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# TO READ OR NOT READ MENTAL STATES: THE ARTFUL PLAY OF OUR MENTAL ACTIVITIES<sup>1</sup>

FREDERICK LUIS ALDAMA

"We live in other people's heads: avidly, reluctantly, consciously, unawares, mistakenly, inescapably" (xi), Lisa Zunshine observes. For Zunshine, it is this insatiable hunger to read the interior state of mind of others from external gesture and expression that not only informs all of our everyday activities, but also drives the very making and consuming of cultural phenomena.

In *Getting Inside Your Head*, Zunshine builds on her earlier work: how creators of fiction play with (and frustrate) this instinctive, biologically universal capacity for reading minds—otherwise known as our Theory of Mind capacity. In her earlier work Zunshine demonstrated how authors such as Jane Austen and Dashiell Hammett created fictions in which readers would encounter characters that would misattribute interior states of mind. Much of our pleasure as readers, according to Zunshine, springs from witnessing various *misreadings* (some total and others partial) of minds between characters. That is, to a great extent our pleasure comes from how a given author builds in narrative structures the different character's minds and thus throws us mind-reading curve balls. Zunshine presented a theoretical scaffold that would consider how authors build into their fictions embedded layers of "I know that she knows that I know that she knows"; and she reminded us that our memory capacity allows us to follow this embedment process up to a maximum of 4 levels, but that some authors choose to push the envelope. For Zunshine, the reader's unremitting appetite of fiction is satisfied in a way akin to gym exercises that, in this case, build their Theory of Mind musculature. The result being that the more one reads fiction the more one becomes adept at reading real minds.

*Getting Inside Your Head* considers moments in film, TV, literature, and painting that reveal instances of mental transparency. Much like infants whose exterior gesture and expression signal directly interior states of pain or joy, Zunshine sleuths out such instances in cultural phenomena that "cut

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<sup>1</sup>Review of Lisa Zunshine, *Getting Inside Your Head: What Cognitive Science Can Tell Us about Popular Culture*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2012.

across genres, historical periods, and national representational traditions" (42). As Zunshine argues, we are centrally and fundamentally biological creatures grown in our social environments—our social interactions. That is, we do not arrive in the world as blank slates, but we do arrive as biological creatures developing and eventually very much formed by our social existence. For Zunshine, our mind reading capacity is foundational to our social existence—our mapping of our social world. As such, makers of culture choose to create artifacts that can feed in new and interesting ways our appetite for "readable bodies" (28).

As one can imagine, Zunshine is interested in all types of artifacts that nourish our hunger for readable bodies in more or less direct ways. She uses as her methodological framework three central principles operating to greater and lesser degrees in TV, film, painting, and so on. They include: 1) "Contrasts" whereby the creator establishes a context in which the figure's transparency stands out against a relative lack thereof in others. 2) "Transience" whereby the instances of transparency are brief—and therefore more akin to the everyday experiences of transparency encountered by flesh-and-blood audiences. 3) "Restraint" whereby the creator creates figures that struggle to conceal their interior state of mind and by doing so inadvertently reveal their *actual* state of mind. With these tools, Zunshine moves with deft precision through an analysis of many cultural products, including some of the following: Jean Baptiste Grueze's painting *La Piété filiale* (1761); Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925); Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946); the 1996 BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*; David Evan's *Fever Pitch* (1997); Gervais and Stephen Merchant's *The Office* (2001-2003) and other mock documentary/reality TV shows; Stephen Frears' *The Queen* (2006). In this whirlwind tour of identifying different instantiations of readable minds, we also learn about how creators use emotions such as anger, indignation, and humiliation as portals for audiences to pass through and engage with other minds. In an extraordinary reading of the novel and the film adaptation *Fight Club*, for instance, Zunshine reveals how audiences have direct access to the actual interior state of mind of an unreliable narrator. And, Zunshine presents a compelling argument about why we are so engaged by reality TV shows. The foregrounding of the use of non-professional actors establish a contract with the audience that they will have unmediated access to the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of ordinary people—people who "are not trained to perform their emotions in situations that surprise, unsettle, or humiliate" (121).

In her various analyses of cultural artifacts, Zunshine moves from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. In so doing, she at once clarifies and complicates just how instances of embodied transparency operate in particular moments of time and geographic space. Taken as a whole, however, *Getting Inside Your Head* has a much larger ambition. Zunshine argues how our Theory of Mind capacity (whether expressed as transparent or occluded) has given rise to the making of all culture: from basketball to opera to finger

shadows to TV shows, literature, film, comic books. We create and consume culture constantly as a way to satisfy what can never be satisfied because we are in the last instance “greedy mind readers” (11). Moreover, given that our interpretation of culture along with our social, political, and economic discourse is built around narratives, rituals, discussions that are centrally informed by “people’s plans, thoughts, and feelings,” if not for our “ability and need to read mental states and behavior” (13) the social tissue that makes up our world would collapse.

In *Getting Inside Your Head* is patent Zunshine’s lucid, jargon-free writing that conveys complex ideas with ease. She disarms with her charm. She elucidates with anecdotes of the commonplace. She insists on biological universals while also calling attention to how our shared biology grows idiosyncratically within different times (historical and social) and places (nations and geographic regions). As she so gracefully states, there is “no predicting what forms cultural phenomena that feed our theory of mind will take in a concrete historical moment in a particular society. We can predict, however, that no cultural form will endure unless it lets us attribute mental states to somebody or something” (12).

This said, I wonder if there might not be a bit of an over-reach here. I am all about learning from other disciplines—and in my work the cognitive and neurosciences have been instrumental. However, it might be useful to keep an eye on what could seem too-easy maneuvers and confluences. By this I mean, the collapsing together of mental operations of *recreated* figures—even reality TV is carefully scripted and edited—with that of flesh-and-blood people. To this end, it might be useful to distinguish carefully between Theory of Mind as it operates in everyday, flesh-and-blood human interactions from its operation in narrative fictional spaces. In the first case, a unified theory of aesthetics, narratology, and socioneurobiology discover facts about Theory of Mind and the way it functions in social life; in the second case, artists of all kinds (writers, painters, film directors, etc.) create characters and representations where Theory of Mind is and always will be an invented construct (based, of course, on the creator’s knowledge or familiarity with the workings of Theory of Mind.) Whether readers encounter a character that misreads or reads with transparency another character’s mind, is an option and a decision taken by the author, not a contingent or universal fact, and as long as there are readers the resulting option will remain so in the given novel for eternity. We as readers simply follow the author’s scripts and cues, in this as in all other matters pertaining to his or her novel. In everyday life, on the contrary, our use of theory of mind is a rather messy business; we often misread other people’s interior states of mind in our daily activities. In narrative fiction there is no guesswork, we follow the author’s lead step by step, univocally, and where there are gaps in the text or the representation we use that singularly human faculty that Charles Sanders Peirce called abduction. This said, the more adept a real life reader is at mind-reading of real people, the better he or she will be at identifying (and

maybe even admiring) the author's ability to ascribe mind-reading capacities to his or her characters. In other words, the gym that increases mind-reading musculature is the everyday, real life gym of human social interactions, and this increased musculature is the one that comes into play when forming better fiction readers.

In all this talk of insatiable appetites, perhaps we should chew on and savor once again vittles served up in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or in his *Metaphysics*. In both books Aristotle talks about all human activity as purposeful. He gives the example of the carpenter building the table. The carpenter has an idea then turns this idea into an object that corresponds to the idea. Just as a carpenter of furniture makes tables, so too does a director make movies, an author make novels, an artist make paintings. Just as the carpenter needs tools—and needs to know how to use them—to transform (cut, shave, notch, glue, screw) her raw materials into something stable that we might use to write or eat at, so too do the cultural makers Zunshine analyzes need tools to transform their raw material (the infinite facets of reality) into something we might read or view with an aesthetic delight. This is to say, Zunshine's cultural producers (and all others) are makers of artifacts built with tools appropriate to their media. Each uses such tools to make something that has a specific purpose in the world: a spatially designed, purposefully organized artifact that steers our imagination, emotion, thought, and perception into, in the best of cases, new territories. That is, to different degrees these cultural makers use their respective tools—including, but *not* limited to the misattribution of thought by characters—to reorganize the building blocks of reality—including, but not limited to our mind reading processes—in ways that create an aesthetic relation. Perhaps an approach to the way theory of mind works in how a flesh-and-blood author creates characters and their behaviors (in a specified way for all eternity) and how a reader uses theory of mind along with all other mental faculties to engage with a work of fiction might lead to more capacious results.

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