Why We Read Fiction

Zunshine, Lisa

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Zunshine, Lisa.
Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel.
The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28189.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28189

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3119217
it pulls it off precisely by creating a situation in which the mind-reading oriented toward solving the crime overlaps with the mind-reading oriented toward figuring out the feelings of the romantic partner. In other words, unless used too often and thus rendered predictable, the conveniently economic focusing of the two different kinds of mind-reading on one person can work for writers who are intent on opening up that “very tight little box” of the classic detective story.

Note that by construing a spectrum, on the one end of which there are detective stories with the minimum of romance and, on the other, the stories in which romance overwhelms detection, with a variety of other narratives gravitating toward either end of the spectrum, I do not intend to pronounce on the aesthetic value of any of these books. Nor do I make any sort of prediction about their chances for survival in what Franco Moretti calls the “slaughterhouse” of the long-term literary market. Instead, I suggest that by articulating the difference between the love story and the detective story in terms of the dominant type of mind-reading required from the reader in each case, we can reground and systematize our intuitions about the differences between the two genres. In general, we can now start thinking of our concept of the literary genre as reflecting, at least on some level, our intuitive awareness that even though all fictional narratives rely on and tease our Theory of Mind, some narratives engage to a higher degree one cluster of cognitive adaptations associated with our ToM than another cluster of such adaptations.

4: Always Historicize!

So what have I really been saying by insisting on grounding our enjoyment of detective stories in the workings of our metarepresentational ability and our Theory of Mind? A quarter-century ago, in his influential *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, John Cawelti cautioned literary critics about the dangers of assuming that the process of writing and reading fiction is “dependent, contingent, or a mere reflection of other more basic social and psychological processes.” Have I recruited research from the currently fashionable field of cognitive science to smuggle in the same old
fallacy of explaining away a complex cultural artifact as a mere reflection of a basic psychological process? Have I tumbled headlong into the pit that Cawelti warned us about?

If I have, my response is to dig myself further in. I shall start by quoting more of Cawelti’s argument:

In the present state of our knowledge, it seems more reasonable to treat social and psychological factors not as single determinant causes of literary expression but as elements in a complex process that limits in various ways the complete autonomy of art. In making cultural interpretations of literary patterns, we should consider them not as simple reflections of social ideologies or psychological needs but as instances of a relatively autonomous mode of behavior that is involved in a complex dialectic with other aspects of human life.  

My main rejoinder to the quite irreproachable case made by Cawelti is that, although certainly focusing on “psychological factors,” a cognitive-evolutionary approach to literature does not subscribe to the traditional notion of psychology that he may have had in mind in his influential study. First of all, as I have argued earlier with my “weightlifting” example, our cognitive predispositions do not enter the “cause-effect” relationship with complex cultural artifacts such as works of fiction. Our Theory of Mind and our metarepresentational ability render the detective stories cognitively possible, but they by no means make their emergence and popularity inevitable. Too many locally contingent historical factors influence the process of the establishment of the new genre for us to suggest otherwise. In fact, it is quite possible that many other genres, currently latent and perhaps never to be explicitly culturally articulated, would have engaged our ToM and metarepresentationality equally well or much better, but the myriad of historical contingencies “conspire” to keep them dormant.

Hence my qualification of the second point made by Cawelti. When he observes that “psychological factors” should be considered as “elements in a complex process that limits in various ways the complete autonomy of art,” we recognize in his formulation the traditional view of our culture as “limited,” via a complex mediation of multiple factors, by our biological (here, cognitive) endowment. Cognitive evolutionary perspective holds the promise of the productive reversal of this model. It seems that, if anything, it is the specific historical contingencies—or “culture”—that limit the concrete expressions of our cognitive endowment, for, as I have
pointed out above, nobody knows how many genre variations that could have worked out our ToM in a particularly felicitous way have never been realized because of a given confluence of historic circumstances (and my concept of historic here includes such factors as the life histories of individual authors).

Ellen Spolsky captures this important reversal of the traditional understanding of the relationship between the “cultural” and the “cognitive” when she suggests that the “theoretically infinite number of creative possibilities will in practice always be channeled and restricted by the cultural surround [even if] those restrictions are themselves often negotiable.” Thus in spite of our evolved cognitive ability to attribute states of mind to ourselves and other people and to store information metarepresentationally, there is no predicting what cultural forms, literary or otherwise, these cognitive abilities can take. To quote Spolsky again, attention “to the complexity of the interrelationships among cognitive and cultural phenomena and the sheer number of possible local variations of these phenomena suggest why a commitment to the existence of evolved (innate or emergent) cognitive structures could never be a commitment to either philosophical or behavioral determinism—quite the opposite.” In other words, by introducing cognitive evolutionary psychology into our study of the genre, we do not, as a matter of fact, give in to the “psychological” determinism of the kind Cawelti justly feared, but rather we develop a conceptual framework that truly commits us to historicizing our data.

It is tempting to seize on Cawelti’s opening proviso about the “present state of our knowledge” and suggest that because back in the 1970s, when he was writing his *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*, literary critics indeed did not have at their disposal conceptual tools made possible by the recent advances in cognitive evolutionary science, he was only too right to be chary about the tendency to reduce “literary expression” to “psychological factors.” Although nothing would date my own work more effectively than claiming that we have *now* attained the state of scientific sophistication unavailable to the benighted literary critics of the previous decades, at least a very mild version of this claim has to be ventured forth because even in its rudimentary state, cognitive evolutionary psychology does offer us a principally new way of approaching fictional narratives. By seeing such narratives as endlessly experimenting with rather than automatically executing given psychological tendencies, this approach opens new venues for literary historians wishing to integrate their knowledge of specific cultural circumstances implicated in the production of literary texts with important new insights into the workings of our brain/mind.