

# 1 Reader-Response Criticism

## 1.1 Reading as a Journey

Towards the beginning of *The Act of Reading* Wolfgang Iser borrows Henry Fielding's "simile" (1968: 813) from Book XVIII, Chapter 1 of *Tom Jones* to illustrate the central tenets of his theory:

... the reader is likened to a traveller in a stagecoach, who has to make the often difficult journey through the novel, gazing out from his moving viewpoint. Naturally, he combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency, the nature and reliability of which will depend partly on the degree of attention he has paid during each phase of the journey. At no time, however, can he have a total view of that journey. (1980: 16)

This passage introduces some of the key concerns that we can trace from John Dewey's *Art as Experience* via Iser's reader-response criticism and Louise M. Rosenblatt's transactional theory to Lothar Bredella's aesthetic reading (cf. 2010: 18–30) and further on to cognitive literary studies, comics theory and, finally, the reading of autobiographical comics in educational contexts. Despite the fact that Iser almost immediately abandons this comparison, which George Lakoff and Mark Johnson would call a 'conceptual metaphor' (cf. 2003), it deserves a more elaborate exploration.

Iser makes an important distinction between an 'often difficult journey', implying an ongoing, partly challenging experience, and a single moment in time, which precludes a 'total view' of the narrative. This is significant, as it challenges a widespread expectation that, for example, at the end of the journey, all the pieces magically fall into place and the puzzle is solved. Iser, however, stresses the fragmentation and idiosyncrasy of experiences that do not automatically add up. The reader has to relate the pieces to each other 'within his memory', even when significant elements are missing. This foregrounds the reading process as an ongoing journey and a cognitive operation that positions readers as active creators of meaning instead of recipients of information that is contained within the narrative. Iser is mostly concerned with the 'moving viewpoint' that is predetermined by the stagecoach's route, presenting the scenes in a temporal sequence and from specific angles that are meant to determine readers' perception to a certain extent. The middle sentence of the quotation above provides an important connection to the cognitive theories that become prominent in

part 3: “Naturally, he [the reader] combines all that he sees within his memory and establishes a pattern of consistency” (1980: 16).

First of all, I take ‘naturally’ to mean ‘automatically’, as there is a clear difference between reading and narratological analysis. In *Biographia Literaria* Samuel Taylor Coleridge argues that readers “should be carried forward [. . .] by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself” (1983: 14; see also Dewey 2005: 4; Benton & Fox 1985: 10), as long as it does not lead to a superficial engagement that is only interested in “striking lines” (1983: 14) and fails to recognise the aesthetic whole. It seems to me that Coleridge describes reading as a flow experience in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s sense (cf. 1991), which can be a complex and demanding challenge, but is handled with ease by experienced readers. Certain passages may demand their full attention, but most of the narrative is actualised without much cognitive strain (cf. 1991: 4, 49–50, 54). If we think of the way we drive cars almost on auto-pilot – paying attention only when the situation requires it – we have a perfect illustration of how every activity can become a flow experience. The cognitive psychologist David Groome explains this phenomenon in the following terms: “cognitive processes become automatic as a result of frequent practice, as for example the skills involved in driving a car, in playing a piano, or in reading words from a page. However, we have the ability to override these automatic sequences when we need to, for example when we come across an unusual traffic situation while driving” (2014a: 18). Accordingly, reading is largely a subconscious and interactive process to which we only attend with heightened awareness when the text requires it. In the case of literature, foregrounding and defamiliarisation (cf. Shklovsky 1998: 4–6) on all levels of composition play a central role in achieving what Coleridge describes in the following way: “at every step he [the reader] pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him forward” (1983: 14). The unfamiliar or surprising stops us in our tracks and, by retracing our steps, we find new orientation and momentum to continue with our journey. The complexity and strain of the reading process, which Iser acknowledges as an “often difficult journey” (1980: 16), is a contested issue to which we shall frequently return.

Secondly, readers/travellers can only make sense of what they notice, not of what the journey has to offer. The tour guide of the coach trip, the narrator, has to select suitable locations and sights, hire local guides, arrange for a few surprises along the way and then present these elements in a chronological and coherent way. Despite the comforts of a modern coach, the tour can be challenging. A flood of new impressions, from the tour guide’s narrative via the individual encounters with locals and unfamiliar settings to one’s own responses, have to be brought in

line with the documentaries one watched at home, the travel guides and holiday brochures one consulted and the recommendations of friends and strangers. The tourists may have arrived with different expectations – ranging from a quiet, relaxing trip via an educational journey to an exciting adventure. Thus, individuals have to establish a “pattern of consistency” (Iser 1980: 16) that allows them to integrate different impressions into a more unified experience. This includes revisiting previous stops in one’s mind and comparing different stages of the tour with each other. Although many viewpoints are predetermined – a beautiful vista here, an observation platform there, chosen by the tour guide and complemented by ongoing narration, the readers/travellers are likely to respond very differently and return with their own stories to tell. The most cherished memories are personal experiences and discoveries that were unique to this particular trip and to a single person. The tourists may even return with “travelled eyes” (Rushdie 1995: 11), seeing their own cultural circumstances in a different light. Like all conceptual metaphors, *READING IS TRAVELLING* manages to capture certain aspects of the experience very well, while obvious differences tend to be obscured (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 10). Since our “conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 3), we take a closer look at conceptual metaphors in part 3.

Thirdly, what readers compare and combine in memory are the contents of mental spaces, not the information provided by the text. Iser offers one possible explanation for this mismatch, which is that readers do not pay enough attention, but there are several factors that influence what we notice. In other areas of language learning, such as grammar, teachers accept the simple formula that input is not intake, but under the influence of narratology, which tends to operate with an “ideal reader” (Iser 1980: 27), expectations are much higher concerning instant narrative comprehension. That is why proponents of reader-response criticism distinguish between aesthetic reading and narratological analysis. The “total view” (Iser 1980: 16), which Rosenblatt calls the “public meaning of the text” (1982: 271), remains inaccessible and an abstraction that is not compatible with the experiences of individual readers. This view corresponds to Rosenblatt’s insistence that the same text can be read very differently: “not even the total text represents an absolute set of guides; multiple and equally valid possibilities are often inherent in the same text in its transactions with different readers under different conditions” (1994: 75; see also 122–3).

Regarding this issue, Iser addresses the struggle that even professional critics face when they attempt to disentangle themselves from the idiosyncrasies of their own narrative experiences: “While we are caught up in a text, we do not

at first know what is happening to us. This is why we often feel the need to talk about books we have read – not in order to gain some distance from them so much as to find out just what it is that we were entangled in. Even literary critics frequently do no more than seek to translate their entanglement into referential language” (1980: 131). Rosenblatt raises a similar point about professional readers: “even the most objective analysis of ‘the poem’ is an analysis of the work as they themselves have called it forth” (1994: 15; see also 137, 141). Since patterns of consistency can only come from individual minds, literary studies has long since embraced different approaches, which are then homogenised to a certain extent through the negotiation and co-construction of meaning within academic circles – a far better model for the classroom than having to guess what teachers think that texts mean. Like all travellers, students like to share personal experiences of the journey, which raises the question how they can transcend their first impressions and arrive at more qualified responses to the text.

## 1.2 Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory

Both Iser and Rosenblatt understand reading as a cognitive “interaction” (Iser 1980: ix) or “transaction” (Rosenblatt 1994: 17) between readers and text. Therefore, Rosenblatt distinguishes between the work of art as a physical object, which she calls ‘text’, “a set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols” (1994: 12; see also Dewey 2005: 1, 86, 222, 228), and the ‘poem’, which “presupposes a reader actively involved with a text and refers to what he makes of his responses to the particular set of verbal symbols” (1994: 12; see also 53). Like Iser, Rosenblatt tried to find a simile that would adequately capture this relationship. Based on Dewey’s metaphor of a “musical score” (2005: 113) she conceptualises the reader as a “performer, in the same sense that a pianist performs a sonata, reading it from the text” (1994: 28; see also 13–14). Iser expresses the same idea in more theoretical terms: “The iconic signs of literature constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate *instructions* for the *production* of the signified” (1980: 65; see also 64; De Bruyn 2012: 115; Dewey 2005: 88). This is an interesting claim. From Iser’s point of view, the story world is neither the real world nor a mirror image of it, but a “blueprint” (Rosenblatt 1994: 86, 88) or ‘construction manual’ that consists largely of symbols and suggests to the creators (the readers) how to build something from the materials available to them. If the ‘product’ is the meaning of the text, it makes sense that Iser sees comprehension as “a productive process” (1980: 59; see also 108) and claims that “the meaning of the text is something that he [the reader] has to assemble” (1980: ix).

These similes imply that there is some room for creativity and interpretation. Looking at certain passages in Iser's *The Act of Reading*, one could get the impression that individual readings inevitably lead to diverse results: "Consistency-building is [...] a structure of comprehension" that "depends on the reader and not on the work, and as such it is inextricably bound up with subjective factors and, above all, the habitual orientations of the reader" (1980: 18; see also Rosenblatt 1994: 11). Accordingly, "a work may be concretized in different, equally valid, ways" (1980: 178). At other times, maybe to fend off charges of complete subjectivity, reader-response critics are willing to substantially curtail readers' interpretative freedom. Iser, for example, states that the "process of assembling the meaning of the text is not a private one, for although it does mobilize the subjective disposition of the reader, it does not lead to day-dreaming but to the fulfillment of conditions that have already been structured in the text" (1980: 49–50). The word 'must', for example, appears more frequently in *The Act of Reading* than one would suspect. On the very first page Iser states: "A description of the reading process must bring to light the elementary operations which the text activates within the reader. The fact that the latter must carry out the instructions shows implicitly that the meaning of the text is something that he has to assemble" (1980: ix). Rosenblatt offers an equally strong image for the influence of the textual structures on the reader, but then returns agency to the latter: "Under the magnetism of the ordered symbols of the text, he [the reader] marshals his resources and crystallizes out from the stuff of memory, thought, and feeling a new order, a new experience, which he sees as the poem" (1994: 12; see also 1964: 126). By taking the "middle position" (Holub 2010: 101) between formalism/determinism and constructivism Iser and Rosenblatt's reader-response criticism becomes vulnerable to attacks from both sides. Sometimes they propagate a rigid system according to which readers mainly execute the instructions of the text (cf. Holub 2010: 100, 102, 133), presumably as a defence against New Criticism, which was still the dominant critical paradigm in the 1970s (cf. Iser 1980: 15; Rosenblatt 1994: 41). Robert Holub objects that "the text as a stable and determinate structure often manages to intrude into the very heart of reception theory" (2010: 149), where its power to control the readers is called upon "to prevent what threatens to be a totally subjective and arbitrary reader response" (2010: 150).

Maybe Rosenblatt's original simile, which she abandons in favour of the musical score, is still the better choice: the reader as a modern-day theatre director who intends to put *Hamlet* on the stage (cf. 1994: 13; see also Holub 2010: 44). Here, the tension between a fixed textual source and the affordances of the stage (cf. Rosenblatt 1994: 67) is mirrored in the readers' creative limitations

(cf. 1994: 129) and interpretative freedom. Every reading and performance of *Hamlet* – either in the readers’ minds or somewhere on stage – is always already an interpretation and adaptation of the text. For Rosenblatt, this involves a “reenactment of the text” (1994: 13; see also 28) or, in Iser’s terms, “literary texts initiate ‘performances’ of meaning” (1980: 27; see also Benton 1992: 14–18). Accordingly, readers are faced with similar challenges as the actors of a play. In *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, Richard Gerrig develops this idea at some length:

Readers are called upon to exercise exactly this same range of skills. They must use their own experiences of the world to bridge gaps in texts. They must bring both facts and emotions to bear on the construction of the world of the text. And, just like actors performing roles, they must give substance to the psychological lives of characters. (1998: 17)

In other words, they ‘inhabit’ the characters to flesh them out as ‘real’ human beings, but without ever losing track of who is who. In “Identifying with Metaphor: Metaphors of Personal Identification” Ted Cohen provides some context for the attempt of readers to ‘become’ the characters of a literary text.

In achieving such an identification, I think, one engages in a dialectic of metaphorical understanding. B is trying to grasp A, to gain some sense of this other person. He likely begins with A=B and then moves back and forth between A=B and B=A, shifting and adjusting. This is the blending one attempts in imagination, a blending of oneself with another, and here one must add to and subtract from oneself. (1999: 407)

Cohen believes that this results in “imagining some third person, some new person, some blend of what I know of you and what I know of me” (1999: 402). Since readers have to rely on their own resources to make sense of characters and their specific circumstances, there is a danger of projecting too much of oneself onto characters, which Cohen finds problematic: “the triumphal assumption that we can easily understand one another is as sinful as the refusal to attempt any human understanding at all” (1999: 404). With certain types of literature, such as tragedy, Cohen proposes that “the impossibility of complete identification contributes to the work’s power” (1999: 406), but I would extend this logic to all literature. In part 3 I explain in detail why empathy requires a more complex operation than straightforward identification.

For Rosenblatt, the play script, which she calls the ‘text’, is merely a means to an end: the important thing is the performance, which she calls the ‘poem’: not “the words, as uttered sounds or inked marks on a page, constitute the poem, but the structured response to them. For the reader, the poem is lived-through during his intercourse with the text” (1994: 14; see also 69). When Rosenblatt argues that the reader is “actively involved in building up a poem for himself out

of his responses to the text" (1994: 10), she refers to the fact that consistency can only be achieved among the mental spaces in working memory. According to reader-response criticism, the emerging gestalt, the tentative meaning, is twice removed from textual evidence. Strictly speaking, students do not make sense of texts, but of what they have read:

Every time a reader experiences a work of art, it is in a sense created anew. Fundamentally, when we speak of understanding a work, we are actually reporting on what we have made of the signs on the page. [...] Drawing on our own resources, we each have called forth and synthesized from that text a structure of concepts and sensations that for each of us is the work of art. Understanding requires an interpretation of this experience. (Rosenblatt 1995: 107)

This creates an interesting tension between having theories about a narrative and knowing that there is far more to discover than individuals can grasp on their own. In communicative language teaching, this opinion gap naturally leads to a discussion among peers of how they have understood the text differently and ultimately requires a return to the textual basis at a later stage of the reading process. Through this specific sequence learners retrace their steps back to the source.

Rosenblatt's transactional approach to reading is ultimately a social event that has to include stages of joint meaning-making, leading from one's first subjective impressions via class discussions to a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of a text. Both Iser and Rosenblatt endorse the "intersubjective discussion of individual interpretations" (Iser 1980: x), as "the very existence of alternatives makes it necessary for a meaning to be defensible and so intersubjectively accessible. The intersubjective communication of a meaning will show up those elements that have been sacrificed, and so, through the negativity of one's own processes of meaning assembly, one may again be in a position to observe one's own decisions" (Iser 1980: 230; see also 22, 25). In other words: even if the reading process led to a satisfying experience, most of the involved processes may have been subliminal to a large extent (cf. Rosenblatt 1982: 269). Sharing one's views with others, however, invites a re-examination of one's attitudes and may necessitate a rereading of certain key scenes. Rosenblatt turns this very idea into a precondition for all literary teaching: "the successful teacher of literature makes the classroom a place for critical sharing of personal responses" (1966: 1003). Since all readings are equally valid and gain currency in a "free exchange of ideas", this contest of the most convincing readings "will lead each student to scrutinize his own sense of the literary work in the light of others' opinions" (1995: 104). This feedback loop among peers is considered to

be more conducive to a re-evaluation of one's own reading than an intervention by a teacher: "that others have had different responses, have noticed what was overlooked, have made alternative interpretations, leads to self-awareness and self-criticism" (Rosenblatt 1982: 276).

For both Iser (cf. 1980: 16) and Rosenblatt readers have to keep an open mind and be willing to overcome their limitations: "the reader's creation of a poem out of a text must be an active, self-ordering and self-corrective process" (1994: 11). This "process of continual correction" (Iser 1980: 167) is already triggered by clues in the text that constantly force readers to check their images and gestalten for their suitability. Rosenblatt lists two "prime criteria of validity" that represent the minimal requirements for a reading: "that the reader's interpretation [should] not be contradicted by any element of the text, and that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis" (1994: 115; see also 1966: 1001). Surprisingly, she can be quite harsh when readers do not follow the text's ample guidance: "Undisciplined, irrelevant or distorted emotional responses, and the lack of relevant experience or knowledge will, of course, lead to inadequate interpretations of the text" (1966: 1001). How this movement from subjective responses to greater objectivity can be organised by teachers in the literary classroom, is a central concern of the next part. In the following chapter we look at framing and how the temporal sequence of reading influences our experiences of a text.

### 1.3 Frames

In Rosenblatt's transactional theory an interaction with a text starts *before* the reading begins, which means that it is always framed. She dedicates the third chapter of *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* to the reader's stance (cf. 1994: 22–47), which she conceptualises as a mental framework or set of expectations that readers bring to a text and that determines their reading until textual evidence forces them to revise their initial approach. This is also one of the central arguments in Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* where he calls "our own expectations" a "mental set" that significantly influences "the deciphering of the artists' cryptograms" (2014: 53; see also 190–4).

Rosenblatt uses two terms, 'efferent' and 'aesthetic', to designate two basic modes of reading: 'efferent', an invented adjective that she derives from Latin 'efferre', 'to carry away', suggests an interest in the literal and factual, such as scanning a text for specific information; an 'aesthetic' reading, however, is geared towards personal responses and the experience of the literary text itself (cf. 1994: 24–5). These stances are understood to affect all aspects of readers'

transactions with texts: “The distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic reading, then, derives ultimately from what the reader does, the stance that he adopts and the activities he carries out in relation to the text” (1994: 27; see also Benton 1992: 1). However, she finds it “*more accurate to think of a continuum, a series of gradations between the nonaesthetic and the aesthetic extremes*” (1994: 35; see also 27), which returns us to the idea of a middle ground between reading comprehension as the extraction of information and reading as a personal experience and a form of self-discovery.

Rosenblatt’s focus on framing is highly relevant, as Werner Wolf has demonstrated in several articles on its importance to literary interpretation (cf. e.g. 2006, 2014). He states that “*narrative* is a major cognitive frame whose application is elicited by certain clues, ‘keys,’ or ‘framings,’ typically and preferably at the outset of a reception process” (2014: 126; see also 2006: 22). Readers’ expectations are shaped by such paratextual devices (cf. Genette 1997) and “then are applied to the entire artefact under scrutiny, at least as a default option” (Wolf 2014: 128). While ‘narrative’ may be a rather broad framework, generic markers often determine whether a book is bought and read in the first place (cf. 2014: 132). In turn, the ways in which authors position their books in relation to generic traditions lead to a more or less conscious negotiation on the readers’ part of whether this classification is warranted or not (cf. 2014: 135). In this sense, framings do not only provide basic orientation, but invite a specific attitude or stance that initially determines all aspects of the reading process:

... framings [...] help the recipient to select frames of interpretation or reference relevant for the work under consideration. If the abstract frames can be described as tools of interpretation, their codings in framings are the (visible or imagined) labels on the tool-box that induce the recipient to choose the correct tools. By pointing to frames as tools or guides of interpretation, framings – and this applies also and in particular to the special form of framing borders – likewise fulfill an essentially interpretive, but also a controlling function. Most importantly, framings mark an artefact as such and distinguish it from its surroundings by indicating the special rules (frames) that apply in its reception. (Wolf 2006: 26)

The impact of frames and framings has two important consequences for this study. On the one hand, they play a central role in the way narrative fiction is introduced and contextualised in the classroom, which has a long-lasting effect on how students transact with a text. On the other hand, reading autobiographical texts requires some preparation on the teacher’s part, especially during the later stages of the reading sequence, if the ultimate goal is critical media literacy.

In *The Act of Reading* Iser addresses the influence of generic markers only indirectly when he presents the challenges of (post)modernist texts. These

consciously subvert essential interpretative frames and rely on advanced reading skills to compensate for a lack of clarity: “It is typical of modern texts that they invoke expected functions in order to transform them into blanks. This is mostly brought about by a deliberate omission of generic features that have been firmly established by the tradition of the genre. Thus the narrator’s perspective now denies the reader the orientation it traditionally offered as regards evaluation of characters and events” (1980: 208). He comments more explicitly on genres and reader expectations in his “Interview” with Norman Holland and Wayne Booth:

This reciprocal conditioning which occurs in [the] time-flow of reading is also influenced, of course, by the ‘genre.’ The genre is a code element which invokes certain expectations in the reader, given his familiarity with the code. In this respect, I would regard the genre as part of the repertoire, though there is no doubt that the many elements of the repertoire encapsulated in each text will not be equally well known to every reader of the text. Nevertheless, the basic differences between genres will precondition different attitudes towards the text, and this applies equally to the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. (Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 65; see also Bruner 1986: 7)

Although leaving aside paratextual information to a large extent, Iser *does* acknowledge the impact of first impressions on the process of reading: “The sequence of image-building is overshadowed by what has been produced in the first instance, which inevitably has repercussions on the way images qualify and condition each other in the time-flow of our reading” (1980: 149; see also 186; Rosenblatt 1994: 54). To better understand framing in reader-response approaches, it may help to briefly introduce two narratological theories that are directly related to Iser’s model, but work with a more predetermined reader or viewer experience.

In *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction* (1978) Meir Sternberg starts with the premise that first impressions are so strong that they tend to overshadow later evidence to the contrary. Based on Carl Iver Hovland’s edited volume *The Order of Presentation in Persuasion* (1957) Sternberg uses this ‘primacy effect’ to explain how writers manipulate their readers’ emphatic responses to characters by setting up expectations that are later proven to be partially or completely misguided. He summarises the results of Abraham S. Luchins’s “Primacy-Recency in Impression Formation” (cf. Hovland et al. 1957: 33–61) in the following way:

Due to the successive order of presentation, the first block [of information about a character] was read with an open mind, while the interpretation of the second – in itself as weighty – was decisively conditioned and colored by the anterior, homogeneous primacy effect; the leading block established a perceptual set, serving as a frame of reference to

which subsequent information was subordinated as far as possible. (1978: 94; see also Smith 2004: 268; Gombrich 2014: 191; Kahneman 2012: 82–3; Gerrig 1998: 233)

The cognitive frame or mindset that is established through the primacy effect, in this case a first judgment of a person's character, is so influential that readers become blinded to further revelations that contradict this assumption. Instead of questioning their own faulty image, they “construct and maintain in each case an integrated, unified view of character in face of the objective evidence to the contrary” (1978: 95). This plays an important role in the context of impression management (cf. Goffman 1959) and more specifically in how autobiographers present themselves at the beginning of a narrative to invite readers' attention, empathy and curiosity. We find some interesting comments on that matter in Sternberg's study, where he is largely concerned with the “expositional unfolding of Odysseus's personality” (1978: 90) in Homer's *Odyssey*. While the protagonist is first presented as a great war hero by other characters in books I–IV, his character is then revealed to be more complex than that by granting the readers access to his actions and thoughts (cf. 1978: 104). In this case, the primacy effect is used to maintain Odysseus's status as a heroic figure while gradually introducing new and partly incompatible character traits from book V onwards (cf. 1978: 101–28). Sternberg is interested in formalist aspects of literature and the subversion of readers' predictions, but he cannot escape cognitive concerns. The “unexpected retrospective illumination” (1978: 100) that he presents as the end result of elaborate narrative ploys relies on readers who have to experience this kind of illumination, notice a discrepancy with their expectations and reconcile the new insight with previously held beliefs. This may even trigger a rereading of previous passages to facilitate the assimilation of the new information (cf. Rosenblatt 1986: 123).

David Bordwell adopts Sternberg's concept of the “primacy effect” in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985: 38), which means that he also favours a structuralist manifestation of an otherwise cognitive process. Although he acknowledges spectators' central importance by dedicating a whole chapter to “The Viewer's Activity” (1985: 29–47), he is fascinated by the idea that a film teaches the audience how it wants to be read: “A film cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of *operations*” (1985: 29). This is so central to Bordwell's understanding of film that he proposes this form of viewer guidance as the very definition of narration: “We can, in short, study narrative as a *process*, the activity of selecting, arranging, and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on the perceiver. I shall call this process narration” (1985: xi; see also 33).

Although Bordwell subscribes to a constructivist notion of meaning-making that places viewers at the centre of his theory, he sees a unique chance in guiding their reception of a narrative through a careful orchestration of perspectives. He uses Gombrich's basic argument in *Art and Illusion* that the sophisticated presentation of images from a specific perspective creates the illusion of realism (cf. 2014: 221), which is, in fact, a highly conventionalised optical trick that does not reveal how things really are. On the contrary, it represents a specific view, a unique angle:

What a painter inquires into is not the nature of the physical world but the nature of our reactions to it. He is not concerned with causes but with the mechanisms of certain effects. His is a psychological problem – that of conjuring up a convincing image despite the fact that not one individual shade corresponds to what we call 'reality'. (Gombrich 2014: 44)

In accordance with the primacy effect, Bordwell ascribes the first scenes of a film a unique role: “The sequential nature of narrative makes the initial portions of a text crucial for the establishment of hypotheses” (1985: 38), which are then constantly tested throughout the reading process (cf. 1985: 31). What is more, similar to Iser's comment on postmodern texts, film directors can play with the viewers' expectations: “Narratives are composed in order to reward, modify, frustrate, or defeat the perceiver's search for coherence” (1985: 38). This deliberate accumulation of narrative gaps foregrounds the importance of readers' cognitive involvement, which has led to the proclamation of an 'ideal reader' as an elegant solution to avoid any concern with cognitive processes and readers' actual responses. This notion of a perfect recipient was forcefully opposed by both Iser and Rosenblatt (cf. Iser 1980: 27; Rosenblatt 1994: 140–1).

Returning to the centrality of readers' interpretative frameworks, Bordwell addresses the question of genre competence directly at the end of his chapter on “The Viewer's Activity” (1985: 29–47). He explains that the experienced spectator is “prepared to justify events and motifs compositionally, realistically, and especially transtextually” (1985: 45). The first refers to a reading of a narrative according to its own logic and structure, the second according to our knowledge of the real world, and the third to our in-depth understanding of the genre to which the film belongs: “Whatever the cues in this film [*Rear Window*], our expectations are funded by knowledge of other films in the tradition. We motivate transtextually” (1985: 44). Contrary to Iser, who only implicitly acknowledges the impact of genres on reading, Rosenblatt's approach is very much in line with Bordwell's:

Past literary experiences serve as subliminal guides as to the genre to be anticipated, the details to be attended to, the kinds of organizing patterns to be evolved. Each genre, each kind of work [...] makes its own kinds of conventional demands on the reader – that is, once he has set up one or another such expectation, his stance, the details he responds to, the way he handles his responses, will differ. Traditional subjects, themes, treatments, may provide the guides to organization and the background against which to recognize something new or original in the text. (1994: 57; see also 55–6; Gombrich 2014: 194, 268)

This is the basis for Rosenblatt’s “concept of selective attention” (1994: 43; see also 184; 1986: 123; Gombrich 2014: xviii, 157), which means that the cognitive frame or stance predetermines the selection of elements for the actualisation of the text. With the exception of formulaic genre fiction, literature usually challenges or even actively subverts readers’ expectations. This is why Rosenblatt proposes a flexible and transactional system:

In broadest terms, then, the basic paradigm of the reading process consists in the response to cues; the adoption of an efferent or aesthetic stance; the development of a tentative framework or guiding principle of organization; the arousal of expectations that influence the selection and synthesis of further responses; the fulfillment or reinforcement of expectations, or their frustration, sometimes leading to revision of the framework, and sometimes, if necessary, to rereading . . . (1994: 54; see also Kafalenos 2006: 147–8)

Paratexts, such as interviews, reviews, (book) trailers and posters, covers or title pages, are highly significant, as they contain an interesting and not always consistent mix of clues, genre markers and framings that can provide a first orientation. We rarely encounter, buy and read books out of context. Rosenblatt acknowledges the influence of such settings in the following way:

Various signals have been developed to alert readers to the types of texts and hence to the appropriate stance: the categories under which books are shelved in libraries, the differences between titles of nonfiction and fiction, the reports of book reviewers, the frequent use of headings such as “Fiction” or “Poetry” in the tables of contents of magazines – even, sometimes, the insertion of the phrase “a story” after a title. This may be an adaptation to the fact that readers themselves often are not conscious of the difference in stance required by different texts, but need such prior signals to adjust their approach to such materials. (1994: 79; see also Nünning 2014: 74)

Like Wolf (cf. 2014: 132), Rosenblatt differentiates between contextual framings, “the ways in which readers are given cues extraneous to the text” (1994: 80), peritextual signals, which can be found on the cover or in the front matter, and those that are integrated into the main text (cf. 1994: 81).

The first scene, then, as Bordwell demonstrates, plays a crucial role in confirming, modifying or undermining viewers' or readers' initial expectations. In addition, it establishes a point of reference for later scenes and begins a transaction with readers that is significantly shaped by the narrator's behaviour: his or her presence, style, attitude and guidance are bound to affect readers' responses to the text. Therefore, the beginning of the reading process is a delicate stage, which needs extra attention in educational settings. Not only do teachers select the text and frame it in particular ways, but they also have certain expectations that need to be communicated clearly, especially when the overall purpose is not aesthetic reading, but language work, reading comprehension, narratological analysis, the development of genre competence, cultural studies, formal writing tasks etc. For Rosenblatt, these approaches exist on a spectrum from an aesthetic to an efferent stance, and certain activities are likely to mix both. In part 2 I present an organisational framework that facilitates reading as an ongoing process in stages, in which tasks play a more specific role in the transition from an aesthetic to a more analytical framework.

#### 1.4 Iser's Model of Meaning-Making

Iser's conceptualisation of reading is the backbone of this thesis, as it anticipates some of the central theories in parts 3 and 4 (cf. Fauconnier & Turner 2003; Dancygier 2012; McCloud 1994; Groensteen 2007, 2013), for which the following overview shall serve as a point of reference. At the same time, it contextualises the terms and concepts that have been introduced so far and allows for a brief discussion of the model's shortcomings.

The most important aspect of Iser's "wandering viewpoint" (1980: 109) is the distinction between and coordination of different perspectives, which he conceptualises – outside the theory of focalisation – in purely optical terms: "perception and interpretation depend upon the standpoint of the observer" (1980: 84). This demonstrates a close relation to Bordwell's film narratology and Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*. On a macrostructural level Iser identifies "various lines of orientation which are in opposition to one another" (1980: 47), which he correlates to the major subject positions that a text offers to a reader:

As a rule there are four main perspectives: those of the narrator, the characters, the plot, and the fictitious reader. Although these may differ in order of importance, none of them on its own is identical to the meaning of the text. What they do is provide guidelines originating from different starting points (narrator, characters, etc.), continually shading into each other and devised in such a way that they all converge on a general meeting place. We call this meeting place the meaning of the text, which can only be

brought into focus if it is visualized from a standpoint. Thus, standpoint and convergence of textual perspectives are closely interrelated, although neither of them is actually represented in the text, let alone set out in words. Rather they emerge during the reading process, in the course of which the reader's role is to occupy shifting vantage points that are geared to a prestructured activity and to fit the diverse perspectives into a gradually evolving pattern. (1980: 35; see also 21, 47, 96)

This is a more elaborate version of the metaphor *READING IS TRAVELLING* and contains the same basic ideas: the meaning of a text exists on a higher level of blending or gestalt-forming than the individual perspectives offered in the text, a process that Barbara Dancygier calls "viewpoint compression" (2012: 97). Iser explicitly states that identification with a character is *one* of many access points to a narrative, but should not be confused with the meaning of the text. Nowhere is this more important than in the context of autobiographies, where the temptation to adopt the narrator's perspective without any critical distance is substantial.

From these textual structures Iser differentiates four external perspectives that rely more directly on the cognitive involvement of the reader. First, there is the "meaning of the text" (1980: 35), which he describes elsewhere as "a dynamic happening" (1980: 22). This corresponds to the individual reader's understanding of the narrative as an "ongoing process" (Rosenblatt 1994: 9; see also Turner 1994: 236) and as guided by textual structures. Iser explains that the "meaning must inevitably be pragmatic, in that it can never cover all the semantic potentials of the text, but can only open up one particular form of access to these potentials" (1980: 85; see also 145; Dewey 2005: 46). The particular stance or standpoint adopted in an ongoing engagement with a text determines the present understanding of the narrative. As we have seen with the primacy effect and the impact of interpretative frames, readers tend to rely on one dominant framework that seems to work for the present moment until proven inadequate.

For casual readers who encounter a narrative text for the first time, the process of meaning-making is far less reflected than that of professional readers. Gombrich correctly observes that our interactions with texts are based on the "assumption that things are simple until they prove to be otherwise" (2014: 231), by which he means that we do not consciously interrupt the flow of reading to overanalyse scenes and look for additional layers of meaning. In his meta-study *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read* Frank Smith draws the same conclusion based on decades of research. Much like Rosenblatt he states that the "interest is always in the experience, rather than in the information. The intentional acquisition of information, especially at the arbitrary behest of others, is one of the most tedious and unnatural activities

anyone can engage in” (2004: 55). A more ‘natural’ form of reading has to have “some bearing on the reader’s purposes” (2004: 189), since “we remember what we understand and what is significant to us” (2004: 190). This is not so much a question of laziness than of cognitive overload and the limited capacity of our working memory (cf. 2004: 87; see also 96). This insight leads Smith to the same conclusion as Gombrich:

The first interpretation that comes to us is the one that makes the most sense to us at the particular time, and alternative and less likely interpretations will not be considered unless subsequent interpretations fail to be consistent or to make sense, in which case we realize our probable error and try to recapitulate. One interpretation usually satisfies us, provided it makes sense, so we don’t waste time looking for a second. [. . .] We don’t expect to find more than one meaning for the same sequence of words. (2004: 39; see also 24)

This characterisation of the reading process typical of casual readers is completely at odds with the concept of the ‘ideal reader’. It also highlights the discrepancy between the enjoyment of reading that schools are supposed to foster and the unstated expectation that students should be capable of providing a detailed retrospective analysis of a text after a first reading. Smith ironises this discrepancy between the public meaning and the casual reader’s satisfaction with a personal experience:

The very notion that comprehension is relative, that it depends on the questions that an individual happens to ask, is not one that all educators find easy to accept. Some want to argue that you may not have understood a book even if you have no unanswered questions at the end. They will ask, “But did you understand that the spy’s failure to steal the secret plans was really a symbol of humanity’s ineluctable helplessness in the face of manifest destiny?” And if you say “No, I just thought it was a jolly good story,” they will tell you that you didn’t really comprehend what the story was about. But basically what they are saying is that you were not asking the kind of questions they think you should have asked. (2004: 26)

Within reader-response criticism we find the same rejection of the “total view” (Iser 1980: 16) or the “ultimate meaning” (Iser 1980: 98), which is Iser’s second external perspective. It represents an impossible, complete understanding of the text in all its intricacies. This is criticised by Iser as “the illusion of a false totality” (1980: 12). To make this point clearer I include Dewey’s example of the cathedral, which is meant to illustrate the fallacy of “simultaneous vision” (2005: 228), which corresponds to an abstract, disentangled view of an object in its totality.

A cathedral, no matter how large, makes an instantaneous impression. A total qualitative impression emanates from it as soon as it interacts with the organism through the visual apparatus. But this is only the substratum and framework within which a

continuous process of interactions introduces enriching and defining elements. The hasty sightseer no more has an esthetic vision of Saint Sophia or the Cathedral of Rouen than the motorist traveling at sixty miles an hour sees the flitting landscape. One must move about, within and without, and through repeated visits let the structure gradually yield itself to him in various lights and in connection with changing moods. [. . .] An instantaneous experience is an impossibility, biologically and psychologically. An experience is a product, one might almost say a by-product, of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world. (2005: 229; see also 311)

The meaning of a text, Dewey suggests, is a by-product of readers' interaction with it. The aesthetic experience is to be had in the intimate moments, the discoveries of 'enriching and defining elements,' the interaction with the object and, most importantly, on repeated visits. Because of all these factors Iser dismisses the "ideal reader" as "a purely fictional being", since the ability "to realize in full the meaning potential of the fictional text" (1980: 29) would require an impossible reading position. Meaning can only result from a personal interaction with a text "at a particular time in a particular environment at a particular moment in the life history of the reader" (Rosenblatt 1994: 20).

Yet, Iser sometimes seems to suggest that, as long as readers correctly follow all the instructions (cf. Holub 2010: 102), the "message or meaning of the text can be organized" (Iser 1980: 81) in exactly the way the writer intended. Norman Holland, who studied readers' responses empirically and became later known for his work in cognitive studies (cf. Holland 2009), found fault with Iser's seeming overreliance on the text, as his research suggested that readers came up with vastly different interpretations by projecting their own personalities and ideas onto the text (cf. Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 58–9). To understand Holland's objection we have to take a brief detour, this time to a more restricted, schematic understanding of meaning-making as we find it, for example, in Emma Kafalenos's *Narrative Causalities*:

*meaning* is an interpretation of the relations between a given action (or happening or situation) and other actions (happenings, situations) in a causal sequence. *Interpretation*, in the restricted sense in which I use the word in this study, refers to the process of analyzing the causal relations between an action or happening and other actions, happenings, and situations one thinks of as related. (2006: 1; see also Bordwell 1985: 34–5, 51)

She thus limits 'narrative competence' to a meaningful ordering of the events as temporally and causally related, which is more or less a reconstruction of the 'fabula' (cf. 2006: 2, 15, 25, 58–60, 113, 130). It reduces the work of art to the perspective of the plot and the readers' involvement to a puzzle game of what came first and why. This limitation allows for a complete picture at the end of the reading process: "Finally, when we reach the end of the narrative and construct

a complete configuration – a final fabula – ideally we will interpret the function of the given event once again, this time in relation to all the information we have amassed” (2006: 151). However, even Kafalenos’s functional approach (cf. 2006: 6) cannot work without the readers’ involvement: “the meaning of an event is subject to interpretations that can vary for people in our world as well as for characters in fictional worlds, and also for readers (listeners, viewers)” (2006: 16). The ‘meaning of an event’ offers an excellent transition back to Iser.

In *The Act of Reading* he makes a surprising distinction between the meaning of the text, the first external perspective we discussed, which “must be assembled in the course of reading”, and ‘significance’, “the reader’s absorption of the meaning into his own existence” (1980: 151) which is the third (theoretical) perspective (after the total view). He suggests that readers are capable of building a story world, reconstructing the fabula according to the text’s internal logic and producing a consistent reading partly or even completely independent of personal relevance:

The experience of the text, then, is brought about by an interaction that cannot be designated as private or arbitrary. What *is* private is the reader’s incorporation of the text into his own treasure-house of experience, but as far as the reader-oriented theory is concerned, this simply means that the subjectivist element of reading comes at a later stage in the process of comprehension than critics of the theory may have supposed: namely, where the aesthetic effect results in a restructuring of experience. (1980: 24)

Not surprisingly, Holland objected to this concept and so do I. The problem is the temporal sequence according to which a mechanical, text-induced actualisation comes first, which might *then* be followed by an emotional impact on readers “at a later stage” (Iser 1980: 24). It contradicts the basic principle of an ongoing transaction, which is precisely Holland’s second point of criticism in the interview (cf. Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 59–60).

To understand Iser’s somewhat unusual claim we have to look at it from within his theory. In contrast to real life, the world of the narrative does not exist prior to readers’ transaction with it. Consequently, we cannot respond to and have opinions about something that is not present yet. This leads him to a conceptualisation of reading as a two-step process in which the construction of the story world has to precede deeper cognitive and emotional involvement with the text: “consistency-building has nothing to do with explanation. It is a passive synthesis occurring below the threshold of our consciousness while we read. Consistency-building establishes ‘good continuation’ between textual segments in the time-flow of reading, and is thus an indispensable prerequisite for assembling an overall pattern” (Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 64). This does

not mean that the aesthetic object is the same for every reader, as the process of subconscious consistency-building completely relies on readers' reading competence and 'theory of the world', as Smith calls it (cf. 2004: 13–15). However, Iser's attempt to split the reading flow into different processes and competences that may or may not involve conscious and emotional responses in varying degrees, creates an artificial separation that is more indebted to the model than to actual reading practices. Most importantly, it is hard to reconcile with Rosenblatt's stance, Genette's paratexts, Wolf's frames, Bordwell's film narratology or Sternberg's primacy effect, which all rely on aesthetic reading as a precondition rather than as an after-effect.

Although Lothar Bredella believes that "all understanding is interpretation" (2010: 51), by which he means subjective, he finds it necessary to distinguish between the two terms for educational purposes: "Understanding means that we grasp content more or less automatically without conscious effort", while he defines "interpretation" as "an attempt to improve our understanding of the text" (2010: 51), which he associates with specific, analytical tasks that students engage in after the initial reading. This point is also raised by Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel*:

reading literature analytically, with an aim of sharing or comparing insights with others or producing interpretations, is a highly specialized activity that (for most people) requires training. This education disrupts students' habitual reading patterns with new demands – attention to privileged details and patterns, to symbolic objects, to loose ends, to contextually relevant information – depending on the approach. (2010: 86)

It is paramount to keep these types of reading both conceptually and practically apart, as the aims and responses are quite different. Iser is correct in assuming that many cognitive processes take place subconsciously, such as consistency-building, and that the flow of reading may not be interrupted by conscious reflection for long stretches of time, but this largely automated understanding of a text is clearly coloured by personal preferences and emotions. If aesthetic reading is meant to be a holistic process, the split into theoretical stages of meaning-making that do not even reach consciousness seems to be futile, especially without any empirical proof.

Rosenblatt, it has to be noted, also differentiates between "the evocation and the reaction" (1994: 65) or "the production of the work" and the "stream of feelings, attitudes, and ideas [that] is aroused by the very work being summoned up under the guidance of the text" (1994: 48), but there are two significant differences: first, personal (ir)relevance and emotional responses in general are instant or "concurrent" (1994: 48; see also 69; 1982: 270), as Rosenblatt puts it.

In “The Literary Transaction: Evocation and Response” she specifically criticises the idea that cognition precedes emotional responses: “The notion that first the child must ‘understand’ the text cognitively, efferently, before it can be responded to aesthetically is a rationalization that must be rejected” (1982: 273).

Secondly, her transactional theory acknowledges a whole spectrum of responses ranging from the efferent to the aesthetic. These are not polar opposites but always co-present and intermingled, depending on reader’s stance and the text-type: “This permits the whole range of responses generated by the text to enter into the center of awareness, and out of these materials he selects and weaves what he sees as the literary work of art” (1994: 27–8; see also 66; 1998: 886). For Rosenblatt, personal feelings are as much a resource to make sense of literary texts as are more analytical categories. She criticises “the formalist fallacy” (1994: 155), by which she means “efferent treatments of literary texts” (1994: 162), and opposes the “theoretic division” of the work of art, which should be understood and read as “an integral whole” (1995: 44). Smith is equally averse to the idea of breaking down reading into processes and skills (cf. 2004: 8–10), as understanding is supposed to be a holistic endeavour. Since teaching necessarily involves more guided transactions with texts, this is not tenable for the classroom, but purely analytical tasks can be pushed back to later stages of the reading process. Even though both Iser and Rosenblatt claim the middle ground between formalism and constructivism (cf. Rosenblatt 1994: 37), one can spot a difference between the two approaches: despite Iser’s condemnation of ideal readers (cf. 1980: 29), his theory belies a clear preference for highly intelligent, rational and experienced readers who know how to handle a text. Rosenblatt’s students, who sat in her poetry classes, started out as readers whose “notes reflect, one might say, a rudimentary literary response” (1994: 7). Thus, she seems to have a more realistic perspective on what can be expected during specific stages of the reading process. In the literary classroom, personal relevance plays an important role as a motivational factor and thus becomes a key component of each reader’s stance towards the text (cf. Lütge 2012: 195).

The fourth and most important of Iser’s external perspectives is the “moving viewpoint” (Iser 1980: 16), a subject position of actual readers in relation to the text, which invites them to coordinate the perspectives locally, but also increasingly on a higher level. Rosenblatt sees the reader as a “mediator among the various structures that present themselves to consciousness” (1994: 42) or a weaver, working on a tapestry that connects textual elements through personal significance (cf. 1994: 88, 90). The moving viewpoint may coincide, at times, with one of the four major structures or perspectives inscribed in the text, such as

the protagonist's point of view, in case readers strongly identify with the central character. A more complex relationship is the one between the moving viewpoint and the implied/fictitious reader's perspective: "the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text. No matter who or what he may be, the real reader is always offered a particular role to play" (Iser 1980: 34; see also 38). The wandering viewpoint is different from this inscribed perspective, as readers may not identify, for example, with a strongly propagandistic text that has a very clear vision of its addressees and how they should respond. Iser is adamant that the reader's role "emerges from this interplay of perspectives, for he finds himself called upon to mediate between them, and so it would be fair to say that the intended reader, as supplier of *one* perspective, can never represent more than one aspect of the reader's role" (1980: 33). In other words, while the implied/fictitious/intended reader is a textual structure, the moving viewpoint is the relation of actual readers to the text, which always transcends any of the perspectives on offer.

There are three basic implications here for the teaching of literature: first, that the total meaning or 'message' of a narrative is a chimera, or an abstraction at best that does not reflect the complexity of the work of art in its procedural nature. The conceptual metaphor that MEANING IS A (RARE) SUBSTANCE that can be dug out of the earth/text, purified and exhibited as a shining object is misleading. This implies that students who do not 'get' the meaning either do not dig deep enough or confuse pebbles for precious stones. Such a materialist reading reduces meaning to a piece of information that can be objectified, evaluated and shared. It corresponds to the public meaning of the text that is equally purified from all personal entanglements and represents a timeless treasury of the best things humans have written and thought about the text. Rosenblatt addresses this problem when she states that literature "lends little comfort to the teacher who seeks the security of a clearly defined body of information" (1995: 27), which she associates with efferent reading. What any teacher of literature has to work with are the (emotional) responses of students that may not correspond to the expected insights, but whose systematic neglect teaches learners that whatever they have to say counts for little. Secondly, traditional approaches privilege one point in time of the meaning-making process, which is when everyone has read the text. This seems logical from the perspective of narratology, as all pieces of the puzzle have been revealed and students are supposed to have a complete understanding of the text. However, 'having-read' comprehension is very different from aesthetic reading. Especially when a teacher's role is to be understood as a facilitator of reading as an experience (cf. Delanoy 2015: 20, 35), a lot

more has to happen before the final discussion of the book in a teacher-centred lockstep phase. And thirdly, scenes with specific character configurations (cf. Emmott 2004: 103) and interactions are the main access points for narrative understanding. Dewey argues that readers' experiences of a text are bound to such details: "The esthetic portrayal of grief manifests the grief of a particular individual in connection with a particular event. It is *that* state of sorrow which is depicted, not depression unattached. It has a *local* habitation" (2005: 94; see also 95–6). Summaries and similar retrospective tasks tend to ask for the elimination of the specific in favour of global insight, whereas reader-response approaches are mostly interested in the dynamic interaction with the text before the final conclusions are drawn.

Iser's model of reading is built on the contrast between a foregrounded perspective under current consideration, which he calls the 'theme', and all previously encountered perspectives, which form the 'horizon': "As perspectives are continually interweaving and interacting, it is not possible for the reader to embrace all perspectives at once, and so the view he is involved with at any one particular moment is what constitutes for him 'the theme'" (1980: 97; see also 98–9). Since the whole narrative consists of such vantage points, the "theme of one moment becomes the horizon against which the next segment takes on its actuality" (1980: 198; see also Dewey 2005: 199, 211), which in Sternberg's or Bordwell's theory means that we are constantly primed by previous moments or scenes for an encounter with the next. While this teleological drive of narrative construction does have a significant influence on meaning-making, the interaction between themes is not limited to priming, but equally includes a re-evaluation of previous scenes in light of recent developments and revelations. Iser acknowledges this phenomenon as "reciprocal spotlighting" (1980: 114; see also 118, 148, 197, 202; Rosenblatt 1994: 85; Dewey 2005: 116) and explains the concept in the following manner:

The continual interaction of perspectives throws new light on all positions linguistically manifested in the text, for each position is set in a fresh context, with the result that the reader's attention is drawn to aspects hitherto not apparent. Thus the structure of theme and horizon transforms every perspective segment of the text into a two-way glass, in the sense that each segment appears against the others and is therefore not only itself but also a reflection and an illuminator of those others. Each individual position is thus expanded and changed by its relation to the others, for we view it from all the perspectives that constitute the horizon. In this respect the literary text avails itself of a mechanism that regulates perception in general, for what is observed changes when it is observed – in accordance with the particular expectations of the observer. (1980: 97–8; see also 99, 116)

This is the most important departure in this model from the strict temporality, linearity and teleology of classical narratology, as narrative comprehension is presented here as based on a relationship between and the mutual illumination of story elements across perspectives and scenes. It is a translinear process that runs backwards and forwards, establishing a tentative web of meaning across the narrative. Iser even introduces a new term, the 'retroactive effect', to specifically address, in Sternberg's terms, the "unexpected retroactive illumination" (1978: 100) of previously encountered scenes:

In most literary texts, however, the sequence of sentences is so structured that the correlates serve to modify and even frustrate the expectations they have aroused. In so doing, they automatically have a retroactive effect on what has already been read, which now appears quite different. Furthermore, what has been read shrinks in the memory to a foreshortened background, but it is being constantly evoked in a new context and so modified by new correlates that instigate a restructuring of past syntheses. (Iser 1980: 111; see also 114, 115, 155; Rosenblatt 1994: 10, 57–8, 60–1, 85, 134)

Sternberg calls the same phenomenon "the bi-directional processing of information" by which he means "the play of expectation and hypothesis, retrospective revision of patterns, shifts of ambiguity, and progressive reconstitution in general" (1978: 98; see also Benton & Fox 1985: 14). Another important concept is the introduction of a 'foreshortened background' in the form of 'past syntheses', which means that the story information we operate with is not atomistic or compartmentalised, but stored as *gestalten* or holistic construals. The groundwork for these ideas can be found in Dewey (cf. 2005: 189).

It is Iser's general conviction that the flow of any narrative cannot be as smooth and steady as our advanced reading skills make us believe (cf. De Bruyn 2012: 131–2). He argues that the 'themes' are set off against each other by gaps: "Wherever there is an abrupt juxtaposition of segments, there must automatically be a blank, breaking the expected order of the text" (1980: 195). When readers begin to compare and contrast related themes, which illuminate each other, a referential field is set up whose elements they are able to simultaneously view within their field of vision at any particular moment. In reader-response criticism synthesis is based on synopsis in the original sense of the word: we understand things by seeing them together. The gap has an almost paradoxical function in this context: on the one hand, it sets apart units of narrative organisation; on the other hand, it ties these segments together through the connective tissue that readers produce in response to the text (cf. Iser 1980: 197). In Iser's system image-building is "polysynthetic" (1980: 148), which means that there are several (potential) narrative strands that readers have to keep track

of. Dewey, almost randomly, calls these gaps ‘problems,’ “intervals” (2005: 164), “seams and mechanical junctions” (2005: 199) or “pause” (2005: 179), but otherwise the theory is surprisingly similar:

Without internal tension there would be a fluid rush to a straightaway mark; there would be nothing that could be called development and fulfillment. The existence of resistance defines the place of intelligence in the production of an object of fine art. The difficulties to be overcome in bringing about the proper reciprocal adaptation of parts constitute what in intellectual work are problems. As in activity dealing with predominantly intellectual matters, the material that constitutes a problem has to be converted into a means for its solution. It cannot be sidestepped. (2005: 143)

According to Iser every text features “strategies” that “organize the *internal* network of references, for it is these that prestructure the shape of the aesthetic object to be produced by the reader” (1980: 96). They may seem insignificant, but they orchestrate the activation of previous segments to become part of the referential field. “The organizational importance of these strategies becomes all too evident the moment they are dispensed with. This happens, for instance, when plays or novels are summarised, or poems paraphrased. The text is practically disembodied, being reduced to content at the expense of effect” (1980: 86). According to Iser, a summary smooths over the “surprising twists and turns” (1980: 112), the “processes of focusing and refocusing” (1980: 113) and other important interruptions of the narrative flow on both micro-structural and macro-structural levels. Iser argues that “the strategies disrupt consistency-building” to shake readers out of a false complacency and force a “continual oscillation between involvement and observation” (1980: 128). Since reading is a “self-corrective process” (Rosenblatt 1994: 11; see also 1964: 125), the text continuously reminds readers of the kind of work they are supposed to do:

... the reader’s communication with the text is a dynamic process of self-correction, as he formulates signifieds which he must then continually modify. It is cybernetic in nature as it involves a feedback of effects and information throughout a sequence of changing situational frames; smaller units progressively merge into bigger ones, so that meaning gathers meaning in a kind of snowballing process. (Iser 1980: 67; see also 167, 201–3; Dewey 2005: 143, 179, 199, 228).

Contrary to Frank Smith, Iser chooses to overemphasise the cognitive strain that every reading demands. Information is not offered in a continuous flow of easily digestible bits, but as discontinuous fragments that have to be actively pieced together by a highly involved creative reader. This gradation of complexity can be explained when we look at the literary texts and readerships that Smith, Rosenblatt and Iser have in mind. While the first focuses on early reading

experiences of native speakers with age-adequate texts, Rosenblatt derives her practical examples from teaching poetry to undergraduates. Iser, however, relied on introspection, which establishes a context that sees university professors engaging with the most demanding texts of the literary canon. Therefore, he naturally associates literary writing with formal complexity and the concept of defamiliarisation or 'enstrangement' (cf. Shklovsky 1998: 4–6; Iser 1980: 43, 61, 87–8, 93–4), which constantly destabilises and questions a facile auto-assembly of narrative information into a consistent storyline. Writing about "energy expenditure and economy in poetry", Shklovsky addresses precisely this point: "If we examine the general laws of perception, we see that as it becomes habitual, it also becomes automatic. So eventually all of our skills and experiences function unconsciously-automatically" (1998: 4–5). Importantly, Shklovsky identifies the danger of automatisisation and numbness in real life and postulates art as the only cure: "And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'" (1998: 6). The strategy of art, according to Shklovsky, is to shake us out of our complacency to see things afresh for what they truly are. It is not hard to notice an echo of Plato's allegory of the cave here. This may explain why Iser's reading process is an "often difficult journey" (1980: 16). He consciously places different texts and genres on this continuum of complexity with (post)modernist prose fiction representing one end of the spectrum and genre fiction and "propagandist literature" (1980: 83) the other. Surprisingly, he groups film with lowbrow fiction, because we are presented with a complete picture that we do not have to construct on our own (cf. 1980: 138). This confusion of his own sophisticated process of consistency-building and gestalt-forming with a literal picture is inappropriate. He even claims that a photograph "excludes me from a world which I can see but which I have not helped to create" (1980: 139). This is the old prejudice that visual narrative media lead to an "impoverishment of the mental image" (1980: 139), because they put a pre-conceived world on display. Part 4 sets out to demonstrate that Iser's own theory is perfectly suited to discredit such a claim and works even better with comics than with prose fiction.

From a contemporary perspective, the most confusing aspect of Iser's terminology is the fact that he uses 'schema' to describe a textual structure, whereas in cognitive psychology it designates a "mental pattern, usually derived from past experience, which is used to assist with the interpretation of subsequent cognitions" (Groome 2014a: 8). Iser, however, prefers 'image' or 'gestalt' instead,

with a slight difference in meaning: he tends to use 'image' for the smaller scale, such as our understanding of a character or situation, and 'gestalt' for a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative itself on a meta-level. Otherwise Iser's grasp of cognitive activity is surprisingly accurate: "The actual content of these mental images will be colored by the reader's existing stock of experience, which acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed" (1980: 38; see also Dewey 2005: 63; Benton 1992: 31, 33). Concurrently, new information reshapes the very structures we use to make sense of the world. This is essentially how all learning works (cf. Smith 2004: 13, 200; Bordwell 1985: 31). Both reader-response theorists and cognitivists claim that this type of experience does not only affect future reading, but our interaction with the world at large: "there is no doubt that processing a text is bound to result in changes within the recipient, and these changes are not a matter of grammatical rules, but of experience" (Iser 1980: 32).

The similarity between Iser's model and cognitive theories can be easily explained through gestalt psychology, to which Iser's model of reading is largely indebted and which was a German forerunner of schema theory. Accordingly, Iser proposes a simultaneous bottom-up/top-down process through which readers keep projecting the 'images' they have created of various characters, relationships and contexts onto the narrative while adapting them in view of new hypotheses or evidence. These cognitive representations are not pictures in a traditional sense: "Our mental images do not serve to make the character physically visible; their optical poverty is an indication of the fact that they illuminate the character, not as an object, but as a bearer of meaning. [. . .] The image produced is therefore always more than the facet given in one particular reading moment" (1980: 138). This is a counterargument to Iser's own claim that visual narrative media show too much of the story world and impoverish the imagination. Since the 'image' of a character is that of a 'bearer of meaning' and not a photorealistic representation, it should not matter whether a character is portrayed by an actor, drawn by an artist or created in prose by a novelist. Significantly, the 'image' is also not a 'fact file', but a blend of experiences that have been drawn from different contexts.

In Iser's theory, the essence of literature and the reason why we read can be found in the fault lines that he calls gaps: "Between segments and cuts there is an empty space, giving rise to a whole network of possible connections which will endow each segment or picture with its determinate meaning" (1980: 196). The signs acquire their meaning only in relation to other signs, which requires a "synthesizing process" that "is not sporadic", as "it continues throughout every phase of the journey of the wandering viewpoint" (1980: 109). Iser

follows Saussurean semiotics very closely here: “each textual segment does not carry its own determinacy within itself, but will gain this in relation to other segments” (1980: 195; see also De Bruyn 2012: 110). This is where the parallels between gestalt psychology and semiotics come to the fore in Iser's theory. On all levels of the reading process an element can only gain meaning against a background of similar elements: sign vs. signs, theme vs. horizon, gestalt vs. gestalten.

In his preface to the sixth edition of *Art and Illusion*, written in 2000, Gombrich identifies semiotics and psychology as mutually exclusive competitors for the ultimate theory: “There never was an image that looked like nature; all images are based on conventions, no more and no less than is language or the characters of our scripts. All images are signs, and the discipline that must investigate them is not the psychology of perception – as I had believed – but *semiotics*, the science of signs” (2014: xv). Gombrich's reassessment of his own approach is ultimately misguided as he cannot shake the conviction that a single theory should be able to explain the complexity of the reading process – semiotics *or* the psychology of perception. The solution is that *both* are indispensable. Iser's reliance on constructivism and gestalt psychology is well founded, after all, as is his insistence that the text guides perception. By constantly revising our models we manage to come closer to a fuller understanding – at least in our own terms: “A gestalt closes itself in proportion to the degree in which it resolves the tensions between the signs that are to be grouped” (Iser 1980: 124). Since literature tries to keep readers on their toes, several images or gestalten are competing for dominance in terms of their capacity to explain the ever-shifting meanings of a text: “The impeded process of ideation, however, allows a variety of definitive gestalten to emerge from the same text” (1980: 188). In other words: the “process of consistency-building” involves “the selection of a gestalt” that provides superior closure in contrast to those that came before, starting with “the formation of an initial, open gestalt” (1980: 123).

In the case of aesthetic reading, there is a danger of narrowing down the range of potential explanations too quickly and too early (cf. Iser 1980: 124). This can be explained through the primacy effect and produces false images in service of an ongoing quest for coherence: “Consistency-building itself is not an illusion-making process, but consistency comes about through gestalt groupings, and these contain traces of illusion in so far as their closure – since it is based on selection – is not a characteristic of the text itself, but only represents a configurative meaning” (1980: 124). These illusions may influence or even overshadow a reading in two dramatic ways: either the readers or viewers are so enamoured with the narrative or indoctrinated by others that their blindness

does not allow for any other reading than the one they bring to the text; or, in case the evidence to the contrary cannot be ignored, they are likely to suffer a disappointment or enjoy a pleasant surprise 'out of the blue'.

Iser tries to reign in such 'misreadings' by claiming that readers' projections never completely mislead them as "the gestalten remain at least potentially under attack from those possibilities which they have excluded but dragged along in their wake" (1980: 127). He explains this point further: "for each decision taken has to stabilize itself against the alternatives which it has rejected. These alternatives arise both from the text itself and from the reader's own disposition – the former allowing different options, the latter different insights" (1980: 230). As we have seen, Gombrich and Smith insist that readers pursue *one* interpretation rather than tracing alternate readings at the same time, but Iser's model allows for competing interpretations and polysynthetic gaps as part of the interactions between theme and horizon. Open gestalten may not be fully fledged and consciously available all the time, but they offer a valuable background against which the current theory can be tested in one scene after the next. To put this into perspective, Iser assumes highly complex (post)modernist literary works that may involve unreliable narration, an ongoing uncertainty about the ontological status of characters, or the presentation of the same events from different perspectives consecutively. In these cases different potential readings are the norm rather than the exception.

## 1.5 The Overdetermination of Literary Texts

We have already encountered Iser's bold claim that the "iconic signs of literature constitute an organization of signifiers which do not serve to designate a signified object, but instead designate *instructions* for the *production* of the signified" (1980: 65). What is the nature of the story world then, that Iser warns us against a false sense of verisimilitude? It is easier to start with what it is *not*: "the very term *fiction* implies that the words on the printed page are not meant to denote any given reality in the empirical world" (1980: 53; see also Dewey 2005: 287). In factual or scientific texts that are intended for efferent reading, writers define the terms they use as precisely as possible and ask the readers to understand the world in exactly these terms. Ideally, the signifieds match, especially in technical discourse, where the whole point of a predetermined terminology is to avoid misunderstandings as much as possible. Narratives, however, invite the readers or viewers to understand them in their own terms, often through indirect means: "the world must be translated into something it is not, if it is to be perceived and understood" (Iser 1980: 64). For Iser symbols "constitute this

nongiven element, without which we could have no access to empirical reality” (1980: 64). Thus, narratives do not require readers to respond to the world, but to the situations they artfully set up: “It is clear that if a literary text represents a reaction to the world, the reaction must be to the world incorporated in the text; the forming of the aesthetic object therefore coincides with the reader’s reactions to positions set up and transformed by the structure of theme and horizon” (1980: 98; see also 128–9). Thus, Iser opposes the concept of mimesis, as the literary work of art does not imitate or document reality: “The literary text performs its function, not through a ruinous comparison with reality, but by communicating a reality which it has organized itself” (1980: 181). It reconfigures and overdetermines (cf. 1980: 48–50) elements taken from real life to create particular effects.

Overdetermination is a helpful concept to explain the differences between real life and art and how artists manage to highlight aspects of reality that would otherwise go unnoticed. Iser uses the term ‘repertoire’ to designate all those elements that have been selected from real life in service of an aesthetic aim: “The aesthetic value conditions the selection of the repertoire, and in so doing deforms the given nature of what is selected in order to formulate the system of equivalences peculiar to that one text; in this respect, it constitutes the framework of the text” (1980: 82; see also 109; Dewey 2005: 91, 93, 112; Fludernik 2005: 38–9; Stockwell 2002: 126–7). This foregrounding of elements (cf. Stockwell 2002: 14) occurs twice: once through the selection of the repertoire from a vast background of socio-cultural contexts and, again, through the wandering viewpoint that draws our attention to specific themes set off against the horizon. This leads to an intense spotlighting and overdetermination of those elements that have not only been selected for the repertoire, but again foregrounded within the text itself. Dewey explains this effect in the following manner: “For art is a selection of what is significant, with rejection by the very same impulse of what is irrelevant, and thereby the significant is compressed and intensified” (2005: 217). Accordingly, I disagree with Jerome Bruner and Alan Palmer who claim that literary texts are underdetermined and thus indeterminate because they contain gaps (cf. Bruner 1986: 24–5; Palmer 2004: 34). I rather follow Iser, who proposes that the gaps are carefully chosen and orchestrated to defamiliarise and, thus, foreground specific beliefs and norms that would otherwise go unnoticed. As we shall see, comics scholars know the same principle as “amplification through simplification” (Mc Cloud 1994: 30; see also Mar & Oatley 2008: 177) by which certain elements of a composition become salient against a starkly reduced background. Iser’s view of literature is not based on a deficit-model. When Palmer goes on to argue that we need our real-world knowledge to make sense of the characters in a narrative

text, there is nothing to object to: “The reader can cope with the gaps in the continuing consciousnesses of fictional minds because in the real world we experience gaps in other real minds too” (2004: 199). However, there are two important caveats: fictional minds are much more accessible through the intervention of art and, secondly, the same logic applies *vice versa*: we also learn to read real life through the experience of art.

While the repertoire suggests a certain familiarity and provides a starting point for the reader/viewer, the unique configuration of the work of art decontextualises and defamiliarises the selected elements and makes the reader/viewer experience them afresh under the guidance of the text: “Experiences arise only when the familiar is transcended or undermined; they grow out of the alteration or falsification of that which is already ours” (Iser 1980: 131–2). Robert C. Holub captures this idea really well: “Through the repertoire, therefore, the literary text reorganizes social and cultural norms as well as literary traditions so that the reader may reassess their function in real life” (2010: 87). This reconfiguration of familiar elements to lift cultural blindness can also be found in Victor Turner’s seminal essay “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*” in which he describes defamiliarisation as an educational tool to make young men undergoing a rite of passage aware of the cultural world in which they live by taking them out of their familiar environment and placing them in a unique relation to it:

much of the grotesqueness and monstrosity of liminal *sacra* may be seen to be aimed not so much at terrorizing or bemusing neophytes into submission or out of their wits as at making them vividly and rapidly aware of what may be called the “factors” of their culture. I have myself seen Ndembu and Luvale masks that combine features of both sexes, have both animal and human attributes, and unite in a single representation human characteristics with those of the natural landscape. One *ikishi* mask is partly human and partly represents a grassy plain. Elements are withdrawn from their usual settings and combined with one another in a totally unique configuration, the monster or dragon. Monsters startle neophytes into thinking about objects, persons, relationships, and features of their environment they have hitherto taken for granted. [. . .] During the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection. In it those ideas, sentiments, and facts that had been hitherto for the neophytes bound up in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their constituents. These constituents are isolated and made into objects of reflection for the neophytes by such processes as componental exaggeration and dissociation by varying concomitants. (1972: 105; see also Bruner 1986: 26, 123)

Literature serves a similar function (cf. Rosenblatt 1995: 183–4), which Dewey describes in the following way: “We are, as it were, introduced into a world

beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences. We are carried out beyond ourselves to find ourselves” (2005: 202). Through selection, concentration (cf. Dewey 2005: 204, 207), reconfiguration and overdetermination writers turn the raw materials of life into narratives that highlight and examine what would otherwise be ignored or quickly passed over (cf. Rosenblatt 1995: 34; Dewey 2005: 87, 99; Gombrich 2014: 121). Most importantly of all, literature “provides a *living through*, not simply *knowledge about*” (Rosenblatt 1995: 38), which results in “an enlargement of our experience” (1995: 40; see also Dewey 2005: 302). This is a critical point for Dewey. Defamiliarisation should not be an end in itself, so that reading becomes “disconnected from other modes of experience” (2005: 9), but a way to reconnect with life. However, if an artist “acts mechanically and repeats some old model fixed like a blueprint in his mind” (2005: 52), readers’ experience may be dramatically lessened.

Overdetermination means that all the elements that have been selected may be referential to a certain extent, but they play more prominent roles within the text itself. They may have an additional symbolic function, exemplify a thematic concern and contribute to the internal network of meanings: “an ‘overdetermined text’ causes the reader to engage in an active process of composition, because it is he who has to structure the meaning potential arising out of the multifarious connections between the semantic levels of the text” (Iser 1980: 49). This process is guided by the textual strategies: “the main task of the text strategies is to organize the *internal* network of references, for it is these that prestructure the shape of the aesthetic object to be produced by the reader” (1980: 96).

Thus, “the elements of the repertoire are highly determinate” (1980: 85); they are made to stand out – both in relation to their old context and their new place in the narrative: “The very process of selection inevitably creates a background-foreground relationship, with the chosen element in the foreground and its original context in the background” (1980: 93). What in real life may be just what it is – such as a chance encounter with a stranger on a train – has to gain significance far beyond a random event to warrant inclusion in a narrative. But if it does, it surely has been transformed, deformed or reformed to take an eminent place in the sequence. That is why Bordwell ascribes all elements of a film such an important status: “All film techniques, even those involving the ‘profilmic event,’ function narrationally, constructing the story world for specific effects” (1985: 12). With just two hours of narrating time, every scene, every visual element, every shot and frame has to count. Since narrative is a perspectival art, the unique ‘vision’ of a writer or director reshapes the material “to enable us to see that familiar reality with new eyes” (Iser 1980: 181). For Iser, the literary text

cannot be a representation of reality, as the wandering viewpoint functions as an optical instrument that provides readers with a unique view: “the work is in no way a mere copy of the given world – it constructs a world of its own out of the material available to it. It is the way in which this world is constructed that brings about the perspective intended by the author” (1980: 35; see also Dewey 2005: 77–8).

For Iser, artistic foregrounding is an eminently political act: “literary texts constitute a reaction to contemporary situations, bringing attention to problems that are conditioned though not resolved by contemporary norms” (1980: 3). The cultural work that narratives perform is such that they foreground what has been consciously or negligently obscured: “the borderlines of existing systems are the starting point for the literary text. It begins to activate that which the system has left inactive” (1980: 72). In terms of literary history, thus,

... we can reconstruct whatever was concealed or ignored by the philosophy or ideology of the day, precisely because these neutralized or negated aspects of reality form the focal point of the literary work. At the same time, the literary text must also implicitly contain the basic framework of the system, as this is what causes the problems that literature is to react to. (1980: 73)

This quotation only makes sense in the context of overdetermination and double foregrounding. The repertoire draws elements from the real world and thus reproduces social structures in the narrative. The unique configuration of these elements, however, together with the orchestration of perspectives and the wandering viewpoint produce a very specific point of view and attitude that invite readers to look at the represented world in a particular way. In this sense literature teaches readers to become better readers of both fiction and real life: “The novel fulfills its didactic purpose by developing the reader’s own sense of discernment” (1980: 216), which is made possible by “the rearranging and, indeed, reranking of existing patterns of meaning” (1980: 72; see also 74, 181, 212; Dewey 2005: 252). Iser’s use of the term ‘didactic’ is interesting, as he otherwise denounces “rhetorical, didactic, and propagandist literature” as genres that “generally take over intact the thought system already familiar to its readers” (1980: 83; see also 190). Iser believes that defamiliarisation invites critical thinking and allows the reader to be “placed in a position from which he can take a fresh look at the forces which guide and orient him, and which he may hitherto have accepted without question” (1980: 74; see also 213, 218; Rosenblatt 1994: 145; Dewey 2005: 99). Iser’s humanist agenda makes him believe that great literature exists outside of socio-political discourses, almost like a pure form that teaches compassion and discernment, a panacea against the stupidity and indoctrination of mass media.

“Iser is convinced [...] that reading is not only about aesthetic appreciation or the formation of meaning, but also about personal transformation” (De Bruyn 2012: 129) and conducive to the propagation of “enlightenment ideals” (Holub 2010: 97). In this sense, a comparison to the functional aspect of Turner’s rite of passage or Plato’s allegory of the cave may not be too far-fetched: in all three instances the confrontation with an altered reality has a direct and significant bearing on our understanding of a reality that has become so familiar to us that we have lost all discernment concerning its constituted nature.

Iser is aware of the challenges that are involved in this Herculean task of dragging the reluctant dupes, spoon-fed by mass media, into the light: “Reading, as it were, against the grain is far from easy”, as the reader must overcome “his own prejudices” (1980: 8; see also De Bruyn 2012: 130; Rosenblatt 1994: 187). Dewey describes this fundamental reorientation in similar terms: “For ‘taking in’ in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction which may be painful” (2005: 42). This is also tied to his distinction between ‘recognition’ and ‘perception’: “In recognition we fall back, as upon a stereotype, upon some previously formed scheme. Some detail or arrangement of details serves as cue for bare identification. It suffices in recognition to apply this bare outline as a stencil to the present object. [...] Perception replaces bare recognition. There is an act of reconstructive doing and consciousness becomes fresh and alive” (2005: 54). Reading, in Dewey’s sense, relies on both types: as trained readers we instantly recognise the words, often whole groups of them, but the meaning-making process involves perception. The true work of art – in Dewey’s view – reconfigures reality in such a way that it elevates the aesthetic experience of readers into a form of enlightened communion. In stark contrast, “[o]rdinary experience is often infected with apathy, lassitude and stereotype” (2005: 270; see also Bredella 2010: 214). In order for a work of art to leave a lasting impression on a human being, there has to be a challenge and an engagement on all levels of existence:

There is always a gap between the here and now of direct interaction and the past interactions whose funded result constitutes the meanings with which we grasp and understand what is now occurring. Because of this gap, all conscious perception involves a risk; it is a venture into the unknown, for as it assimilates the present to the past it also brings about some reconstruction of that past. When past and present fit exactly into one another, when there is only recurrence, complete uniformity, the resulting experience is routine and mechanical; it does not come to consciousness in perception. The inertia of habit overrides adaptation of the meaning of the here and now with that of

experiences, without which there is no consciousness, the imaginative phase of experience. (Dewey 2005: 284)

Dewey tries to capture this all-encompassing engagement with the verb 'to mind': "'mind' denotes every mode and variety of interest in, and concern for, things: practical, intellectual, and emotional" (2005: 274). Again it becomes apparent how closely Iser builds his theory on Dewey's: the routine and mechanical application of genre knowledge to a formulaic novel does not engage readers, as the text only confirms what experienced readers already know. Instead of instant recognition the kind of aesthetic reading that Dewey and Iser have in mind takes time and effort (cf. Dewey 2005: 182–3).

To put this approach into perspective it may help to quickly reference Daniel Kahneman's bestseller *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. This is a book about systematic biases of intuition that can be explained through the metaphor of two complementary systems in the brain: one is thinking fast and relies on norms, prototypes and intuitions (System 1), the other is thinking slowly and requires conscious effort (System 2). System 1 "continually constructs a coherent interpretation of what is going on in the world at any instant" (2012: 13; see also 71) and with little effort. It works on autopilot, completely independent of conscious control (cf. 2012: 20; see also Turner 1994: 32–4; Gerrig 2011: 37, 45; Groome 2014a: 17–19), and roughly corresponds to what Iser calls consistency-building in his theory (cf. Iser, Holland & Booth 1980: 64; Kahneman 2012: 50–1, 75–6, 85–8). However, System 1 operations rely on all the resources of an individual, including emotions, intuitions and personal preferences. In contrast to this, "System 2 is activated when an event is detected that violates the model of the world that System 1 maintains" (Kahneman 2012: 24). From a literary studies point of view defamiliarisation is the cause of cognitive strain and triggers the activation of System 2. This is why, for Iser and Dewey, there is a direct connection between the complexity of the work of art and its potential to provide a real experience. Overdetermination, as the strategic selection, deployment, aggregation and foregrounding of narrative elements and clues, guides consistency-building in very general terms (System 1), but it also prepares for striking revelations and deeper insights by activating System 2 and establishing translinear connections.

Kahneman also deserves credit for accepting that the stereotypes of System 1 are the only framework we have to make sense of the world. Without them instantaneous consistency-building would be impossible:

*Stereotyping* is a bad word in our culture, but in my usage it is neutral. One of the basic characteristics of System 1 is that it represents categories as norms and prototypical exemplars. This is how we think of horses, refrigerators, and New York police officers;

we hold in memory a representation of one or more “normal” members of each of these categories. When the categories are social, these representations are called stereotypes. Some stereotypes are perniciously wrong, and hostile stereotyping can have dreadful consequences, but the psychological facts cannot be avoided: stereotypes, both correct and false, are how we think of categories. (2012: 168–9)

What does a fight against stereotypes involve then, when they are all we have? Based on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s views on prejudice, which seem to be the same as Kahneman’s, Lothar Bredella and Werner Delany come to the following conclusion:

We must pre-judge in order to be able to judge the text or another culture. For Gadamer “prejudice” is not a negative term. Prejudices as prior understanding play a constitutive role in the process of understanding. They determine how we understand from behind our backs. Therefore we are not conscious of them. But when we encounter others who think and feel differently we might become aware of them. Thus the encounter with others is necessary for a critical reflection of our prejudices. (1996: ix)

If our thought processes are mostly subconscious and prejudiced, how is it possible then that something like “expert intuition” (Kahneman 2012: 11) develops, which allows for the accurate analysis of a complex situation within split seconds, based on minimal evidence? The answer is simple: “mental activities become fast and automatic through prolonged practice” (2012: 22) or, as Dewey puts it: “Of course there are recognitions that are virtually instantaneous. But these occur only when, through a sequence of past experiences, the self has become expert in certain directions” (2005: 182). Research has shown that chess masters reach the highest level of performance after “at least 10,000 hours of dedicated practice” (Kahneman 2012: 238). This allows System 1 to draw from a vast store of experiences and insights that the layperson simply does not have. In addition, “subjects who possess a great deal of expert knowledge about a subject are particularly good at remembering material which relates to their field of expertise” (Groome 2014b: 163), simply because they are personally invested and enjoy engaging in the activity.

Overdetermination, as the orchestrated guidance of readers’ attention, can be understood as a didactic tool that foregrounds patterns that are supposed to be noticed (cf. Nünning 2014: 39, 42). The psychologist Keith Oatley describes this phenomenon with the help of the medium film: “in the discourse structure of film – how different from our own real lives – the camera and microphone are always at exactly the right spot, at exactly the right moment, with exactly the right angle, so that we can observe just the transaction that is essential to the

plot” (1999: 445). This is why overdetermination is the exact opposite of realism and verisimilitude.

Gombrich, who is mainly concerned with the illusion of realism in painting, understands the medium as a particular selection of signs and affordances into which the artist has to translate what he or she sees (cf. 2014: 30, 56). What is more, his “style, like the medium, creates a mental set which makes the artist look for certain aspects in the scene around him that he can render. Painting is an activity, and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints rather than to paint what he sees” (2014: 73). This has to do with the impact of culturally available frames, such as genres, that artists rely on and through which they develop distinct styles that become recognizable, even across vastly different subject matters. Gombrich explains the matter thus: “There is no neutral naturalism. The artist, no less than the writer, needs a vocabulary before he can embark on a ‘copy’ of reality” (2014: 75). He argues that artists arrive at their own individual styles through “the rhythm of schema and correction” (2014: 92).

Patrick Colm Hogan presents an interesting example in the context of jazz improvisations (cf. 2003: 7–28). He claims that the music has to be challenging, but still comprehensible as a pattern (cf. 2003: 9–10), so that the genre remains transparent as a blueprint or formula, but embellished with enough variety and original ideas to make it highly engaging. Hogan uses John Coltrane’s 1961 jazz record *My Favorite Things*, which is a cover version of the popular hit from the musical *The Sound of Music*, to illustrate the difficult balance between easy recognition and complex deviation from the established pattern. On the part of the musician this requires mastery of the established pattern (cf. 2003: 19, 69) to be then able to focus on the improvisations and innovations. The listener is primed by the “themes and basic phrases” that “are already in the listener’s long-term memory” (2003: 21), so that the variations of the theme can be much more daring, precisely because the pattern is so familiar.

Gombrich acknowledges that “the revulsion from the formula is a comparatively recent development” (2014: 128) and that most artists start out by imitating and experimenting with established patterns. For Gombrich it is important that the “schema on which a representation is based will continue to show through the ultimate elaboration” (2014: 92). This play with schemas – Gombrich’s term for the established aesthetic structures of a work of art – is central to his theory and is mirrored in readers’ engagement with a text, which equally takes place between convention and innovation:

The work of art is thus a challenge to the performance of a like act of evocation and organization, through imagination, on the part of the one who experiences it. It is not just a

stimulus to and means of an overt course of action. This fact constitutes the uniqueness of esthetic experience, and this uniqueness is in turn a challenge to thought. It is particularly a challenge to that systematic thought called philosophy. (Dewey 2005: 285)

In this context Iser argues that texts take readers out of their comfort zone and open up a “third dimension” (1980: 218; see also Benton 1992: 23) which is situated halfway between the familiar and the new and allows for “the heightening of self-awareness which develops in the reading process” (1980: 157). He describes this ‘third space’ in between the familiar world of readers and the circumstances of the narrative in the following way:

He is caught, as it were, between his discoveries and his habitual disposition. If he adopts the discovery standpoint, his own disposition may then become the theme of observation; if he holds fast to his governing conventions, he must then give up his discoveries. Whichever choice he may make will be conditioned by the tension of his position, which forces him to try and achieve a balance. The incongruity between discovery and disposition can generally only be removed through the emergence of a third dimension, which is perceived as the meaning of the text. The balance is achieved when the disposition experiences a correction, and in this correction lies the function of the discovery. (1980: 218; see also 213, 217)

In other words: the literary text challenges readers to integrate new discoveries or experiences into their existing mental frameworks: “the acquisition of experience is not a matter of adding on – it is a restructuring of what we already possess” (1980: 132; see also 152, 210, 221; Rosenblatt 1994: 145; Bredella 2010: 78). The function of literary texts, according to Iser, is for narratives to contain enough of the familiar to provide basic orientation, but, at the same time, enough of a challenge to make readers connect the dots under the guidance of the text.

Iser never tires of stressing the unique qualities of fiction that lie precisely in its unrealistic, strongly selective, defamiliarising and perspectival treatment of real life. Towards the end of *The Art of Reading* he adds a further essential difference that stresses the unique role of fiction in human understanding:

the final gap *can* only be closed through a fiction, since it is both the function and achievement of the literary work to bring into existence something which has no reality of its own, and which can never be finally deduced from existing realities. Now for all the given material that goes to make up a mental image, it is only the fictive element that can establish the consistency necessary to endow it with the appearance of reality, for consistency is not a given quality of reality. And so the fictive element always comes to the fore when we realize the projective nature of our mental images. This does not mean that we then wish to exclude the fictive element from our images, for this is structurally impossible anyway – without the fictive link there can be no image. But it can mean

that, through our awareness of the fictive closure, integral to our acts of ideation, we may be able to transcend our hitherto fixed positions, and at least we shall be conscious of the intriguing role which fiction plays in our ideational and conceptual activities. (1980: 225)

Here he claims that all human understanding is creative and requires a leap of the imagination, often in the form of metaphorical thinking. Just like rituals, which are heavily invested in metaphor, stories have the power to invite closure, which is a blend of seemingly irreconcilable matter into a unified whole that transcends the gaps and inconsistencies. Only through overdetermination, defamiliarisation and the moving viewpoint can narratives reposition us in relation to the world we live in. For the literary text is an optical instrument that allows for new insights to be gained from reading, whose consistency-building and meaning-making require an ongoing negotiation of different perspectives.