthetic and other experience, such that “the recipient can perceive or experience [a represented world] as if it were (a) reality, that is, in analogy to everyday experience” (Wolf 2013b: 36, also p. 25). As I’ve mentioned, Wolf also makes clear that no fact/fiction distinction is required by AI: “the quasi-experiential nature of aesthetic illusion renders it *to a large extent indifferent to the opposition fictionality/factuality*” (12)—though a little later he remarks on our “ability to differentiate between reality and fiction, between natural and artificial phenomena” (28). He mentions “news hunger,” or a thirst for information, as one of the anthropological preconditions for AeI, along with our “theory of mind,” our empathic capacities, and our social natures more generally (27–8). So, in sum, AeI is on a continuum with all sorts of other engagements with fictional or factual socially relevant stimuli. But on the other hand, the definition of AeI depends on separating it from experiences (e.g., illusions) that would be labeled *nonaesthetic*, and, as we’ll see in the next section, even avoids calling it a proper experience at all. There seem to be profoundly conflicting impulses here: on the one hand, to bring aesthetic and other experiences into proximity with each other, on the other hand, to separate them categorically. Rather than provide clear falsifiable hypotheses about this question, the AeI framework hedges its bets in a way that makes it very hard to criticize—except on precisely that basis.

And the broader question that rears its head here is whether “aesthetic” can be assumed to be an appropriate way of describing all experiences of reading all kinds of fiction. The leap from calling something fiction to calling it an aesthetic object, or from identifying something as a reading experience to calling it an aesthetic experience, is commonly made without comment. But if a reader reads short stories carelessly or is bored by what she reads, or reads novels by Fontane in order to teach

herself about the geography of Berlin, or *Harry Potter* to improve her chances of getting a job in children's publishing, is her experience necessarily an aesthetic one? Or, at the other end of the spectrum, is a highly "absorbed" experience in which the boundaries between the reading self and the read-about self are most porous *aesthetic*? Does whether you conceive of yourself as having a specifically aesthetic experience already change the experience (Mellmann 2013: 82–3)? The data I'll present in the second half of this chapter seem in many cases to describe experiences that are very absorbed and not very aesthetic at all. So what, in the end, is aesthetic about fiction reading? Is it important that we set this out rather than assuming it?

c. Quasi

Once we want AeI to be qualitatively distinct from nonaesthetic phenomena, it's easy to take the next step, as Wolf does, and say that it isn't actually a normal experience at all: the nondistanced component of AeI "involves emotions and sensory quasi-perceptions (including, but not restricted to, visual imagination)" (2011); "aesthetic illusion is essentially and primarily a quasi-experience" (2013b: 33). We've already encountered *quasi*'s sibling, *pseudo*, in Wolf's remark about the illusion really being "experiential pseudo-illusion," but *quasi* is just as crucial to the model. In AeI, what we have when we engage with fiction are quasi-experiences, quasi-perceptions, quasi-emotions (Wolf never uses this last term, but he includes emotions in the quasi category, e.g., 2013b: 12). This terminology crops up in other literary-theoretical contexts too, particularly when someone is trying to support the bizarrely popular idea that there is a "paradox of fiction" (that it's paradoxical to feel emotions for people we know don't really exist), or otherwise demarcate the aesthetic realm from the nonaesthetic (e.g. Walton 1978).

But what is a quasi-perception, or a quasi-experience? Are they *quasi* because they have different initiating stimuli from other perceptions or experiences? (This brings us back to the subject of the previous section: the meaning of *aesthetic*.) Or because they involve different physiological (including neural) responses? Or because there's something different about how they feel? Investigation of the first two domains—the triggers and the objective aspects of response—can tell us only that these cases and others lie on a continuum, or in a constellation: eye movements, visual processing, physical markers of fear or excitement, neural corollaries of motor response, measures of “mindreading” and mental imagery—none of these things shows any categorical difference from its occurrence in other relevant contexts (reading nonfiction, remembering, listening to a news report, getting frightened in dark woods). As we've seen, Wolf also doesn't require there to be anything different about the objects that can and can't elicit AeI. And although he devotes little attention to physiology, he doesn't seem to make any claims about categorical differences between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic.

This leaves us with the *how it feels*—and maybe there is something special about that. This is a matter for introspection, with all the caveats that entails, not least the thorny question of whether or not we can lack full insight into, or be positively mistaken about, our own experience. If I try carefully to attend to my own experience when reading a novel I love, I can pick out, perhaps, a sense of feeling with the protagonist, and a projection of my own experiences on to the protagonist, and a desire to know what happens next mingled with vague memories of when I read it before, interrupted now and then by thoughts of what I have to do later, and awareness of the room around me and having slight stiffness in my shoulders and being slightly nervous about a talk I have to give tomorrow, and so on. I can't identify

anything that feels like it needs a different category from experiences I have at other times: when listening to an interesting radio interview, for example, or trying to focus on constructing this argument, or remembering an important conversation from last year. This may not be true for everyone, of course, but I've never read any clear description of an experiential phenomenon that makes it sound fundamentally *aesthetic*, in a sense that warrants a category distinction as opposed to a careful assessment of the always grey zones of many matters of degree.

And even if one were to identify such a feature, we ought to ask whether it's best conveyed with the prefix *quasi* (from the Latin for "as if" or "almost"): it seems hard to imagine an experience that would be best captured by being called either only *seemingly* an experience, or only *partially* an experience, or a *not-quite-real* experience. (This is quite different from the notion of *as-if* experience I discussed earlier; the reality of the experience itself is there not in doubt.) Wolf's 2013 exposition offers another possibility: "Aesthetic illusion thus elicits *quasi-experiences*" (2013b: 11–12; original italics). The idea that AeI *results in* quasi-experience runs counter to what seems to be the case everywhere else: that AeI *is* a quasi-experience. But it seems no more plausible than that more prevalent account.

The terminology feels all wrong, just as it does when Wolf ends up remarking on the fact that the outward signs of emotional involvement during AeI "are surprisingly similar to real-life reactions" (2013b: 7). Totally unsurprisingly, they look like real-life reactions because they *are* real-life reactions. The person who is reading is really alive and is reacting to something just as real as my mother telling me a story about her brother's partner.

Some researchers who use the concept of AeI strongly resist the *quasi* label, insisting on the reality of the experience, however virtual its prompts (Wessely 2013:

358). Others, like Katharina Bantleon and Ulrich Tragatschnig (2013), do take on the *quasi* label, speaking, for example, of the “quasi-experience allowing the beholder to become immersed in the represented world” (272). Interestingly, though, *quasi* is here applied to the phenomenon of immersion, not to AeI proper; I’ll return to this in point (f). Beyond that complication, however, the notion of the quasi-experience sits uneasily next to an interest in the personal-level factors such as familiarity and emotional involvement that may help shape viewers’ experiences of visual art, and in the double-layered qualities such experiences can have. Calling them *quasi* can only serve to discourage or complicate serious inquiry into the prerequisites and constituents of such experiences, which requires that we treat them straightforwardly *as* real-world experiences.

d. Aesthetic objects: Artefacts and representations

The things that elicit the quasi-experiences of AeI are aesthetic objects, or works of art, or illusionist artefacts, or simply artefacts, which include “non-artistic medial artefacts” (Wolf 2013b: 2). Typically, these triggers are “representations” (11), which include “representational texts, artifacts or performances” (Wolf 2011). Indeed, “aesthetic illusion cannot be triggered by natural phenomena, nor refer to artefacts that are either non-representational or do not create (or suggest) an imaginable world” (Wolf 2013b: 10). It’s easy to see why there’s some slippage among all these lists: *artefact* is too narrow if we want to allow things like theatrical performance to elicit AeI, but once we broaden out to *representation*, it’s hard to exclude things like news reports or gossip.

These slippery constraints cause problems when one tries to apply the AeI concept to art forms that are less obviously representational, like music. Walter Bernhart (2013) quotes some statements on how only representations can elicit AeI

and concludes: “So we may as well close our discussion and accept that there is no aesthetic illusion in instrumental music” (368). Happily, he doesn’t stop there, but the discussion that follows centers on his attempts to tweak and expand Wolf’s definitions so that they can fit the musical case. The topics of discussion—is music representational or not, is the perceptual really more important than the emotional, or the external more than the internal—are arguably a case of analytical energies having been diverted into questions that were based on mistaken premises from the outset and that distract from the more interesting ones that could be asked about the kinds of experiences music elicits in listeners, freed of this framework.

False dichotomies of this kind abound in AeI. Wolf sometimes remarks on the “non-natural character of representation” (2011), but representation is not nonnatural: we would struggle to come up with a definition that included a story but excluded many everyday uses of language, or a schematic cognitive model of the environment, or indeed nonhuman phenomena like some forms of camouflage. Again, a clear cut-off point between the “natural” and the “representational” seems hard to achieve but is posited by AeI theory, just as are those between the aesthetic and nonaesthetic, the experience and the quasi-experience, the emotional and the rational, and all the other pairings on which the idea of AeI relies.

Nonetheless, again the opposites are partially collapsed as soon as they’re created: despite being defined as “non-natural,” it turns out that “genres and media can also be viewed as being part of reality” (Wolf 2013b: 13)—though how *reality* relates to *nature* is unclear. Finally, Wolf also equivocates about the representation issue. There is only one general proviso about the AeI trigger, we learn: “namely ... that it is (or at least suggests) a *representation*” (35). Ultimately, representation seems

far too broad to be useful, and artefact too narrow, and so we're left in an ill-defined territory somewhere in between.

e. Distance

As we've learned, what distinguishes AeI from nonaesthetic illusions (or, presumably, other pseudo-illusions) is that it combines *immersion in* with *distance from* a represented world. By definition, both total immersion and total distance (however we try to define these poles) are excluded from the state of being subject to the AeI.

So what exactly is this distance, and how does it relate to the immersed state? AeI seems to be founded on the assumption that distance has to be rational and immersion emotional: "Aesthetic illusion consists primarily of a feeling, with variable intensity, of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world ... counterbalanced by a latent rational distance resulting from a culturally acquired awareness of the difference between representation and reality" (Wolf 2011); "While rationality is thus not excluded from aesthetic illusion ..., emotional involvement is a more important facet of the state of mind under discussion" (Wolf 2013b: 7). At certain points, Wolf seems ready to hesitate about the emotion-immersion equation: AeI lies somewhere between the poles of "total rational distance" and "complete (and *predominantly* emotional) imaginative immersion" (16–17; my italics). And on one occasion, the distance is not rational (rationality would be a hindrance to AeI's existence) but "evaluative, perhaps compassionate" (2013c: 213)—which confuses things further. But the immersion-emotion versus distance-rationality opposition is assumed in almost every statement about AeI's two poles.

Unobjectionable as it might seem at first glance, there's no reason why we need make this automatic alignment, and there are good reasons not to. Firstly, the

rationality-emotion distinction arguably isn't meaningful in the first place. Emotional response can be persuasively characterized as based on a broadly cognitive appraisal of *what this means to me now* (e.g., Frijda 2007); the evolutionary purpose of emotion is to flexibly drive goal-orientated action, and it does so in close interaction with all the evaluative mechanisms we might tend to classify as "rational." Furthermore, emotions like fear and disgust are arguably more effectively "distancing" than any "rational" response could be. Equally, evaluations we might want to place in the rational camp, like admiration or concentration, can of course be powerfully anti-distancing, and sweeping claims like "comedy and laughter always imply emotional distance" (Wolf 2013b: 41) are belied by any decent romcom, sitcom, or work of tragicomedy. Finally, in the context specifically of fiction reading, there's similarly no reason to assume that "rational" elements of response can't contribute to immersion or emotional ones to distance, even if those are the right metaphorical parameters to be using.

Wolf grudgingly allows "reason" to contribute to immersion "to the extent that it is required to make sense of the represented world" (2013b: 23), but he states that "[a]esthetic illusion can, for instance, to a certain extent include rational reactions, although this does characteristically *not* mean a pronounced 'technical' interest in or appreciation of ... the way in which the artefact is made or structured" (7). This again seems reasonable at first glance, but when we see the idea applied to specific examples of engagement with art, we see its limitations. Bantleon and Tragatschnig discuss the case of an oil painting of New York that looks like a photograph, and about the double illusion that may result from looking at it. The notion of illusion/delusion encourages them to claim that the viewer "is actually tricked into temporarily mistaking a representation for what it represents" (2013: 272), which

seems unlikely: do we really think we're looking at Central Park? Beyond this, the process of coming to realize that the painting is not a photograph is described in terms that feel far too black-and-white: starting from "undisturbed immersion," we "eventually activate the frame of rational distance" and suspicion and work out that it's a painting (271). Intruding into this schema are indications that the distancing is in fact emotional as much as intellectual: the eerie stillness of the lake and the heightened intensity of color are excellent examples of how inevitable cognitive-perceptual-emotional intertwinings are in the engagement with artistic form and content.

The cognitive-literary scholar Merja Polvinen unpicks the closely related assumption that "involvement with narrative can only mean engagement with the events and characters represented, not engagement with the artefact itself," noting that many of the empirical paradigms used to assess degree of "transportation" or similar provide "no option ... for respondents to indicate that they may be caught up in a novel's way of using language, in the intricacies of its narrative structures, or, indeed, in its fictionality" (2017). Engagement with metafictional devices or linguistic patterning can be just as important to the "immersed" reading experience as engagement with character or plot, and Polvinen suggests a model of "double vision" as an alternative to AeI and other frameworks that pit awareness of fictionality and engagement with the fictional world against each other on the spatially construed ("from within," "from without" [Wolf 2013b: 22]) dimension of immersion—distance. AeI could offer a flexible account of *as-if* duality along just these lines, but entrenched ideas about the reason-emotion dichotomy prevent it from doing so.

There's also ambiguity in the degree and/or status of the distance in the AeI model. On the one hand, "rational *distance* is a necessary constituent of it [AeI]"

(2004: 328). On the other hand, this distance is often described as “latent”—that is, as not fully actualized, or present but not directly observable or measurable: “This constitutive immersion is, however, counterbalanced by a latent rational distance” (2013b: 52). In Wolf’s 2013 exposition, “residual” offers an optional alternative to “latent”: “we at the same time maintain a residual rational awareness of our true situation” (15). This may mean just “minimal,” but may also have the stronger meaning of something created by a previous reaction—or, in statistical terms, the distance between an observation and a model’s line of best fit. Nowhere is it ever made clear what the latency (or the residue) is, or how exactly the distance would be different if it weren’t latent (or residual). However, the rationale for the qualifier is evident in statements about how AeI is “a complex phenomenon characterized by an asymmetrical ambivalence” (16). It seems that the “distance” mustn’t be allowed to seem too significant, but that there is also resistance to straightforwardly calling it “minimal” or “low-level,” or otherwise conveying a simple quantitative function. Again, it’s almost as if the intention is to defend AeI from empirical investigations that might provide evidence against a clearly articulated claim about a quantifiable degree—or perhaps just to make it seem more “remarkable and complicated, ... even ... paradoxical” (4) than it otherwise would. But the danger is that this defense gets carried out by means of terms that create more obscurity than intrigue.

f. Related phenomena: Immersion and transportation

AeI is explicitly if not unproblematically defined as a complex combination of immersed and distanced responses with all the specific characteristics we’ve just explored. It is categorically impossible for it to be the same as, say, “immersion,” which is one of the mutually exclusive poles between which AeI sits. (That is, unless immersion itself is taken to be a gradable phenomenon that, at the low end, includes

lots of “distance,” but this would make the whole notion of AeI redundant.) And yet researchers who tend to favor alternative terms with different reference points can be found aligning their research unhesitatingly with AeI: in Wolf’s 2013 book, Marie-Laure Ryan equates the two—“aesthetic illusion, or immersion” (Ryan 2013: 140)—before moving rapidly on. Other contributors to the same volume do this too: indeed, a striking fact about this book is that of the twelve chapters (one by Wolf himself), only four (Mellmann, Mahler, Wolf, and Bernhart) adopt the definition of AeI as involving two contrasting elements of immersion and distance. One contributor doesn’t even try to work out how participation in make-believe relates to AeI, immersion, or suspension of disbelief, but wryly leaves that pleasure to the reader (Walton 2013: 129). The other seven all conflate AeI with some combination of immersion, transportation, illusionism (i.e., immersion/deception), lifelikeness, plausibility, and/or imitation of reality. Ryan works her way toward the idea of a *lucid aesthetic experience* equivalent to AeI, but never seems to realize that precisely this, not immersion or imaginative re-centering, is what AeI means (Ryan 2013: 142). It will be interesting to see how often this tacit redefining of AeI happens in the present volume.

Wolf in fact does the same thing elsewhere, referring to terms like absorption, re-centering, and immersion as “the various synonyms [for AeI] used in research” (2011), or, more carefully, speaking of “one, albeit dominant, facet of aesthetic illusion, namely immersion” (2013b: 20). A little later in the same discussion, however, he attempts to clarify the situation: because immersion designates “the dominant constituent of aesthetic illusion,” it “may thus be used, like ‘illusion’ as a synonym of “aesthetic illusion” in the way in which “illusion” *tout court* may be employed by way of abbreviation” (22). So immersion is an acceptable shorthand for

AeI, even though we know it omits one of the phenomenon's two defining elements (distance). And it's acceptable by analogy with illusion, short for aesthetic illusion, which we've learned doesn't even involve any actual illusion.

Thus AeI finds itself in the strange position of having been created as a theoretical alternative to concepts with which it is now quite casually being equated, as well as going by the name of something precluded by it.

g. Typicality

The theory of AeI never quite makes clear how typical the phenomenon is taken to be for experiences whose stimuli meet the criteria in point (e). “[AeI] manifests itself as a pleasurable feeling, of variable intensity, which can be triggered in the recipients by many—though not all—works of art, artefacts or performances” (Wolf 2013a: v). Leaving aside the question of whether “pleasurable” is really the right way to characterize every single instance of AeI, presumably it isn't inevitable that the stimuli listed lead to AeI, since alternative states like “delusion” (which may or may not be equivalent to immersion) are also possible (when “distance” is lacking). But at some points it seems that any powerful engagement with a relevant artefact does in fact constitute AeI: “[W]hoever, for instance, has felt fear, horror and suspense when reading a novel or playing a computer game, whoever has been moved to tears during emotionally loaded film scenes and whoever has pitied tragic characters such as King Lear on stage testifies to have been in the grip of aesthetic illusion” (2013b: 4).

These examples are an odd choice for a claim about AeI as opposed to immersion, since they epitomize responses that lack any obvious element of “distance,” “latent” or otherwise: if you pity Lear, get scared playing *Alien Isolation*, or cry when Boromir dies in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, it's because those people and

situations are emotionally real to you. You'll probably also have some degree of awareness that the aliens aren't actually in the room, or of the layers of mythology that separate you from Middle Earth, but those "distancing" elements run counter to what is given in Wolf's description here. More obviously good examples are given a little later on: for example, "[i]n painting or cinema film, it is the penetration of the canvas or screen which we seem to disregard and yet perceive" (2013b: 15). But maybe sometimes the duality of awareness (of what's represented and the fact of it being a representation) can be absent and the response still count as AeI: "[AeI] thus harbours a mute 'observing ego,' which (*in most cases*) simultaneously coexists with the experiencing ego" (16; my italics). No indication is given of what is special about the cases where there isn't such a separation—or rather, of what makes them still qualify as AeI. Wolf notes that the breaking of AeI is always a "latent" possibility within itself (19), leading easily to a game of immersion followed by distancing and again by immersion. And though immersion seems to be viewed as the default option in many cases "during the reception of representations" (23), immersion itself is then described as involving the recipient's half-awareness of a "rational, metareferential security cord permitting him or her to emerge from the illusionist 'plunge' at will" (23)—which sounds a lot like what AeI is meant to be.

h. Imagination and the mental screen

Imaginative response is crucial to AeI: a response doesn't count as AeI if you're emotional "*without* being induced to develop "internal images" or other representational imaginations" (2013b: 7; original italics). "[AeI] is thus first and foremost the inner, mental experiencing of (elements of) an imaginative world which is elicited and shaped by an artefact" (7–8). This raises more questions for film and visual art, which depend largely on visual perception, than for reading, where mental

imagery plays an obviously more salient role. But what is most striking here is the theory's lack of engagement with the qualities and mechanisms of as central a cognitive faculty as the imagination.

AeI, Wolf says, is the result of a particular combination of the representational trigger, the context, and the individual recipient. Having listed all the obvious facets of individual variation like experience, age, and gender (29), and set out the defining characteristics of the "average recipient" (ibid.: 31), Wolf then turns to a metaphor to describe the recipient's role. The recipient is a film director or producer, for whom the "illusionist representation" provides the script (or raw material), which combined with knowledge, empathic abilities, and so forth contributes to creating the "'projection' on their minds' 'screens'" (27, also p. 24). In the next sentence, he equates the "mental screen" with "the imagination." One would think, first off, that the act of projection would be a better candidate for the imagination than the screen on to which the projections are made. But more importantly, there are many reasons why we should resist the intuitive conflation of the visual with the pictorial (see also Wolf 2013c: 222), question the metaphor of "pictures in the head," and not think of the mind, or (any part of) the brain, as a screen, display, or other 2-D array that requires a metacognitive agent (some kind of homunculus) to decode its content (see, e.g., Troscianko 2013).

This facet of the AeI account doesn't make a huge difference to anything else, except in eliding the already ambiguous causal/constitutive elements of AeI with a mental-screen metaphor that is scientifically and philosophically problematic, and is being applied to the most important element of the cognitive response.

i. Summary

I hope I have said enough to make clear that despite its potential, AeI theory is hard to make sense of as a theory of aesthetic response. I don't have the space here to review the pros and cons of AeI's competitors, but to me at least, it's clear that if we want a critical term that foregrounds a duality of potentially conflicting responses, we need a less problematic one than AeI. We need one that has the clarity to encourage empirical and introspective exploration which will further our explorations of the big questions that arise when we think about engagement with fiction. These include the relations between "aesthetic" and "nonaesthetic," between "immersion" and "distance," or between other more helpful categories; the ubiquity and typical elicitors of the experience; and the roles of the various cognitive faculties and factors of personal and contextual variability involved in creating it.

5. Aesthetic illusion in empirical practice

The openness of a theory to validation and refinements deriving from evidence may take many forms. The prerequisite of them all is a terminological framework that yields predictions clear enough to be tested and falsified.

AeI hovers somewhere between being a concept and being a theory. Every concept, whether explicitly or implicitly, presupposes some kind of theoretical framework, but the more this context remains implicit, the more ambiguity there is as to whether the aim is description or explanation, and the more explanations can come across as claiming the neutrality of descriptions. One of the striking features of AeI is the gap between those who treat it as a relatively self-explanatory stand-alone concept (usually equivalent to immersion) and those who engage with the theoretical framework Wolf has constructed around it. This discrepancy means we need to tread all the more carefully in evaluating AeI's value.

A simple way of evaluating one aspect of the usefulness of our terminological apparatus is to see whether people spontaneously employ its terms of reference (or closely

related ones) in their descriptions of engaging with fiction. On its own, this kind of evidence can't prove or disprove anything, but it can offer one means of assessing the extent of the perceived relevance or appeal of the terms under theoretical evaluation.

In this section, I provide a brief outline of what a qualitative dataset gathered for entirely other purposes can and can't tell us about one set of readers' ways of writing about their reading experiences. In a recent collaboration with the UK eating-disorders charity Beat, I conducted an online survey to gather data on how people think about the connections between their reading habits and their mental health (with a particular focus on eating disorders). Of the 885 respondents who took part in our online survey, 773 had a personal history of disordered eating. Other findings from the data are set out elsewhere (Troscianko submitted), but here I'll use the qualitative (free-response) data to shed further light on AeI from an empirical perspective.

I will use this dataset first to offer a crude way of adjudicating between the main competing terms in the critical lexicon—AeI, immersion, absorption, and transportation—by asking which of their structures, metaphorical or otherwise, arise most often in respondents' descriptions of their reading experience. Secondly, I'll provide illustrations of how the basic dual structure of AeI may be important in understanding reading experiences not just with critical precision but also for therapeutic benefit. Thirdly, I'll consider other facets of response that arise in the data and that might not be directly predicted by any of the existing terms, but may be useful in further assessing their relative merits.

The survey data include 1,524 qualitative responses, mostly to open-ended questions inviting respondents to tell us more about a particular aspect of their reading. These responses come from 443 respondents, of whom 399 report personal experience of an eating disorder; 274 responses are represented in the various categorizations that follow, which are based on

my own close reading of the responses, plus searches for keywords like “immers-” and “absor-.” (The 274 include 77 responses that were categorized under more than one heading.)

It’s both a weakness and a strength that these data were gathered with completely different questions in mind. It’s a weakness because the focus on the relevance of reading to mental health and illness means the responses may be biased in that direction: whatever kind of reading experience is more likely among people with past or present experience of disordered eating, or is more likely to be emphasized when people are describing reading experiences with an eye to that context, will crop up more than in a more broadly representative sample asked in general terms about their reading experiences. But it’s a strength because the data aren’t restricted or skewed by experimenter biases—in particular, by hypotheses about what aspects of the AeI or other models may or may not be manifested in these readers’ reports of their responses to texts. Respondents can say anything that occurs to them as relevant. There’s only one question that explicitly asks anything directly related to AeI and its competitors: when asked whether they’ve ever read anything that helped them tackle their eating disorder, and then asked how it helped, respondents were given a range of eight options of which one was “offering an escape from the real world into a fictional world”; 178 people selected this option. Having read this question may have had a priming effect on the responses that followed.

A. Frequencies of AeI and other concepts

A basic count of the frequency with which the competing terms crop up in the free responses yields the following results (I include an example for each category, giving every quotation in full and with typos and other idiosyncrasies intact).

Absorption: 6

Example: “For me, it depends if the book is interesting or not, if not then I am likely to become bored, which is a trigger for bingeing; however, if I like the book, then I will become absorbed in it – not thinking about food.”

Immersion (including being “wrapped up in” the book/story): 6

Example: “I live to read and reading is a major passion (I’m a writer, and writers have to read! It’s a compulsive habit!). I’m not happy if I don’t have a book on the go and I love immersing myself in fictional stories and other worlds and my favourite genre is science fiction. After reading sci-fi my mood is raised and I tend to feel more at peace with the Universe, cognitively and imaginatively stimulated and inspired.”

Aesthetic illusion: 15

Example: “I feel less alone – even if the characters are fictional, a real connection can be made. And it’s good to know there is someone out there (i.e. the author) who ‘gets me.’”

Transportation: 13

Example: “takes you to a different world.”

Transportation as escapism (not including cases in which escape-related sentiments are expressed in terms other than “escape”): 68 (26 in elaborations on responses to the question specifically about escape, 42 other)

Example: “I often read fiction to escape day-to-day stresses and worries.”

So the two transportation categories together win by a large margin: 81 occurrences versus only 27 for the other three combined. It’s easy to argue that transportation, and especially transportation inflected with escapist elements, is likely to figure prominently in responses from people with experiences of mental health problems, in a context in which they are being asked to focus on the connections between those problems and their reading. And 26 mentions of escape came in the question that gave “offering an escape” as one of the multiple-choice options. But the two transportation categories, once explored beyond a simple yes or no head count, show internal richness that prevents us from dismissing them, as professional critics have a tendency to do, as “mere escapism.”

The other elements bound up with the experience of being transported and/or escaping from a present reality include the following: engaging more fully with the “world” of the eating disorder, or conversely achieving distance from the disorder or from other preoccupations and achieving a temporary “normality”; being entertained or inspired;

growing happier or calmer or more relaxed, or more excited or creative; taking time for oneself away from other people without seeming rude; engaging with characters as with other (real) people; becoming someone else temporarily, or catching a glimpse of the breadth of potential human experiences; being disorientated on the return to “normal life”; and sleeping better.

The same degree of variation is found in the testimony categorized under “absorption” and “immersion”: absorbed and immersed responses are bound up with the instinct to self-harm (by reading about disordered eating) or to avoid eating or thinking about food; with the desire to escape everyday stresses; with slowing down and finding calm and peace, or with mental stimulation and inspiration to creativity; with forgetting one’s worries, finding inspiration and joy, experiencing hopefulness and openness to new possibilities; with the boost to one’s self-esteem that comes from successfully focusing on something “worthwhile” as well as absorbing; and again with disorientation when returning to “reality.”

The variety and richness of these reports provide a robust riposte to the denigration, in the AeI model, of “delusion” as the unfortunate ugly sister of the subtle and fascinating aesthetic illusion. Immersion is not a one-dimensionally trivial facet of readerly motivation or response, and nor is absorption or transportation or escapism. Remarkable complexity comes in many guises.

B. The therapeutic relevance of aesthetic illusion

These responses also help make the obvious point that feeling transported during a reading experience may or may not also feel like an escape—that is bound to depend primarily on the qualities of the situation in which the reading happens. This situational contingency also applies to the examples of AeI found in the survey responses and is directly connected to the therapeutic capacity that AeI clearly manifests.

Deciding which responses counted as AeI was tricky, in particular because with amalgamated reports of numerous reading experiences, often a long time after the fact, it's hard to tell whether the reflective elements were present during the reading itself, or result from a retrospective understanding of the reading. For the sake of transparency, I reproduce all the responses categorized as AeI here, with a brief discussion. In square brackets I note any other categories they also fall under, as discussed in the following section.

“I feel less alone – even if the characters are fictional, a real connection can be made. And it's good to know there is someone out there (i.e. the author) who ‘gets me’” [also Fiction as social world]. Here the awareness of fictionality sounds like it might well be inherent to the reading experience.

“I often find it difficult and/or scary to express how I feel in words or to others. Books and in particular fiction provide a kind of transitional and creative space for that – I can relate to aspects of myself (both similar and different) in the voices of the characters, their journeys and so on – and offer an opportunity to go beyond my experience and explore different possibilities, ideas, and so on, without completely disconnecting from them. I find reading completely invaluable as a therapeutic experience and means of exploring my feelings and potential.” The idea of going beyond one's own experiences without entirely disconnecting from them sounds like classic AeI.

“Reading makes you still, I should make up for the inactivity by exercising more.” This kind of distance isn't quite the awareness of “the difference between representation and reality” that usually constitutes distance in the AeI model, but the statement does concisely convey an experience poised between the enjoyment of reading and the constant awareness of its price.

“When I read a beautifully structured sentence I feel happier, impressed, creative. I long to lose myself in a book again.” This suggests that the appreciation of the aesthetic construct as a construct either coexists with or complements, or at least is in no sense felt to be a contradiction to, the feeling of getting lost in a book.

“It depends entirely on what the fiction is – ALL fiction of any interest at all has an effect on my mood, much fiction has characters who have eating disorders in it – there's one in the first

Sidney Chambers book, it's hardly profound literature and the character's ED is peripheral to the story (so peripheral that it wasn't included in the TV adaptation) but whether it improves my mood or worsens it depends on what happens to the character, how accurate the portrayal of the ED is, what the author's intentions in including the character is etc." What happens to characters is balanced against comparison with other knowledge and inferences about authorial intention.

"I wasn't sure whether to put improves or worsens because I think it is mixed. I often find inspiration in characters (eg in Harry Potter, in Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime, in Sugar Rush) but also can feel quite down that I am not like them. Whilst reading I feel good, I get ideas of how I could change my life, get hobbies, get friends, but then I realise that it's not me. When I read I wish I was the character. I struggle with self harm as well as the ED, so I can be quite hard on myself at times" [also Comparison with explicitly fictional characters]. Here the engaged experience of feeling that the characters' lives can be inspiration for one's own is balanced by the difficult awareness that one is not (and can't be) them; recognition of distance is emulation's prerequisite.

"Girls under pressure- this book was released not too soon before I developed full blown eating disorder and by reading it or listening on audio book to it, it made me feel less lonely but that I could relate to the character and that I could relax and not think of my own problems but still be thinking about eating disorders. So it sort of satisfied my eating disorder obsessions and let me relax from them" [also Comparison with explicitly fictional characters] [also Fiction as social world]. Reading here provides a partial escape from the eating disorder, by allowing the reader to focus on eating disorders in general, but not her own; finding similarities between herself and the character is thus a means of partial distancing from a personal reality.

A significant subset of the AeI responses can also be thought of as having therapeutic benefit when it comes to tackling the eating disorder.

"I feel a kind of nostalgia whenever I read about (in a fiction or non-fiction context) an individual with an eating disorder. I feel like I have recovered because I am no longer underweight or restricting but at the same time it reminds me that feeling envious of characters with eating disorders is perhaps a reflection that I am not 100% better!" [also

Comparison with explicitly fictional characters]. Reading returns the respondent to a previous state, but this nostalgic return itself tells her that recovery still needs working on.

“I find that the more I read the better I feel about myself, except in the case that the people I read about have idealistic bodies/are flawless in ways that I can’t possibly hope to meet. Girls are often described as lithe, thin, athletic, and these are descriptions I wish I could apply to myself, so it makes me a little sad when I read that and it doesn’t fully meet how I perceive myself. Even though I know these descriptors are of fictional characters, this makes it a bit better but it is still something that I think about” [also Comparison with explicitly fictional characters]. Unhealthy responses to characters are counterbalanced by the awareness of their fictionality.

“Sometimes it can make you feel like I am a fake anorexic as I don’t have some of the behaviours described or that I’m not really sick. Often fiction is badly informed and events and ideas are exaggerated for effect, but I have to remind myself of that.” Similarly, active self-reminders of fictionality as involving inaccuracy or exaggeration help counter the unhealthy comparisons.

“Fiction about eating disorders makes me uncomfortable. I avoid it because I feel like it mocks the non-fiction memoirs (which personally I find extremely harmful.) The little fiction about eating disorders I have come across have affected me too, but not to the great extent of non-fiction because it’s easier to avoid comparison to something that isn’t true. If the eating disorder was only part of the plot, it might not be so bad. However, on the TV show *skins* (which is a teen drama), Cassie had anorexia. I liked her character and watched it often, but it did affect my ED and I found myself desperate to spiral. I felt guilty for eating and idolised her, because she could cope better with lack of eating than me. I feel this would be the same if it were in a book. I think it’s hard to find the right balance with fiction between mocking and glorifying, but maybe it would be different for a younger audience” [also Comparison with explicitly fictional character]. Again, unhealthy comparisons with characters are easier to resist if one remembers they’re fictional.

“Reading can be a distraction after a meal. Inspiring characters can suggest other ways of living a life rather than one with an over emphasis on eating. A well written character can invite one to imagine and try to identify with the experience of being that person and

experiment with different ways of being. It can open up possibilities and ease the rigidity of anorexic thought patterns and behaviours” [also Distraction] [also Comparison with explicitly fictional characters]. Identification and a broadening of possibilities is described as prompted by characters with the aesthetic trait of being “well written”: awareness of the stylistic qualities of the text feeds into, rather than running counter to, emotional and emulatory engagement with what the text evokes.

“I am thinking of *Good Morning Midnight* mostly – this immediately made me feel sad for the central character and identify with her. At the same time, it made me aware of my vulnerabilities and motivated me to pursue a different life course and remain hopeful – I could identify with an earlier time when I had felt quite hopeless and self-destructive and I am very motivated to do all I can never to get that unwell again.” Negatively valenced identification with the character is countered by more positive self-awareness.

But the dual structures of AeI can also have damaging effects.

“It usually makes me feel like ‘a failed anorexic’ since real-life eating disorders present very differently to the stereotype presented in such books.” –Here awareness of textuality makes it even harder to live up to the textually evoked standards, without lessening the desire to.

Or the AeI duality can simply fail to undo the negative effects of other facets of response.

“Some books describe the eating and exercise habits of their protagonists to a T, so obviously in order to be a ‘real’ eating disordered person, I must eat at least as little as them and burn at least as many calories through exercise” [also Comparison with explicitly fictional characters]. Awareness of the layer of textual/descriptive mediation doesn’t exacerbate, but also doesn’t help counter, the desire to have a “real” eating disorder by copying what is described.

In these responses, then, we see evidence for the therapeutic relevance of AeI, as well as evidence against simplistic components of the model like the idea that the “immersed” element is always emotional and the “distanced” element rational, or bizarre elements of the model like the idea that these experiences aren’t real experiences. The dual structures that AeI helps us think about are important to reading, perhaps especially when we inquire into its

possible mental health benefits, but beyond that, its constituents don't live up to theoretical or empirical scrutiny.

6. Thinking beyond the existing competition

The last thing I'll use these data to do is to present a few other categories of response that are relevant to expanding our thinking on AeI and its alternatives. These are

- The comparison with textually evoked people, with (63) or without (34) an emphasis on the fictionality of these people;
- the extension of an emotional response to textually evoked people long after reading has ended (2);
- the direct effects of reading on embodied action or sensation (4);
- the deliberate use of reading as distraction (19);
- the experience of an identity between the reader and the fictional world (4) or a fictional character (2);
- the appreciation of the fictional world as a social world (34); and
- the use of reading as a means to loss of self or a movement outside the self (13).

A large number of respondents talk about comparing themselves—whether their bodies, their eating habits, or other less specified aspects of themselves—to the people they read about in books. Some respondents are referring obviously to either fiction or nonfiction, while with others it's unclear. An interesting question to be asked with the AeI model in mind, though, is to what extent these comparisons are altered or forestalled by an awareness of the characters' textually mediated nature—as well as the extent to which this awareness seems part of the reading experience to begin with.

In many cases (34), textuality just doesn't seem to come into it: the comparators are simply "people," "sufferers," "individuals," "them" (or a singular "someone" or "person"), for example,

"It's usually along the lines of, well, if this person can get over it, why can't i? Etc etc etc."

This can be therapeutically problematic:

"I feel more incline to reduce my calorie intake to compare to the book i have just read, to try and beat the person i have read about."

Occasionally it can be helpful:

"Offering insight into unhelpful thinking patterns, which helped me spot them and challenge them. Teaching me problem-solving skills, which made me feel less hopeless. Showing me that a desire to binge is a natural result of starvation and not a sign that I was developing another disorder ... this realization that I was experiencing a common phenomenon also dispelled some of the guilt I felt. Showing me how other people deal with painful emotions gives ne alternative ways of responding."

It may also involve a blurring of boundaries between author and character:

"I may compare myself with the author, person in the story and try to copy, or feel inadequate if I don't."

Presumably all these cases would, in the AeI schema, come under the devalued heading of "delusion": if you make no distinction between responses that apply in "reality" and in the "represented" world, because the category of "representation" doesn't exist, or seem relevant, you are an unfortunate victim of delusion.

What about the alternative: engaging in comparisons of self with other even when that other is thought of as a representation (e.g., as fictional)? Again, I don't want to make any strong claims about the distinction as manifested in these data, since all we have are these short reports, but under this heading, there are a total of 63 responses that use words like "(main) character," "heroine," "protagonist," or "people depicted," for instance:

“If I read ‘chick lit’ comparison of my heavier body with the perfect heroines can make me feel inferior. I can also feel inferior – and annoyed, which causes me to eat – reading about people in happy relationships who have perfect children.”

From the size of this category, and bearing in mind the previous caveats, it seems clear that awareness of mediation in no sense precludes the drawing of comparisons with textual others.

Again, the comparisons can be healthy:

“By having insight into the main character’s life and daily routines, it makes me feel like I can do these things. I can live normally and eat normally and stop when I’m full, just like the character does. They also taught me how to feel the ‘right’ emotions because I used to be unable to put labels on how I felt.”

Or they can be unhealthy:

“I remember one particular book that I read which stated that the main female character was 110 pounds, and she expresses moderate surprise that the main male character could carry her, and that upset me greatly as I was over 110 pounds and thought that I must be very, very heavy.”

One of Wolf’s claims about why AeI is a quasi-experience rather than a real one is that we may feel suspense and fear for a protagonist, but have no desire to actually come to her rescue; more generally, “Nor do we feel inclined to actually interact with the represented world, its objects and inhabitants” (Wolf 2013b: 14). All the 97 responses that talk about comparisons with characters are examples of interaction: for someone with an eating disorder, it’s hard to conceive of any social interaction more significant than comparison and imitation. The responses also indicate how directly the reported textual engagement connects with, and indeed directly affects, “real-life” actions and emotions and sensations. The interaction may typically begin with a perception of similarity plus difference, which has cognitive-emotional effects, which lead in many cases to embodied actions (eating less, exercising more, engaging in more mirror- or touch-based body checking, learning how to make oneself vomit, etc.). We can imagine variations on the same process happening if the

comparator were someone heard about on the news, seen in a photograph, or seen on the street. Further evidence of this continuity crops up with mediators other than interpersonal comparison, for instance in one respondent's mention of how reading makes her feel more connected to her own body.

And remember that 63 of these responses manifest the dual structure of AeI, not the regrettable state of "delusion." People are perfectly well aware that they're engaging with textually mediated entities. (As I said, it's possible that in some cases either the comparison or the awareness of mediation came after the reading had finished, but it doesn't really sound like it in any of them. Probably the awareness of textuality or fictionality is present while reading in the other 34 too.) But they feel it's appropriate to interact with them in some of the most important ways they interact with anyone else they might meet, and to alter other actions accordingly.

Other responses provide glimpses of motivations for reading and experiences of reading that make it harder still to maintain the notion that anything other than AeI is anomalous and delusionary: 19 responses make clear that reading is an experience that serves the purpose of distraction. Similar to the idea of escape, but with a more explicitly cognitive quality ("Takes my mind of my last/next meal"), the value of reading as distraction contradicts the notion that a combined AeI-like state is typical: distraction only works if you're engrossed enough to actually forget the other stuff. A similar conclusion is suggested by other manifestations of respondents' engagement with characters in books. There are two examples of strong emotional responses that last long beyond the reading itself:

"Occasionally worsens mood as I worry about what will happen to certain characters, and if I read straight before bed sometimes I have nightmares about characters, which doesn't put me in a great mood in the morning!"

"I feel invalidated and often angry, especially if the subject has passed away, I feel jealous. I resent them for an abnormal period."

Worrying about what happens to characters so much that it infiltrates your dream life and remaining jealous of a character's death long after reading about it are clear indicators that the reality/representation border is not just profoundly porous but also, in some moments of heightened emotion, simply doesn't exist.

In many responses we see either direct identification with characters ("I feel I've been able to escape into another world and for that moment be someone else without any difficulties" [also Transportation as escapism]) (2 responses) or other kinds of testimony to how easily a fictional world can become a social world equivalent to the extratextual one (34). Textually evoked people can provide company ("It makes me feel less alone") or role models ("Cheers me up (if it is good!) or it may inspire me. Sometimes it makes me want to grab life and live for now! Especially if I like the main character and look up to them. It can also relax me and take my mind of the daily stresses"). They can even offer the comfort of friendship ("I think my own low self-esteem comes from a place of insecurity, but after reading science fiction I feel that I have ideas and a sort of friend to hold on to and find comfort in").

The psychological potency of reading that has no obvious "distanced" element is equally clear in the last two categories I'll mention. Both involve a change or loss in sense of self. In the first (4 responses), respondents talk about an experience of identity with the book or the fictional world:

"I feel happier that I've done something I like to do, and become part of the book. However my mood rarely interests me to read a book as I'm lazy and depressed."

"I love historical novels, there is often intrigue and I enjoy being part of a whole other world. My mind drifts and I am not thinking about me only the characters and their stories.

If the book is light it can make me laugh, lighten my mood, relax me. If the book is dark or melancholy it will intensify my thoughts and emotions, I might weep. I experience a oneness and sense of identity with the book. Reading a book is an intensely intimate experience for

me, with a sense of sharing something insightful/profound. A recognition, a yes that-is-what-it-is-like.”

More strongly still, respondents describe losing themselves, or being taken outside themselves or their bodies (13 responses), for example:

“Feeling of loss of self and life and being able to take on the character and experience their life for a short while” [also Fiction as social world].

“Because it has taken me outside of my body – the cerebral ‘work’ of reading and reflecting helps me to forget body dissatisfaction and reminds me that there are far more important things.”

7. Conclusion

Recalling the AeI condemnation of anything that looks like undistanced engagement, it’s hard not to feel that there are enormous gaps in our critical grasp of reading experiences in the real world. Quite apart from the many theoretical problems with the concept of aesthetic illusion, it seems inadequate to illuminating an important range of experiences that are interesting and complex without manifesting the qualities of emotional engagement versus rational distance that the AeI model so unquestioningly prizes.

If we care about having terminology at our disposal that not only describes particular kinds of experience precisely but also avoids imposing arbitrary value judgments that privilege a small class of experiences and thrust all the rest into the shade, it seems clear—to me at least—that we should reject AeI and find a better alternative. On the limited evidence presented here, transportation seems the likeliest candidate, featuring in far more responses than any of the other terms and allowing us to capture the sense of moving between worlds and the motivations of escapism and loss of self. Proponents of AeI would say it’s less well suited to dealing with the in-between cases and the cases where no distinction is made between “fictional” and “real” worlds at all, but the basic metaphor allows perfectly well for

both: moving between worlds or feeling like you have a foot in both, say, or letting the world of the book come to you.

In paragraphs like the last one, it may start to seem that what we're talking about is really the words not the experiences. I'm not going to tackle the vast question of how far linguistic factors can be said to influence "experience itself," beyond saying that our ways of conceptualizing and processing experience, which are at least partly linguistically informed, can't easily be separated from that experiential "essence," and that when we're talking about reading experiences, we can expect the linguistic element to be particularly pronounced. The methodological question also arises of whether asking people to talk or write about their experiences is the best way of finding out about those experiences: do linguistic skill, education level, and so on end up being more prominently expressed than "experience itself"? Ultimately, that experiential essence is so elusive that we probably need to triangulate numerous forms of inquiry to feel confident that we have found out anything about it at all.

The other point to make is that linguistic choices—including the ones that feed into our more or less automatic processing of our own experiences—are of course not determined solely by their strict applicability to the phenomenon in question. They are influenced by fashion, or more specifically by the many forms that memetic competition can take. Meme theory is a controversial but powerful way of understanding how human culture developed and continues to evolve: it proposes that everything that humans transmit between each other through imitation, including language, follows the same evolutionary principles as the genetic code (e.g., Blackmore [2010](#)). Darwin's staggeringly powerful observation was that when you have replication with variation and selection, you *must* get evolution. Stuff gets copied not primarily because clever humans choose it, but more importantly because it has features that make it succeed in the memetic selection war. In language, those features may be anything from the number of links between a given word (say, "transport") and other words and

concepts at different removes, to how clever it makes its users sound, to how flexible its morphology is. Factors like this affect academic terminological competition just as much (though probably in different proportions) as they do more colloquial uses of language.

This may be the start of an explanation of why AeI has (if often through misunderstanding) clung to some territories in academia's corner of the memetic battlefield, but never even made it out into the wider world at all. But even though we meme machines have much less power than we like to think, we still have some, and we can (and should) do what we can to guide the memetic replication in directions where it can do least harm and most good.

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