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Refiguring Cognitive Narratology

Digital Literature and Representations of the Mind in David Ciccoricco's *Refiguring Minds*

Introduction

Augmenting the current trend to enhance narrative theory through more interdisciplinary considerations, David Ciccoricco's *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media* combines fields of media studies and theory of mind (or cognitive narratology more generally). While he acknowledges that it is too early to analyze the evolution of literary history from print to digital forms, Ciccoricco nonetheless maintains that, "in the meantime, it would be a mistake to dismiss the works before us as mere transitional forms with vestigial qualities that will eventually drop off on their way to becoming pure exemplars" (p. 5). As such, he examines the aesthetic and philosophical representations of minds in various forms of digital fiction, focusing specifically upon issues of attention, perception, memory, and emotion. By drawing upon forerunners in cognitive narratology such as David Herman, Uri Margolin, and Alan Palmer, Ciccoricco surveys "research [that] is invested in a reciprocal exploration of how minds, cognition, and consciousness are represented in literary narratives and what these narratives tell us about the minds of readers" (p. 6). Simultaneously, however, *Refiguring Minds* is counterbalanced by advancements in media studies made by figures including Espen Aarseth, Ian Bogost, and Marie-Laure Ryan; thus, while tracing the similarities between cognitive representations, Ciccoricco's carefully-chosen examples likewise "remain sensitive to media specificity […] as they explore fictional minds, acknowledging, for instance, that we draw on propositional-processing faculties exclusively for verbal media, facial-recognition faculties only for visual media, and time-constrained sensorimotor faculties only for participatory media", each of which "color[s] our imaginative projections in different ways" (p. 24). The result is a well-constructed book that offers insightful critical readings while simultaneously deepening theoretical discussions in both fields of media studies and cognitive narratology.

Spaces of Perception: Digital Literature and Attention

Refiguring Minds is divided into two parts, each of which addresses three forms of narratives: (print) novels, digital fiction, and story-driven video games. Part 1, "Attention and Perception", has, as Ciccoricco puts it, "a more spatial valence", and "narrative theories of perspective, point of view, and focalization" are forefront considerations (p. 11). The first chapter of this section, "Tragic Misperceptions in a Novel of Twin Consciousness", addresses perspective and focalization through a cognitive analysis of Patrick White's 1966 *The Solid Mandala*. While this novel seems, perhaps, a dated example given the recent emergence of digital fiction, Ciccoricco has deftly employed this work as both exemplar of attribution theory and the adaptive unconscious even as he uses it as a connector to early psychoanalytic criticism, thereby lending an historical trajectory to his own analysis. Indeed, offering an "update" to prevailing literary discourse regarding the Freudian and Jungian unconscious, Ciccoricco presents a nuanced and sensitive account of the "nonstandard mental functioning" (p. 35) of the primary characters of White's novel that simultaneously acknowledges that these characters are "*historically specific* constructs shaped by cultural and ideological suppositions about human mental functioning and, like those suppositions, are subject to the same obsolescence" (pp. 48f.; italics in the original).

Building upon these conclusions in the second chapter, "Digital Fiction and Your Divided Attention", *Refiguring Minds* turns then to digital fiction, and in particular, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries's "The Last Day of Betty Nkomo" (2005). Ciccoricco shows that the flash fiction used as the platform by works like "Betty Nkomo" employs animation, speed, and architectonic design in ways not available to print narratives in order to make the reader / viewer "acutely aware of the function and limitation of [his or her] own perceptual apparatus" (p. 72). Such limitations are highlighted not merely by the affordances of digital media themselves, but likewise by the added demands on the reader / user, who is often placed in the position of operating the text by manipulating the digital windows. Breaking down "Betty Nkomo" into a numbered list of sentences, Ciccoricco then shows how a narratological analysis of the flash fiction of Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries requires assemblage and accretion in order to "convey a *greater* amount of text than is displayed in the interface at any one time" (p. 83; italics in the original). This process of assemblage runs counter to customary ways of close-reading print narratives, which often demands the breakdown of the text into smaller units. Ciccoricco argues that when digital fiction is read in this manner, it "serves as a site of resistance to commonplace ideas that digital media ultimately degrade attention" (p. 92).

The final chapter of this section, "Gameworlds and Sharing Attention in Mythic Proportions", further enlarges upon the role of the reader / user as agent, and indeed, this chapter argues that "story-driven video games […] involve not just representations of cognitive processes but parallel *enactments* of them in that players become the agents – and, in some cases, the architects – of

the narratives that emerge therein" (p. 93; italics in original). The 2012 video game *Journey* stands as the primary example of this chapter, and Ciccoricco argues that *Journey* alters the user's attention and perception of the gameworld by shifting its gameplay to focus on cooperation among players rather than competition. Likewise, because of this cooperation, *Journey* "offers insight into the way social cognition plays out in fictional worlds of video games" (p. 96), ultimately revealing how conceptual metaphors enable communication among players even as they shape "narrative universals" (p. 105). By thus combining methods of literary analysis with principles of cognitive science, Ciccoricco argues for the expansion of Brian Boyd's conception of art as "cognitive play with pattern" to include "narratives that involve corporeal players actualizing stories through gameplay" (p. 124).

Distorting Memory and Manipulating Emotion

The second part of the book, "Memory and Emotion", is more temporally oriented, addressing such issues as plot, story progression, and sequencing. Nicholson Baker's 1988 novel, *The Mezzanine*, is the central example of the first chapter of this section, which is titled "Great Escalations in a Novel of the Everyday". This chapter is subdivided into three main parts, the first of which analyzes the correlation between "higher-minded meditations" and "lower-level cognitive activity" (p. 128) in relation to contemporary cognitive-scientific research into memory and emotion, while the second part extends the analysis of emotion in particular by showing how the novel negotiates the "'complex emotion' of nostalgia as codified by [Philip] Johnson-Laird and [Keith] Oatley", among others (p. 129). The final part combines these discussions with a reader-response analysis that "considers the way in which representations of fictional minds might go beyond the animation or emulation of cognitive activity of characters in motivating an analogous pattern of cognitive activity on the part of the reader" (p. 129). This analysis likewise picks up on themes elaborated upon in the first part of the book, including reader enactment and "empathetic and ideological consonance" between the reader and fictional characters (p. 154).

The next chapter, "Digital Fiction and Memory's Playground", discusses the role of memory and our distortions of past events, updating literary criticism's reliance upon Freud's psychoanalytic theory of repression by turning to current cognitive-scientific understandings of the mind. Simultaneously a narrative about digital environments and one that is itself enacted within a digital space, Andy Campbell and Judi Alston's digital fiction, *Nightingale's Playground* (2010) perfectly exemplifies Ciccoricco's argument that the medium shapes the portrayal of memory and emotion; and indeed, Ciccoricco uses this text to enter into the posthumanist discussion of how computers have shaped the ways in which we understand the human mind. Returning, then, to the reader response avenue that he opened in the previous chapter, Ciccoricco examines "cybernetic

narration", which "accounts for multimodal elements that, as part of an integrated operation of the interface, contribute to characterization but are not attributable to […] first-person narration" (p. 165). In so doing, he displays how digital spaces and architectonic design shape the reader's emotional and critical responses to the text.

"Playing with Memory and a Graphophiliac God of War" stands as the last chapter, bringing the reader full-circle to another story-driven video game – David Jaffe's *God of War* (2005) – that incorporates mythic elements. Drawing on Gonzalo Frasca's definition of simulation (as opposed to representation), Ciccoricco maintains that "criticism of simulational artworks must factor in both mnemonic and emotive effects that are peculiar to the player's embodied experience of video games" (p. 196). This embodied experience is, moreover, established through the construction of a "shareable narrative memory for the player and the player-character" (p. 195) or a memory in the story-world that is unlocked after the player overcomes certain key obstacles in the game, thereby serving "as a reward system that feeds the player's sense of achievement" (p. 196). By demonstrating this process at work in the sophisticated albeit extremely violent *God of War*, Ciccoricco posits that the dual motions of action and evaluation performed by Kratos, the primary player-character in the game, are ultimately emulated by the player, enabling the "creative acts of reflection by players", who have formed "a community of gamer scribes"; fan-fiction style, these gamer scribes are "determined to retell, rewrite, or reimagine the story of Kratos" (p. 197). Such evaluative rewriting helps Ciccoricco show that even popular and violent video games can trigger intellectual curiosity, therefore making them worthy of close critical and theoretical attention.

Conclusion

Ciccoricco writes in a clear and engaging style that conveys complex ideas with ease, making this work as enjoyable to read as it is informative. Additionally, *Refiguring Minds* incorporates supplementary images and screenshots from the digital narratives and video games throughout. The book likewise contains an Appendix by Dr. Lisa Marr titled "Monkey in the Mirror". Concise albeit insightful, this essay provides an overview of the discovery of mirror neurons and the applications to which scholars in the humanities – ranging from music and dance to literary studies, and from philosophy to game studies theory – have adapted this neuroscientific phenomenon. Because, then, of its deft and penetrating analyses as well as its interdisciplinary approach, this volume will prove invaluable for both the beginning scholar and the expert alike.

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