Over lezers en lezen / On Readers and Reading

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Over lezers en lezen / On Readers and Reading
Janine Hauthal & Hannah Van Hove (red.)

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OVER LEZERS EN LEZEN
ON READERS AND READING

Janine Hauthal en Hannah Van Hove (red.)

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Inhoud

On Reading Matters

Introduction

Janine Hauthal & Hannah Van Hove (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)[1]

Over the past few decades, the field of literary studies has increasingly been interested in the question of *how* we read (Bennett 1995; Littau 2006). Developments in cognitive and cultural studies, hermeneutics, reception theory as well as digital humanities have contributed to enlarging our understanding of reading and have gradually brought together previously separated domains of study such as reader-response theory (Iser 1976; Fish 1980), narratology (Genette 1972/1983), sociology of reading (Bourdieu 1979) and history of reading (Chartier 1994; Manguel 1996; Cavallo & Chartier 2003). While, initially and most influentially, approaches to reading in the context of literary studies have viewed reading as a transactional process between reader and text and focused on the semantics of texts and on readers' significant role in constructing textual meaning (i.e. *what* we read), cognitive literary studies and narratology (Herman 2002) shifted the focus to the mental processes through which readers make sense of texts. More recent approaches have pushed further in this direction by conceptualizing reading as social cognition and exploring it as an embodied act (Caracciolo 2014; Kukkonen 2017, 2019). In distinction to the field's tradition of 'close reading', different ways of reading have also engendered methodological innovations, tellingly called 'distant reading' (Moretti 2005, 2013) or 'hyper reading' (Hayles 2012), which, in turn, have played a role in the current rise of interest in the future of reading in the attention economy of the (post)digital age, in which human attention is perceived as a limited and therefore contested resource or currency (Birkerts 1994; Baron 2015; Berg/Seeber 2016; McLean Davies et al. 2020; Sommer 2020). Indeed, recent media developments have not just had an impact on the production and distribution of literature (through, e.g., e-books, audiobooks, interactive media) but also affected (the social interactions around) reading and readers, thus providing 'new opportunities to study what readers read and how they read it' (Andersen et al. 2021: 134), even though, as Tore Rye Andersen, Stefan Kjerkegaard and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen claim, 'social interactions around reading should not be overstated' (134-135).

The thirteen articles gathered together in this special issue devoted to 'On Readers and Reading' illustrate the methodological breadth that explorations of this topic can take in the fields of literary and theatre studies as well as in higher education practices. Engaging with reading as either cognitive process, physical activity, social behaviour, or institutionalized practice, or blending these aspects in considering their interactive dynamics, the contributions employ such various methodologies as cognitive, computational, empirical, narratological, sociological and queer approaches. Taken as a whole, this issue raises pertinent

1 The editors would like to thank Katrijn Van den Bossche for her diligent help with proofreading the manuscript.

questions concerning the location of meaning production. Some of our contributors build on recent research in the field of literary studies that has scrutinized how readers are constructed and written (about) (cf. Birke 2016), and how social media foster and celebrate book cultures and 'bookish' cultures of reading (Pressman 2009; Striphas 2009; Birke 2021); some of our contributions build on this research by looking at how online platforms such as Goodreads create online reading communities which operate independently from institutionalized literary critique, also in terms of their assessment of literary works. Other questions our contributors engage with include: How do mind wandering and (slow) reading shape our understanding of literary texts? How do the readings we teach relate to student and layman's genre preferences? What are the (disciplinary, social, neurological) consequences when analysis through machine algorithms is recognized as a form of reading as valid as close reading? How do we as scholars understand ourselves as readers? How does children's literature affect and engage with young people's notions about age?

The question of how we read inevitably touches upon the existential questions of the discipline of literary studies itself: how do we do critique? In the last decade or so, this question has often, as the editors of a recent special issue of *Textual Practice* on the futures of literary studies point out, been framed as a question about so-called 'method wars' in literary studies. As Eleni Coundouriotis and Lauren M. E. Goodlad have remarked, debates drawn along these lines tend to trade in generalised oppositions:

> Close versus distant. Form versus history. Generality versus difference. Critique versus postcritique. These are just some of the polarities through which the last decade's critical debates have expressed themselves, sealed in a millennial pressure cooker of financial crisis, technological upheaval, nationalist upsurge, and environmental precarity. (Coundouriotis & Goodlad 2020: 399)

They suggest caricatures such as these reduce the work of literary scholarship, which is much 'more differentiated and intellectually diverse' (Coundouriotis & Goodlad 2020: 400). Mathias Nilges and Tim Lanzendörfer agree, suggesting that:

> Literary studies is a field whose history consists of an always multiple, changing constellation of methodological relations and exchanges. Its history is not the succession of methodological dominants but the temporality emerging from the complex interrelation of and productive tension between always blended and varied methodological constructions.
> Literary studies is nothing other than this moving, complex relation between different approaches, and, like literature and art itself, it is richer for its productively contradictory nature. The idea of method wars robs us of this complexity. (2023: 197)

Following Nilges and Lanzendörfer's prompt, this special issue connects to these 'method wars' in that its contributions aim to account for ways of reading that are close(r) to ordinary practices. At the same time, rather than opposing academic and lay reading practices as postcritical approaches do (Felski 2008, 2015; Moi 2017), they propose alternative

distinctions, focussing instead on fast and slow reading (see also Kukkonen 2021), distraction and mind wandering (see also Kukkonen & Baumbach 2022), or on age as an intersectional dimension of readership. Moreover, in reflecting on literary studies as 'a public practice geared towards training better readers' (Nilges & Lanzendörfer 2023: 199), they pick up on and continue debates started in the 'Literature and Society' sections of earlier issues of *Cahier voor Literatuurwetenschap* (*CLW*) by, for instance, Benjamin Biebuyck, Elke D'hoker and Vanessa Joosen regarding the ways in which we understand, stimulate, and develop reading skills and habits. Touching upon academic literary scholarship and secondary school curriculums (Biebuyck 2019), the relationship between literary research and criticism (Joosen 2019), and the role of secondary school handbooks in developing literary studies skills (D'hoker 2020), their contributions demonstrate that reading is 'a complex and embodied phenomenon that takes place in a changeable social place' (Andersen et al. 2021: 138) and necessitates an interdisciplinary and multisensory approach. As the public outcry with which each report about a decline in youth reading performance is met demonstrates, the need for such an approach is all the more palpable and urgent today, a most recent case in point for Flanders being the 2023 news coverage in response to an analysis by Katrijn Denies et al. (2023) of the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

Modelling the Literary Reading Experience

The thirteen contributions to this special issue have been divided into four subsections. The first one, entitled 'Modelling the literary reading experience', gathers articles which engage with, and further develop, existing models relating to the ('close') reading experience from a cognitive narratological angle (Sommer, Kukkonen) or by presenting a research overview on the place of 'traditional' reading in the newly emerging field of computational literary studies (Vitse).

The section starts out with Roy Sommer's article 'Mindwandering as World-Modeling: Toward a Slow Theory of Resonant Reading'. In this contribution, Sommer (University of Wuppertal) develops the groundwork of a theory of 'resonant reading', highlighting how it challenges existing conceptions of reading. Understood as neither contributing to narrative comprehension nor reducible to the study of reader's responses, resonant reading – in which the mind is encouraged to venture beyond the storyworld – is characterised in this article as an integral part of literary worldmaking. Building on David Herman's notion of storyworlds, the concept of narrative ways of worldmaking as put forward by Ansgar and Vera Nünning and Brian McHale's ideas on literature as a thought experiment, Sommer links the notion of cultural or world models to the theory of resonance as proposed by German sociologist Hartmut Rosa. World-modelling, in Rosa's theory, is both an individual and a communal effort that is grounded in practices of storytelling and storysharing. Joining Rosa's sociological approach with the works of the previously mentioned narratologists, Sommer suggests six concepts*, namely* storyworld, mental world models, worldmaking (as cognitive operation), cultural world models, and resonant relationships to the world as key components of literary world-modelling. Integrating the realm of resonant reading and

mind-wandering, which previous approaches have tended to neglect, such an understanding of literary world-modelling aims to allow for a better understanding of the relationships between the text and literary worldmaking.

Sommer then turns to the emerging studies on slow reading, distinguishing between attentive reading and resonant reading. While the former is thorough, goal-oriented with a definite ending and takes perseverance and time, the latter is characterized by associative thinking, mind-wandering, or mental drift. Using the concept of resonant reading to rethink our understanding of the reading process, Sommer shifts attention from what happens while we are reading (which cognitive models of mental processing focus on) to what happens when readers contemplate the text, being prompted by some thought, memory, or emotion triggered by the text. These experiences that fall under the category of resonant reading prompt him to develop a diagram of 'resonant reading in practice' that prioritizes resonant relationships over mental models of the storyworld, simultaneity over precedence, relationality over hierarchy and indicates how resonant reading offers readers the option to either abandon reading or to resume storyworld co-construction. According to Sommer, rethinking the reading process in this way also allows us to rethink its temporal dimension. If texts also have an impact on us when we are not reading, when might reading begin, and (when) does it end? Equally, conceptions around readers might similarly have to be adjusted and rethought. Sommer's article concludes with a reflection on the lack of conceptual integration between literary theories of worldmaking and empirical research on reading in cognitive psychology before suggesting that acknowledging and appreciating the resonant experiences which interrupt storyworld co-construction as something worthwhile in its own right could be beneficial for struggling readers, both in higher education and in literary studies courses.

The theoretical section continues with Karin Kukkonen's article 'Distracted or Mind-Wandering? Readers' Multiple Engagements in Probability Designs'. Building on earlier work in the field of psychology, Kukkonen (University of Oslo) develops an embodied cognitive narratological framework for distinguishing between the spontaneous cognition of mind-wandering involved in the imagination and interpretation of literary texts, and the distraction that presents an obstacle to understanding or reading comprehension. Situating her analysis in current debates regarding how to sustain potentially endangered modes of 'deep reading' in our digital attention economies, Kukkonen takes Franz Kafka's 'Wunsch Indianer zu werden' (1913) as well as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878) as examples to distinguish productive mind-wandering from distraction or 'zoning out'. Earlier studies have already established that, should readers' minds activate autobiographical memories or experiences in reading, this can further their reading comprehension or anchor the text in their memories even though it moves readers away from the immediate semantic decoding of words and sentences for meaning. Kukkonen's article builds on this research and focuses specifically on the directedness of readers' mind-wandering into the past or future that is evoked by the 'verbal vection' or 'vection illusion' in consciousness representation and embodied language of a text, i.e. its forward or backward drive, and argues that, should readers

continue mind-wandering in the direction indicated by the text itself, that this enriches the reading experience and contributes to readers' engagement with the literary text.

Kukkonen then presents a similar argument relating to readers who detach themselves from the word in front of them ('tuning out') to explore the probability design of a text by positing virtual epistemic scenarios and scoping the text for elements that confirm or contradict (multiple) hypotheses about what is at stake in the text. However, when readers begin mind-wandering in a direction not motivated by the mental time travel encoded in the text or no longer explore the probability design of the text, they are distracted ('zoning out'). Moreover, in both cases, Kukkonen posits readers' meta-awareness of the mind-wandering process as the defining criterion that distinguishes productive mind-wandering from distraction and makes these mind-wandering activities part and parcel of the qualities of engagement and reflection that many consider typical of the literary reading experience.

In the third contribution to the theoretical section of this special issue, Sven Vitse (Utrecht University) engages with the increasing currency and appreciation of computational methods in the field of literary studies by focusing on the much-discussed opposition between 'close' and 'distant' reading that predominates the debate. Entitled '"Traditioneel" lezen binnen de computationele letterkunde' ['"Traditional" reading in computational literary studies'], the article starts by zooming in on how popular notions such as Franco Moretti's 'distant reading' or Matthew Jonkers's 'macroanalysis' conceptualize this opposition as a difference in distance and scale. In so doing, Vitse argues, they retrospectively re-define and homogenize non-computational methods for the analysis of texts as 'micro' or 'close' reading, notwithstanding that, in the last decades, literary studies has developed methods, such as ideological criticism and cultural historicism, which take up an equally critical stance towards close reading and the premises it is based upon. Vitse, however, is primarily interested in how 'traditional' close reading re-enters computational approaches in more recent text and how it acquires new functions in complementing such approaches. Generally fulfilling a secondary role in studies of big corpora, as Vitse observes, 'traditional' close reading can serve to illustrate quantitative data or statistical tendencies, to help explain such data, and, in some cases, to relativize quantitative data or even offer new insights, which then lead to a dialogue between both ways of reading. Rarely, however, does this combination of computational and non-computational methods of text analysis happen on an equal footing, nor do the practices of 'close' reading that are integrated into text analysis have much in common with 'traditional' close reading. Vitse conjectures that text analyses that make use of machine learning and data driven methods based on manual annotations by individual readers in advance, may offer ways out of this impasse in the future as they necessitate a reflection e.g. on what narrativity is or how (ideologically) differences in reading could be integrated, even though identifying labels and scores in the process of annotation does not yet live up to a fully-fledged 'traditional' close reading or narratological analysis. Hence, as long as such approaches are still in their infancy, Vitse concludes, they testify, above all, to the *wish* to integrate both 'close' and 'distant' reading methods, to overcome their opposition and, in so doing, to prevent the discipline of literary studies to fall apart.

Empirical Research on Readers and Reading

The next subsection continues the interest in empirical methods that the contributions in the first section already reveal and consists of four individual case studies, whose contexts of gathering data range from a survey of linguistic and literary studies (under-)graduates and staff at the University of Ghent (Biebuyck and Vandenhaute) and an empirical pilot study of readers in Antwerp (Ghasseminejad) to an academic climate fiction reading group in Sweden (Toivonen and Nikoleris) and a consideration of lay critics on 'Goodreads' (Martens and De Greve). In the first article of this subsection, entitled 'Van studenten en docenten. Empirisch onderzoek naar studenten en docenten Letterkunde als lezers' ['Of students and teachers. Empirical research on students and teachers of literature as readers'], Benjamin Biebuyck and Daan Vandenhaute explore the seemingly simple question: 'how do we see (ourselves as) readers?'. In their article, they attempt to answer that question empirically, basing themselves on data gathered through a comprehensive survey conducted in 2018 among undergraduate and graduate students specialising in language and literature programmes, as well as amongst their literature lecturers. The survey gauges various aspects of engagement with literature, surveying both reading behaviour in a broad sense (from newspaper reading to specific genres) and the *how* of literary reading (from expectations to preferences). Using Multiple Correspondence Analysis, Biebuyck and Vandenhaute look for patterns in reading practices and reading preferences of the surveyed students and lecturers and find clear clusters of types of readers that can be linked to the study path of the respondents. The article concludes with some reflections on what the findings from this study might mean for academic literary education. One of the conclusions reached is that those who choose a literary-oriented course of study appear to do so primarily because they want to enjoy a story without complexity, focusing on texts that invite such an experience-driven reading attitude. However, a literary education does not necessarily appeal to this reading preference but redirects students towards texts in which reflection and (formal) complexity take centre stage. The survey data indicates that literary lectures and classes have efficient methods of transferring literary skills from teachers to their students and enabling them to reproduce these skills. The programmes thus succeed in teaching students the desired, 'professional' reading behaviour in the time allotted, even if, in doing so, they pay little attention to the intrinsic reading preferences of the students, which nevertheless constitutes the very specificity of this group. This leads the authors to question why literature courses, either at the beginning or at the end, do not make more space for those texts and genres that may have prompted students to take the course in the first place, suggesting that this would give them a chance to bring together experience and reflection and reconcile 'professional' and 'lay' reading practices, or more actively question the multiplicity of reading styles and preferences.

The next contribution by Heidi Toivonen (University of Twente) and Alexandra Nikoleris (Lund University), is equally concerned with empirical analysis of reading behaviour but rather than focusing on literature students and their lecturers in Belgium, they focus on an academic climate fiction reading group situated at a Swedish university. Their article '"The arrow is never straight": Constructing climate change knowledge in reading

group discussions of [Barbara Kingsolver's] *Flight Behavior* and [Jeff VanderMeer's] *Annihilation*' analyses how structured group discussions on climate fiction invited the reading group participants to deeply reflect on the nature of knowledge in the context of climate change. In doing so, they engage with the claim, in recent years often suggested, that fiction, especially climate fiction, is uniquely equipped to provide readers with tools to deal with the crisis of climate change. Their article aims to highlight the potential benefits for making use of climate fiction in higher education to conjure up discussions on climate change. Complicating the notion that climate fiction should have certain concrete 'effects', they illustrate how structured group discussions on climate fiction must be understood as a complex phenomenon emerging from the interactions between discussions with other readers, cultural and societal discourses on climate change, as well as aspects such as the readers' sense of identity. Using Thematic Analysis, the authors conducted an empirical study of the reading group discussions which focused on constructions of knowing and knowledge related to climate change. The reason for this focus was the fact that the conversations had revolved primarily around the topics of knowing and knowledge about climate change, instead of human-nature relationships as the authors had initially anticipated. The decision to focus on this topic was further motivated by the observation that knowledge and especially scientific knowledge – what it is, how it is produced, and how it leads to action – is a central aspect of discourses on climate change more generally. Differentiating six different types of knowledge, the authors study four of these in detail, concluding that the structured discussions which took place during the reading group points to the potential of similarly structured discussions on climate fiction as a starting point for challenging not only one's existing knowledge about climate change but also to delve deeper into difficult questions such as: What is knowledge? Who produces it? And who has access to it? The authors argue that reading groups such as these which are not steered towards evaluation of the books but rather towards a more reflective discussion among students and/or scholars from different disciplines should be central to institutional reading practices in higher education. They could namely offer the participants chances to elaborate on their thinking about climate change, including how to understand and act on different kinds of climate change knowledges.

Melina Ghasseminejad's (University of Antwerp) article centres on the concept of 'storyworld possible self' – a concept developed by cognitive narratologist María-Ángeles Martínez – and uses it to develop a 'Framework for Measuring Narrative Engagement' ranging from readers' culturally expected responses to idiosyncratic responses. The article is specifically interested in whether fictionality affects readers' creation of storyworld possible selves and, thus, influences their narrative engagement. Ghasseminejad bases her argument on a pilot study with twenty participants who read fragments from James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, the story of a young male alcoholic and drug addict that sparked a media controversy and lawsuit because it was originally sold as a memoir but later turned out to be an at least semi-fictional novel. For the empirical research, text fragments featuring linguistic prompts (such as *narrated perception* and *emphatic repetition*) were selected that encourage the creation of storyworld possible selves, while participants were divided into

three groups. One group was told that they were reading fiction, another group was told the text was non-fiction, while the last group did not receive any such information. Although limited in terms of reliability and generalizability, the study revealed perceived fictionality to play a role in readers' responses to narrative as those participants of the study who had been told that they were reading a fictional narrative activated more self-concepts than those reading in the two other groups. As Ghasseminejad argues, this activation can partly be explained by readers' personal experiences with drug abuse but may also point to fiction readers' increased empathy levels, a hypothesis which further empirical research into the nexus of empathy and fiction would need to clarify.

In the final article in this section, Gunther Martens (Ghent University) and Lore De Greve (Ghent University) turn their attention to online literary criticism on social media platforms by lay critics such as influencers and their influence on professional literary criticism, publishing policies, literary debates, canon constructions and – generally – on the reception of literary texts in our digital society. Going against scholarly perceptions of the new gatekeepers as 'midcult' (Bassler) and as advocates of a canon of international realism, their empirical research concentrates on the reading platform 'Goodreads', on which readers share their opinions and recommendations. The authors focus specifically on the reception of two German novels published in 2019, *Stella* by Takis Würger and *Miroloi* by Karen Köhler, both of which were rebuffed by professional critics but fervently defended on social media and reading platforms by reader reviewers. Martens and De Greve see in the discrepancy in the reception of, and the intensity of the debate surrounding, the two novels an effect of an institutional struggle, as the publishers of both novels relied on influencers to market the books, a privilege previously enjoyed by professional critics. However, rather than engaging with the debate concerning the pros and cons of "old" and "new" gatekeepers, Martens and De Greve's contribution explores the role canonisation plays in this debate. Based on the premise that both professional critics and lay critics refer to reference texts that constitute a "canon" in similar ways, they examine a manually annotated corpus of German-language reader reviews of the two novels on Goodreads with a view to name-dropping by using named entity recognition, i.e. the mentioning of (other) literary authors, characters, works, prizes, to map the canon construction of lay and professional critics. As their analysis demonstrates, online reading communities are determined by literary awards and debates in the initial choice of works to read but operate independently of those debates in their assessment of literary works. *Miroloi* and *Stella* were more positively reviewed by lay critics than by professional ones, the authors argue, as they read the texts within a different canon. These differences in judgement, however, do not mean that lay critics position themselves in opposition to the institutionalised consecration by professional critics but rather (and merely) that public judges 'read' differently (i.e. operate with another frame of reference) than professional critics.

Children´s Literature, Age and the Reading Experience

The articles by Leander Duthoy (University of Antwerp) and Frauke Pauwels (University of Antwerp) both concern the influence of children's literature on the understanding of age

and intergenerational interactions and have therefore been grouped into a third subsection 'Children's literature, age and the reading experience'. Duthoy's contribution, 'Hoe beïnvloedt de leeftijd van de lezer het begrip van leeftijd in kinderliteratuur?' ['How does the reader's age influence the understanding of age in children's literature?'] discusses how readers of different ages refer to 'decline narratives' and 'wisdom' to make meaning of their own age and the age of characters in children's literature. The article focuses on two children's books: *Iep!* [*Eep!*] (1996, 2010) written by Joke van Leeuwen and *Voor altijd samen, amen* [*Together Forever, Amen*] (2010, 2016) written by Guus Kuijer. Duthoy takes as a starting point the statement recognised by fields such as age studies, gerontology and children's literature criticism that age is much more than a biological property of the body; it is also a socially, historically, and culturally constructed idea, Children's literature plays an interesting role in this process. Not only is it one of the first sources in which children are confronted with characters of different ages, it is also one of the few genres in which children are the protagonists. However, little is known about how reader age affects how characters' ages are constructed by readers, and this is the central issue that Duthoy's article tackles. In order to explore this concern, Duthoy bases his discussion on qualitative data collected through 57 semi-structured interviews and 4 focus group discussions with readers aged 9 to 75 years old. During these conversations, Duthoy reflected on a children's book with readers, asking questions about the construction of age of characters, how readers view characterisation, and the interpretation of intergenerational conflicts in the story. During these interviews, 'decline narratives' – prejudices based on age, where the process of ageing from middle age onwards is outlined as 'decline which continues relentlessly into old age and death' (Featherstone & Hepworth 2005: 357) – appeared in different ways in the responses of readers of all ages. Young readers, for instance, used them to shape their expectations about older characters. Missing information about older characters was thus supplemented by a belief in their imminent death, and a suspicion that they were poorly behaved. Older readers also framed insights about older characters in decline narratives, but further nuanced this through reflections on their own experience of (older) adulthood and age-related physical and cognitive changes. As part of that process, older readers emphasised 'wisdom' as an important positive effect of ageing, thus linking positive growth to the ageing process in addition to decline narratives. Wisdom, moreover, was attributed by older readers to young and older characters in complex ways. Not everyone agreed that getting older automatically makes you wise, and according to some adult readers, children can also be wise. Decline narratives and wisdom thus represent a small part of the complex process by which readers make meaning of their own age and the age of characters.

In 'Ook geschikt voor volwassenen: twee jeugdromans van Joke van Leeuwen en hun adaptaties als stapsteen naar intergenerationeel begrip' ['Also suitable for adults: two children's novels by Joke van Leeuwen and their adaptations as stepping stones to intergenerational understanding'], Pauwels starts out from the recognition that children's literature contributes to social constructions that are widely shared, such as expectations of age. The age categories 'child' and 'adult' play a key role in children's literature, both in the texts themselves and in their production and reception. In her article, Pauwels explores the

hypothesis that children's books and, through their potentially wider reach, especially their film adaptations, can enhance intergenerational understanding. Indeed, shared story worlds and characters offer children and adults a guide to understanding each other's age-related experiences, and a cognitive and affective repertoire to challenge age norms. Drawing on insights and concepts from children's literature studies, age studies, childhood studies and adaptation studies, the article analyses how transmedia and medium-specific techniques create and interrogate constructions around age. The case study of two children's novels by Joke van Leeuwen and their film adaptations, namely *Iep!* [*Eep!*] and *Toen mijn vader een struik werd [The Day My Father Became a Bush]*, illustrates that the novels as well as the films highlight age norms and expectations. Yet most adults judge adaptations mainly from expectations and ideas about what children can grasp and like. The expected 'childness' – the amalgam of cultural and personal visions of what it means to be a child – of books and their adaptations for children thus possibly limits the intergenerational understanding they could encourage.

Close Reading and Genre

Our final cluster of articles focuses on intersections between close reading and genre from different methodological angles. In the first article of this section, Alexander Scherr (Justus Liebig University Giessen) uses actor-network theory for a sociological reading that conceptualizes the literary text as 'actor' and attends to the networks through which any act of reading is mediated. To explore these aspects, the author revisits the institutional context of an undergraduate seminar on 'methods of reading', in which students read and analysed Ambrose Bierce's short story 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' (1890) under his guidance. Arguing that the story allegorizes the importance of reading closely through its employment of unreliable focalization, Scherr's sociological reading demonstrates that, when taking aspects pertaining to the specific higher-education context of his undergraduate seminar into account (ranging from the concrete pedagogical encounter or the medium through which student readers engage with the text to the text's place on the syllabus and to the university as locus of knowledge production), Bierce's short story attains a self-reflexive quality. Rather than constituting a universal site of meaning-making, Scherr argues, the text-as-actor becomes meaningful to its student readers in the concrete social situation of the seminar by enabling them to experience the value of close reading.

In his contribution to this section, Anthony Manu (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) examines what features of humour a reader finds in May Kendall's poem 'The Conscientious Ghost' (1887). Taking issue with existing models for examining humour, Manu argues that their conceptualization of reading as linear and the limited attention they pay to creative uses of language makes them unsuited to the analysis of literary humour. Manu therefore proposes to adapt existing models to better capture the experience of the complex literary qualities that scholars have noted in poems such as 'The Conscientious Ghost' by modelling a reading that consists of three flows, i.e. the decoding, the poetic and the meta-reflective flow. The three-flow model reveals how the mechanisms behind humour play an important role

in the poetic creation of complex meaning and the non-linear experience in the reading of humour.

In his article '"Een vlak, een kleur, een geverniste merel": Een cognitivistische lezing van Hugo Claus' *Over het werk van Corneille gevolgd door een gedicht* (1951)' ['"A plane, a colour, a varnished blackbird": A cognitivist reading of Hugo Claus's *On the work of Corneille followed by a poem* (1951)'], Stefan Clappaert (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) focuses on Claus's blending of art criticism and lyricism that characterises his prose about the artists associated with the international Cobra movement and places his critical work in a tradition of explicitly subjective, poetic prose about visual art. It is a well-known fact that Hugo Claus (1929-2008) had close contacts with artists; especially his poems created through collaborations with Cobra artists have been abundantly documented and analysed. Besides those poems, however, Claus also wrote prose about his artist friends, and this has remained little studied until now. His most complex art critiques concern the work of Corneille, Karel Appel and Pierre Alechinsky (not coincidentally all three of them were members of Cobra). In his article, Clappaert suggests that Claus's atypical art criticism requires a particular reading strategy which can benefit from a cognitive-schematic approach and which allows us to explore what makes Claus's critical prose creative. It aims to show how the 'reading' of the image guides the reading of the text, and vice versa. Building on the work of Michael Sinding who distinguishes frames as a type of schemata which serve for situations, and in particular also the rhetorical situations that distinguish literary modes and genres (Sinding 2005: 591-592), Clappaert investigates to what extent the frames of art criticism and of lyric poetry are activated when reading Claus's *Over het werk van Corneille gevolgd door een gedicht* [*On the work of Corneille followed by a poem*]. Finding prototypical features of both art criticism and lyricism, Clappaert concludes that both genre frames are activated and understands the text then as a hybrid form. Taking recourse to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's (2003) blending theory in order to investigate the provoked complexity in reading, Clappaert then goes on to analyse how Claus's text encourages the reader to restructure two frames into one new frame. He shows how the reading process becomes even more complex if we take into account the intermedial aspect of Claus's lyrical art criticism and the iconic resemblance created between word and image in the booklet made about and with Corneille. Because the pictorial compositions correspond to the verbal representation (at both macro and micro level) in lyrical art criticism, the reader relates the two genre frames to the scheme of modern visual art. Clappaert suggests that those who accept that a proper understanding of the Corneille text requires multiple schemata take a first step in participating in the creative process of the writer and the visual artist. While reading, the reader's encyclopaedic knowledge of painting is challenged by iconic similarities between word and image, complex imagery and a fragmentary, analytical structure. Since we cannot fully fall back on the frame of art criticism, the destabilising experience of innovative visual art is repeated (recreated) in the text. This confusion is brought into the criticism, inviting the reader to have an experience during the reading and thus not look at Cobra's art in a solely cerebral way. The article concludes that Claus's experimental prose about Corneille's work therefore continues the aspirations of the literary experimentalists and Cobra artists.

Finally, in his article 'About *Masakra* (2019) by Paweł Sakowicz, *odmieńczość*, and Cultural Appropriation in Contemporary Polish Theatre', Jonas Vanderschueren (KU Leuven) focusses on the dance performance *Masakra* (2019), directed by Polish theatre maker Paweł Sakowicz. Situating his analysis in the context of Polish identity formation, Vanderschueren explores in how far the dance performance can be read as a form of protest against, and disruption of, nationalist normalization which encompasses also sexual orientation, by employing *odmieńczość.* Defined as a specifically Polish interpretation and appropriation of political and aesthetic strategies of queering by the author, *odmieńczość*, in the case of *Masakra*, concerns the performance's use of ballroom dance, which Sakowicz, on the one hand, frames as a problematic form of cultural appropriation of indigenous cultural traditions, and, on the other, uses to reflect the strive for virtuosity and heteronormativity inherent in both the dance form and Polish society. As the provocative quotation from the performance in the article's title 'Are we the Latin Division, or the Bleach Squad' already indicates, the critical potential of the performance's queering is also directed at the colonial ambitions of Polish elites in the 1920s and 1930s and cultural appropriation (e.g. the use of the racial stereotypes of black- and brownface) that continue to pervade Polish society and culture today. Accordingly, Vanderschueren argues that the performance criticises the use of brownface in the Latin division of ballroom dancesport and raises the audience's awareness of (and discomfort with) the colonial nature of this dance style. However, with the production team and audiences being largely white and with some of the performance's criticism only being mentioned in the programme booklet, the performance's critical potential ultimately remained limited because, as contemporary reviews expressing their bewilderment at the performance indicate, it could not be unambiguously 'read' as a form of protest. Hence, the article does not just present a nuanced analysis of a rare critique of racial stereotyping in the Polish cultural debates, it also adds an important intersectional element to the discussion of readers and reading to this special issue at large.

In sum, focussing on readers and (how) reading matters, the contributors of this special issue build on and develop earlier insights and discussions of readers and reading in reader-response theory, sociology of literature, narratology and postcritique from different methodological angles. However, they share a concern with reading as a situated and concrete practice emerging from the meeting of actual readers with texts, on which different media and (educational) contexts bear, thus taking important steps toward a better understanding of reading today.

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