

Walking in Someone Else's Shoes: Aesthetic Experience and Empathy

Introduction:

In addition to the script of Stefan Deines one premise of the following investigation is that there are *different* kinds of aesthetic experience in the reception of art. Thus, we can distinguish between the reception, for example, of abstract graphic arts or experimental films on one hand and the reception of narrative arts like narrative literature or fiction films on the other hand. I will focus on the latter: the reception of narrative art.

Whereas some kinds of art, for example a classical greek sculpture or a modern abstract artwork, might be treated and valued for their very own sake, just for their formal perfection or their beauty (as Roger Scruton suggests), narrative art seems to be more closely related to a *certain* kind of understanding: namely in virtue of moral and ethical questions.

I do not appreciate a fictional novel, say, of Max Frisch only for its formal and linguistic quality, but I also appreciate getting something from the narration, learning something about the story's protagonists, their lives and, finally, maybe learning something about myself and life in general. (As you may know, Martha Nussbaum stresses the point, that literature can itself be considered as a kind of Ethics insofar as it tells us something about the good life through concrete stories).

Furthermore, art, especially narrative art, and our reception of it is attended by emotions: As Noël Carroll points out, perceiving and, even more, understanding narrative art requires the mobilization of emotions and (moral) judgements. Leaving aside the fact that I do not agree completely with Carroll's approach of *Moderate Moralism* – which contends that some artforms can be evaluated in virtue of their contribution to moral education – I find his argument of emotional involvement persuasive: The reception of narrative arts comes along with some kind of emotional involvement or engagement which in turn is bound up with moral understanding – otherwise we wouldn't be able to understand the narrative in full. In other words, if we do not comprehend emotionally – at least to a certain degree – the anxiety of John "Scottie" Ferguson in Hitchcock's Thriller *Vertigo*, we might not understand both why he is not able to prevent the woman falling from the tower and why he feels so guilty afterwards. The value of the aesthetic reception in this case might be that the film activates our antecedent moral and emotional beliefs,

concepts and feelings and that they are shaped and depend through the reception of the concrete story and moving images.

I cannot explain this very complex idea of the relation between emotion, understanding and morality in art any further; (among other questions this would also concern the debate about form-content-coherence, about autonomism versus moralism and about the nature and function of art at all). Instead, what interests me now and foremost is, how to explain this emotional involvement and the emotional-moral process in the aesthetic experience? What has to be presupposed? How do we understand narratives, the actions and feelings of the protagonists? In my opinion there is some central and special phenomenon involved: Empathy.

Admittedly, the concept of empathy is not exactly clear or uncontroversial. But considering that the notion is often used in the aesthetical discourse in association with the idea of aesthetic understanding it is even more important to take a closer look at it.

My thesis is, that empathy (in German = *Einfühlung*) is a form of cognitive *and* emotional understanding of the other as a perceiving and feeling subject. However, in difference to contagion (*Ansteckung*) and some kind of strong identification (*Einsfühlung*) empathy, in my view, must not mean, that the recipient of the feelings of the other *feels* the *same* nor that he gives up his own self, his „I“. In fact, especially in view of fictional characters it would be rather absurd to assume that we could or even should *feel* all the same like the other feels (or at least seems to feel fictionally; think of the paradox of fiction). But yet, we can comprehend (*nachvollziehen*) the other's feeling to a certain degree and can relate it to ourselves and our own life. Moreover, empathy is the presupposition of other forms of emotional engagement: like sympathy and compassion – that means: feeling *for* someone.

Empathy implies, that the recipient can comprehend what's going on with the other, why he feels and acts one way or another. The empathetic recipient catches somehow the situation and the emotions of the other, but without abandoning his own „I“. Empathy in this sense is more (but not completely) what Peter Goldie calls „in-his-shoes-imagining“ rather than what he calls empathy. Hence, my notion of empathy is weaker than Goldie's notion, but it is stronger than his “in-his-shoes-imagining”.

In the following I want to discuss first Peter Goldie's concept of empathy. He is a critic of the idea of empathy and proposes instead a concept of In-his-shoes-Imagining. I will attempt to show that his comprehension of empathy is too strong and that we can reconcile his concept of in-

his-shoes-imagining with another concept of empathy, namely Edith Stein's concept. Therefore, in the second part I will present Stein's concept and compare it with Goldie's. Finally, I would like to explain why those imaginative phenomena like empathy are important for our reception of narrative art at all: Because, as Noël Carroll stresses, they are related to our (moral) judgments in many respects. First, you need empathy, so that the artwork (in this case: the narrative art) succeeds at all. Secondly, empathy and moral emotions like sympathy are important for our understanding of both the artwork and its meaning for human life. Thirdly, those emotions bear upon ourselves as aesthetically and morally perceiving and judging persons – on a meta-level .

Part 1:

Empathy is the English translation of the German word „Einfühlung“, which has been established in Philosophy especially by Theodor Lipps at the beginning of the 20th century. It refers to the Greek word „*empathia*“, which is „feeling into“. Roughly spoken, it means: to put oneself into the mental shoes of somebody or to see the world through the other's eyes. In this respect empathy is a kind of imaginative process. However, it is unclear how far this imagination goes: Does it imply that the empathetic subject *feels* the same like the other - at last it is called *Einfühlung*. Does empathy therefore mean the similarity in feelings? Or rather that we only comprehend the situation of another subject and its thoughts and feelings only in a more weak, cognitive way? How much emotion is involved in empathy anyway? As Alvin Goldman writes, empathy is the ability to put oneself into the mental shoes of another person to *understand* her emotions and feelings – but does this understanding imply *feeling* as well?

Peter Goldie, a prominent British philosopher in the field of theory of emotions, distinguishes two kinds of empathy or imaginative experiences: the first one is strong, the second one is a more moderate form. The first one is just called empathy or empathetic perspective-shifting. The second one is called In-his-shoes-Imagining or in-his-shoes perspective shifting.

- 1) Empathy in a strong sense as „empathetic perspective-shifting“ means „consciously and intentionally shifting your perspective in order to imagine *being* the other person, and thereby sharing in *his or her* thoughts, feelings, decisions and other aspects of their psychology“ (Goldie, 2006, Manuscript, 1).

- 2) In-his-shoes-imagining as a weaker form of „perspective-shifting“ means „consciously and intentionally shifting your perspective in order to imagine what thoughts, feelings, decisions and so on you would arrive at if you were in the other`s circumstances.“ (ibd.)

According to Goldie, being empathetic with somebody implies that I *centrally imagine* being the other person within a narrative so that empathy is as if I am acting in the other`s head: Empathy usurps, then, the other`s own first-personal stance. Like other forms of emotional engagement (like contagion, emotional sharing and emotional identification) empathy is a way „that can come to have an emotional experience of the same sort as another person“ (Goldie, 1999, 27).

Empathy – as well as in-his-shoes-imagining – thereby *presupposes* understanding. But on the other hand, according to Goldie through empathy I gain a *deeper* understanding of what it is like for the other (but not what it is like for me). Hence, I may be able to predict the other`s emotional responses and so on.

The difference now then between in-his-shoes-imagining and empathy lies in the content of the imaginative process: „who, in the imaginative project, is doing the thinking.“ (Goldie, 2006, 5): I or the other?

In my opinion, Goldie`s notion of empathy is too close to emotional identification. One definition of strong emotional identification is the following, brought forward by Max Scheler: „Emotional identification is an extreme case of infection affecting the very roots of individuality. In emotional identity one self absorbs the other. Examples are a little girl “playing at mother” with her doll, [...] hypnosis or being possessed by a demon. Like emotional infection, emotional identification is involuntary and not intentionally directed at the feelings of others” (Krebs, 2010, 17). Admittedly, according to Goldie empathy is voluntary. However, if it goes so far that the empathetic subject feels all the same like its object of empathy, then, I think, there is no possibility any more to take one foot back and to reflect the situation with the benefit of hindsight. But that is, what the empathetic subject nevertheless must achieve particularly with regard to the aesthetic experience and understanding: The reception of narrative artforms relies on the empathetic ability of the recipient, but also on his ability to reflect it. I think, another concept of empathy could accomplish this.

But before looking into this other interpretation of empathy we have to explain In-his-shoes-Imagining a little bit better: Like empathy in-his-shoes-imagining is a kind of perspective-shifting. However, in distinction to empathy in-his-shoes perspective-shifting involves a mixture of characterisations; it retains aspects of my character. In other words: It is me in *another*

persons` s situation, but it is still *me*. I ask myself: What would *I* do if I were in the situation of the other subject? For example: How would I react if I were Scottie and would see this woman, Madeleine, wandering around, visiting a cemetery garden, looking at a painting for hours.

I think this description sounds more plausible in respect of the aesthetic experience and understanding: First, the process of in-his-shoes-imagining seems to be connected to epistemic and moral judgements, since the recipient who acts in somebody`s head recognizes both: the other subject in distinction from himself, the situation of the other and his own characterization in it. How would *I* think, feel, act if *I* were in this situation? Therefore the empathetic subject must make appropriate judgements in view of his own ethical values. Secondly, more than Goldie`s notion of empathy it establishes a distance between recipient and its object.

The problem here in Goldie`s concept is either that there is too less understanding of the other, for it is *me* who thinks, feels, acts – therefore I cannot imagine what *another* person would think, feel, act. Or that it isn`t even possible at all to feel *myself* into the situation of the other, because the situation is so different from me and my life – therefore I cannot imagine being in that situation unless imagining *being* this person. For example: When Isak Borg, main character in the film “Wild Strawberries” of Ingmar Bergman, is going to Lund in order to receive an honour the voyage becomes at the same time a kind of research of the meaning of life. As recipient I feel sympathy and compassion with this old man who recognizes that he has wasted his life and that he is now very lonesome. How am I able to understand his problem and how am I able to feel sympathy for him? If I imagine walking in his shoes – but only as *I* – do I really get the crucial point? I don`t think so. I should not only imagine how I would feel, think, act and so on in this situation; I should imagine how this old man who has been egoistic and selfish all his entire life feels, thinks and acts. As Goldie stresses, it is a mixture, but this mixture should include, in my opinion, more openness for the other than Goldie assumes.

Part 2:

I think we will find an answer to this in Edith Stein`s concept of empathy. Stein, disciple of Edmund Husserl, makes in her dissertation an original contribution to the description of empathy. Empathy, she explains, is the givenness of foreign subjects and their experiences. In this sense, empathy itself is an *experience*, a kind of perceptive act (eine Art erfahrender Akt) *sui generis* (Stein, 2008, 20). Hence, empathy is the *precondition* of other moral emotions like sympathy and

compassion. Empathy is an act which is primordial as present experience though non-primordial in content, that means: the empathetic subject experiences something, insofar as she at least experiences the empathetic act itself. However, she does not experience primordially the experience of the perceived other, she only comprehends it (*nachvollziehen*). Stein compares empathy here with remembrance, expectation, and phantasy: The act of memory, for instance, is a primordial act but its content is non-primordial, because it is a repetition of a once experienced primordial act.

Stein distinguishes three levels of accomplishment of empathy: First, the emergence of the experience (= *das Auftauchen des Erlebnisses*), secondly, the accomplishment of explication (= *die erfüllende Explikation*), thirdly, the comprehensive objectification of the explicated experience (= *die zusammenfassende Vergegenständlichung des explizierten Erlebnisses*) (cp. Balzer, 1991, 273 and Stein, 2008, 19). Stein describes the three levels as follows:

<p>„When it [that is, the experience] arises before me all at once, it faces me as an object (such as the sadness I «read in another’s face») [first level, S.S.]. But when I inquire into its implied tendencies (try to bring another’s mood to clear givenness to myself), the content, having pulled me into it, is no longer really an object [second level, S.S.]. I am no longer turned to the content but to the object of it, I am at the subject of the content in the original subject’s place. And only after successfully executed clarification, does the content again face me as an object. [third level, S.S.]“ (Stein, 1917, 10; quote adopted from Balzer, 1991, 273).</p>	<p>„Indem es [d.h. das Erlebnis, S.S.] mit einem Schlage vor mir auftaucht, steht es mir als Objekt gegenüber (z.B. die Trauer, die ich dem anderen «vom Gesicht ablese»); indem ich aber den implizierten Tendenzen nachgehe (mir die Stimmung, in der sich der andere befindet, zu klarer Gegebenheit zu bringen versuche), ist es nicht mehr im eigentlichen Sinne Objekt, sondern hat mich in sich hineingezogen, ich bin ihm jetzt nicht mehr zugewendet, sondern in ihm seinem Objekt zugewendet, bin bei seinem Subjekt, an dessen Stelle; und erst nach der im Vollzug erfolgten Klärung tritt es mir wieder als Objekt gegenüber.“ (Stein, 2008, 19).</p>
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There are two central questions which arise now: How much emotion is involved in the empathetic act? Or, in contrast, how far is empathy only a kind of a cognitive, comprehensive act without any emotional involvement? As Stein stresses, empathy is not to mix up with emotional infection or contagion (*Gefühlsansteckung*; being swayed by the emotion of another), just as with emotional identification (*Einsfühlen*; a borderline case of infection in which one self absorbs another). Furthermore, empathy is not primordial. Thus, do I *feel* anything here?

Let’s say, I could understand films like *Vertigo* or *Wild Strawberries* just without any emotion at all. I can comprehend, on a cognitive, emotionally neutral level, what is happening with the character Isak Borg in *Wild Strawberries*. I understand what Bergman wants to say about life.

For example: Isak reports his dream in which he is confronted with his own death. This faces me as an object (First level): I conclude, well, he is an old man and dreams of being dead. Maybe he is frightened, I think, without feeling frightened myself, without even feeling anything. Now, speaking with Stein, I inquire into the implied tendencies of the situation which pull me into it: Adopting the position of Isak (to a certain degree) I draw attention to the meaning of the dream, reflect my life, look back and may see what I have missed in life. I watch these scenes through the eyes of Isak (Second level). Finally, I distance myself again and clarify the whole situation: I conclude, that Isak recognizes what he has missed in his life and I understand, why he now regrets a lot now. But do I really learn something out of it without being emotionally involved?

Do I *really* understand the case of Isak if I do not feel what he might feel? Can I walk in someone else's shoes without adopting his feelings – if only to a certain degree? I am not sure, how much emotional character Edith Stein ascribes empathy. But one thing is for sure: She conceives empathy itself as a kind of *understanding* of the other. And she distinguishes her position from that of the philosopher Stephan Witasek who denies the emotional character of the empathetic emotions: der “den eingefühlten Gefühlen den emotionalen Charakter” abstreitet (Stein, 2008, 32). However, in contradiction to Theodor Lipps' concept of empathy – that implies identification between Self and Other – Stein's concept does only mean that we are *with* somebody not *in* somebody: “indem wir bei ihm sind, ohne doch restlos eins mit ihm zu sein” (Stein, 2008, 22).

For those reasons we shall compare Edith Stein's concept of empathy with Peter Goldie's concept of in-his-shoes-imagining rather than with his concept of empathy. Moreover, there is one advantage: The difference to Goldie is, that Edith Stein's empathy is itself an act of understanding and does not presuppose understanding. Furthermore, it is the precondition of sympathy and other forms of sympathetic emotions. In this sense empathy (in the moderate form of Edith Stein's concept) is necessary for sympathy. I think this much more plausible. Goldie contends, however, sympathy would function without empathy. I would deny that. In order to feel for someone we must understand him somehow through a kind of empathetic process.

Conclusion:

My conception of empathy sees it as a form of cognitive *and* emotional understanding of the other, also in the aesthetic experience. Empathy plays a central role in the reception of narrative artworks in respect of its moral or ethical meaning. In difference to infection (*Ansteckung*) and identification (*Einsfühlung*) empathy does not mean, that the recipient of the feelings of the other *feels* all the *same* nor that he gives up his own self. That means, in empathy the emotion of the other is present to you as an emotion, but as a separate one: it does not walk over to you and become your own feeling.

However, in difference to in-his-shoes-imagining empathy involves more of the first-personal-standpoint of the other.

Either way, the whole aesthetic experience, the reception of narrative art for example, is much more complex: we might not only feel empathy, we might also develop sympathy, we might even be neutral, we might identify with the main character, we might judge him, we might go into distance, we might also comprehend the feelings and actions of other characters... For example, I would not be able to get the whole content of a story of a film like *Vertigo*, if I would only feel empathy or sympathy with the main character during the whole aesthetical experience: I wouldn't be able to go into distance and to make judgements beyond the view of the protagonist with whom I identify, I would not see, that he is screwed by others who abuse him and his fear of height – and, I think, the whole aesthetic work wouldn't succeed if I wouldn't get it on different levels of understanding and emotions.... However, to explain this complexity would need another talk.

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