

Empathy and Aesthetics

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1. Overall argument

The basic claim of this paper is that experiences exist in which empathy and aesthetic experience are one and the same. More specifically, it will be claimed that one of these experiences is that of narrative turning points, that is, decisive moments in a temporal progression that are experienced from a second-person perspective. It will also be suggested that these kind of experiences are enhanced by certain stage effects. As a rough orientation of the argument, one can state the idea as follows: empathy involves co-experiencing emotions or emotional states, while aesthetics involves intense experience from some distance. The two can come together when emotions are shared despite *and with* some distance. Narratives are one of these forms where sharing and distance can coexist. The recognition of a narrative turning point or decisive moment can be a trigger for such a joint experience of empathy and aesthetics.

For example, we might feel some empathy with someone who faces a hardship or has an affliction that limits the person. However, when we come into the position of witnessing this person speaking up, perhaps taking the microphone at a public event or speaking in front of the *agora*, and thereby setting in motion new actions that have the potential to change his or her situation, we tend to be more involved. Witnessing the speech can be many things, including embarrassing, but it can also be a powerful trigger to cause or intensify empathy. The speech can be a turning point toward liberation, retaliation, or recognition. And it can be an aesthetic and moving experience for the audience. It is moving in Greek tragedies when the suppressed challenge fate. It can be a

¹ I thank Binyan Li for his precise reading and his many comments of this text.

potent moment in Hollywood, including the clever set-up of *The King's Speech* (2010) in the moment when stuttering King George VI speaks up against Nazi Germany in a radio address, literally overcoming his affliction of stuttering. But it can also be perceived aesthetically in real life when we witness people who verbalize their life story. These examples include two elements of importance for our overall argument, the turning point and the stage effect. In these and other experiences, we are not simply identifying with the protagonist or speaker, but are (or imagine we are) a member of the audience, such as a concerned friend.

Of course, if a trigger leads to a process that involves both empathy and aesthetic experience, this does not mean that the subjective experiences of empathy and aesthetic experience are identical. Instead, both might run parallel to each other, perhaps enhance each other. Still, this article will present at least one case where both actually are one and the same. Concerning that one experience, one does not need to distinguish between empathy and aesthetic experience and can use the same concept to describe it.

With a focus on temporal arts and narrative developments, this paper will focus on the *intense, moving moment* as trigger for the combined concept of empathy-aesthetic experience. Such a concept has been presented with differing emphasis by a variety of theories of drama, including Aristotle's notion of *catharsis* and Lessing's *fruchtbarer Augenblick* (fruitful or fertile moment; *le moment frappant*). The focus of the following discussion will not be on the historical forms of this concept and their differences, but on an integrated concept and the involved processes. The article will also not have the space to engage in the intellectual history of the aesthetics of empathy since Theodor Lipps² and Vernon Lee.³

The basic argument goes as follows: When someone observes another being who faces an intense and decisive moment that affects the well-being and state of that being, the observer can become absorbed and mentally co-experience the situation of another, without forgetting the difference between self and other. Such an experience is an experience of empathy and involves having emotions that fit the co-experienced situation.

² See Malika Maskarinec: *On Weight and the Will: The Forces of Form in German Literature and Aesthetics 1890–1930*, Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2017.

³ See Susan Lanzoni: "Practicing psychology in the art gallery: Vernon Lee's aesthetics of empathy." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 45.4 (2009): 330-354.

It can also be an aesthetic experience under certain conditions. Intensity of the experience is one of these conditions. Another one of these conditions is that the observer does not have the sense that he or she could intervene in the observed events, as is the case in fictional events, in narrated events (“this is what happened to me”), and in a range of cases where the observer has some distance from the events.

The criterion of aesthetic distance has a long history in art and philosophy.⁴ For example, it was famously articulated by Edmund Burke in the case of the sublime where he added that the safety of the observer has to be guaranteed, like the spectator on the shore who observes a shipwreck (an image by Lucretius with an illustrious history⁵). Art, fiction, and narrative operate in a space of aesthetic distance.⁶ This distance can allow for, but does not have to include, aesthetic judgment and the reflection on formal aspects of the artwork.⁷ One might speculate that the combination of intense absorption and simultaneous inability to intervene creates the typical aesthetic emotion of an (internal) being-moved since there is no release of action possible. (However, there are other possibilities that explain the emergence of the aesthetic experience of being-moved apart from this sense associated with the inability to intervene. For example, it could be a reward function that trains us for paying attention. There are also forms of art and aesthetical experience that include audience participation of some form where aesthetic distance takes on more complex forms). We are still far from understanding this aesthetic distance well, and will come back to it below.

⁴ For an account of two lines of tradition, see Gerald C. Cupchik: "The evolution of psychical distance as an aesthetic concept," *Culture & Psychology* 8.2 (2002): 155-187.

⁵ See Hans Blumenberg: *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.

⁶ Winfried Menninghaus et al. describe aesthetic distance as the first of two factors of finding enjoyment in negative emotions in artworks, see Winfried Menninghaus, et al.: "The Distancing–Embracing model of the enjoyment of negative emotions in art reception." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (2017): 1-58. They leave open the question of whether aesthetic distance might also be an element of art reception in general or a prerequisite also of the aesthetic reception of positive emotions.

⁷ For a discussion of some recent approaches to value judgment and autonomy driven forms of aesthetics, see Noël Carroll: "Recent approaches to aesthetic experience," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70.2 (2012): 165-177.

In addition to aesthetic distance, there are several other conditions that have to be met for an experience to be an aesthetic experience. However, there is no agreement about the complete list and status of these conditions. They also vary widely for different people. Later, we will touch on some of the possible additional conditions, such as the stage-effect, the looping moment in a narrative chain, and the kind of emotions involved. However, there is much disagreement about these conditions; instead of conditions they could also be mere effects. What all of these conditions or effects have in common is that they intensify the experience of the moment and keep leading back to the decisive moment. Intensity in this sense could be described as being two-dimensional. It involves emotions in the moment of perception and thus can be measured physiologically, for example via goose bumps. It also involves a prolonging of time beyond the actual duration of the perception. This second dimension of intensity includes memory and the narrative unfolding or looping.

Of course, not every intense experience is aesthetic. Other intense experiences are also tied to the perception of a single moment, such as an accident, a traumatic event, success, or a surprising win in the lottery. There are some borderline experiences, such as sports and eroticism, that fit most of the features we will address in the following. Some of these issues will be addressed in the following, but there are more riddles than can be solved in this short space.

What we have covered so far is not exceptionally new; the uncommon explanation I wish to give concerns the emphasis on the decisive moment. The key issue concerns how intensity can be described and how it comes about. In particular, this article will suggest that the heightened importance of the decisive moment can be described as a recursive reception structure. People who are absorbed by a specific moment imagine and experience the future and the past of this moment, consider alternative developments and alternative versions of the events, including counterfactuals, thereby mentally looping back and forth to the moment, making it the “knot” of temporal developments.⁸ This

⁸ This recursive reception structure is similar to what Monika Fludernik has described as narrative experience that retrospectively bridges the distance to a narrated event, see Monika Fludernik: *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

mental activity of looping back and forth will be described with the help of Theodor Ephraim Lessing below. An example can be the hesitation of a person before a decisive action. In the weighing of this moment, the possible future outcomes and the present moment are already intermingled. And even retrospectively, the observer might revisit this earlier moment and connect it with its consequences, while comparing it to other possible outcomes had a different action been chosen.

That the moment is heightened and prolonged means that we consider it more than once and view it as a multidimensional event. This holding-on to the moment results in an oscillation of moving from the moment to its preceding and following moments and the consideration of alternative developments. This looping is where empathy and aesthetic experience come together. As observers, we co-experience the situation of the other and we are likely aesthetically moved by it, literally, by moving along the real and potential developments. And it is here where we create the precise aesthetic distance required for the intense experience: we create the role of observer who has enough distance to consider the non-present moments of the other, but we are close enough to feel the relevance of the future we anticipate for the other. This observer assumes a special relationship with the other, close perhaps to a second-person perspective to the other (which tends to involve some moments of first and third-person perspective).

We can experience the moments of our own life in this form, in special moments of significance where we hesitate and go back and forth. In that case, we split ourselves off from the present moment and become observers of ourselves. We can also re-experience moments of our past in this way, especially those decisive moments that we retrospectively recognize as bringing about change and conversion (for these kind of moments, it seems to be not uncommon, that we only recognize them after the fact and that we change our perspective on them and also shift which moments of our life we view as decisive). Jerome Bruner has suggested that life stories and especially turning points connect fiction and the experience of real life.⁹

It is probably more common for us to experience the life of others in this way—but others whose life we follow for a moment from a first-person perspective. It is when

⁹ See Jerome Bruner: *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.

we co-experience the situation of another that it is more likely that we can “freeze” the moment, as people say, and hold on to this moment in our memory. It turns out not to be a freezing at all, but rather a dynamic movement of considering all possibilities and alternative outcomes that are encapsulated in the one moment. In our own life, we are rarely able to “freeze” time, but as spectators, we have this liberty.

Lessing famously describes such as looping back and forth to and from the heightened moment in *Laocoon*:

Kann der Künstler von der immer veränderlichen Natur nie mehr als einen einzigen Augenblick, und der Maler insbesondere diesen einzigen Augenblick auch nur aus einem einzigen Gesichtspunkte, brauchen; sind aber ihre Werke gemacht, nicht bloß erblickt, sondern betrachtet zu werden, lange und wiederholtermaßen betrachtet zu werden: so ist es gewiß, daß jener einzige Augenblick und einzige Gesichtspunkt dieses einzigen Augenblickes, nicht fruchtbar genug gewählt werden kann. Dasjenige aber nur allein ist fruchtbar, was der Einbildungskraft freies Spiel läßt. Je mehr wir sehen, desto mehr müssen wir hinzu denken können. Je mehr wir darzu denken, desto mehr müssen wir zu sehen glauben. In dem ganzen Verfolge eines Affekts ist aber kein Augenblick, der diesen Vorteil weniger hat, als die höchste Staffel desselben. Über ihr ist weiter nichts, und dem Auge das Äußerste zeigen, heißt der Phantasie die Flügel binden, und sie nötigen, da sie über den sinnlichen Eindruck nicht hinaus kann, sich unter ihm mit schwächern Bildern zu beschäftigen, über die sie die sichtbare Fülle des Ausdrucks als ihre Grenze scheuet. Wenn Laokoon also seufzet, so kann ihn die Einbildungskraft schreien hören; wenn er aber schreiet, so kann sie von dieser Vorstellung weder eine Stufe höher, noch eine Stufe tiefer steigen, ohne ihn in einem leidlichen, folglich uninteressantern Zustande zu erblicken. Sie hört ihn erst ächzen, oder sie sieht ihn schon tot.

[...] Unter den alten Malern scheint Timomachus Vorwürfe des äußersten Affekts am liebsten gewählt zu haben. Sein rasender Ajax, seine Kindermörderin Medea waren berühmte Gemälde. Aber aus den Beschreibungen, die wir von ihnen haben, erhellet, daß er jenen Punkt, in welchem der Betrachter das Äußerste nicht sowohl erblickt, als hinzudenkt, jene Erscheinung, mit der wir den Begriff des Transitorischen nicht so notwendig verbinden, daß uns die Verlängerung derselben in der Kunst mißfallen sollte, vortrefflich verstanden und miteinander zu verbinden gewußt hat. Die Medea hatte er nicht in dem Augenblicke genommen, in welchem sie ihre Kinder wirklich ermordet; sondern einige Augenblicke zuvor, da die mütterliche Liebe noch mit der Eifersucht kämpfet. Wir sehen das Ende dieses Kampfes voraus. Wir zittern voraus, nun bald bloß die grausame Medea zu erblicken, und unsere Einbildungskraft gehet weit über alles hinweg, was uns der Maler in diesem schrecklichen Augenblicke zeigen könnte. Aber eben darum beleidiget uns die in der Kunst fortdauernde Unentschlossenheit

der Medea so wenig, daß wir vielmehr wünschen, es wäre in der Natur selbst dabei geblieben, der Streit der Leidenschaften hätte sich nie entschieden, oder hätte wenigstens so lange angehalten, bis Zeit und Überlegung die Wut entkräften und den mütterlichen Empfindungen den Sieg versichern können.¹⁰

Since the artist can use but a single moment of ever-changing nature, and the painter must further confine his study of this one moment to a single point of view, while their works are made not simply to be looked at, but to be contemplated long and often, evidently the most fruitful moment and the most fruitful aspect of that moment must be chosen. Now that only is fruitful which allows free play to the Imagination. The more we see the more we must be able to imagine; and the more we imagine, the more we must think we see. But no moment in the whole course of an action is so disadvantageous in this respect as that of its culmination. There is nothing beyond, and to present the uttermost to the eye is to bind the wings of Fancy, and compel her, since she cannot soar beyond the impression made on the senses, to employ herself with feebler images, shunning as her limit the visible fulness already expressed. When, for instance, Laocoon sighs, imagination can hear him cry; but if he cry, imagination can neither mount a step higher, nor fall a step lower, without seeing him in a more enduring, and therefore less interesting, condition. We hear him merely groaning, or we see him already dead.

[...] Among the old painters Timomachus seems to have been the one most fond of choosing extremes or his subject. His raving Ajax and infanticidal Medea were famous. But from the descriptions we have of them it is clear that he had rare skill in selecting that point which leads the observer to imagine the crisis without actually showing it, and in uniting with this an appearance not so essentially transitory as to become offensive through the continuity conferred by art. He did not paint Medea at the moment of her actually murdering her children, but just before, when motherly love is still struggling with jealousy. We anticipate the result and tremble at the idea of soon seeing Medea in her unmitigated ferocity, our imagination far outstripping any thing the painter could have shown us of that terrible moment. For that reason her prolonged indecision, so far from displeasing us, makes us wish it had been continued in reality. We wish this conflict of passions had never been decided or had lasted at least till time and reflection had weakened her fury and secured the victory to the maternal sentiments.¹¹

Of course, Lessing's remarks occur in the context of visual art, which is (traditionally) limited to the depiction of a single moment of a progression. However, in his typical media-cognitive style, he reflects on the way we perceive a single moment and thereby

¹⁰ Theodor E. Lessing: *Laokoön oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1999 [1766], chapter 3.

¹¹ Theodor Ephraim Lessing: *Laocoon*, trans. Ellen Frothingham, Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887, p. 16-19.

focuses on the repeated reflection on this moment that imagines the past and future moments to loop back to this one single moment. Especially vivid is his description of Medea: We imagine the horror that is coming to wish that the moment before would last forever or would give way for another scenario that we know will not come. Intensity of the moment is paired, perhaps paradoxically, with imaging the moments before and after the moment.

Empathy and aesthetic experience are not only coinciding here. Rather, the empathetic co-experience here is with that of a witness who watches Medea and foresees her actions, but cannot intervene. The aesthetic experience consists in the horror of the foresight and the drama of the inner nature of Medea's struggle, seen as if from the safe shore that Burke imagines. The empathetic-aesthetical complex of this experience includes being (or creating) the observer who stands close by and cares, but cannot intervene.

The unity of empathy and aesthetic experience for such triggers as the *fruchtbarer Augenblick* can concern both perception of temporal artworks, such as theatre, as well as real people or beings that are perceived as especially moving. A common enhancer (but not a required condition) of such experience consists of stage-and media-effects, that is the framing of the moment on some ritualized stage that is available for onlookers. Ritualized stages of this kind can be found in a wide range of social institutions: the theatre, the legal court, public examinations, speeches, political arenas, religious settings, performances, but also moments that seem more 'private' but which have been culturally ritualized and are known scenes in our collective consciousness, such as confessions of love. To some degree, all aesthetic reception elevates the observed situation on some kind of stage, even if there is no stage to begin with. These stages train us in developing the mobile consciousness required to be close-by observers.

It should be noted that it is possible that there is a formalistic pattern underlying the heightened experience of the moment. Insofar as we can describe the looping back and forth or the oscillation between presence and future and alternative futures, it could

be described as paralistic pattern in the sense of Roman Jakobson since the same moment keeps appearing in the temporal progression and thereby gets elevated in the perception.¹²

Behind this basic outline of the argument lies a range of hypotheses, definitions, and evidence.

2. Definition of empathy: Co-experience of situation of another

In this article, empathy is defined in a phenomenological way as the co-experience of the situation of another.¹³ The co-experience can be focused on strong and immediate emotions, such as pain, sadness or happiness, but it can also involve more complex mental operations, such as the struggling to make a decision, anticipating some events, or reconciling different values.

This definition is wider than the definition of empathy as some form of emotion-sharing that is used in neuropsychology.¹⁴ The current working hypothesis in the neurosciences is that observing an emotion in another activates the neural mechanisms in an observer responsible for the production of a similar emotion, with an awareness of the difference between self and other (De Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Decety & Lamm, 2006).¹⁵ The neuroscience definition of empathy has the advantage that it can be

¹² Jakobson, Roman: *Linguistik und Poetik*, in: *Ausgewählte Aufsätze.1921-1971*, ed. by Elmar Holenstein and Tarcisius Schelbert, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979 [1960]), 83-121. See also Winfried Menninghaus, Valentin Wagner, Eugen Wassiliwizky, Thomas Jacobsen and Christine A. Knoop; *The emotional and aesthetic powers of parallelistic diction*, in: *Poetics* 2017 (forthcoming).

¹³ For more clarification about this definition, see Fritz Breithaupt: *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2018, Introduction. For a phenomenological understanding of empathy, see also Dan Zahavi and Søren Overgaard, "Empathy without isomorphism: A phenomenological account," in Jean Decety, Ed., *Empathy: From Bench to Bedside*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2012: 3-20.

¹⁴ Stephanie Preston, and Frans de Waal: *Empathy: Its ultimate and proximate bases*, in: *Behavioral and brain sciences* 25.1 (2002): 1-20. Claus Lamm, Markus Rütgen, and Isabella C. Wagner: *Imaging empathy and prosocial emotions*, in: *Neuroscience Letters* (2017).

¹⁵ Jean Decety and Claus Lamm: *Human empathy through the lens of social neuroscience*, in: *The Scientific World Journal* 6 (2006), 1146-1163. Frederique de

measured with current technology of brain imaging. Typically, participants of studies are shown a very brief stimulus (such as, someone hitting or hugging another) and the immediate reaction is measured. However, this measurability also reduces the meaning of empathy to short-lived emotional responses in specific situations. The measurability drives the definition.

Unlike the narrow definition of neuroscience, the definition of co-experience of another's situation is not limited to immediate feeling or sharing of emotions and also includes the affective and non-affective intensity of experiencing the other's situation. By focusing on the situation of the other, it accounts for different perceptions of that situation by empathizer and the target of empathy. The observer typically knows more or less than the person in a situation, and can, for example, see the shark that the swimmer cannot yet see.

3. Aesthetic experience and intensity

In this paper, the main feature of aesthetic experience is its intensity. However, intensity alone does not describe aesthetic experience well. The intensity of an experience somehow has to remain removed and aesthetic, without shifting into an immediate first-person experience. Someone who directly experiences great joy or great sadness does not experience these emotions aesthetically. However, a removed observer of these emotions can experience them aesthetically and empathetically. While it would be too naïve and simple to describe the first-person experience as simply immediate, it is also clear that there are some attributes that apply almost exclusively for distanced aesthetic observation. This includes the feeling of being-moved;¹⁶ we are not moved by our own fate, but by that of others.

Vignemont and Tania Singer: *The empathic brain: how, when and why?*, in: *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 10, no. 10 (2006): 435-441.

¹⁶ Winfried Menninghaus, Valentin Wagner, Julian Hanich, Eugen Wassiliwizky, Milena Kuehnast and Thomas Jacobsen: *Towards a psychological construct of being moved*. *PloS ONE* 10 (2015) no. 6: e0128451.

The proper distance seems to be key to aesthetic experience. However, there are many open questions about how to define and understand the optimal distance for aesthetic experience. When considering the optimal aesthetic distance between an observer and an observed scene, it is clear that those mental operations that bridge the gap are especially interesting since they suggest a presence without being present. These include the imagination, absorption¹⁷ and empathy.

Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht has recently made a sweeping proposal on how to contextualize the experience of intensity. He describes the modern longing for intensity as the counterpoint to a search for tranquility, but as part of the same movement that fluctuates or circulates between phases of relaxation and intensity.¹⁸ Intensity of experience is close to passion that can overwhelm and subject us. It also is open to contingency beyond our control. In this movement, Gumbrecht depicts the overall willingness, longing for, or at least tacit agreement to states in which the subject cedes control of his or her autonomy. Intensity, if we follow Gumbrecht's argument, involves heightened perception because we do not feel that we are in charge of what is happening. Things happen and occur—like in a fairy tale—and we are in awe about it. In this sense, intensity and tranquility can emerge as desired categories of life in a world shaped by individualism and self-effects.

Gumbrecht points to Deleuze as one of the core theorists of intensity.¹⁹ Additionally, John Dewey's focus of the connection of art and the heightened experience of the moment comes to mind.²⁰

4. We have empathy by aesthesizing the other's situation

¹⁷ Michael Fried: *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkeley: Univ of California Press, 1980. For different forms of absorption in reading, see Don Kuiken and Shawn Douglas: *Forms of absorption that facilitate the aesthetic and explanatory effects of literary reading*, in: *Narrative Absorption* 27 (2017): 217-35.

¹⁸ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: "Intensität – und existentielle Ästhetik der Gegenwart," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Dez. 2, 2017).

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Mille plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Paris: 2. Minuit, 2013 [1980].

²⁰ John Dewey: *Art as experience*, London: Penguin, 2005 [1934].

There is a core difference between the experience by the empathizer and the target of empathy. Obviously, the observing empathizer is not in the situation of the other and does not need to react to the demands of the situation. At least on some level, the observer is conscious about the difference between himself/herself and the other. And by not being in the actual situation, the observer has the advantage of distance and thereby also clarity.²¹

When we co-experience another's situation, we tend to view this situation as clear and relatable. In contrast, when we actually face a situation of our own, we are usually more distracted by the variety of sensual stimuli and the space of action, even when the situation is quite demanding. Most people are confused about their own situation, while observers from the outside have a clear picture. Whereas in our first-person experience, we tend to have mixed emotions and second thoughts about many core actions and feelings, the third-person observer can more easily reduce the situation of another to a few major features. This also involves anticipating more than the person in first-person can see or anticipate.

This perception of the third-person observer can be described as “clear” in the sense of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. For Baumgarten, the clarity of sensual perception was the basis of aesthetics. Using this meaning of aesthetics, we can say that the situation of the other is often *clear* to us or clearer than it is for the other himself or herself. More specifically: we can in our imagination put ourselves into the shoes of someone else precisely because their situation seems clear to us. Both of these processes go hand in hand: We can empathize because we can aestheticize—clarify—the situation of the other—and we clarify the situation of the other by co-experiencing his or her situation.

There is a certain attraction in the clarity of empathy. We owe this clarity to a *medium*, that is the other person. Others allow us to experience more aesthetically. Emotionally intense situations, dramatic actions, and decisive moments are especially well suited for empathy since in these instances, the pressure on the other is exceptionally *clear*.

²¹ For a more complete account of the aesthetic clarity of empathy, see Fritz Breithaupt, *Die dunklen Seiten der Empathie*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017.

What is important to note here is that the clarity of the situation is not just a given, but is also produced by the observer. There are certainly external situations that present themselves as more clear, and there are also situations that may at first lack clarity until an observer brings it about. However, there is always some contribution by the observer.

The observer reacts to something in the situation and then also modifies or purifies the situation to increase that to which he or she reacts. This act of purifying consists of an act of simplifying. Simplifying can make the situation more appealing and thereby intense, but it can also involve a downplaying of the relevance of the situation and thus serve to block empathy.

5. Empathy requires triggers

Empathy requires triggers. In fact, the triggers may be the best evidence for the hypothesis of an aesthetization to bring about empathy. Here is a cursory list of some factors that can trigger or enhance empathy:

- 1) All those **situations that trigger emotions** are an obvious focus for the observer. Still, there are differences between being oneself in a situation and observing someone else being in a situation. For one, being in a situation involves specific prehistories of that and similar situations. Also, being in a situation can be more confusing than observing it as an observer from a distance. For an observer to share into a situation of another requires some transparency of the situation. If someone cries in a coffeehouse in reaction to a message he or she got on the phone, the observer can relate to the expressed feelings of the other, but does not know their content and trigger. Even the valence of the emotion may remain hidden since the expressions can be misleading; crying can be out of joy, happiness out of schadenfreude etc.

- 2) In general, when people **express emotions**, others are more likely to pay attention and react to them. When observing an emotion, people tend to activate the same networks in the brain that bring about a similar emotion.²²
- 3) Even if the direct mechanism referred to under point 2 does not apply, we tend get involved when we **evaluate emotions** of others. While not every expressed emotion leads to empathy by observers, the expression of emotion operates as a form of signaling for others how to tune in to them (even if they do not copy the emotions). The expressed emotion can serve as a vehicle to assess the situation of the other person. The person crying usually (but not always) views his or her situation as sad. In this case, the mechanisms underlying the Appraisal Theory of Emotion may operate in reversed mode: Because the observer expresses an emotion, the observer derives clues for understanding their situation. This reading of the situation may then also allow the observer to experience this situation vicariously and thereby share the feelings of the other, i.e. have empathy.
- 4) Similar to point 3, we react to a variety of **mental states by others**, including desires, intentions, preferences etc. When we know what someone else desires but does not yet have, we can relate strongly, given also the directionality.
- 5) In general, “**events**” are highlighted in empathy. Events are framed episodes for which most people agree about begin and end of the event structure.²³
- 6) Empathy is more likely in **clear situations** in which the emotions and states, but also the pressures and opportunities of the other are well defined and perceivable by an observer. (This clarity may in fact be one that only the observer can comprehend. It may well be that the person in the situation is more confused). The clarity of the situation allows the observer to form specific expectation of what will happen or has happened before.
- 7) Empathy is more likely when there is a **development** (perhaps but not necessarily with a before and after structure). Stagnation is not well suited for empathy. In

²² See again De Vignemont & Singer, 2006; Decety & Lamm, 2006.

²³ See the event border theory by Gabriel Radvansky and Jeffrey Zacks: *Event Cognition*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014. See also: Andrew Hamilton and Fritz Breithaupt: *These things called event: Toward a unified narrative theory of events*, in: *Sprache und Datenverarbeitung (SDV)* 37, 1-2, 17-33.

general, Jerome Bruner and others have made the suggestion that narratives with their focus on developments are our proxy of perceiving the personality of others.²⁴

- 8) The development structure becomes intensified in before & after structures and especially **decisive moments**. The moment in that someone has to make a decision, has to act, has to choose is privileged in human perception in many ways. Hollywood movies have their own dramaturgy of decision making and obvious turning points that highlight this decision making.
- 9) **Physical movement** has been described as one of the more “direct” or “immediate” trigger of shared experience.²⁵ Physical movement may not rely on some direct copying via mirror neurons or even the Perception Action Model, but instead be a case of embodied cognition in a situation. It is interesting to note that physical movement also serves as a bridge to people we do not know, such as anonymous athletes performing.
- 10) **Antagonistic** relationships support side-taking by bystanders and observers, which is a likely precursor for perspective-taking and empathy.²⁶ Humans make decisions of sympathy and aversion very quickly. Situations of conflict between two parties lead many observers to mentally choose between both sides. Once people have chosen, they seem more likely to enhance the positive evaluation of this side, take their perspective and also to feel empathy.
- 11) **Positive attitudes toward specific other(s)** the likeliness of empathy strongly. Positive attitudes may be a result of personal knowledge of the other, but also extend to in-group biases.²⁷
- 12) Similar to point 11, our **knowledge of others and our familiarity** with them enhances the likeliness of empathy.

²⁴ See Bruner, 2003.

²⁵ Vittorio Gallese: *The roots of empathy: the shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity*, in: *Psychopathology* 36.4 (2003): 171-180.

²⁶ Fritz Breithaupt: *A three-person model of empathy*, in: *Emotion Review* 4.1 (2012), 84-91.

²⁷ See Miles Hewstone, Mark Rubin, and Hazel Willis: "Intergroup bias," *Annual review of psychology* 53.1 (2002): 575-604.

- 13) **Romantic and erotic experience** of others lead us to focus on others and to share their experiences. In erotic experiences, the reactions by the others can subjectively be felt and experienced as if they were experiences of our own body.
- 14) **Novelty and other means of getting attention** also increase the likeliness of empathy.
- 15) **Culturally emphasized situations** receive more attention than others. Different cultures emphasize different forms of behavior and find ways to enhance, perhaps ritualize specific situations in various ways. There is probably no form of behavior of relevance for empathy that is not strongly influenced by cultural factors. One culture may emphasize sensitivity to children, while others may practice ignorance to children; some cultures celebrate the success of leaders in vicarious ways, while others rarely engage in such behavior.

If one considers this list, one can notice a strong emphasis on decisiveness, intensity, and clarity. This is no surprise. It is likely that both sides of the empathizer and the situation interact here: The more decisive, intense, or event-focused the situation is, the more likely will the observer react empathetically. And reversely, the more the observer is able to turn the situation into a focused situation of another that is intense, decisive, and meaningful, the more likely he or she will be emotionally involved.

As indicated, clarity is at the center of this reorganization of a situation to connect an observer and the observed being in a specific situation. Clarity does not mean that the situation is harmonious or simple. A tragic situation can be crystal clear. Instead, the clearest situations are most demanding.

This demanding nature of the clear situation will be central for our following thoughts. For now, it is enough to mark that Baumgarten's notion of aesthetics as clear is a key to considering empathy, especially if we are adding a second component to it, namely the demanding nature of the clear.

6. Stage Effects: Empathy, but also aesthetic experience, is enhanced by stages

There are some situations that enhance both empathy and aesthetical experience. One of them is what one could call the “stage effect.” When we observe something that takes place on a stage, for example in a court house, in the theater or in politics, we are somehow already in the proper mental stage to observe the situation carefully, to reflect on the situation of the protagonists or speakers, and to analyze their emotions. This does not in itself suggest that we will feel either empathy or experience the situation aesthetically. However, we are much more likely to do so.

Stages have in common that they create a space for the audience. In fact, the physical architecture of the stages of the world, including theater houses, court rooms, parliament buildings, sport halls, auditoriums, etc., typically reserve more space for the audience than for the performers or actors. Hence, what marks the stage is less the boards for the actors, but rather the division to the audience and the creation of spectators. Being a spectator can mean many things. The historic range includes, for example, the witness, decider as in juries or political arenas, accuser, worshipper, supporter, admirer, learner, and celebrant.

What all of these different forms of stage-audiences have in common is that an observer has a limited and usually ritualized range of actions available vis-à-vis the events on the stage. Additionally, the events on stage are highlighted as that which is to be seen, heard, and witnessed. This state of the events as “to-be-seen” is not a simple feature that is added to all other features to the events on stage. Rather, it changes the appearance of everything that happens on the stage. The spotlight of the theater lightening glows on the skin of the actors, gives all their actions and emotions special relevance and makes them appear more true than things that do not happen on the stage. It seems that virtual stages provided by the electronic social media today maximize stage-effects: Every act of a human being now is available for spectators.

Paul Bloom has criticized empathy for its “spotlight” effect: We unfairly tend to favor those who draw empathy to themselves, over other people.²⁸ What needs to be stated first is how closely stages and empathy are intertwined. Stages generate or trigger empathy. Once someone stands on a stage people are invited to take his or her

²⁸ Paul Bloom: *Against Empathy*, New York: Harper Collins, 2016.

perspective and to co-experience his or her imaginary or real situation. And indeed, empathy effects are not limited to the morally better people. In theater theory, it has often been discussed how a monster like Shakespeare's Richard III can draw empathy to him. (And Lessing spends considerable time trying to reconcile this empathy-effect with his hope in a morally positive effect of theater).

How exactly does this work? Again, what has to be emphasized is that empathy is not a simple trick or mechanism. Stages gradually developed to induce or trigger mental transport beyond the sphere of the individual in the here and now. Our mobile consciousness is a cognitively and culturally highly developed asset. Apparently, our human culture needed ten thousand years (and likely more) to enhance various elements of creating the stage. A stage requires the expectation that attention is focused toward the stage, that the space of actions for spectators is limited. At least to some degree or during certain phases that audience has to be quiet and inactive. Stages seem to work better if there are masses of spectators. Many stages have used special effects of lighting to lull the audience in the dark. The people on the stage are special; they are prepared for their work on the stage. The audience has expectations about the events that will happen on stage and have a general understanding about the kind of things they will see or hear. Hence, instead of reducing the stage to a single triggering factor for empathy, we should understand the stage itself with its many features and cultural mechanisms as the trigger of empathy and thus as part of the empathy experience. Empathy is for us a stage experience.

Not every stage is associated with aesthetic experience. However, aesthetic effects and aesthetic experiences reach beyond the theater or opera house. Other stages, such as the sport complex, often participate in it. Political arenas also exploit aesthetic effects of the stage, including feudal aristocratic systems, nationalistic systems, fascism, dictatorships, etc. Many psychological processes are tied to stages as well; narcissists for example may imagine being seen by others and thus turn many situations into mental stages in which they are the focus of attention.

7. Intensifications:

Aesthetic experience and empathy intensify the moment

The last reflection on the stage effect have indicated that stages increase the likeliness of empathy. Some but not all stages are also connected with aesthetic experience. One could be tempted to suggest that those stages induce higher degrees of aesthetic experience where the events on stage do not have an external *meaning* beyond that stage, thereby excluding courts, politics, etc.. However, the distinction between intrinsic and external “meaning” remains vague and ultimately unsustainable.

Instead, there is a different and more precise way to consider some forms of aesthetic experience. The overall hypothesis of this paper is that empathy increases or brings about an aesthetic experience in those cases where the moment is dramatized. A dramatized moment features an intense, demanding situation of high significance for the following or previous developments. Such demanding situation is bound up in a development that requires a solution, thereby activating a search for future trajectories including counterfactuals, possible developments, and repeated viewing (as in Goethe’s concept of *wiederholte Anschauung* that connects his science and fiction). And this is where the plurality of perspectives and empathic engagements comes in: The intense situation leads spectators to consider multiple possible developments and thereby frequently also multiple perspectives on the same issue.

Spectators experience the situation of another from a first-person perspective, while also having the liberty of not actually being in the situation of another and having to actually react to the actual pressures. Rather, empathizing spectators can “view” competing possible developments simultaneously and thereby intensify their experience.

It is here that both empathy and aesthetics connect: By simplifying and intensifying situations to the point of drawing observers in empathetically (and otherwise with curiosity etc.), these situations also become potent and subject to intense mental scrutiny, thereby leading people to seeking to re-experience them. Interestingly, there is a second way empathy gets entangled in the experience of the moment. In many cases, the looping back and forth in considering the moment in its significance leads spectators to abandon the first-person perspective and to also take on other perspectives, including that of an outside observer or other involved parties in a scene. In fact, in many scenes of such

intensity, the spectator can oscillate between different perspectives. The power of scenes of recognition (*anagnorisis*) lies in this very oscillation between two (or more) perspectives, of both being the revealer of an identity and the one who is surprised by the revelation. For this effect, it does not matter whether its valence is positive or negative. One may think on the moment the returned Odysseus reveals his identity to the suitors while he lifts the impossible bow with a new arrow to kill them; just before these scenes, the old maid, Eurycleia, had recognized him in the most positive way. Likewise, the ritualized moment of a penalty kick in soccer can be experienced simultaneously from the side of the striker and the goal keeper. The effect is that the moment is experienced more than once, in different possibilities, connected with different hopes and fears and with different outcomes for each player. It is here that both empathy and aesthetics are not just linked but become one process.

There are some possible counter-argument to these elaborations. Co-experiencing the situation of another (empathy) not only intensifies the experience of the empathizer but it also draws the empathizer into a psychological situation of another person. This may be intense, but is it aesthetical? If for example the situation involves long-term consequences for the person (this does not need to be harm, but could be all kind of complications), the empathizer will likely drift into weighing some of these consequences and thus will be cognitively distracted. It is likely that in that case the aesthetic experience is reduced or ends as an aesthetic experience.

Hence, we have to add a constraint. Empathy increases the intensity of an experience. This experience can be called aesthetical only if it remains focused on the actual moment of observation/the situation. The more it drifts into empathic concern and the future of the empathy target, without looping back to the moment of the situation, the less aesthetic it will get.

One may also ask about the radically negative situations that may not fit aesthetical observation. However, it is precisely via empathy that negative situations can be turned into (pleasurable) forms of experience, such as nostalgia, horror, sublime experiences, or the uncanny (as long as the negative situation does not turn into empathic

concern, as just outlined).²⁹ Empathy can frame a situation as the situation of someone else from a specific viewpoint, and thereby condense some of the negative aspects of the negative situation into a specific intensity of the experience of that person.

Hence, we can say that empathy intensifies aesthetic experience by providing one of more perspectives for which the events matter thereby leading spectators to linger on the moment in its valences and effects longer, thereby making it more complex, intense. Empathy and aesthetic experience became one and the same process by creating the prolonged experience of one moment beyond the control of the observing subject. Aesthetically clear and demanding situations initiate a search for development of a situation and thereby drive repeated viewing and multiple perspectives.

²⁹ See again Menninghaus et al., 2017.