Rüdiger Heinze

Cognitive Confusions and Critical Misapprehensions. Henry James's »The Real Thing«

2022

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19710

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Heinze, Rüdiger: Cognitive Confusions and Critical Misapprehensions. Henry James's »The Real Thing«. In: *Kulturwissenschaftliche Zeitschrift*, Jg. 7 (2022), Nr. 1, S. 71–88. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19710.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:
https://kulturwissenschaftlichezeitschrift.de/artikel/reisener-bucklichte-maennlichkeit-benjamins-entstaltung-eines-konzepts-im-anschluss-an-lukacs-theorie-des-romans/

Rüdiger Heinze

Cognitive Confusions and Critical Misapprehensions

Henry James's »The Real Thing«

ABSTRACT: This essay uses principles and concepts of cognitive psychology and the context of 19th-century visual culture to show that the narrator of Henry James's »The Real Thing« (1892) is an unreliable narrator – a point which has been made before – not primarily because his judgments are incongruous with those of an implied author (a troubled concept in itself) and reader (as has been argued by critics so far) but rather because the manner in which he perceives and judges is so much d'accord with the way humans tend to perceive and judge: by heuristic processes of selection, projection and generalization. As I will further argue, these processes of cognition also have serious ethical repercussions – a point mostly overlooked so far.

KEYWORDS: Henry James; visual culture; cognitive cultural studies; psychology; narrative theory

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.
(Oscar Wilde in his preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray)

[F]or the critics, as for the governess, the characters and events around which the narrative turns, and turns again, evoke a profound unease in the face of epistemological as well as ethical uncertainty, and hence a tendency to impose univocal order and sense on language that strongly resists such acts of force.
The criticism that has emerged around James's tale is often as much a record of efforts to quell that anxiety as it is an attempt to understand a story that consistently defies such efforts.
(Esch & Warren, preface to The Turn of the Screw, xi)

I. Introduction: No Larger Than Life[1]

Henry James's short story »The Real Thing« (1892) begins with the narrator recounting a moment when the porter's wife announces »A gentleman – with a lady, sir« (James 1963: 229). The announcement of the gentleman and the lady triggers a »vision of sitters« – the first mistake on the side of the narrator, as it turns out. After their introduction and the removal of the initial misunderstanding – the »sitters« (who

1 I would like to thank the reviewers, whose suggestions and comments have significantly improved the essay.

would pay *him*) actually want to be »models« (who would be paid *by him*) – the narrator is »disappointed; for in the pictorial sense I had immediately *seen* them. I had seized their type–I had already settled what I would do with it« (231). This early deceptive impression is repeatedly corroborated in the course of the story by numerous conjectures such as »It was odd how quickly I was sure of everything that concerned them« (235). Given that the narrator has never before seen his sitters, the Monarchs, and that he has never been in contact with »their type« (»I seemed not to know any of the people he and his wife had known« (242)) we have to deduce that he cannot realistically seize their type at all – at least not from firsthand experience.[2] As it turns out, his claims are failures of cognition and judgment – failures that are never fully remedied: the narrative situation sets up a contrast between an experiencing I and an experienced I. The latter seems vaguely cognizant of the cognitive confusions which »got [him] into a second-rate trick« (258), but he never scrutinizes the causes of these confusions and consecutively readapts his percepts. His cognizance of that »second-rate trick« may count as partial insight, but he still blames this »trick« on the Monarchs without acknowledging his own failure. It is ironic that he comes to his insight in part by relying on the judgment of his friend Jack, who knows even less about the Monarchs and is apparently a bad/amateur painter (251), something which the narrator explicitly scorns earlier on (236f). To double the irony, the narrator conclusively purports to value memory so highly that he is »content to have paid the price–for the memory« (258). Yet it is his non-existent previous experience and the resulting impossibility of a memory (how could he remember something which never happened?) which lead him to his rather rash cognitive claims in the first place.

All this makes him an unreliable narrator; that much is uncontroversial. Catherine Vieilledent, Samuel Ludwig, Stuart Burrows, Michael Butter and others all have observed that the story »opens with a moment of vision that proves deceptive« (Burrows 255), that the narrator is not an acute observer because he is repeatedly mistaken, and that the text »suggests certain shortcomings of his ability to represent reality« (Ludwig 171). Far fewer critics, however, follow up on this: the narrator is unreliable not so much because his judgments are incongruous with those of conceivable readers or the wider implicit rules and norms of the storyworld but rather because the manner in which he perceives and judges is *so much d'accord* with the way humans tend to perceive and judge: by heuristic processes of selection, projection and generalization.

As John Armstrong has shown at length and in detail in his work on Henry James, phenomenology, and cognition, James is a »phenomenological writer«. In his groundbreaking *Phenomenology of Henry James* (1983), Armstrong writes: »James's heroes and heroines have dramas because they have impressions; indeed, their dramas

2 As Fiorenzo Iuliano points out, the sitters are aptly named Monarch (Iuliano 2019) – and how many people can boast to actually know monarchs from firsthand experience?

are their impressions. And he tells their stories by relating the impressions of observers, registers, or reflectors« (1983, 3; see also 37ff). In a more recent contribution, Armstrong argues that James shows and makes us aware of »the constructive powers of cognitive pattern-making that we ordinarily do not notice in everyday perception« (140). This pattern formation is a »temporal process of projecting expectations that are then *modified, refined, or overturned*« (2018, 141; emphasis mine). It would therefore be misleading to assume that the narrator's ›failure‹ of cognition suggests the availability of a perfect cognition, on the contrary; cognitive confusions and misapprehensions are an essential part of how humans make sense of the world and for this, the narrator cannot seriously be faulted. But it is when a lack of self-awareness and self-reflexivity – in other words: the unwillingness or inability to *modify*, *reflect*, and, if necessary, *overturn* one's temporary expectations, impressions, and formed patterns[3]– combines with these all too human misapprehensions and consequently leads to hasty attributions, stereotypes and prejudices, that questions of epistemological and narrative reliability and, most importantly and seriously, moral judgment enter. It is this last aspect of ethics and morality that is, I argue, regularly overlooked.[4]

Coincidentally, ironically, and testament to Henry James's mastery, we as readers run the danger of replicating the narrator's failures of judgment/cognition. As Sam Whitsitt argues, this is due to the fact that the story tells several, overlapping yet contradictory stories at once, so that the narrative »differ[s] with itself« and the narrator is »split, not into two–but into a differing within the same« (306). Many critics, he explains, take the artist's word for it and try to disambiguate[5] at all costs; »they assume that the narrator who tells us about the transformative powers of art has not in turn transformed that very story« (305). However, »whether the artist teaches a lesson to a pair of would-be models, or the would-be models teach a lesson to the artist remains an open question, not in spite of but because critics have apparently felt compelled to decide the issue one way or another« (304). In this respect, the story carries the same characteristics that Deborah Esch and Jonathan Warren ascribe to James's hallmark example of narrative, epistemological and ethical unreliability, *The Turn of the Screw.*

3 As Whitsitt puts it, the narrator »does not ever *master[.]* this [initial] mistake, this fracture, this gap« between the cognition of the experiencing I and the reflecting experienced I (309; emphasis in the original).

4 Theoretically, one could argue that humans are always already unreliable and that subsequently there cannot be an entirely reliable human narrator. While this is *generally* true (and also truistic), it ignores that there is an entire, epistemologically complex spectrum of degrees and facets of reliability.

5 »Disambiguation« shall be used in the logical sense introduced by Jeremy Bentham, i.e. the fixing of the various possible senses and meanings of an ambiguous term in order to determine one specific meaning.

Considering the story's cultural historical background, the cognitive confusions do not come as a surprise: the 19th century, and particularly the second half, witnessed an increasing and insistent orientation towards visuality, an »increasing freedom of spectacular display« as well as an »increasing awareness of the ubiquity of surveillance« (Brosch xi). Conventional visual codes were destabilized through ever more quickly developing mass media and technological novelties (Brosch 2) culminating in what Renate Brosch calls a »crisis of seeing.« If we follow the cognitive psychological hypothesis that perception and cognition are influenced by cultural determinants (Bierhoff 262ff; Armstrong calls humans »bio-social hybrids;« 2019, 133ff), and add to this Lakoff's postulation that symbolic models pair with cognitive models (154) through the »*structuring* of experience« (302; emphasis in the original), then »James's excessive use of the observer in his texts can be seen as a structural analogy to the cultural emphasis on the visual« (Brosch xii).

Moreover, his emphasis on processes of human cognition and their inherent pitfalls and shortcomings, disruptions and failures can also be seen as a structural analogy to the increasing heterogeneity, multiplication, ambiguation and destabilization of visual codes and human cognition at the end of the 19th century, lasting until today. If »seeing typically involves categorizing« (Lakoff 127), then a crisis of seeing also effects a crisis of categorizing and inevitably (as categories perform a crucial function in the formation of our judgments) a crisis of ethics and morality.[6] Racism, classism, ableism and various other forms of discrimination are all based on categorization and, to varying degrees, visuality.

By analogy, one could say that when reading »The Real Thing«, one executes cognitive processes akin to those activated upon looking at a Phenakistiscope or a Wheatstone stereoscope (Crary 28-31), the significant difference being semantic rather than visual confluence. Although we can never see any of the pictures and illustrations described and referred to in the story (it is after all only one semiotic system, a pro-

6 These cognitive problems are among the reasons the introspective psychology of William James and others was largely ignored in the US around the turn of the last century: it produced contradictory and often practically irrelevant results. William James writes on knowing (identified as cognition) that »[f]inding a world before him which he [the psychologist] cannot but believe that he knows, and setting himself to study his own past thoughts, or someone else's thoughts, of what he believes to be the same world; he cannot but conclude that those other thoughts know it after their fashion even as he knows it after his« (216). Thus, »the waking minds of our fellows and our own minds know the same external world« (218). The experimental refutation of these claims provided a fertile ground for the repudiation of this version of cognitive psychology by behaviorism. The latter restricted itself to the observation of observable behavior and did not attempt to hypothesize mental processes. It was only after the limits of behaviorism crystallized and when a change in methodology and new research into computer sciences and artificial intelligence provided good models that cognitive psychology experienced a revival (Anderson 20).

totypical example of ekphrasis), we inevitably imagine them: »Wir gestalten räumlich-bildliche Strukturen beim Verstehen sprachlicher Kunstwerke, und wir entwerfen sprachliche Kontexte beim sukzessiven Lesen von bildlichen Kunstwerken« (Brosch 13).[7] Contrary to the stereoscope, however, the particular conjunction of the various and quite diverse references to visual representation in »The Real Thing« will not congeal into one coherent ›picture‹ or idea of visuality and representation in the story but remain contradictory, insoluble, heterogeneous, or, in the words of Whitsitt, »differing within the same« (Whitsitt 306).[8]

II. Cognitive Confusions: (Mis)Perception in »The Real Thing«

One of the most basic and important precepts in cognitive psychology maintains that our previous experiences and the meaning and memories we attach to them, shape how and what we perceive. If we extrapolate from this hypothesis, one could say, simplifying somewhat, that we perceive with our past and our memories of it. Inversely, we also remember depending on what we experience, as new experiences alter our memories. In Frederic Bartlett's phrasing, we bring our »attitude« to what we experience.[9] Since we tend to remember the meaning/significance of what we see rather than the object itself (Anderson 106), one could argue that we structure our seeing according to the influence of past meanings. As we perceive things, we create models of the functioning of this world. As Lakoff points out, there is »nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action, and speech« (5). We may experience sense perception,

7 »We create spatial/pictorial structures in comprehending linguistic pieces of art, and we create linguistic contexts during the successive apprehension of pictorial pieces of art;« *author's translation.*

8 In the background of my argument and indeed my entire essay there lurks an ongoing debate I am intentionally eschewing: do we as humans and readers read and make sense of fictional characters much like, or exactly as, we do of humans, or are fictional characters something apart and ergo exceptional (thus the branding »exceptionality thesis«)? While I find the question per se intriguing, the debate is, upon closer look, not much of a debate. The claims on both sides of the debate are controversial only in their strong versions (fictional characters are exactly/not at all like humans, with the attending consequences for how we make sense of them), which however are easily dismantled; the weak version of the debate (being fictions of the human mind, fictional characters, while ontologically distinct, are inevitably similar to humans and we use similar techniques/scripts etc. for making sense of them), in turn, is not much of a debate. For a little older but still succinct outline of the relation between cognitive science and narratology, see Marie-Laure Ryan's essay in *Style* from 2010.

9 As CT scans of the brain suggest, remembering experiences activates the same regions of the brain that are active while we are making these experiences. Without additional complex data input, the brain could not distinguish between the memory of an experience and the experience itself.

but these sensations are aligned with our percepts, which in turn are the result of idealized cognitive models (ICMs) and provisional heuristics for effectively moving about in the world (Lakoff 68ff; Bierhoff 262ff), such as the availability heuristic, the representativeness heuristic and over-attribution, which more precisely describe processes of selection, projection and generalization. As we acquire new information, we adapt and shift our percepts (Anderson 4ff; 23ff).[10]

As I will show below in more detail, the narrator in James's short story most frequently relies on 1) availability, 2) representativeness, and 3) over-attribution. The availability heuristic (1) focuses on specific, easily accessible and colorful information (Bierhoff 262ff) – such as strong first impression of »types«. When humans filter information through this heuristic, they may assume a false consensus (assuming general agreement to one's judgment or perspective by the majority), commit egocentric errors (overestimating one's own contribution to an interaction because self-information is better stored than partner-information), or work with preemptive hypotheses and/or assimilation (we seek support for what we already believe; we tend to keep false hypotheses and view everything else with the intent to support initial hypotheses; the initial information shapes all successive information, even if incongruous; Bierhoff 287). The representativeness heuristic (2) fosters inductive judgments from atypical cases (e.g. assuming outgroup homogeneity; Bierhoff 266), i.e., that the members of another group are more homogeneous than the members of one's own group. Lastly, over-attribution (3) emphasizes personal characteristics over situational determinants (Bierhoff 267) so that one judges capabilities and effort rather than difficulty and chance (Bierhoff 302).

The defining characteristic of these heuristics is that they afford effectiveness, which means that they tend to unify disparate sensations. Nevertheless, any perception may also instigate multiple percepts or none: if what we see cannot be aligned with our established percepts and previous experience, we may not perceive it at all. In this case, wherever we are faced with »domains of experience that do not have a preconceptual structure of their own« (Lakoff 303), we comprehend experience by importing metaphors from other realms of experience:

> [T]hose concepts which are not directly grounded in experience employ metaphor, metonymy, and mental imagery–all of which go beyond the literal mirroring, or representation, of external reality. […] The imaginative capacity is also embodied –indirectly– since the metaphors, metonymies and images are based on experience, often bodily experience. […] [E]very time we categorize something in a way that does not mirror nature, we are using general human imaginative capacities. (Lakoff xiv)

10 For an extensive overview of heuristics and decision-making theory, see Betsch, Funke, and Plessner's standard monograph (2011).

For whatever is new and unfamiliar to us, we have to invent or import categories. Some are more adequate than others, and all of them are in need of revision once we attain more experience. If we apply these cognitive models to »The Real Thing«, we can shed light on the narrator's cognitive misapprehensions and on the story as a prototypical exemplification of the unreliability and pitfalls of human cognition.

Perhaps the most notorious example of the narrator's misperceptions is his early claim upon seeing the Monarchs for the first time that »in the pictorial sense« he has »immediately *seen* them« and »seized their type«, thus working in fact with the representativeness heuristic. Numerous similar statements follow in which he purports to »see« them, where »see« could semantically be replaced by »imagine« or »envision.« Crucially, however, the claims to visual perception (see) are seldom attenuated by a semantic shift to imaginative capacity (envision). The ontic factuality of what is allegedly seen, implied by the declarative »see,« culminates in his statement that he is »sure of everything that concern[s] them« (235). Similarly, his rather extreme extension of the representativeness heuristic (seizing their type without knowing their type) belies the neglect of relevant base rates.[11] It appears that the autodiegetic narrator aspires to the panopticism and absolute epistemological authority of the authorial narrators prevalent in much 19th-century realist and naturalist fiction: »It is the elision of these discrete stages of perceiving, representing, and recognizing the world of objects that marks the Cartesian spectator's transcendent, universal view« (Jacobs 48). What Jacobs writes of the narrator in James's *The Sacred Fount*[12] can be applied to the narrator of »The Real Thing«. By eliding the difference between subjective and objective reality, he is not only unreliable but discredits »the posture of detached observation itself« (Jacobs 54). Admittedly, there are repeated epistemological inflections when the narrator concedes that he cannot »of course see the thing in detail« (233) or finds it »odd how quickly [he is] sure of everything that concern[s] them« (235). Nevertheless, the narrator's admonitions that his vision is faulty hardly balance his panopticism in the bulk of the story.

It is ironic that much criticism neglects these admonitions and tends to elide the »discrete stages of perceiving, representing, and recognizing the world of objects« when the story in fact contains a variety of modes of perception (how he sees) and visual codes and media (what he sees): the narrator sees, looks, glances (229), seizes (231), pictures (231), envisions (233), appraises (233), fancies (235), imagines (236), evokes (236), catches and keeps (257). The semantic variety is immense. If one replaces

11 The relevant base rate fallacy describes probability judgments that are based on irrelevant information.

12 Written roughly ten years later, this novel may be seen as a continuation of the issues in »The Real Thing«.

the words look and see with synonyms and examines their connotations, they will vary from

- cursory perception (glance),
- references to attire and posture (»she looked too distinguished«),
- experience (»I had seen people painfully reluctant«),
- imagination (retrospective – »I could see the sunny drawing-rooms [...] in which Mrs. Monarch had continuously sat« – and prospective – »I had a vision of the promptitude with which they would launch a table d'hôte«),
- aspiration/expectation (»I looked to a different branch of art«),
- appearance (as an emphasis on the difference between ontology – what is – and epistemology – what we may know or, in this case, see of it),
- to apperception of ontic factuality (passive – see – and active – look at),
- as well as allusions to perceptive distortion (blurred, swam).

Cognition is overwhelmingly visual in the story, to the degree that even non-visual modes of experience and cognition are expressed in visual terms, a tendency which is in keeping with Renate Brosch's claim that in the course of his literary career James increasingly described cognitive processes of his figures as acts of seeing (6) – which in English (Ah, I see) doubles as an expression for comprehension. This in turn does not contribute to cognitive coherence but adversely, due to the story displaying a »diminished faith [...] regarding the capacity of vision to deliver reliable knowledge« (Jacobs 3), creates even more ambiguity.[13]

Moreover, visual cognition is filtered through a variety of modes, while other modes of cognition are neglected, specifically language: »Language, the main nonvisual source of information, is simply done away with as a source of knowledge« (Ludwig 172). When the narrator first meets the Monarchs, he may *see* them all at once but he entirely ›misreads‹ their intention through egocentric error, a misunderstanding amplified by the presence of ›wrong words‹ (»We should like to make it pay«) and the absence of the ones necessary to clear up the misunderstanding. This is, once again, highly ironic because as readers we have access to the story through language only, the semiotic code most ignored in a story of visual cognition. The narrator's misjudgments result from his endeavors to heuristically reduce the complexity of this co-simultaneity of visual modes in order to assimilate complex and plethoric information into his familiar meaning-making frame. This is exacerbated by the various visual codes and media, among them landscape painting (230), portraits (229), black and white illustrations (231), woodcuts (237), portrait photographs (243), advertising photographs

13 The narrator's description of the Major's size offers a concise intratextual comment on this heterogeneity, as Ludwig remarks: »the surplus registered is not larger than life but, inversely, larger than the monologic perspectivism [...]. He or she cannot be contained in an imposed perspective« (173).

(233), copies of photographs (243), sketches (231), pictures with and without figures (232), pictures of love (257), of social life (233), etc. To complicate things, these numerous different visual media and genres are repeatedly conflated within one sentence.

In view of such a variety of visual stimuli, the narrator's cognitive confusions and misapprehensions appear as predictable as his attempts to »impose univocal order and sense« (Esch and Warren xi). Looking at the narrator's assertions about things in his field of vision and cognition, we will find that what he relies on is heuristic availability in his initial and subsequent encounters with the Monarchs, i.e., he does not further seek information beyond what he initially sees and, aggravatingly, assumes. As Ludwig puts it: »When Miss Churm poses as a Russian princess, he paints neither his model nor any Russian princess he knows (we may safely assume that he has never met one); rather he produces the representation of something invented.« (171) He relies, thus, on his almost non-existent knowledge about ›their‹ class and reduces their entire personality to effects of that class, assuming outgroup homogeneity, and in addition he over-attributes personal characteristics over situational determinants:

> I could see she had been photographed often, but somehow the very habit that made her good for that purpose unfitted her for mine. [...] But after a few times I began to find her too insurmountably stiff; do what I would with it my drawing looked like a photograph or a copy of a photograph. (243; emphasis mine)

If they fail him as models, it is because of who they are; their desperation, effort and humility, but most importantly the external causes of their plight are given scant mention and appreciation only fleetingly, and mostly toward the end (another egocentric error). In fact, his unreflected and preemptive reliance on these heuristics appears to play a key role in his abilities as an artist:

> the value of such a model as Miss Churm resided precisely in the fact that *she had no positive stamp*, combined of course with the other fact that what she did have was a curious and inexplicable talent for imitation. (245; emphasis mine)

Paradoxically, he appreciates Miss Churm having »no positive stamp« for the power this gives him in attributing whatever content he deems suitable for her representation in his pictures: ›seeing all‹ where there is in fact a cognitive blank prevents the ›adequate‹ representation of the Monarchs but is the prerequisite for the representation of Miss Churm. In both cases, an absence is constitutive for his cognition and artistic ability, but while he is able to fill that blank imaginatively in the case of Miss Churm, his filling of the blank in the case of the Monarchs preempts any further imaginative work. As Miss Churm appears to carry just as much, if not more, specific ›personality‹ as the Monarchs in terms of cultural and educational background, language, attire, habits,

there seems to be no logical reason why her person should be more easily rendered than the Monarch's, apart from her unspecified »talent for imitation.« In moral vocabulary, the narrator does not really care about anyone, neither the Monarchs nor Miss Churm, over and beyond how they may serve him and his ambitions. Over the course of the story, he gets to know the Monarchs a little better (he already knows Muss Churm, if one can talk about »knowing« at all) and has sufficient opportunities to revise his judgments, to get to know »their types« (and here I mean all of his models), to appreciate them and their situation, but he makes no use of these opportunities – in fact, it would seem that in the case of the Monarchs, these opportunities rather are nuisances to him.

The narrator's probably most obvious reduction relies on preemptive hypotheses and assimilation. All judgments subsequent to his initial impression of the Monarchs are made and shaped in accordance with that impression. He may not yet be prescient about the impending predicament which they more or less haplessly instigate – or in other words: the second rate trick into which they get him–, but this is not because he alters his initial assessment; rather he fails to comprehend the potential consequences of that assessment. As Phyllis van Slyck points out, James's story challenges the illusion that »one understands what one sees« (217). While all humans are potentially subject to this illusion, it is how we deal with it that makes the illusion an ethical issue; the narrator in »The Real Thing« never really confronts the truth of »his (or her) subjective shaping of reality« (218), which makes his excusable cognitive »failure« simultaneously a significantly less excusable moral failure. In unsympathetic terms, we could call him self-absorbed, egoistic, superficial, vain, and arrogant.

Pointing out that the narrator is unreliable in the literary sense thus does not quite do justice to the complexity of the story if this unreliability is merely premised in his self-revealing comments. The narrator is unreliable not simply because he misjudges but because he is cognitively overtaxed, respectively unwilling to adequately deal with cognitive complexity, and thus no more or less unreliable than any human being under certain circumstances might be. If we judge his judgments, we enter the realm of morality and ethics, and here it is not so much the Monarchs but the narrator who fails, not because his misjudgments would be completely avoidable, but because he fails, in the framework of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, to revise, reflect and adapt his prejudices (see also Armstrong 2019, 139-141). Selection, projection and generalization are filters we all employ, indeed have to employ, if we want to maintain some degree of agency, moral and otherwise, but they need to be paired with self-reflexivity and self-awareness:[14] »the establishment of habitual modes of pattern-

14 In an essay on what readers may learn from the experiences of fictional characters, Michael Butter makes a similar point (albeit within an overall different context and to a different end): »Die Herstellung dieses Zusammenhangs [between complex and ambivalent signs and our

formation is both a blessing and a curse« (Armstrong summarizing William James, 2019, 142) because it enables fast coping, reaction, and learning, but it also makes us »vulnerable to the danger of becoming locked in behaviors« (142).

Neither, then, should it be a surprise that the narrator's heuristic reduction of complexity leads to misjudgments nor that critical readings in their exegesis tend to replicate the reduction of cognitive complexity, because it is a necessary and inevitable cognitive human process. The decisive –ethical– difference lies in the degree of awareness and self-reflexivity we bring to that reduction and in our willingness to question ourselves and our judgments. The ›deviousness‹ or propensity of the story to encourage these reductions is grounded in its engendering of ambiguity, its tendency to defy and resist disambiguation and the imposition of »univocal order and sense.« In psychological terminology this amounts to the inability of coming to a judgment and the multiple coexistence of contradictory assessments (in one person) called cognitive dissonance. Put into the cultural historical context, this seems fitting, because it goes hand in hand with what one might call visual dissonance.

III. Crisis of Seeing, Crisis of Cognition: Historical Context

Granted, one can appreciate the complexity, the phenomenological ruminations, and the stylistic mastery of »The Real Thing« without knowing too much about the cultural historical context. However, one would miss the many subtle allusions to late 19th century »visual culture« that James has clearly built into the story (and that are part of many other stories and novels by James). More importantly, one would be left with a truncated understanding of the facets and layers of the story – without being aware of it.

The various different kinds of media and visual representations depicted and/or alluded to in the story constitute an indirect reference to visual media in the second half of the 19th century in general and to the medium of photography in particular. Given that ›photography‹ comes in a variety of different media and genres, one has to differentiate among a variety of visual codes and genres. At the time James published »The Real Thing«, the daguerreotype was almost extinct, although occasionally re-photographed onto calo- or ferrotypes or onto paper-based film in order to salvage it from disappearance. But ambrotypes and ferrotypes were still in use alongside Disdéri's popular carte-de-visites (whose pervasiveness is likely to have caused James's disap-

efforts to make sense of them] erfordert beträchtlichen kognitiven Aufwand – und das Vermeiden von interpretatorischen Schnellschüssen. Einen solchen leistet sich aber der Erzähler [...].« (313) According to Butter, the narrator's most dramatic shortcoming is his inability/unwillingness to reflect upon his mistaken assumptions.

proval in contrast to his early appreciation of the daguerreotype) and the even more popular Kodak camera patented by Eastman in 1888.

In addition, visual capacities were tested by tableaux vivants, panoramas, stereoscopes, dioramas, early animation devices such as phenakistoscopes, zoetropes, etc.[15] The complexity of visual decoding was enhanced by the different genres in which visual media found expression, such as advertising pictures, photojournalism, post mortem pictures, medallions, photographic pairs in books en face (which demanded dialogic apprehension and occasionally developed a narrative dimension), and hand colored pictures (which subverted the gap between representation and surface). Audience accounts of the popular visual spectacles give witness to a curious mixture of the ›natural‹ and the sensational: the habitually inured distinction between real and unreal was disrupted just because the illusions were so effectual that they amounted to a kind of naturalistic sensationalism.[16]

All this is important for the story because, as Jonathan Crary shows, the »new empirical knowledge of vision and techniques of the visible« (5) that developed in the 19th century go hand in hand with, or rather entail, a »new kind of observer« (5). As he points out, »there is a tendency to conflate all optical devices in the nineteenth century as equally implicated in a vague collective drive to higher and higher standards of verisimilitude« (16); if that was the case, there would have been no need for a new kind of observer, or a new kind of science, for that matter. However, as Crary continues, such »teleological approaches most often neglect entirely how these devices were expressions of nonveridical models of perception« (17). By this he means that in many devices, what is seen is not really »there« but constructed in the human brain. It is, in other words, phantasmagoric, as in a Wheatstone stereoscope, for example. In other words, and more generally, »[v]ision is literally hermeneutic–a circular, recursive process of assembling parts into wholes« (Armstrong 2018, 139).

Criticism of James and »The Real Thing«, however, tends to focus on photography only, probably because of James's many remarks about it. Regarding the technological aspects of photography, which affected the evaluation of its aesthetic merit, the actual mechanics of photography effectively contributed to the proliferation of visual codes and their decoding. In focusing on James's disdainful remarks on photography in his reviews and prefaces as well as on the narrator's equally disparaging comments, critics

15 Some panoramas even had live animals placed in them, accompanying music and sounds, as well as wind. They were, contrary to the critical focus on their unsettling of the real through visual illusion, anticipating the cinematic, aimed at »deceiving« all senses. In his essay »Techniques of the Observer« (1988), Jonathan Crary provides a comprehensive and detailed discussion of the development of visuality (in science, philosophy, art, and entertainment) in the 19th century.

16 Anno Mungen provides an excellent collection of documents (from announcements, programs and reviews to essays and miscellanies) regarding panoramas, tableaux vivants and other forms of visual ›spectacle‹ (2006).

tend to demonstrate a limited recognition of photography's artistry and modes of production (not uncommon in the years that first witnessed its mass production) that may in part stem from an inability to distinguish ›bad‹ from ›good‹ photography. Understanding photography requires the learning of codes and conventions just as much as understanding painting requires historically and culturally acquired knowledge. Towards the turn of the 19th century »the debate as to the aesthetic character of photography [Slater claims] conventionally rest[ed] on the distinction between scientific and artistic vision, fact and fiction, objectivity and subjectivity« (220), thus the dominant understanding of photography emphasized its mechanics while downplaying its aesthetics.

In contrast, the famous photographer Peter Henry Emerson pointed out as early as 1889 that it is not the machine, but the people using it who choose the picture, so that the camera enforces a transferal, not a loss, of creative control (Michaels 218).[17] Walter Benn Michaels aptly points out that for Emerson »the fact that almost anyone can take a picture is no more damaging to photography than the fact that almost anyone can write is damaging to poetry« (220). Even more importantly, it follows from accepting the conventionality of decoding photographs and other visual modes that the viewer does add something to the picture. It is not pure referent and surface, but rather product and producer of ambiguity. According to Michaels, if one denies »the ambiguity of the photograph, [one] denies also what Berger calls the ›social function of subjectivity,‹ the potential for each viewer of a photograph [...] to construct a personal relation with it« (237).

Despite the significance of media and visuality in the story and the attending moment in cultural history, it should not be forgotten that the story is a piece of ekphrasis: there are no visual codes, only their textual, and thus metaphorized and metonymized, rendering. Considering that in a fictional text words are all we have for visualizing (= imagining!) the represented pictures, drawings, illustrations, etc. there are precious few actual descriptions of what is allegedly put on canvas. It is up to the reader to imagine what we might see, or what the narrator is seeing. In that regard, too, the story is phenomenological, on yet another level.

We might leave it at that, were it not for the confounding and at the same time illuminating fact that much criticism of the story repeats the filtering and disambiguation by the narrator (both the experiencing and the experienced I). To avoid misunderstandings: the purpose of the next section is not to depreciate critics and their attempts to analyze and interpret the story, much less to suggest that akin to the narrator's disambiguation, there is an ethical dimension to this critical disambiguation. After all, critics do not depreciate people in writing about »The Real Thing«. What I aim

17 This view gained prevalence only two decades later with the ascendance of other famous photographers such as Stieglitz, Coburn, or Steichen.

to show is that the story is not only *about* impressions, cognition, and phenomenology, but also *engenders* – verifiably – typical phenomenological processes in readers.

IV. Critical Reductions of »The Real Thing«

The story is among the most analyzed pieces of James' short fiction. Independent of one's critical view as to what end the story actually does what it does, »The Real Thing« is a complex comment on reality, representation, fiction, and art – phenomenological fiction, as Armstrong calls it. The many plausible and sustained critical readings given to it are probably the best indication of its ambiguity and cognitive equivocation, despite or perhaps because of its apparent closure. However, a significant amount of criticism tends to take its task of disambiguation somewhat too seriously, testifying to a »tendency to impose univocal order and sense on language that strongly resists such acts of force« (Esch & Warren xi). Critical disambiguation focusing on reality, representation and cognition in »The Real Thing« works with one or more of the following reductions:

(1) Exteriority: Based on the fact that Henry James's reviews, prefaces, notebooks, other critical commentaries as well as his autobiography brim with remarks on fiction and representation, art and photography as well as with painting, drawing and theater metaphors, it is assumed that this predilection is reflected in »The Real Thing« (Schwarzschild; Grossman).[18]

(2) Thematic focus / correlation: As part of the critical work, the focus has to be narrowed to what seem the most pertinent comments, which often amounts to a reduction of focus on one medium, namely photography. Biographical fallacy creates a correlative relationship between what James says about representation, art and photography outside the story and what the narrator says about it inside the story (Nadel; Higgins).[19]

(3) Ontological distinction: By equating James with the narrator – mostly asymmetrically, i.e. they are not identical but rather the narrator represents James's views –, the story is incorporated into the textual universe of all that James has written.

18 For example, in a 1859 review on the character of Carter in De Forest's *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* James writes that Carter is »daguerreotyped from nature« (491), other frequently cited examples are found in the prefaces to *The Golden Bowl* (1904), *The Sacred Fount* (1901), or *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). In his fiction he has written about a host of diverse painters and artists (listed in Tintner) in addition to his fictional ones; and in his autobiography he comments on his picture being taken as a boy: »Beautiful most decidedly the lost art of the daguerreotype« (52) and on the fact that he has kept that picture all his life.

19 The same is true for James's comments on the Monarchs: in his notebooks, he calls them »clean and stiff and stupid« (103).

Therefore, what James has written about photography, for example, can be treated not as a mere intertext but as integral to the story (Sonstegard; Schwarzschild; Nadel).

(4) Argumentative heterogeneity: At this point, critical ventures branch out into three lines of argument. Among the most frequent disambiguations (Tick; Grossman) are those that argue »that James's story identifies the real thing with photography, a medium he supposedly despised« (Burrows 256), turning the story into a »straightforward parable about James's supposed scorn for the real thing« and, by extension, photography (Burrows 256).[20] Unsurprisingly, another critical route is to claim the opposite, namely that James, whether he openly admitted it or not, was fascinated with photography, appropriated its »pictorial sense« (Higgins 662) or saw in it, for his New York Edition, a means of attracting a larger audience, making it more marketable but also adding something aesthetic to it (Sonstegard; Schwarzschild; Nadel). The third critical disambiguation focuses on those remarks by James in and outside the story that attest to his ambivalence about photography (Grossman; Miller).

Cognitive psychology understands heuristics as reductions of complexity necessary and inevitable in order to effectively arrive at judgments and in order to be able to act at all at reasonable speeds. Therefore, the above comments are not meant to discredit or stereotype the extant criticism on the whole. Rather, they aim to emphasize how readings of the story replicate the mechanisms of cognitive heuristics and their potential for misjudgments and stereotypes described in the story, as well as the attempts to alleviate the resulting ambiguity in evaluating and interpreting the story.

Generally, James's commentary in various genres changes over time and is repeatedly contradictory, so that »[a]ttempts in the direction of totalizing Henry James's reactions to photography [and various other visual media; my insertion], even if the narrative involves a sensitive tracing of his shifting views, are unconvincing in that they fail to take account« (Rawlings 459)[21] of James's own ambivalent and contradictory comments as well as of the fact that teller and tale should not be conflated:

20 Crucial to this argument are James's derisive comments in his *Notebooks* on the Monarchs: they »have no pictorial sense. They are only clean and stiff and stupid« (1947: 103). For him they stood for English amateurishness (1987: 55).

21 Rawlings completes the sentence with a reference to the »Kodak Moment.« Apart from providing a concise history of the photograph, he is one of the few to address the fact that there was a tremendous difference between the initial daguerreotypes and the later Kodaks, which were mass products and available to a mass of amateur artists, making it radically different from what Alfred Stieglitz and Alvin Langdon Coburn produced. However, he does not fully heed his own advice when ›totalizing‹ Walter Benjamin, who also saw political and revolutionary potential in the loss of aura due to mass production (137).
In fact, James is not ignorant of the need for, and market conditions of, production; he expounds it in »The Madonna of the Future«, and it is, after all, a deluxe edition the narrator of »The Real Thing« illustrates.

> Gerade weil James' fiktionale Texte, besonders die späteren, eine skeptisch-relativistische Position zur Wahrnehmung beziehen und den Glauben an die Präzedenz ›unschuldiger‹ Sinneswahrnehmungen als Illusion enttarnen, ist eine Übernahme seiner theoretischen Positionen der Übertragung lebensweltlicher Wahrnehmung auf die Textproduktion und Rezeption nicht möglich. (Brosch 7)[22]

In effect, the homogenization of James's shifting views in both literary and non-literary texts amounts to what Lakoff identifies as typical of human cognition: prototyping, i.e. the graded categorization that ranks one member of a set/category as more central than another.

Even if we abide by the latter admonition and neglect or at least carefully differentiate the heterogeneity of James's comments on art and representation outside the story, we are still faced with an abundance of heterogeneous kinds of representation, media and visual codes inside the story, as well as insoluble contradictory observations by the narrator regarding these ›visualities.‹ The stereotyping of »The Real Thing« thus appears to replicate the heuristic reduction of complexity and cognitive proliferation by the narrator in the story.

V. Conclusion

We should pay attention to, but not take at face-value what Henry James has written. The explicitness of some of his statements regarding »The Real Thing« as well as diverse visual media and modes of representation belies their inconsistency with many of his other statements regarding similar matters and the complexity of the story itself. »The Real Thing« might, in fact, be telling us that there is no real thing; that there is only »empty chatter« (Vieilledent 34). Nor is the story, contrary to Vieilledent (34), an *allegory* about writing producing the real thing. The proliferation of modes and codes of perception and the subsequent cognitive ambiguity argued for in this essay would preempt such a reading. Rather, as Ludwig argues, the story is experiential, interactional, and dramatic (174); or in the phrasing of John Armstrong, the story is a drama of impressions (1983). Granted, many nineteenth-century writers of fiction wanted their texts understood not as written but as visual and corporeal artifacts (Flannery 5). But while readers can of course transpose the textual semiotic code into other codes or simply metaphorize it, the story itself cannot. What »The Real Thing« offers is a

22 It is *because* James's fictional texts, especially the later ones, assume a skeptical-relativistic stance towards perception and disclose the belief in the precedence of ›innocent‹ sensory perception as an illusion that it is not possible to adopt his theoretical positions regarding the transferal of worldly perception onto text production and reception. *Author's translation and emphasis*

brilliant textual, semantic transposition of real visual, historical and corporeal phenomena current not only at the end of the 19th century, but characteristic of the human cognition. But the story does not stop there. Neuroscience can help shed light on how cognition presumably »works« in the human brain, but »it cannot tell us what to do, morally« (Armstrong 2018, 146). »The Real Thing« – fortunately, I might add – does not do that either, but it does something better: it shows us and tells us about the ethical and moral consequences of unreflected cognition and hasty judgment, and it engages, almost forces us as readers to reflect upon that ethical dimension. To the end, the narrator does not fully understand the lesson so that we as readers may.

Works Cited

Anderson, John R. (2009): *Cognitive Psychology and Its Implications.* 7th Ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Armstrong, John (2018): »Henry James and Neuroscience: Cognitive Universals and Cultural Differences.« In: *The Henry James Review* 39, 133-151.

Armstrong, John (1983): *The Phenomenology of Henry James.* Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.

Benjamin, Walter (1977): *Illuminationen.* Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

Betsch, Tilmann/Funke, Joachim/Plessner, Henning (2011): *Denken – Urteilen, Entscheiden, Problemlösen.* Berlin and Heidelberg, Springer.

Bierhoff, Hans-Werner (2006): *Sozialpsychologie.* 6th Ed. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.

Brosch, Renate (2000): *Krisen des Sehens.* Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

Burrows, Stuart (2002): »Stereotyping Henry James.« In: *The Henry James Review* 23, 255-264.

Butter, Michael (2012): »Was Leser mit Figuren lernen: Henry James' ›The Real Thing‹ and Stephen Cranes ›An Experiment in Misery‹.« In: Pape, Lilith/Krämer, Olav/Lampert, Fabian (Eds.): *Figurenwissen.* Berlin: de Gruyter, 307-323.

Crary, Joanathan (1988): »Techniques of the Observer.« In: *October* 45, 3-35.

Esch, Deborah/Warren, Jonathan (1999): Preface to the Second Edition. *The Turn of the Screw.* By Henry James. New York & London: Norton. xi-xiii.

Flannery, Denis (2000): *Henry James: A Certain Illusion.* Aldershot: Ashgate.

Grossman, Julie (1994): »›It's the Real Thing‹: Henry James, Photography, and *The Golden Bowl.*« In: *The Henry James Review* 15, 309-328.

Higgins, Charles (1982): »Photographic Aperture: Coburn's Frontispieces to James's New York Edition.« In: *American Literature* 53:4, 661-675.

Iuliano, Fiorenzo (2019): »Making and Unmaking (Im)Possible Worlds: Language Games, Naming, and Necessities in ›The Real Thing‹.« In: *The Henry James Review* 40, 137-154.

Jacobs, Karen (2001): *The Eye's Mind.* Ithaca and London: Cornell UP.

James, Henry (1879/1963): »The Madonna of the Future.« *The Complete Tales of Henry James.* Ed. Leon Edel. Vol. 3. London: Rupert Hart-Davis.

– (1892/1963). »The Real Thing.« *The Complete Tales of Henry James.* Ed. Leon Edel. Vol. 8. London: Rupert Hart-Davis.

– (1867). »Miss Ravenel's Conversion.« In: *Nation* 4: 491-492.
– (1913-1917/1956): *Henry James: Autobiography.* Ed. F.W. Dupee. London: W.H. Allen.
– (1987): *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James.* Ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers. New York: Oxford UP.
– (1947): *The Notebooks of Henry James.* Ed. F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock. New York: Oxford UP.
James, William (1890/1950): *The Principles of Psychology.* New York: Dover.
Lakoff, George (1987): *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
Ludwig, Sämi (2002): *Pragmatist Realism: The Cognitive Paradigm in American Realist Texts.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
Michaels, Walter Benn (1987): *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism.* Berkeley etc.: University of California Press.
Miller, J. Hillis (1995): »The ›Grafted‹ Image: James on Illustration.« In: McWhirter, David (Ed.): *Henry James's New York Edition.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 138-141.
Mitchell, W.J.T. (1994): *Picture Theory.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
Mungen, Anno (2006): *BilderMusik: Panoramen, tableaux vivants und Lichtbilder als multimediale Darstellungsformen in Theater- und Musikaufführungen vom 19. bis zum frühen 20. Jahrhundert.* 2 Vols. Remscheid: Gardez!.
Nadel, Ira B (1995): »Visual Culture: The Photo Frontispieces to the New York Edition.« In: McWhirter, David (Ed.): *Henry James's New York Edition.* Stanford: Stanford UP, 90-108.
Rawlings, Peter (1998): »A Kodak Refraction of Henry James's ›The Real Thing‹.« In: *Journal of American Studies* 32:3, 447-462.
Ryan, Marie-Laure (2010): »Narratology and Cognitive Science: A Problematic Relation.« In: *Style* 44:4, 469-495.
Schwarzschild, Edward L. (1996): »Revising Vulnerability: Henry James's Confrontation with Photography.« In: *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 38:1, 51-78.
Slater, Don (1995): »Photography and Modern Vision: The Spectacle of ›Natural Magic‹.« In: Jenks, Chris (Ed.): *Visual Culture.* London and New York: Routledge, 218-237.
Sonstegard, Adam (2003): »Painting, Photography, and Fidelity in *The Tragic Muse.*« In: *The Henry James Review* 24, 27-44.
Tick, Stanley (1993): »Positives and Negatives: Henry James vs. Photography.« In: *Nineteenth Century Studies* 7, 69-101.
Tintner, Adeline R. (1993): *Henry James and the Lust of the Eyes.* Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP.
van Slyck, Phyllis (2001): »Trapping the Gaze: Objects of Desire in James's Early and Late Fiction.« In: Dewey, Joseph/Horvath, Brooke (Eds.): *›The Finer Thread, The Tighter Weave‹: Essays on the Short Fiction of Henry James.* West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 217-234.
Vieilledent, Catherine (1984): »Representation and Reproduction: A Reading of Henry James's ›The Real Thing‹.« In: Royot, Daniel (Ed.): *Interface: Essays on History, Myth and Art in American Literature.* Montpellier: Université Paul Valery, 31-49.
Whitsitt, Sam (1995): »A Lesson in Reading: Henry James's ›The Real Thing‹.« In: *The Henry James Review* 16, 304-314.