

Brosch, Renate. 2007. *Short Story: Textsorte und Leseerfahrung*. Trier: WVT, 266 pp.

My book aims to propose a new short story theory. It is a response to the curious fact that the recent major developments in literary and cultural theory have had very little impact so far on short story criticism, which remains notoriously undertheorized. One of the reasons that short stories have always been neglected by literary critics is their enormous potential for experimentation and transformation. Their capacity for innovation is not a mysterious self-renovating property of this sort of text, but a result of its manner of distribution and its reception. As its dissemination has almost always been linked to the most transient and casual media, the short story is a form of literary articulation most proximate to the cultural context and predicated on the particular formative discourses of its time. This particularity also informs its manner of reception; readers often appreciate it as a popular or topical text for quick consumption, an attitude which has led to a traditional deprecation as a lesser form in generic theories and literary histories. Hence, it is no coincidence that Edgar Allan Poe's early attempt to ingratiate the genre to educated readers was based on a commendation of brevity and its effects. It is significant that short story theory thus had to take recourse to response aesthetics from its very beginning, and it is my conviction that the nature of the short story can only be explained from this angle: as an aesthetic experience.

The book's approach to the short story is therefore based on reception theory in combination with recent orientations in narratology towards cognitive science. Literary experience here means interaction between story and audience, between interpretive communities and texts. To approach short stories from the vantage point of the experience involved rather than as set and finite texts allows us to look at the organizational processes involved which depend neither wholly on the structure of the text nor completely on an individual reaction of the reader, but on a combination of these. Mental organizational processes involved in reading literary texts take place in successive stages which need to be distinguished more carefully than early reception theory allowed. Analyzing separately the emotional and cognitive reaction to first reading and a later interpretational effort to come to terms with the dissonances and gaps in the text is the heuristic path followed in this investigation.

The fundamental assumption guiding this discussion is that the difference between novels and short stories is one of kind not of quantity. This difference, however, lies primarily in the kind of aesthetic experience the short story promotes, an experience that involves a

degree of reader participation not frequently found in other narrative texts. Lacking extensive information to go on, readers relate what they find in brief literary narratives to their prior knowledge and their expectations. The main thesis of the book is that the reading of short stories involves two apparently opposite but in effect complementary mental activities: visualization and projection. Following the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, I understand "visualisation" to refer to visual images created in the mind of the reader in processing a literary text (Esrock 2005, 633). The extension of meaning beyond the frame of the text and/or the fictional world, which takes place in the reader's attempt to come to terms with indeterminacy or recalcitrance, I call "projection" or "projective blending".

As an ephemeral form of text and a transient reading experience, short stories face the problem of producing enough lasting impressions to be retained among the storage of one's literary cognizance. Every short story reader knows that many examples are quickly forgotten, but some seem grafted on one's memory. The mystery of memorable short stories can be solved by recourse to the two qualities identified above: images are a traditional mnemonic aid and cognitive participation greatly increases attention. According to Wolfgang Iser, mental images are primary in any process of reading (Iser 1984, 222). Although the images produced in visualization are not necessarily distinct and lack of optical definition, visualization helps to organize the complexity and openness of narrative into iconic units. These iconic units are apparently more readily produced in reading short texts, firstly because brevity in narrative inclines readers grasp together iconic configurations and secondly because visual images moderate the textual difficulties, of which short stories (for reasons elaborated below) tend to produce proportionally more than long narratives. Whereas visualization takes place in the immediate reading experience, lasting iconic configurations are formed also afterwards.

Another strategy for making a significant appeal is cognitive challenge. Since all of us remember best the things we do ourselves, participation in coming to terms with dissonance ensures memorability. Whereas the novel can create a large and largely interdependent intratextual system, understanding a short story must have greater recourse to contextual supplementary knowledge and extrinsic ways of constituting meaning. This can be made evident by comparing interpretations of shorter and longer narratives, which diverge less in the latter case, because a long readings process educates readers in the belief system of the implied author, in compensating dissonance and in

reading “inaccessible” characters. Experiencing short stories unfolds in a tension between verbal economy and imaginative blending. Because they do not have room to elaborate on the determining factors of the fictional world and its values, they demand a dual understanding in the reading experience, one in which one's own perspective is constantly co-present with, projected onto and interactive with those of the fiction. Hence, short stories profit from a supplementary reaction to gaps of meaning which correlates different reading frames and world pictures. Such metaphoric and metamorphic practices of blending prior knowledge and experience into the processing of the text is encouraged, often even demanded by short narratives. Short stories, in order to engage the reader in creative participation, often deliberately provoke the mental activity of projecting beyond the textual boundary - be it structural or thematic. This projective blending beyond the frame of the text occurs typically after a first reading experience, in a conscious act of interpretation, when meaningful hypotheses are compared and juxtaposed with the proposals of text. However, it is also less consciously performed during first text processing when we speculate on possible outcomes or anticipate “preclosure”, as Susan Lohafer would have it.

Thus participation in the act of reading involves both visualizing images which simultaneously construct and contain units of meaning and transforming these in blending with exterior frameworks. These historically situated activities realize the different forms of narrative potential we call short story. Though the volume concentrates on these interactions between readers and texts, it emphatically does not claim that reading experiences are universal or that short stories possess essential features which would legitimate a purely formalist analysis. On the contrary, it aims to supplement cultural and literary histories of the genre with a contextualized view of the reception and it relates contemporary experiences of short stories to their historical readings. Both the textual instructions as well as readers' responses are understood within a framework of dominant discourses and ways of seeing; these contextualizations can throw light on larger questions regarding the cultural function specific stories perform.

In separate chapters the different aspects of this process are examined: First, there is a historical account of reading practices of short fictions which aims to supplement existing literary histories of the genre. The second chapter deals with the specific reading experiences produced by narratives that are short. Chapter three is concerned with the (limited) capacity short stories have for developing fictional character. Since the subject of

characters who begin young and grow old obviously cannot be their special domain, short stories tend to allegorize figures as well as objects. Narrative space turns out to be considerably more important for short stories than for novels. Chapter four investigates this particularity of spatial settings. Chapter five discusses narrative perspective, an element which is consummately employed for experimentation in the form. And chapter six deals with the construction of time. Since many primary texts are difficult to procure, the discussions draw on well-known examples from literary history so as to be able to engage the reader in the argument. In the last chapter (seven) the initial distinction between immediate reading experience and later interpretation is followed up in relating the experience of dissonance in the texts to cognitive compensatory strategies. In order to assess the cultural work short stories perform for readers today, this discussion of reading practices is placed within a larger contemporary cultural and intermedial context.

Works Cited:

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