

Expectations



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**Reader Assumptions and Author
Intentions in Narrative Discourses**

Medusa

*Expectations:
Reader Assumptions and Author Intentions in Narrative Discourses*

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Introduction

This anthology examines the dynamics of authorial intentions and reader expectations. Ever since William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley published the classical New Criticism-essay »The Intentional Fallacy« (1946), questions whether literary criticism ought to take the authorial intention into account, and if so, how one should access and deal with the authorial intention of a literary work have been raised. Wimsatt and Beardsley famously claimed that looking for the author's intention with the text is a potential source of error since what matters is the words on the page – nothing else. Even though the principle of the 'anti-intentionalist' reading had immense significance for the development of 'close reading', the epistemological concerns that followed in the wake of anti-intentionalist readings were never faced by Wimsatt and Beardsley or any other of the representatives of the New Criticism movement.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983) Wayne C. Booth rejected Wimsatt and Beardsley's critique, but acknowledged that criticism should not return to the former practice of delimiting the critical interest to historio-biographical aspects of the text. Instead he launched the concept of 'the implied author' as an embodiment of the work's core of »norms and choices«. ¹ Whether this embodiment is the result of the reader's interpretation or it is present in the work has been subject to debate in literary narrative theory ever since, and it has been closely related to considerations of readers' responses and expectations.

The New Critical dicta regarding critical objectivity was in many ways challenged by the development of reader-response criticism. Yet, reader-response criticism originates from New Criticism for instance with the work of Louise M. Rosenblatt during the 1930s. Rosenblatt suggests a more reciprocal and synergistic relationship between the reader and the text in the volume *Literature as Exploration* (1938). Rosenblatt argues that reading is a transaction and a »constructive, selective process over time in a particular context. The relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral [...] each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed«. ² For

Rosenblatt the reading process is never a neutral event. It is affected by the historical and cultural context and it is inevitably personal, because the reader carries »a specific past life and literary history« as well as an active present with all its »preoccupations, anxieties, questions, and aspirations«.³

Rosenblatt's idea of the reading process as a transaction is in some ways comparable with Wayne C. Booth's conception of a narrative transmission between the implied author and the implied reader. 'The implied reader' is a figure created by the author, implied and postulated by the text, which the real reader (or flesh-and-blood reader) is asked to play. In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988) Booth is interested in the reflexive relationship that develops between texts and their readers and the implicit ideological and ethical ramifications of the reading experiences: »Of course the value is not there, *actually*, until it is actualized, by the reader. But of course it could not be actualized if it were not there, in *potential* in the poem«. ⁴ The valuation of the reading experience as a reflexive process that involve a kind of fusion between reader and text is also known from Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1970) where he argues that the goal of the literary work is to make the reader a *producer* of the text instead of merely a *consumer*.⁵

The interest in issues of reader response and reception within literary studies continued to grow throughout the 1970s and 80s and served as inspiration for the 'cognitive turn' in narrative studies in the second half of the 1990s, where postclassical narratologists explored the cognitive basis for creating and understanding stories. Monika Fludernik and David Herman began developing hypotheses about how particular features of narrative cue different kinds of processing strategies, how frames and scripts guide interpretation and how readers construct or map narrative worlds from words.

Thus, literary critics have raised questions about how to interpret authorial intention and how to understand the reader's participation in the construction of the text's meaning within a broad array of theoretical traditions. Discussions have taken place in a variety of fields ranging from studies of unreliable narration, unnatural narratives, cognitive narratology, reader-response theory, fictionality theory and rhetorical narratology, to cultural and historical studies of reader paradigms. How connected are writing and reading? Why do readers respond differently

to the literary signs? Does the reading depend on the reader's own experiences, individual feelings, personal associations or on conventions of reading, interpretive communities and cultural conditions? How can we distinguish the implied reader from the actual reader? What are the social frameworks of reading? How do race, gender and class influence the act of reading? How influenced are the readers' responses by their own psychological needs? How can authors infer intentionality and determine the range of their intended reader's response? When might we assign intentionality to the author, the narrator, and the characters respectively? Are the reader's expectations and the production and understanding of narrative also based on some underlying cognitive processes and structures? This volume brings together fictionality theory, narrative theory and speech act theory to address such questions of expectations and intentionality in relation to narrative and fiction.

Notes

- 1 Wayne C. Booth: *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago 1983 (orig. 1961), p. 74.
- 2 Louise M. Rosenblatt: *Literature as Exploration*, New York 1938, p. 26.
- 3 Op.cit., 144.
- 4 Wayne C. Booth: *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley 1988, p. 89.
- 5 Roland Barthes: *S/Z*, Paris 1970, p. 4.