

# **RECEPTION THEORY**

YUMI KINOSHITA

Department of Art

University of California Santa Barbara

November 4, 2004

## Reception Theory and “Power” of the Reader

In his book, *Reception Theory* (1984), Robert C. Holub (1949- ) characterizes Reception Theory as “a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader.”<sup>1</sup> Reception Theory reflects a paradigm shift in the history of literature, and it is considered “a reaction to social, intellectual, and literary developments in West Germany during the late 1960s.”<sup>2</sup> According to Holub, Reception Theory was a revolutionary approach to contemporary literary criticism.<sup>3</sup>

This new paradigm of literary criticism pays attention to the function of the reader in a process of literary experience. Hans Robert Jauss (1921-1997), one of the main contributors to Reception Theory, published an essay, “The Change in the Paradigm of Literary Scholarship” in 1969. In this essay, Jauss points out the rise of the new paradigm and emphasizes the importance of interpretation by the reader, replacing the obsolete literary scholarship methodology which involved the studies of accumulated facts.<sup>4</sup> Jauss’s theory views literature “from the perspective of the reader or consumer” and treats literature “as a dialectical process of production and reception.”<sup>5</sup> In his article “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory” (1969), Jauss states the following:

...the relationship of work to work must now be brought into this interaction between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception. Put another way: literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject—through the interaction of author and public.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), xii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 15.

So, how much “power” of interpretation does Reception Theory actually give to the reader? Holub suggests that Reception Theory is a creative process that occurs in the act of reading. He states, “The literary work is neither completely text nor completely the subjectivity of the reader, but a combination or merger of the two.”<sup>7</sup>

Wolfgang Iser (1926- ), who is considered to be one of the most prominent figures in Reception Theory, points out the importance of this literary process, as well. Iser takes a phenomenological approach to Reception Theory and he “decontextualizes and dehistoricizes text and reader.”<sup>8</sup> Iser argues that the reader’s involvement coincides with meaning production in literature.<sup>9</sup>

...the literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text [by the reader], but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader...The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader.<sup>10</sup>

This suggest that Reception Theory defines literature as the process of how the reader and the text interact with each other, and it was a revolutionary way of looking at the history of literature and literary criticism. Reception Theory, however, confines the role of the reader within this process, and the “power” of the reader does not function as the dominant in the act of reading the text. Reception Theory introduces the necessity of the reader’s involvement in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Holub, 84.

<sup>8</sup> Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, Peter Brooker, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. (Essex: Prentice Hall, 1997), 55.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), xi.

<sup>10</sup> Iser, 274-5.

history of literature, and this drastic and “revolutionary” development was rather natural considering the influential writings on the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein (1879-1955) and the concept of “paradigm shift” by Thomas S. Kuhn (1922-1996). Both Einstein and Kuhn raise questions as to how one should approach the notion of “truth” and “fact”, thus, suggesting the importance of interpretation. In addition, these two authors provided the foundation for Reception Theory, which requires the notion of interpretation to be included in the process of literary experience.

### Hermeneutics

Iser argues that Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834), a German philosopher and theologian, advocated the importance of hermeneutics, which was defined as the theory of interpretation, in order to study how the process of understanding worked.<sup>11</sup> Iser suggests that “hermeneutics marks the stage at which interpretation becomes self-reflective, this results in a continual self-monitoring of its operations and eventually a thematizing of what goes on during the activity of interpretation itself.”<sup>12</sup> Don Ihde (1934- ), a philosopher who is known for his works on phenomenology and postphenomenology, gives a brief description of the term hermeneutic. Ihde states, “Hermeneutics in its broadest sense means interpretation, and rules give shape to an interpretation.”<sup>13</sup> Paul de Man (1919-1983), a literary theorist associated with poststructuralism, defines hermeneutics as “a process directed toward the determination of meaning; it postulates a transcendental function of understanding, no matter how complex,

---

<sup>11</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-2.

<sup>13</sup> Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 32.

deferred, or tenuous it might be, and will, in however mediated a way, have to raise questions about the extralinguistic truth value of literary texts.”<sup>14</sup>

Jauss approaches the notion of hermeneutics with great emphasis on the importance of history and incorporates the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), who was a follower of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976).<sup>15</sup> Gadamer states the following on the term hermeneutics:

...all interpretations of past literature arise from a dialogue between past and present. Our attempts to understand a work will depend on the questions which our own cultural environment allows us to raise... Our present perspective always involves a relationship to the past, but at the same time the past can only be grasped through the limited perspective of the present... a hermeneutical notion of “understanding” does not separate knower and object in the familiar fashion of empirical science; rather it views understanding as a “fusion” of past and present.<sup>16</sup>

What is the role of hermeneutics in Reception Theory? Jauss argues that literary hermeneutics plays the role in the concretization of the meaning of literary works, which develops historically within a framework of a certain “logic,” creating and transforming “the aesthetic canon.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, according to Jauss, hermeneutics is a critical element in the ever-changing “horizons of the interpretations,” which defines a distinction “between arbitrary interpretations and those available to a consensus.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the notion of hermeneutics functions as a key element in Reception Theory since interpretations by the reader are now a part of literary process.

---

<sup>14</sup> Paul de Man, “Introduction” from *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), ix.

<sup>15</sup> Selden, 54-5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid..

<sup>17</sup> Jauss, 147.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

### Implied Reader and Actual Reader

Reception Theory suggests the new role of the reader in the literary process and categorizes the term “reader” into “implied reader” and “actual reader.”<sup>19</sup> Holub argues that the concept of the “implied reader,” introduced by Iser, was one of the most controversial ideas that he adapted from other theorists.<sup>20</sup> Holub defines the implied reader “as both a textual condition and a process of meaning production.”<sup>21</sup> Iser makes a point that the concept of the implied reader is fundamental to Reception Theory. Iser states, “This term [implied reader] incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader’s actualization of this potential through the reading process. It refers to the active nature of this process.”<sup>22</sup>

The term implied reader is defined as “the reader whom the text creates for itself and amounts to a network of response-inviting structures, which predispose us to read in certain ways.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the actual reader is defined as the reader who “receives certain mental images in the process of reading; however, the images will inevitably be coloured by the reader’s existing stock of experience.”<sup>24</sup> Realizing the importance of understanding how the reader’s interpretation is produced, Jauss introduces the concept of “horizon of expectations” in order to reveal the way in which the text interacts with the reader’s interpretation.

### Hans-Robert Jauss: Horizon of Expectations

Holub argues that the term horizon of expectations refers “to an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, a system of references or a mind-set that a hypothetical individual

---

<sup>19</sup> Selden, 56

<sup>20</sup> Holub, 84.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Iser, *The Implied Reader*, xii.

<sup>23</sup> Selden, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

might bring to any text.”<sup>25</sup> Jauss explains how the horizon of expectations is constructed in the text:

A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read, bring the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the “middle and end,” which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text.<sup>26</sup>

According to Holub, Jauss makes a connection between literary and general history; this is considered to be an important contribution to literary theory.<sup>27</sup> Jauss argues that the task of literary history is “completed when literary production is not only represented synchronically and diachronically in the succession of its systems, but also seen as ‘special history’ in its own unique relationship to ‘general history.’”<sup>28</sup> Jauss explains that the horizon of expectations is formed through the reader’s life experience, customs and understanding of the world, which have an effect on the reader’s social behavior.<sup>29</sup>

In this sense, the notion of history becomes fundamental to the horizon of expectations, and this is what differentiates Jauss’ approach to Reception Theory from one of Iser. Jauss also points out that the horizon of expectations is a crucial element in connecting literature and society. Jauss argues, “The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectation...”<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Holub, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Jauss, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Holub, 68.

<sup>28</sup> Jauss, 39.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

## Reception Theory and Minimalism

Reception Theory introduced the concept of reader involvement and how text and reader converge in a process of literary experience and meaning production. This paradigm shift was also apparent in visual art, especially in works of Minimalists, such as Carl Andre (1935- ), Dan Flavin (1933-96) and Donald Judd (1928-94).<sup>31</sup> In Minimalism, the viewer was also considered to be a part of the process in order to complete the work. In addition, interpretations by the viewer and the presence of horizon of expectations played an important role in this artistic experience.

The earliest statement concerned with Minimalism is Carl Andre's 1959 homage to painter Frank Stella, "Preface to Stripe Painting" which praises the artist's reduction of painting to its essential formal components.<sup>32</sup> Andre also comments on his way of approaching "essence":

The materiality, the presence of the work of sculpture in the world, essentially independent of any single individual, but rather the residue of the experience of many individuals and the dream, the experience of the sea, the trees and the stones—I'm interested in that kind of essential thing...My work has not been about the least condition of art but about the necessary condition of art...I will always try to have in my work only what is necessary to it.<sup>33</sup>

His series of brick works and steel plate works illustrate his point. His brick work, *Equivalent VIII* (Figure 1: 1966, Fire-bricks, 5" x 27" x 90") was made from 120 sand-lime bricks piled into two layers of 60 bricks laid on the gallery floor. This pile of bricks questions

---

<sup>31</sup> According to James Meyer, all of the artists associated with Minimalism rejected the idea that it was a coherent movement. However, Michael Archer says that the label "Minimalist" was applied by critics to the work of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, and Carl Andre because the key features of Minimalism are most easily recognizable in the art of these artists. See James Meyer, *Minimalism*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 16.

<sup>32</sup> James Meyer, *Minimalism*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), 17.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth Baker, *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 45, 52.



and challenges the definitions of both the work of art and of artistic labor. Andre believed that sculpture must prove itself as art in real space with the viewer, and he avoided the use of “framing devices such as the traditional pedestal.”<sup>34</sup>

In the following year, Andre made a series of “floor sculptures,” consisting of steel plates laid directly on the gallery floor.<sup>35</sup> Andre uses a similar strategy of inviting the viewer in his series of steel plate works. For one of the pieces from the artist’s steel plate sculptures, *144 Steel Square* (Figure 2: 1967, Steel, 12’ x 12’), Andre suggests the following: “You can stand in the middle of it [the work] and you can look straight out and you can’t see that piece of sculpture at all because the limit of your peripheral downward vision is beyond the edge of the sculpture.”<sup>36</sup> Both examples illustrate that the viewer is included in his work as “essence” and “the necessary condition of art” as Andre described above.

Kenneth Baker, an art historian, suggests that one of strategies that Minimalists were interested in was “a profound questioning of the work of art in its relationship to the individual spectator and to society.”<sup>37</sup> Frances Colpitt, the author of *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective* (1990), also argues that “the spectator is given a new role as a contributor of meaning,” and that this strategy distinguishes Minimalism from previous modernist art.<sup>38</sup> According to Brandon Taylor, works of Minimalists “required the presence of the viewer in an abstract, ungendered personification to function in the completion of the work.”<sup>39</sup> An art historian, Darby Bannard (1934- ) explains, “It is part of the nature of these works [Minimalism] to act as triggers for

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>35</sup> Meyer, 98.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, *Sculpture Since 1945*. (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1987), 78.

<sup>38</sup> Frances Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. (London: Research Press, 1990), 134.

<sup>39</sup> Brandon Taylor, *Avant-Garde and After: Rethinking Art Now*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 15.

thought and emotion pre-existing in the viewer and conditioned by the viewer's knowledge of the style in its several forms."<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

It is clear that these art historians approach Minimalism in a very similar manner to the way the literary theorists approach Reception Theory. Both are concerned with reader/ spectator involvement and recognize the importance of one's horizon of expectations. In addition, both suggest literary/ artistic experiences exist in the process of creating meanings through the interactions between the text/ work of art and the reader/ spectator. Moreover, both have influenced how we look at the history of literature and art.

Reception Theory's revolutionary approach to the role of the reader in relationship to the notion of interpretation was one of the most important contributions to the history of literature, and its new perspective on the literary experience established a new paradigm for writers and theorists. Although it is difficult to fully understand how powerful and revolutionary this paradigm shift was at that time, it is easy to see that the concepts which came out of Reception Theory are now part of how we try to understand literature, art, and the world. In fact, we still function in the same paradigm, so to speak, and it is mind boggling to imagine how exciting it will be to witness the eruption of new paradigm.

---

<sup>40</sup> Darby Bannard, "Present-Day Art and Ready-Made Styles," *Artforum*. vol.5, no.4, December 1966, 33.



## Bibliography

- Baker, Kenneth. *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1988.
- Bannard, Darby. "Present-Day Art and Ready-Made Styles," *Artforum*. vol.5, no.4, December 1966.
- Colpitt, Frances. *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*. London: Research Press, 1990.
- De Man, Paul. "Introduction" from *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- Holub, Robert C. *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Methuen, 1984.
- Ihde, Don. *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1986.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.
- . *The Range of Interpretation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Sculpture Since 1945*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1987.
- Meyer, James. *Minimalism*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000.
- Selden, Raman., Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Essex: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Taylor, Brandon. *Avant-Garde and After: Rethinking Art Now*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.

Reception Theory: A Brief Note. By Nasrullah Mambrol on November 2, 2016 ( 0 ). Conceptualized by Hans Robert Jauss in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* in the late 1960s, Reception Theory refers to a historical application of the Reader Response theory, emphasizing altering interpretive and evaluative responses of generations of readers to a text. Reception theory provides a means of understanding media texts by understanding how these texts are read by audiences. Theorists who analyze media through reception studies are concerned with the experience of cinema and television viewing for spectators, and how meaning is created through that experience. An important concept of reception theory is that the media text—the individual movie or television program—has no inherent meaning in and of itself. Instead, meaning is