

WOLFGANG ISER AND LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY

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Technology by Mr Benjamin James Matthews BA (Comm) Hons (Eng)

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For Clieve and Joy McCosker

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CHAPTER	TITLE	PAGE
	Acknowledgements	iii
	Table of Contents	iv
	Abstract	vi
	Introduction	1
1.	Literary Fictionality: an exploration	37
1.1	Strategy in The Fictive and the Imaginary	39
1.2	Three Fictionalizing Acts: selection, combination, self-disclosure	45
1.3	How literary fictionality can assist us to explore discourse	69
2.	The Imaginary	79
2.1	Iser's dual approach in The Fictive and the Imaginary	79
2.2	Introducing the imaginary	85
2.3	The imaginary and play	97
3.	The Interplay of the Fictive and the Imaginary	113
3.1	The reader, play, and games	114
3.2	The imaginary as a critique of methodology	125
3.3	Figuring convergence and deforming	137
4.	The Reception of Iser: Fish	150
4.1	Fish's reception of Iser	151
4.2	The "reality" of fiction	162
4.3	The reality of literary anthropology	169
4.4	Alternate "realities" of Iser	174
5.	The Reception of Iser: outcomes	179
5.1	The reception of Iser and new directions in literary theory: "cognitive reception theory"	184
5.2	Iser's psychology of reading and Tom Jones	198
6.	The Reception of Iser: literary example	214
6.1	Cerny and Iser	217
6.2	Toker and "second-degree" fictionalizing	232

CHAPTER	TITLE	PAGE
7.	The Reception of Iser: Gans	243
7.1	Comparing literary and generative anthropology	255
7.2	Does literary anthropology require an originary hypothesis?	279
8.	Decline of Literary Studies: a case for exploration	286
8.1	Iser, interpretation and translation	287
8.2	Gans and van Oort, literary anthropology and the significance of interpretation	296
8.3	Discourse of the decline of literary studies	310
8.4	Literary critic as “hero”?	328
9.	Emergence	334
9.1	Emergence and defining the human	342
9.2	The negative and literary interpretation	349
9.3	The text in language	368
9.4	Conclusion	382
	Conclusion	389
	Works Cited	404

Abstract

This dissertation argues that the literary anthropology of Wolfgang Iser allows us to resituate literary studies in response to the challenges of the “cultural turn” and the decline of literary studies. These include questions about what defines a literary text, and whether literature should be bracketed off from the remainder of culture. Iser’s definition for literature focuses upon the materiality of culture, by defining the text in language rather than as a concrete object, and as a unique medium we use to meet a basic need. Iser argues that the “open ended” nature of literature reflects the dynamic human, and favours a definition of the human that points towards the performative quality of representation, in terms of the metaphor of “plasticity”. However, he gives no account of the emergence of this vertical dimension in language. As a corrective measure, an argument is presented for the adoption of the originary hypothesis articulated by Eric Gans to underpin his generative anthropology. Here we follow Richard van Oort, who, in pursuing the argument for an anthropological perspective on the project of cultural interpretation conducted in the humanities, suggests the necessity for a grounding interpretation of our common origin in language. This originary hypothesis indicates that culture, language, and thereby, the human are coterminous. They each begin in a single scene, and a minimal fiction can be offered to describe this scene and provide a basic structure we can discover in each subsequent scene of human culture. The final phase of this dissertation examines the proposition that Iser’s anthropology exhibits a generative perspective on literature. The outcome suggests that the supplement of an originary hypothesis brings stability to his work in articulating categories such as fictionalizing, the imaginary, play, staging, and emergence, which undergird an important new way to approach literary studies.