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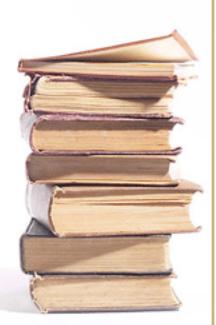
# The aesthetic paradox in processing fictional vs. non-fictional texts

Lena Wimmer Reading Mediated Minds: Empathy with Persons and Characters in Media and Art Works A CCCT Summer School Amsterdam July 11-13 2011



## Theoretical background

- The aesthetic paradox (Wimmer et al., submitted; Christmann et al., submitted)
  - Aesthetic objects are related to positive experiences
  - The processing of aesthetic objects demands effort
  - Cognitive load during information processing leads to negative results
  - → Tension between the appreciation of aesthetic objects and their strenuous processing
  - → Solution: When adopting an aesthetic attitude, cognitive load is even appreciated



#### Research question

What effect has the adopted reception attitude on text Processing criteria?

- Hypothesis: Depending on the reception attitude (aesthetic vs. factual), different criteria for successful text processing are applied by recipients
  - Factual attitude: demand of precise and unambiguous comprising of information
  - Aesthetic attitude: claiming deep comprehension, processing on several dimensions



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## Methods

- Data collection: semistandardized interview, corresponding field manual
- Data analysis: content analysis drawing on a set of categories for processing criteria
  - Main categories consisted of levels of evaluation (example: evaluation of textual quality)
  - Sub-categories indicated genrespecific occurrence of each main category (example: evaluation of language level vs. logical structure)



- Study 1
  - Activation of reception attitude: Addressing of typical genrerelated text features

Material: two text excerpts, one of them fictional (Böldl: Studie in Kristallbildung [Study on Crystallization]), one non-fictional (Peroni: Die magische Grenze [The Magic Frontier])

- Procedure
  - Read the text
  - Interview (incl. activation of reception attitude)

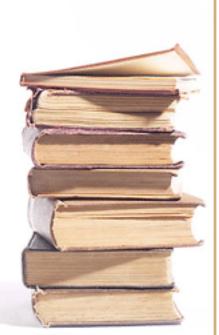
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- Study 1
  - Results

Processing criteria Recep- tion attitude	Non- fictional	Fictional
Factual	8	26
Aesthetic	11	28

Chi<sup>2</sup> = .206; df = 1; n.s.

In both conditions fictional criteria more frequent than non-fictional ones! Explanation: Activation of reception attitude failed



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• Study 2

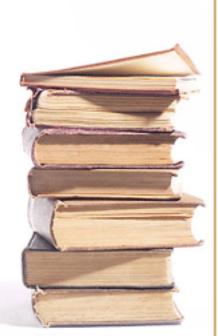
 $\rightarrow$  3 different methods to induce a factual vs. aesthetic attitude

- Staff member of public library
- Review of the text
- Booth operator at a flea market
- $\rightarrow$  treatment check

Material: two text excerpts, one of them fictional (MacLean: Ice Station Zebra), one nonfictional (Krakauer: Into Thin Air)



- Study 2
  - Procedure
    - Induce reception attitude
    - Read the text
    - Treatment check
  - Results
    - Most effective method of induction: review of the text
    - Independent from method of induction: aesthetic variant more successful than factual variant
    - Explanation: non-fiction review too inexplicit → modification of review



- Study 2
  - Results for modified non-fiction recension:

	Fictional text	Non-fictio- nal text	Sum
Not successful	6	7	13
Successful	1	2	3
Sum	7	9	16

→ Independent of text condition, participants were not convinced of the text being non-fictional!



## Role of empathy

- Explanation:
  - Narrative text structure ( $\rightarrow$  text structure is critical)
  - → i.e. there is a narrator the reader can identify with
  - Empathy in the sense of Davis' (1980) fantasy scale:

Tendency to imaginatively transpose oneself into fictional situations ("When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me")



## Role of empathy

• Resulting hypothesis:

Neither the reception attitude nor the text genre account for the aesthetic paradox, but the possibility to identify oneself with a narrator

 Prove required: presence of narrator facilitates text comprehension compared to texts without narrator



## Main study

- Material
  - Both narrative texts from the previous study
  - Two non-narrative text excerpts, one of them fictional (Schätzing: The Swarm), one non-fictional (German Wikipedia article on Tsunamis)
- Procedure
  - Read the text
  - Write summary
  - Semi-standardized interview → reception attitude, processing criteria



#### Results

• Text structure  $\rightarrow$  reception attitude

	Narrative structure	Non- narrative structure	Sum
Factual attitude	2	31	33
Aesthetic attitude	21	0	21
Sum	23	31	54

Chi<sup>2</sup> = 46.316; df = 1; p = .000

→ Highly significant effect of narrativity on reception attitude



## Sum up and Discussion

- Conclusion
  - Narrative Texts are considered as typical fictional texts
  - Narrativity implies possible identifications with narrator
  - Hypothesis: Empathy as measured by the Fantasy Scale functions as intervening variable between textual features and processing
- Further Steps
  - Collection of empathy during reading narrative vs. non-narrative texts
  - Checking the possible role of other textual factors



## Thank you very much for your attention!