

A virtual roundtable on Iser's legacy Part I: a conversation with Gerald Prince

Gerald Prince, Laura Lucia Rossi
University of Pennsylvania, University of Leeds

Abstract

In this article you find the first part of a roundtable on Wolfgang's Iser legacy with Gerald Prince, Mark Freeman, Marco Caracciolo and Federico Bertoni. In Part I we discuss with Prof. Gerald Prince the influence of Iser's aesthetic response theory on past and current reader oriented approaches, as well as Iser's last insights on literary anthropology and the role of literary theory.

Parole chiave

Wolfgang Iser, aesthetic response, reader-oriented criticism, narratology.

Contatti

lauralucia.rossi@gmail.com

1. Iser and narratology

[LR] Despite it received many criticisms (e.g. the ones moved by Stanley Fish)(Fish 1981), Iser's act of reading's theory (based on the heuristic model of the implied reader and on the notion of indeterminacy) was long-lasting and is still a milestone, not only in the field of reader-oriented studies. What was the influence of Iser on narratology? What were the merits and limits of his theory?

[GP] Of the major figures associated with reader-response criticism and reception theory but not working in a narratological vein (e.g. David Bleich, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, Hans Robert Jauss), Wolfgang Iser is probably the one whose work has proven most pertinent to narratology and the analysis of narrative. Using a corpus of prose fiction, Iser made a distinction between the text, the reader's concretization of it, and the artistic work, which results from their convergence. He stressed that the text pre-structures meaning production and guides it by gradually providing skeletal views of what the artistic work will be and leaving between these views areas of indeterminacy or gaps that the reader then fills in completing the artwork. Iser's implied reader, which is not a real reader, allows him to take into account both text and reading activity. It is both a textual element that can be deduced from the text and a set of mental operations engaged in the production of meaning (linking past and present knowledge, say, or constructing and modifying patterns). It includes the textual gaps as well as the processes that eliminate them, the directions set by the text as well as the mental activities of reading.

Now, various aspects of Iser's account have been criticized, including his failure to specify sufficiently the nature of textual gaps, for example, to explore the freedom of real readers reading, or to provide the implied reader with a significant historical dimension.

However, it remains that Iser's account proved narratologically germinal in many ways. Iser supplied a useful term for narratologists (one patterned after Wayne Booth's implied author). In addition, Iser's implied reader pointed to the room any (narrative) text provides for the reader. It evoked a counterpart for the implied author in the transmission of narrative, a transmission that can be said to go from real author to real reader through implied author, narrator, narratee, and implied reader. Furthermore, it helped to underline the dynamics of narrative semiosis as well as the role of virtuality in narrative and it also helped to promote narrative taxonomies based on the number or kind of gaps featured.

2. The reader *in* the text

[LR] Professor Prince, the problems of the act of reading and narrative communication were also central to your work. Alongside your famous definition of the narratee as a link between real author and real reader, you also devoted your attention to real readers of narratives and interpretation, as well as to narrative texts as readers of themselves. How crucial is the investigation of the reader within – in interaction with – the text, and outside the text, to the understanding of narrative dynamics?

[GP] In considering narrative and its processing, it is important to pay attention to its real, actual, audience and the various reception positions it adopts in reading (as characterized by Peter Rabinowitz and further clarified by James Phelan: authorial audience, ideal narrative audience, narrative audience). It is also important to pay attention to the narratee, the audience explicitly inscribed in the narrative text. Perhaps the most obvious difference between the narratee and the real audience is that the former is part of the text and does not change. On the contrary, the physiological, psychological, and social conditioning of real readers, their knowledge, capacities, feelings, interests, or aims vary considerably and so do their take on and negotiation of reception positions. Depending on the distance between the narratee and the real audience and depending on the way the latter adapts to reception positions, that different readings and responses obtain.

Another reader figure to be considered is the character reader. Narratives often discuss what characters read as well as when, where, how, and why they read, and this constitutes a great fund of information on (possible) reading practices. Moreover, narratives too partly read themselves. They are readers of themselves not only by specifying the linguistic meaning of some of the terms and utterances that they use but also – to adopt Roland Barthes's terminology – by characterizing the cultural, proairetic, hermeneutic, or symbolic meanings and functions of some of the situations and events that they recount. For instance, a narrative text can explicitly indicate the hermeneutic functioning of a particular event or state of affairs, as in «Jane, who had always been very cheerful, now was crying all the time. This was a mystery». Again, the distance between these various kinds of reader and the real reader affects the latter's processing of the text.

In other words, an investigation of the different readers or reading activities entailed by a narrative and of their interplay sheds light on the understanding of that narrative and its variable dynamic nature.

3. Reader response criticism today

[LR] After a sort of aesthetic revival, recently, more empirical approaches, like the psycholinguistic and the evolutionary ones, have moved the attention from interpretation as the basic interaction between text and reader, to its effects and processes, as well as to narrative sense-making as a source of knowledge. What is the current state of reader-oriented criticism? What can it offer to the narrative and literary studies nowadays?

[GP] The prominence of reader-response theory and criticism began to diminish in the 1980s in part, no doubt, because many of its theses about the processing, interpretation, and evaluation of texts became commonplace. But interest in reader figures and reading practices is still significant. In narrative studies, for example, rhetorical narratology has been exploring the ethical and aesthetic judgments of readers. Psychonarratology has investigated the psychological mechanisms at the basis of readers' immersion in narrative works. Natural narratology has discussed the links between readers' narrativizing of a text and protocols operative in their real-life experience. Last but by no means least, cognitive narratologists and their relatives have investigated the connections between narrative and mind, and, more particularly, between texts and receivers. For instance, in an important essay published some twenty years ago in *Poetics Today* ("Frames, References, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology"), Manfred Jahn shows how cognitive frames regulate textual interpretation and how they are reshaped or replaced by other such frames when textual features require it. Alan Palmer too draws on cognitive science to describe the way readers (and authors!) construct characters' minds. He underlines the fact that mental functioning is revealed and understood not only thanks to descriptions of a character's consciousness but also through that character's actions, reactions, and interactions. He also insists on the importance of frames or sub-frames involving intermental (joint, shared) thinking or the continuity between thought and action. Similarly, in studying readers' interest in fiction, Lisa Zunshine invokes theory of mind and human mind-reading capacities as well as the ability to keep track of characters' states of mind and of what characters say, think, or feel in one context or another. Most recently, the resurgence of interest in fictionality has been leading to considerations of the effect on readers of reading texts as fictional rather than nonfictional (or vice versa). In short, "the reader" remains alive and well.

4. A literary anthropology?

[LR] All Iser's last efforts were in the appeal for the foundation of a new discipline: literary anthropology. Such an inquiry on human life requires, for Iser, specific heuristic tools and cannot make use of frames borrowed from other disciplines. The risk would otherwise be that literature is merely used to provide illustrative examples. Do you think that we need such an independent discipline? Which could be the most suitable premises for it?

[GP] As envisioned and discussed by Iser, literary anthropology is one part of literary theory that transcends it. If literary theory tries to answer questions about literature (what is it or when is it? how is it or what forms does it take? why is it? etc.), literary anthropology focuses on the reasons for literature («why literature?») and the needs or desires it responds to, why we take unending interest and pleasure in it, and why we continually add to it and revitalize it.

According to Iser, literature, which necessitates or engages our perceptual, conceptual, and imaginative faculties, illuminates the world and the human condition in the world; it reveals potentialities and develops them; it shows what can lead us to action. Now, as Iser points out, using frameworks from other disciplines and domains of thought (e.g. Marxism, psychoanalysis, or social theory) to explore the functioning and functions of literature too often only results in making literature illustrative of these disciplines and domains. Literary anthropology should instead first concentrate on literature itself, analyze its specificities, and examine its possible configurations or manifestations. But this is only an essential first step. Drawing on the cognitive and affective sciences, for example, literary anthropology might study whether certain kinds of narrative fiction promote the intricate use of our mind-reading capacities, whether reading hermetic poetry calls for the exploitation or development of certain processing strategies and operations, or whether certain literary features tend to provoke certain emotions. Similarly, drawing on evolutionary theory, literary anthropology might investigate the kinds of survival advantage that literature and its different forms possibly afford, the aspects of evolutionary fitness that they represent, the types of adaptive traits that they constitute, the links with evolutionary features, mechanisms, and processes that they have.

It seems to me that the elaboration of literary anthropology is a valuable enterprise, one that can make the study of literature and its various dimensions or constituents even more worthwhile by further contributing to our knowledge of the makeup, distinctiveness, practices, and potentials of human beings.

5. Do we still need literary theory?

[LR] In his last book *How to do theory*, Iser reflected on the practice of literary theory. What do you think is the role and the use of literary theory at the present day? Do we still need it? How should we do it?

[GP] As I indicated above, literary theory asks a number of fundamental questions about the nature of literature, the forms it assumes, the purposes it serves, the functions it fulfills, the effects it has, and so on and so forth. It characterizes the various methods that can be used to answer these questions explicitly and systematically and to account for the sources, the makeup, the structure, the functioning, the meaning and meaningfulness of (sets of) literary works. It endeavors to capture and describe the textual and/or contextual differences between literary and non-literary works or texts and explores the literary in these works. It details the elements that literary works consist of and the configurations of elements that can obtain, considers the kind of reading that these works elicit or require, and discusses criteria for their evaluation.

Of course, apart from providing insight into and guidelines for the production and reception of literature (literary theory can not only illuminate comprehension and appreciation but it can also function as a rhetoric) and apart from discerning proclivities, resemblances, or patterns in literature and mapping its study, as it were, literary theory helps to clarify a multiplicity of other enterprises, from textual theory and art theory to semiotics and aesthetics.

Note that, among the guiding principles and obligations of literary theory, two seem to me particularly important. The first is that literary theory should always examine, question, and assess the assumptions underlying the statements constituting it. The second is that these statements should pertain first and foremost to literature or its con-

stituents, their specificity, their singularity, rather than the world, the author, or the reader. It is on these conditions that literary theory can justify its *raison d'être* and achieve its goals.

Bibliography

Fish, Stanley. "Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser." *Diacritics* 11.1 (1981): 2-13. Print.

Iser, Wolfgang. *How to Do Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. Print.

Jahn, Manfred. "Frames, References, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology." *Poetics Today* 18 (1997): 441-68. Print.