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ARTISTIC EXPERIMENT AS A COGNITIVE STRATEGY  
OF THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL: A CASE STUDY  
OF *ONDE ESTAS?* BY SEBASTIAN BUKACZEWSKI

**Abstract.** There are many ways in which the term experiment may be used with reference to art and, in particular, the novel. Most commonly the term is used for innovative techniques employed in artefacts. But artistic experiment may also consist in (1) the reader using artefacts to evoke her aesthetic response and enhance thereby her introspective potential, (2) the author (and the reader) exploring in the mode of fiction how real people might behave in certain situations, (3) the reader testing upon herself a hypothesis inscribed in the novel's design. In this paper, the theoretical considerations are illustrated with an in-depth study of Bukaczewski's *Onde estas?* as well as a brief discussion of other contemporary novels.

**Key words:** the novel; experiment; cognition; *Onde estas?*; Sebastian Bukaczewski.

The novel is an affective medium. Not wholly so, because it argues and discusses as well as expressing feeling. Indeed, its mode of inquiry cannot be separated from its expression and manipulation of feeling, since its medium is mixed, conducting experiments and inquiries in ways which are impassioned, personal and particular.

Barbara Hardy (1982)

The term *experiment* in the context of art often denotes an innovative use of formal techniques, a break with tradition, whose effect might be difficult to predict. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, an early epistolary novel, is an 18<sup>th</sup>-century narrative experiment, while atonal compositions of Claude Debussy are a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century experiment in music. However, within a cognitive approach to art—the approach in which art is taken to perform the cognitive function—it appears that the term can also be used to name some

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specific cognitive procedures which to a considerable extent resemble various kinds of scientific experiment. The present paper aims to consider how these procedures are used in the contemporary novel.

### 1. AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE TAKEN AS EXPERIMENT

Art, the novel included, may be taken as among other things a cognitive activity directed at exploring human psychic experience. Art's primary cognitive mechanism appears to consist in engaging art recipients in a unique sensual, emotional and intellectual experience. This experience and reflection upon it (possibly including a comparison with the experience of other recipients as well as the artist's project) extend the recipients' knowledge of themselves and other people. The experience is occasioned by artefacts—original, man-made material objects, equipped (by the artist as well as art recipients) with meanings and values. Within this basic cognitive mechanism of art, three further strategies may be differentiated: (1) presentation of ideas, (2) construction of models of reality, often offering the recipient a chance for vicarious experience, and (3) staging various kinds of experiment.<sup>1</sup>

In epistemology, *experiment* may be defined as “perception (observation) of an event or process caused by the cognizing subject in a controlled situation” (Stępień 32). Provided that art is interpreted as a cognitive activity,<sup>2</sup> the experience of the artist—her perception of the reaction the artefact evokes in herself and other people—appears to fit the definition. Also the recipient may be said to engage in an experiment when by choosing a given artefact as the object of his attention, he first provokes and then observes his own reaction, provided that the context is cognitive. The element of the “controlled situation” may be found first of all in the separation of the aesthetic experience

<sup>1</sup> This cursory presentation of the cognitive theory of art is a synthesis of the work of various authors, including Umberto Eco, Piotr Gutowski, Henryk Markiewicz, Ewa Borowiecka, Karl Popper, Stanisław Ossowski and Denis Dutton. I present this approach to art in greater detail in the second chapter of *Contradictions in Art*.

<sup>2</sup> The same author defines *cognition* as “the action of contact with something which one tries to apprehend, with which one becomes acquainted, about which one gains information.” The aim of such an action is knowledge, which “manifests [...] in the ability to formulate and state propositions [...] which are true or aspire to be true, and one way or another justified” (21). In some contexts two further constraints may be added: the awareness of the person engaging in the cognitive activity of its proper meaning and the legitimacy of the claim to truth of its result (Stępień 25).

from everyday life (cf. art galleries, music halls, as well as picture frames or the formal opening and closing of a concert); in the usually intimate character of this experience, which reduces the risk of other people's interference; as well as in the fact that the artefact is experienced gradually (not all at once) in a process which a competent artist can design.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in the aesthetic experience the recipient may be taken to be conducting an experiment on himself using for the purpose the artefact supplied by the artist. For the process to be most effective, the artist and the recipient should be able to provide each other with relevant feedback information (cf. Gombrich 326). Apparently this exchange may also be indirect: *via* critics or scholars. Interpreted along these lines, each artefact is part of a *sui generis* experiment, which because of its original union of form and thematic content, offers the recipient a unique experience under otherwise unavailable conditions.

I believe that the term *experiment* is not abused by such usage although the differences between this kind of artistic experiment and the scientific one are quite pronounced. In science, experiments are usually devised so as to test a certain theory,<sup>4</sup> and their construction often entails manipulation of variables in a laboratory (e.g. Benjamin Libet's experiment aiming to measure the difference in time between the brain's preparation for action and one's conscious decision to act; qtd. in Blackmore 138–41). In philosophy (and science), the term is also used for *thought experiments*, taking the form of hypothetical or counterfactual thinking (as in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's proposal that to understand how metaphors work one should replace the actual metaphor *argument is war* with the hypothetical metaphor *argument is dance*, "Concepts We Live By").<sup>5</sup> Confronting the recipient with an original aesthetic object and giving her a chance to observe her response, even if the context is cognitive and the situation artificially arranged, stands apart from these kinds of scientific experiment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The requirement of "controlled setting" is not always part of the definition. Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, for example, defines *experiment* as "an operation, undertaken in order to carry out observations, which either itself evokes the events to be observed or affects their course" (251).

<sup>4</sup> In fact, an experiment may perform various functions, such as "deciding between two competing theories, calling for a new theory, confirming a theory, refuting a theory [. . .]" (Franklin and Perovic).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew D. Irvine defines thought experiments as "arguments concerning particular events or states of affairs of a hypothetical (and often counterfactual) nature which lead to conclusions about the nature of the world" (qtd. in Swirski 98).

<sup>6</sup> This and the previous paragraph closely repeat the discussion presented in my *Contradictions in Art* (57–61).

## 2. MENTAL EXPERIMENTS IN FICTION

The idea that novels offer experiments does not sound exactly original. One can easily find novelists and theoreticians of the novel who explicitly formulate it, witness A. S. Byatt's claim that: "characters are hypotheses let loose in the world very like physiological or psychological experiments, with names and social backgrounds, to see how people react in test situations" (qtd. in Kenyon 55–58; cf. also the present paper's epigraph). But it is not obvious how the experiment works. Already in his 1968 essay "Techniques of Cognition in Modern Fiction," Daniel Schneider asks how, if the novelist is supposed to conduct an experiment, he can avoid interfering with the results: "If the novel is truly a scientific laboratory, then the results of the experiment cannot be foreknown by the experimenter; they must issue from the experiment itself. The novelist may devise the experiment—we must grant him the liberty to set up the test conditions—but he must not, once the experiment is launched, interfere in such a way as to alter the results. But how is it possible for him to do this?" (323). Schneider responds by suggesting that the artist must put aesthetic considerations aside and focus on the subject-matter—the initial situation and how it may possibly develop; he must be loyal not to art, but life, as was D. H. Lawrence in *Rainbow* and James Joyce in *Ulysses*. Admittedly, the suggestion sounds vague.

The more recent approach of Catherine Z. Elgin seems more promising. In "Understanding: Art and Science," Elgin interprets literary fiction in terms of thought experiments: "imaginative exercises designed to disclose what would happen if certain conditions were met" (204). Though scientific thought experiments do not involve actual experiments, they are informative (cf. Albert Einstein's speculations on the theory of relativity which entailed "imagining what someone riding on a light wave would see" and computer simulations of how electricity is conducted by metals at a temperature of absolute zero, 205). The same applies to thought experiments in art: works of fiction are "vehicles for exploration and discovery, providing contexts in which features may be demarcated, their interplay examined, their implications drawn out" (205). Thus in the person of Pierre Bezukhov from *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy shows that one's honest resolution to behave better may be totally ineffective, while *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee exemplifies the possibility of one feeling at the same time both love and hate towards another human being (205–06). To check its value the artist

may repeat an experiment (with some variation);<sup>7</sup> the viewer tests it in his perception of other relevant (actual and artefactual) objects (206). Though Elgin illustrates the last idea with John Constable's visual representations of clouds, it is clear that artistic experiments extend first of all the recipients' ability to understand other people in real life (203–07).<sup>8</sup>

It might be worth adding that in contrast with the thought experiment in science, the artistic variety is not purely intellectual, since it invites emotions and sensations, the surrogate experience gained through the reader's imaginative identification with fictional characters included. It is also worth bearing in mind that, as in the case of all thought experiments (also those proposed in science and philosophy), their epistemic status should not be overestimated. *Nota bene*, as Allan Franklin and Slobodan Perovic explain, also "real" experiments (the ones that are actually conducted) in physics are fallible, like all science.<sup>9</sup> Finally, one should realize that in the case of hypothetical (as opposed to counterfactual) narratives, it may be difficult or even impossible for an outsider to differentiate between the texts in which the artist presents in the guise of fiction her real life experience and the texts in which she tries to test a hypothesis. Obviously in the former case one cannot speak of a thought experiment.

### 3. THE QUASI-SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENT IN ART<sup>10</sup>

In addition to the two kinds of artistic experiment mentioned above, it seems that the novel may try to offer the reader yet another kind of experiment that comes much closer to the scientific model. Rarely, but not negligibly, the reader is invited to test in a carefully designed experiment a specific hypothesis inscribed in the artefact. It is with this kind of experiment, called here *the quasi-scientific experiment in art*, that the paper is primarily concerned.

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<sup>7</sup> "The adequacy of an aesthetic 'experiment' is tested not by trying to produce exactly the same effect in exactly the same way, but by trying to project the exemplified feature or family beyond the work that first exemplifies it" (206).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also chapter "Literature and thought experiments" in Swirski's book (96–123).

<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless the authors argue that experiments can "provide the basis for scientific knowledge" as, in their opinion, "epistemological procedures provide grounds for reasonable belief in experimental results."

<sup>10</sup> This section develops and extensively revises ideas I first presented in *Contradictions in Art* (61–62).

In the experiment in question the artist formulates the hypothesis and designs the experiment, while the recipient conducts the experiment upon himself, observes his reaction, which should take the form of a clear choice, and interprets it in the context of the hypothesis. In science, the hypothesis is usually derived from a theory, and the results of the experiment either confirm or falsify the hypothesis, and thereby the theory. (If from a theory  $p$  one can derive an empirically testable hypothesis  $q$ , and the experiment designed to test  $q$  results in the negation of  $q$ , it thereby falsifies  $p$ ). In the artefact, the hypothesis appears to stand on its own: its broad theoretical basis, if it exists, remains the author's private knowledge.<sup>11</sup> But examined closely, artefacts which offer experiments discussed here seem to entail both a general idea (e.g. "mimetic truth is irrelevant to the cognitive value of literature") and a specific hypothesis which can be derived from this idea (e.g. "the reader informed that the tale is not faithful to facts will lose interest"; the reader who keeps reading the book falsifies the hypothesis, cf. the discussion of *Albert Angelo*, below). Significantly, the results of the experiment have limited validity: they are relevant to the life of the recipient, providing her with new insight into herself.<sup>12</sup>

It is not easy to stage the artistic experiment thus construed. First of all, the experiment should be well-designed so as to provide the reader with an experience that will truly help her examine herself in the respect relevant to the hypothesis inscribed in the experiment. The reader's reaction (whether it takes the form of an interpretative decision, an emotional stance, a change in the belief system or a reading strategy) should be limited to a yes-or-no choice, where "yes" is roughly identifiable with the tested hypothesis, and "no" with its negation.

Further, the recipient should initially be unaware of participating in the experiment (at the very least he should be unaware of what specific hypothesis is involved and how it is going to be tested)<sup>13</sup> but should afterwards, when the experiment is over, know the tested hypothesis and be able to interpret the results of the experiment. In each case the reader may require

<sup>11</sup> *Nota bene*, Ian Hackling lists quite a few examples showing that also the scientific experiment "often has a life of its own, independent of theory" (qtd. in Franklin and Perovic).

<sup>12</sup> In theory art might cooperate with psychology: properly designed artefacts might be used in experiments testing psychological theories. In practice the *modus operandi* of art is different.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the strict standards respected in experimental psychology: *the blind* and *double-blind* experiments, where either the participant or both the person conducting the experiment and the participant are kept ignorant.

some assistance. The relevant information may be supplied by the artist herself in an afterword, or so presented in the artefact that the recipient should be able to reconstruct it once the experiment is over. Also, critics may act as mediators either explaining how the experiment works or conducting interviews in which the authors have a chance to do so (the reader should consult such publications *post factum*).<sup>14</sup>

Finally, for the experiment to work it is important that the recipient should not be manipulated into a certain kind of behaviour<sup>15</sup> unless his susceptibility to manipulation is what is being tested. Indeed, while the experiment is in progress, he should not be offered any experience or confronted with any ideas that might change his choice from a yes to a no, or the other way round. Hopefully, the novels discussed below will demonstrate that these problems are not insurmountable.

#### 4. *ONDE ESTAS?*—A CASE STUDY

*Onde estas?* (2012) is a highly experimental debut novel by a Polish artist, painter and writer, Aleksander Bednarski, whose pen name is Sebastian Bukaczewski. The text comprises two introductory paragraphs, four chapters titled Outono, Inverno, Primavera and Verão, each consisting of alternately short italicized passages presented longer unitalicized passages in which another autodiegetic narrator, a student, tells of one year of his life; and a closing paragraph printed in mirror reflection, stylistically continuing, by and large, the introductory paragraphs. Also the novel's narrative structure is strangely circular. This circularity is further suggested by the book's front cover featuring a streetcar heading towards a circle (made of the first letter of the

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<sup>14</sup> One might take this opportunity to ask whether for art to operate in this experimental mode both the author and the recipient must necessarily be aware of art's cognitive potential. On the one hand an uninformed recipient might easily miss the hypothesis, or even the entire experiment, and fail to interpret the results. On the other hand only the narrow definition of cognition demands that the cognizing subject be aware of the cognitive activity. As argued by cognitive psychologists, much of human learning is implicit and much human knowledge tacit (Nęcka et al. 140–48). Perhaps the experimental mode might also be effective without artists and recipients realizing what exactly is going on.

<sup>15</sup> One can, for instance, imagine a work which presents evil as attractive (by either strengthening its sensational appeal, or combining it with eroticism, or using as disguise the comic tone) to expose the hideousness of the reader's fascination. This kind of strategy clearly differs from the experiment under discussion.

novel's title), which clearly offers no way out. This is relevant because the cover, jacket flaps, visual inserts and typographic experiments inside the book have all been designed and painted by the author and are integral to the text.

To define the book's thematic content, even in a likewise cursory manner, is a much greater challenge. The anonymous protagonist's monologue (presented in the past tense except for the final paragraphs which use the present tense) tells partly of his studies, his friend Bulo, with whom they drink beer in clubs, the world football cup or the student's girl-friends—a typical student's life. Partly, and this time untypically, the monologue tells of the student's growing fascination with local atmospheric anomalies, the municipal public transportation and its mysterious connections with Portugal, as well as strange mystical experiences which the student in vain tries to comprehend. They are triggered by the weather phenomena, the public transport or chance encounters with people somehow connected with Portugal, but entail strange inner sensations, such as the feeling of someone's close presence, and, as regards their visual content, they are characterized by a strong and recurrent typographic component—as if the moment of revelation, which never actually happens, was to be partly textual in nature.

Two interpretations of the student's experience (and the book), both mentioned by the student, seem most plausible: the student might be suffering from some mental affliction, such as schizophrenia, or he might for some reason be granted insight into a supernatural reality of which other people remain unaware. The italicized passages seem to support the latter option—though by and large incomprehensible, they might be authored by Lublin (incidentally the home town of the real author), who intuits the presence of Lisbon, and struggles to respond, offering his affection. Strange as this may seem, the book might be read as a fantastic tale of a love affair between the two cities, in which the young man has got entangled (paradoxically, Lublin seems aware of the fact). For some reason the urban love affair is interrupted, the moment of tender intimacy is in the novel's final pages displaced by a growing sense of isolation and anxiety. The ending of the book may be read as either the man's mental disintegration (he neglects his studies, loses touch with his friends, lives as if he were homeless in streetcars, in danger of starvation, suffering from strange paranoid visions); or as the man's supernatural translocation to Lisbon, where as a chance victim of the strange love affair he is now a confused outsider.

When interpreting the book, the reader may opt for a rational explanation



of the story, compatible with the contemporary scientific model of reality, and treat all the supernatural elements as evidence of the narrator's unreliability, related to his lack of mental balance. However, this choice should not be taken for granted. The reader may take into consideration the shape of the book: the protagonist's internal experiences are partly materialized in the text's layout, which grants them a kind of objective reality.<sup>16</sup> She may also be affected by the novel's highly mystical character: like the protagonist, the reader is mystified, like him, the reader may feel that coming to know the mystery might be undesirable (much better to simply enjoy the wonderful sensation of some higher-order significance), like him, the reader may find the urge to check and analyze all the data in hope for some pattern that will explain everything irresistible. Finally, the reader might consider the introductory and the concluding paragraphs of the novel, which seem to combine the human with the municipal, personal and impersonal modes of narration—as if discreetly suggesting that a human being can become a town and the other way around, and as such spend his life searching for the beloved who is both human and urban, both present in and absent from both life and text.

From the above presentation of *Onde estas?* it follows that the reader who takes the book gains a chance of a unique experience, one that might help her penetrate deeper her own mind and the minds of other people (the author in the first place). Like all works of art, *Onde estas?* offers thereby the reader the kind of experiment discussed in the first section of the paper. Because the book is a work of fiction—tells of imaginary adventures of a fictional character—it may (like many other novels) be taken to offer a mental experiment of the kind discussed in the second section of the paper (focusing, among others, on the process of social estrangement of a mentally ill person). More interestingly, the puzzling book seems to make much sense if taken as a quasi-scientific experiment discussed in the third section of the present paper.

The idea that is examined in *Onde estas?* might be formulated as follows: branded as insane and threatened with social exclusion, people do not dare to indulge in fantasies. The testable hypothesis posits that the reader threatened with the label of insanity will reject magical readings. This thesis is tested when the reader is offered the choice of two interpretations of the narrative. The novel may be taken to tell a story of two towns consumed by erotic pas-

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that these are the italicized passages which open and close the proper narrative also speaks in favour of the objective reality of the fantastic vision.

sion yet for some reason failing to unite, reported by a man who gets entangled in the weird love-affair. But it may also be read as telling of a mind that in the process of disintegration fabricates weird stories. The choice is the reader's. The reader who reads the novel as a study of mental illness confirms the hypothesis inscribed in the construction of the novel; the reader who accepts magic, identifying thereby with the mentally ill man (in the book the two of necessity go together: to believe in the love between the two towns is to accept the label of insanity and social isolation), affirms her allegiance to imagination and falsifies the hypothesis. Naturally, the confirmation or falsification of the hypothesis has no universal relevance, it applies solely to the reader in question.

Taking into consideration this individual dimension of the experiment in question, one might classify it as diagnostic. *Diagnostic experiments*, as Ajdukiewicz explains, "are carried out in order to use the observations thus obtained in classifying an object or to find out some of its properties [...]. For instance, if it is known that only objects of a kind *A* behave so and so under certain conditions, then we experiment by bringing a given object under such conditions, and if we notice that it behaves in the way in question, then we conclude that it is of the kind *A*" (251). In the novel, the reader presented with a choice between magic (erotic desire, metaphysical mysteries, a feeling—both blissful and exhausting—of intense signification) and dull reality (football cups, beer, public transport, casual sex, studies), where the former is available only to the mentally ill and socially excluded, can check whether she belongs to the class of people who cherish imagination above all other things, the safety of public reality included.

I have presented the general idea and the testable hypothesis, the construction of the experiment in the book and its hypothetical realization in the reader's aesthetic experience, including the interpretation of the findings. It is time to assess the experiment. Firstly, the idea (if reconstructed as above) is interesting but susceptible to critique. Given the above formulation, the reader faces an either/or situation. The (rational) choice is to be sceptical, and opt for the story of the student's mental disorder. (Irrationally) one may choose to adopt the protagonist's viewpoint, be rewarded with a fairy-tale romance and stigmatized as insane. One may well ask whether the reader should accept the conditions of this choice, whether (fantastic) dreams indeed can never be shared. Also as regards the construction and execution of the experiment, one can raise some objections. The reader who is never informed about the experiment may miss the hypothesis and fail to see how it

is being tested. Most problematic, however, is the postulate of neutrality, since the novel may be taken as encouraging the reader to opt for imagination: the hypnotizing front-cover painting, the seductive beauty of the protagonist's mystical visions, the novel's strategy of transferring the protagonist's epistemic efforts onto the reader (strengthening the moment of identification)—might all be taken as motivating the reader to make this choice regardless of the costs. That the story of initiation into a mysterious love affair of two towns has much more appeal than the competitive story of a man's mental disintegration goes without saying. In other words, it seems debatable whether, tempting as the attractions of imagination may seem in the novel, they are true to life, or whether the book exaggerates them to influence the reader's choice. Only in the former case can the novel be taken to offer the reader a quasi-scientific experiment. It thus appears uncertain whether the book truly exemplifies the third kind of artistic experiment discussed above or whether it comes close to this possibility without fully realizing it.<sup>17</sup>

Naturally, *Onde estas?* is not unique in attempting this kind of experimental strategy. The same technique may be found in *Life of Pi* (2001) by Yann Martel.<sup>18</sup> The idea tested here might be formulated as follows: when choosing a belief, if epistemic reasons—either for or against it—are missing, one acts rationally considering pragmatic reasons, which further means that one can rationally adopt theistic belief since it develops one's ability to love and epistemically speaking is as good as atheism. In the novel's experiment the reader is offered, in a basically religious context, an adventure story that is enchanting but very unlikely, and then its "sober" version which is cruel and unlikely, but less so than the original one, *nota bene* neither story is supposed to conflict with empirical data. Two characters in

<sup>17</sup> To better bring out the experimental character of *Onde estas?*, one might compare the book with Jojo Moyes's *Me Before You*—a recent (2012) best-seller and tear-jerker (if one trusts the blurb) concerned with the problem of euthanasia. The book is in particular concerned with the question whether the family's respect for the decision of a person suffering from extreme physical or psychic pain to choose euthanasia is acceptable. Arguably, the book does not offer the reader a fair chance to examine his opinion. Instead, it persuades him to be tolerant by inviting him to identify with the protagonist, a Louisa Clark, who at first condemns such tolerance and then, after becoming involved in a relationship with a person who chooses euthanasia, changes her mind—without approving of the decision of Will Traynor, she (with the author's blessing) comes to respect it. The book may thus be taken as educational, rather than exploratory.

<sup>18</sup> I discuss the book focusing on its use of contradiction in my essay "*Life of Pi* by Yann Martel" and in *Contradictions in Fiction* (62, 234–36). I have decided to summarize and revise the relevant fragments of both publications here because *Life of Pi* exemplifies some aspects of the experimental strategy exceptionally well.

the novel, like the reader, face then the choice. The reader may accept the novel's argumentation and choose both the fantastic version of the tale and theism, or she may reject them. The epistemic thesis is interesting and exceptional in fiction, the experiment is carefully designed, though one can voice some reservations concerning the novel's argument (the author's concepts of atheism and agnosticism depart from their dictionary definitions; the assessment of the pragmatic value of religious beliefs is one-sided; the thesis that all human discourse—presumably science included—entails fiction sounds risky). But the experiment comes to an end the moment the reader is advised to choose theism (literally the advice is given by the autodiegetic narrator, Pi, to the two fictional characters). Already the fact that the fantastic tale is told first and in great colourful detail, together with Pi's personal choice of God, might encourage the reader to opt for theism, but Pi's explicit instructions effectively change the novel's status from exploratory to educational.

*Albert Angelo* (1964) by B. S. Johnson offers in turn an experiment concerned with fiction and its techniques. The idea examined in the novel might be stated as follows: literal (mimetic) truth is irrelevant to the cognitive value of literature.<sup>19</sup> To test it, the novel introduces an autodiegetic narrator, Albert, who tells the story of his life and then in the last but one chapter informs the reader, or is replaced by another narrator who informs the reader, that the story has been a mystification since "telling stories is telling lies." Thereafter the story continues, as if no metafictional interruption has taken place, to tell of Albert's murder. Reading the last section, the reader may either once again suspend her disbelief, as if nothing has happened, ignoring the narrator's metafictional confession, or continue reading the book without, however, engaging emotionally. The former choice confirms the idea that literal truth does not matter in fiction: the story of Albert, even if it misinforms the reader about the details<sup>20</sup> of Albert's (or B. S. Johnson's) life, provides a most valuable insight into various aspects of human experience—human loneliness, need of love, fear that teachers are in the wrong when they presume to have authority. The latter choice falsifies it. Assessing this experiment, one may note that the story may be misread as illustrating the belief that telling stories is telling lies: after all, this idea is communicated

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<sup>19</sup> Considering Johnson's extra-textual statements, one may presume that he would disagree with this interpretation.

<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, the story of the break-up between Albert and his girl-friend, presented in the metafictional chapter in a new version, is by no means a detail.

by the narrator who can be taken by the reader as having the author's approval or or even as being identifiable with B. S. Johnson, who also outside the novel expressed the very same idea. Otherwise, as regards the construction of the experiment and the interpretation of its results, everything seems clear. This, as suggested above, is a special case of an experiment whose subject matter is literary theory (hence there is no need to translate the insight gained in an imaginative experience to the circumstances of real life).<sup>21</sup>

Crucial for the notion of experiment discussed here is the moment of choice. It may take the form of interpretative decision (as in *Onde estas?*), a choice of a belief (as in *Life of Pi*), or a reading strategy (as in *Albert Angelo*). *Filth* (1998) by Irvine Welsh exemplifies yet another possibility: the reader's response consists here in adopting an emotional stance. The novel may be taken to embody the idea that human beings can empathise with psychopaths, which is tested when the initial portrait of a revolting psychopath (guilty of all kinds of cruelty including murder and underage sexual abuse) is complemented with a gradually disclosed account of his own traumas. The reader who at the end of the novel feels sorry for Bruce Robertson confirms that it is possible to empathise with a psychopath; the person who does not—falsifies this idea.

The above discussion illustrates some of the problems involved in an artefact offering a quasi-scientific experiment: (1) the experiment is difficult to stage, (2) the analogy with science remains remote, as the results are valid for the particular recipient, who is not supposed to formulate on this basis any general laws. Further, the strategy is probably available only to verbal art (music or visual arts could not convey with sufficient precision all the information the recipient needs in order to go through the experiment). Indeed, the notion of an artistic quasi-scientific experiment is undermined most seriously by freedom of interpretations, ambiguity of texts, the fictional mode of literature and the surrogate character of the reader's imaginative experience. Even so, though rare at the moment, it might become more common as art becomes more self-conscious and more aware of its cognitive potential.

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<sup>21</sup> I discuss some issues relevant to this interpretation of *Albert Angelo* in *Contradictions in Art* (259–64).

## 5. CONCLUSION

With all the reservations mentioned above, the paper highlights, I hope, some underestimated aspects of art's cognitive potential.<sup>22</sup> The various uses of experiment in narrative fiction, construed in analogy with its uses in the natural sciences, though admittedly in many respects departing from the model, seem to offer the reader (and the author) remarkable cognitive possibilities. The object of the novelistic experiment need not be limited to theory of literature, *pace* Ronald Shusterman (116–17), neither should it be perceived as concerned with all reality. As suggested above, the novelistic experiment seems best suited to offer the reader a chance to explore people and most of all herself.

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<sup>22</sup> The novel's cognitive potential seems very rich: some kinds of experiments might still be waiting for discovery. Recently the concept of "the novel as a cognitive experiment" has appeared in a new context of cognitive studies on literature. In *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Lisa Zunshine uses this very phrase as the title of the sixth chapter. The phrase in this context refers to literary explorations of human efforts to read other minds, and does not seem to coincide with the three kinds of experiment discussed in the present paper. Novelists "experiment with the amount and kind of interpretation of the characters' mental states that they themselves supply and that they expect us to supply," while readers practice their mind-reading skills, trying to guess "the hidden mental states of fictional characters" (24–25). Apparently, for Zunshine, fictional narrative can be construed "as a cognitive artefact in progress—an ongoing thousand-year-long experimentation with our cognitive adaptations," in particular, our Theory of Mind (26–27).

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ARTYSTYCZNY EKSPERYMENT  
JAKO POZNAWCZA STRATEGIA WSPÓŁCZESNEJ POWIEŚCI —  
ONDE ESTAS? SEBASTIANA BUKACZEWSKIEGO

Streszczenie

Termin *eksperyment* jest używany w odniesieniu do sztuki, w tym do powieści, na wiele sposobów. Najczęściej wtedy, gdy dzieło wprowadza nowatorskie techniki. Artystyczny eksperyment może jednak polegać także na tym, że (1) czytelnik korzysta z dzieła, by wywołać u siebie estetyczne przeżycie i tak poszerzyć możliwości introspekcji, (2) autor i czytelnik przy pomocy konwencji fikcji badają, jak realni ludzie mogliby się zachować w pewnych sytuacjach, (3) czytelnik sprawdza na sobie hipotezę wpisaną w strukturę utworu. Powyższe teoretyczne rozważania są zilustrowane szczegółowym studium powieści Bukaczewskiego *Onde estas?* i krótszym omówieniem innych współczesnych powieści.

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**Słowa kluczowe:** powieść; eksperyment; poznanie; *Onde estas?*; Sebastian Bukaczewski.