

Self-readings: The artistic experience on the crossroads between psychoanalysis and narrative theory*

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ABSTRACT

The paper undertakes to examine different angles of the filmic and literary reception process: on the one hand it analyses the understanding of a narrative film and the causal representation of its events from a cognitive-narrative approach by using the thinking-aloud-method. On the other hand, the expectations posted by psychoanalytic reception theories are also discussed and the role of attachment style in the reception process is empirically tested. The Man without a Past was shown to a sample of 20 students, who also had to interpret the poem Füst by Attila József. Our main question accordingly is to what extent the structure of the film/the poem and the character of the viewer/reader determines the coherent causal representation. To find the answer we presuppose correlations between the demand and the depth for the understanding of works of art as well as the personality and attachment style of the receiver (BFQ, SOC, LOC, ECR-R). Preliminary results show that the reception of a narrative is determined by two, interrelated factors: the attachment style of the person and his/her ability to control emotional impulses.

INTRODUCTION: THE ORIGINS OF INTERPRETATION

Both in aesthetics and in psychology of art the reception of a work of art has posed a general theoretical problem for decades. Aesthetic theories are centered around the characteristics of the work of art, while reception theories highlight the role of the reader. First, we critically discuss and interfere two theories which represent exaggeratedly the work-of-art-based and the reader-based approach,

* This research was supported by National Research Fund OTKA-K79146.

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namely narrative theory and psychoanalytic theory. Then we attempt to test the interaction of the reader and the work of art in the framework of an integrative empirical research. Beside the theoretical importance, the abundance of art therapies also provides significance to our research.

Narrative theory

It is a general view among narrative theorists that narrative construction is essentially based on causal relations between the narrative events (Barthes, 1970; Bordwell, 1986; Forster, 1985; Todorov, 1981). Understanding of a narrative then is naturally examined taking the reconstruction of causal links into consideration. While there is some controversy regarding the status of causality in narrative understanding, there is no doubt about the primordial function of causality in narrative understanding.

If one accepts the claim that interpretation of a narrative depends to a considerable extent on the reader/viewer's input, and consequently a narrative can be legitimately interpreted in multiple ways, it means that the differences of interpretation should be traced back to the most basic elements of interpretation, i.e. the causal links between the events. It is very unlikely, that the reader/viewer's side of the interpretation does not concern construction of the basic logical structure of the narrative.

Narrative theory predicts that *the viewer's activity is essentially directed by the clues provided by the narrative flow* regarding the questions: who, what, when and why. Basic similarities of interpretations of narratives support the claim that narrative clues in fact have a considerable role in the interpretation. We do not know, however, to what extent the viewer's interpreting activity may overwrite those clues. In other words, we don't know what is the respective role of the clues of narrative construction, and what role the viewer's personal traits play in the causal construction of the narrative, which is the basis of a narrative's interpretation. The aim of this research is to assess by empirical means the weight of one side and that of the other in interpretation in the dimension of causal inferences.

Psychoanalytic theory

To give a brief overview, we chose Norman N. Holland's transactional model of the reception of the reception of the work of art to give a brief overview, because this was one of the first attempts which developed a coherent explanatory model of the reception process on the basis of the results and concepts of psychoanalytic literary criticism.

Holland's views interfered with the analytic practice of new criticism as it left the problem of the origins of different readings in the case of the same literary work of art uncovered. Changing his focus from the comparison of different readings of a single work of art to examining responses of the very same reader to different pieces of literature and film, he worked out a model of the unconscious fantasies of the reader. Besides being suitable for empirical tests, the model is also advantageous in providing an integrative theoretical framework for the process of interpretation, while it utilises concepts of various phases of psychoanalysis towards a coherent system (1976/1998), cognitive psychology, the identity theories developed in the sixties, and the questionnaire method of personality psychology (Kann, 1984).

He states that the reader takes possession of his environment, the work of art in a structured way matching his identity, and recreates his own adaptive and defensive mechanisms using the options offered by the text. So the chance arises that the reader can project his unconscious fantasies into the work of art, which take shape in the interpretation as intellectual and moral meaning in a form acceptable for the reader and the society. The model of interpretation referred to under the acronym DEFT, summarised by the quote 'interpretation recreates identity' explores the question what the contents of the projected fantasies are: the identity theme of the reader, which evolves on the basis of

the early dual mother-child union according to what the infant means for the mother, and later defines the acts of the individual as a central organising principle.

Thus the relation to a work of art is defined by the unconscious need of maintaining and representing the relational pattern to the primary caregiver, which for the interpreter is necessarily unapproachable, and for the observer can only be grasped by the thematic repetitions in responses to different works of art. That, on the other hand, can be examined by the analysis of the text for the scholar of literature, unveiling the central theme of the individual in the different interpretations. Thus interpretation is a text which articulates the person's identity theme or the pattern of the relation to reality.

In literary criticism the theories adopting the terminology of object-relational theory (e.g. Rudnytsky, 1993) also suppose the primer identity, the patterns of early mother-child relation to be a major force in the background of the emergence of aesthetic experience, nevertheless they relate it to mediational mechanisms such as the ability of symbol formation. During the development of the individual, symbol formation, as the product of the transitional phase, bears the function of handling the frustration of the infant in its relation to the mother and integrating the fragments of experience (Klein, 1999).

Looking at the readings of poetry based on the aesthetic experience this theory indicates a number of consequences. By putting the stress on identifying the mechanism of symbol formation instead of particular symbols, it leaves a lot of space for executing a structural interpretation of the text, pushing the analysis of contents into the background. On the level of theory, this change of stress is expressed by the criticism of Christopher Bollas against the notion of identity theme as defined by Holland: the aesthetic experience of the beholder does not lie in the reaction to the content of the work of art, but in the pleasure of the reader in how the aesthetic framework of the text transforms and contains its own content. Because according to Bollas the aesthetic moment is "A spell that holds self and other in symmetry and solitude, time crystallizes into space, providing a rendezvous of self and other (text, composition, painting) [...] provides the person with a generative illusion of fitting with an object, evoking an existential memory" (1993, 40). This experience has another important function in addition to the one of recalling the early memories: the opportunity of a corrective experience for forming and transforming the content of the self by the environment, the work of art provides the uncanny pleasure of being held by its form. In the thoughts above some of the elements of the therapeutic influence of the works of art emerge described by terms of the object relation theory, thereby posing the question not as the interpretation of the imprint of the reader but rather as whether the aesthetic experience can have a corrective affect, for instance in shaping the fragmented self of people in a state of psychosis.

Both psychoanalytic models predict that the *viewers react to the work of art in their personal ways* according to their early relational experiences, although object-relational theory admits that *the work of art can have an integrative effect on the viewers' selves*.

Summarizing the expectations of narrative theory and psychoanalytic theories discussed above our main question is to what extent the structure of a work of art and/or the character of the viewer determine coherent representation being made during the process of reception? Is the process of reception of a work of art "only" a projection of our personality/identity theme or there is an opportunity for corrective self-experience?

METHOD

Antecedent

In 2004-2005 a research was conducted by a team led by Tamás Tényi and Antal Bókay at the Psychiatric and Psychotherapeutic Clinic of the Medical Faculty of the University of Pécs (PTE ÁOK), into interpretations of the poem *Füst* (Smoke) by Attila József by people living with psychic

problems. The original aim of the team was ‘to look for reception positions during our research involving psychiatric patients which in one way or another tear up or bely the net of grammatical order of understanding of the text, the cases of normal reading and the subjective-rhetorical *modus vivendi* of the construction of meaning’ (Papp, Bókay, & Tényi, 2005). This focus incorporates problems such as the nature of individual interpretations of literary works of art being formed on the basis of personal life experience versus the field of interpretation of a poem as defined for the reader within the borders of the given text; furthermore the use of interpretational responses to works of art as tools of diagnostics from the viewpoint of psychiatry.

In our qualitative analysis, based on the theory of N. N. Holland (1975) we have formed six case studies by contrasting the psychiatric anamnesis on the one hand and the different interpretations of the poem on the other (Papp, Bókay, & Tényi, 2005). *Füst* is a symbolic poem, it contemplates the origins of human existence and provides an artistic statement of the ways of shaping personal identities (Papp, 2005). This article also presumed that it evokes the functioning of symbolisation processes taking shape in the context of early mother-child relations. These processes differ from “normal” in the case of people living with chronic psychiatric problems, for whom it will not be without problems to interpret the poem just as other relationships in their lives.

Personal reactions to the poem clearly reflected the life themes and world view of the reader, furthermore the reception experience, the distorted object-relational patterns of the interpreters could also be mapped in the background, which the experimenting team examined along the lines drawn by Ogdén on the typology of the psychopathology of symbol formation (1985/2004).

Because these results were quantitatively not valuable, another experiment was designed in 2009 with the more specific aim of becoming able to give an integrative, critical answer to different psychological approaches, particularly psychoanalysis, the psychology of personality and cognitively oriented researches, regarding the process of reception. According to the authors’ view a joint application of individual interpretations of different works of art, autobiographical episodes and personality tests may bring us nearer to detecting the psychological factors of constructing meaning behind the different readings and positions of reception, thereby counterbalancing those schools of reception which underline the historical tradition, conventions, cultural and social circumstances.

Experiment: Participants

Participants were 26 voluntary students mainly studying film part-time or full-time from ELTE University Budapest (19 people completed the whole procedure, 8 men, 11 women). Their age ranged from 19 to 42 years (average age: 26,3 years). Students participated in this experiment for credit-compensation, but did not receive individual feedback on their results.

Procedure

The film “The Man without a Past” by Kaurismäki (2002), which is also centered around the problem of identity formation, was showed to 26 students, who were asked to make running, ‘online’ comments on the film to identify the processes of the formation of meaning, by way of continuously dictating every question, comment, conclusion, remark in connection with the story that they had into a sound recording device during screening. To avoid the interference of sounds they listened to the film’s sound via headphones. After having completed the viewing of the film they were asked to write down the storyboard of the film. Two days later they answered questions about the film. At the same time they filled out psychological tests so that differences of causal attribution, eventually due to psychological differences, could be observed. They also had to interpret the poem *Füst* written by Attila

József, and recall personal life events as part of a narrative interview to detect individual patterns in their experiences about the world and themselves. The interview was also sound recorded.

Equipment

The experiment consisted of three major parts, each required different equipment. In the film-viewing part we used the film 'The Man without a Past' by Kaurismaki (2002), which is also centered around the problem of identity formation, was shown sound registering devices and headphones.

The test questions after viewing the film included demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, level of education, profession) and specific questions examining the different ways the viewers understood and completed the storyboard of the film.

In the interview part we attempted to detect whether any other remarks or ideas in connection with the film, particularly with those parts they might not have understood, emerged since they have seen it. Then followed the narrative interview part with seven personal life events following László's method (László & Ehmann, 2004) to select thematically specific life episodes which reflect certain cognitive, emotional and relational characteristics of the narrator. We asked the persons to tell stories from their lives on the topic of loss and achievement, an unexpected event, a good and a bad story with an important person, and an episode they would do another way. These personal stories are supposed to reflect the ways the narrator makes coherent mental representations of his/her life events either positive or negative.

The participants also had to complete psychological tests, which were selected in order to test the effect of personality traits, attachment style and cognitive characteristics on the reception of the work of art.

The Big Five personality traits are usually measured in experimental aesthetic researches, where an overall personality picture of the beholder is relevant. We used the Big Five Questionnaire (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Borgogni, 1993, translated and adapted into Hungarian by Rózsa, Kő, & Oláh, 2005), which assesses Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

The early mother-child experience, namely the attachment style underlying the aesthetic pleasure was assessed in the experiment by The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR-R, Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), which comprises two scales: the attachment-related avoidance and the attachment-related anxiety, characteristic of the person in emotionally intimate relationships.

More specifically, we examined the role of causality in the meaning making process, the capacity of constructing a coherent representation of a work of art, which is supposed to be related with the Locus of Control personality orientations (Rotter, 1966) and the Sense of Coherence (Antonovsky, 1987). The first refers to a person's belief about what causes his/her life events: the consequences of his/her own efforts or rather caused by powerful people, fate, or chance. The latter questionnaire describes a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement (ibid). The questionnaire consists of three scales: Comprehensibility, Manageability and Meaningfulness.

We also presumed that making coherent representations of novels or films requires a certain capacity of Working Memory. We used Digit Span (Jacobs, 1887, translated and adapted into Hungarian by Racsmány, Lukács, Németh, & Pléh, 2005), Listening Span (Daneman & Blennerhassett, 1984 translated and adapted into Hungarian by Janacsek, Tánzos, Mészáros, & Németh, 2009) and Corsi Cube (Lezak, 1995) tests for evaluating the persons' working memory capacity.

RESULTS

Our first question was to what extent does the structure of a work of art and/or the character of the viewer determine the coherent representation being constructed during process of interpretation?

Trying to find an answer each persons' comments and narrative interviews were written down literally except from hemmings and repetitions of words derived from looking for the right expressions. The questions of the interviewer and the direct follow-up questions were also eliminated. We have interpreted each text from the viewpoint of one particular dimension of cohesion, namely causality, according to Graesser, Singer, and Trabasso's categories of inferences constructed during narrative text comprehension (1994). Therefore cohesion was indicated by the number of causal antecedents (the inference is on a causal chain between the current explicit event and previous ones), causal consequences (the inference is on a forecasted causal chain predicted on the basis of the current event), superordinate goals (the inference is the agent's motivation) and author's intents (the inference is the author's attitude or motive in writing) in the texts.

According to narrative theory most "normal" viewers react in *a similar way* to causal cues in a work of art and this pattern has a sequential structure determined by the work of art. In contrast, psychoanalytic theory claims that the viewers react *in their personal ways* according to their early relational experiences, therefore the reactions will not follow any pattern during the film.

To test these predictions we divided the storyboard of the film into 7 sequences (see Table 1) and counted the number of causal inferences given by the 20 participants for each film-sequence (as shown in Figure 1). Then we used analysis of variance (ANOVA), for testing differences of means among the sequences ($p=0,028$; $F=3,231$; $df=3,06$). The significant F -ratio tells that at least some of the differences among the means are probably not caused by chance, but rather by causal inferences of the viewers' responses to specific film sequences. To isolate which means differ significantly, Bonferroni's post hoc test was conducted. The results indicate that significant differences are between the 1-3 and 1-5 pairs of means. It means that Sequence 3 and Sequence 5 provoke significantly the most causal inferences independently of the viewers' cognitive and personality traits or relational patterns.

TABLE 1
A summary of the sequences of the film

1	0:00-03:12	In the train	The man is beaten up, amnesia
2	03:25-07:00	Wakes up	A family adopts him
3	07:40-23:30	The woman nurses him	He rents a container
4	23:39-36:51	Cleans up	Gets a job
5	37:10-45:55	Gets a dog	Kisses Irma
6	46:19-1:12:56	Suggests rock 'n' roll to the band	The police recognize him
7	1:13:47-1:28:27	He visits his ex-wife	Goes back to Irma

Our second question was to what extent do the participants' responses fit into the causal pattern of the film given by the mean of this particular sample? If there is deviation, is it caused by non-understanding or personality traits?

To test these questions the personal deviation from the mean pattern was computed into a dependent variable, and an analysis of linear regression was conducted to isolate the specific personality and cognitive traits that explain the differences in causal inferences. Table1 shows the significant results of linear regression both for a general personal deviation and for each sequences.

FIGURE 1

Sequence (jelenet) 3 and 5 of the film provoke higher causal inference reactions of the viewers

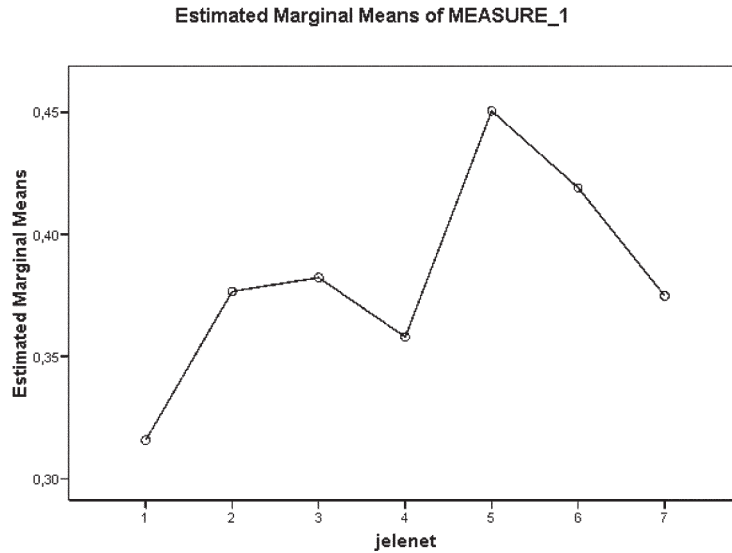


TABLE 2

Significant personality traits underlying the variances in responses to each sequence

Dependent Variable	Personality characteristic	Unstandardized	Standardized	<i>t</i>	Sig.
		Coefficients	Coefficients		
		<i>B</i>	Beta	Tolerance	VIF
General Personal Deviation	<i>Attachment Related Anxiety (ARA)</i>	-,065	-,448	-2,067	,054
Deviation Sequence 2	<i>Impulse control</i>	,014	,537	2,624	,018
Deviation Sequence 5	Age	,011	-,457	-1,941	,071
	Gender	,176	,481	2,119	,051
	<i>ARA</i>	-,111	-,609	-2,469	,026
Deviation Sequence 6	<i>ARA</i>	-,132	-,616	-3,165	,006
	Causal relations in life narratives	7,216	,522	2,682	,016
Deviation Sequence 7	<i>ARA</i>	-,083	-,481	-2,264	,037

According to our results Attachment Related Anxiety (ECR-R) and Impulse Control (BFQ) gave an explanation for the individual differences in causal inferences. Attachment Related Anxiety shows the extent to which people are secure or insecure about their partner’s availability and responsiveness (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000), correlated with the number of causal inferences negatively in Sequence 5, Sequence 6 and Sequence 7, while Impulse Control related to the number of causal inferences significantly in Sequence 2 (see Table 2).

The results do not support the hypothesis that the proper understanding of a narrative, tested by a question (‘Has there been any part of the film you did not understand? If yes, please write it down’), correlates with the number of causal inferences in the narrative ($n=20$ $r=0,036$ $p=ns$).

Our third question was whether the interpretation of a work of art is ‘only’ the projection of our identity theme or the work of art has an integrative effect on the readers. We analysed the personal narratives, which were interrupted by the task to interpret the poem *Füst*. A paired sample T-test was used to compare the means of causal relations in the life-stories, which were the indicators of personal coherence, before and after interpreting the poem *Füst*. The higher the number of causal inferences in personal narratives after interpreting the poem would be, the more integrative effect of the poem could be detected. The results ($t=0,503$; $df=18$; $p=0,621$; ns) do not support the hypothesis that the work of art has an integrative effect on the interpreter.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to the predictions of narrative theory most respondents gave only a few (Sequence 3 and 5) significantly matching responses in the narrative. The rest of the responses are evenly distributed throughout the narrative. Nevertheless, highly matching responses partly match the existing dramaturgical or narrative segmentation. Sequence 3 features a new beginning in the narrative, where we receive information for the first time about the consequence of the attack on the hero at the beginning of the film (amnesia), about his new environment and about his decision to start a new life. He also meets a woman, which awakens expectations in the viewers to a romantic relationship. Sequence 5 gives resolutions of the questions raised in Sequence 3: the hero gets his first salary, which forms a basis of his new life and his romantic relationship completed with Irma.

There are at least two personality factors that significantly correlate with the causal thinking activity during film viewing: Attachment Related Anxiety and Impulse Control. This set of results supports Holland’s reception theory in that we relate to a work of art the same way as we relate to other people. On the other hand the results stress the importance of the capacity of emotional self-regulation, which emerges in the course of the first years of life in relation to the primary caregiver, and also directs emotion-related cognition.

Proper understanding does not seem to direct the causal thinking activity, but we do not know much about the effective understanding yet, and nothing about non-conscious causal understanding. Our research left open the questions to what extent effective understanding relates to conscious causal inferences and how it is possible to examine unconscious causal perception.

All this suggests that viewers’ responses are not directed, only enabled by the narrative structure, and the actual response is also dependent on the individual viewer’s relational and emotional pattern. Therefore it is worth to investigate the reception of the work of art further in an integrative theoretical framework, because neither narrative theory nor psychoanalysis alone can give an appropriate explanation for personality-based and work of art-determined interpretations.

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