How to Read Minds: A Review of *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media* by David Ciccoricco (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015)

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**Abstract**

In *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media* (2015), David Ciccoricco employs an impressive range of contemporary science on cognition, memory, and emotion to update our narratological theory so that we might be better equipped to read minds in printed fiction, digital fiction, and video games. In doing so, Ciccoricco expands the remit of the burgeoning field of cognitive literary studies, which despite its recent growth remains largely focused on print fiction published before the 20th century. *Refiguring Minds* is an exemplary work of cognitive literary studies which showcases both the field’s weaknesses and its strengths. While Ciccoricco sometimes tends towards reductionism — a problem in any scientifically-inflected field of literary study — he also enriches our understanding of the cognitive processes in fictional characters and in ourselves as we engage with those fictional minds.

Cognitive literary studies has become increasingly established as a discipline, its rise marked by landmark studies such as Lisa Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006) and Alan Richardson’s *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind* (2001). Yet its focus is still largely on print fiction published before the twentieth century. In *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media*, David Ciccoricco addresses this imbalance, expanding the field to cover not only some twentieth-century print fiction but digital fiction and video games as well. Though Ciccoricco recognises that “what we call ‘cognitive literary studies’ can by all means operate as one literary-critical approach among many” [Ciccoricco 2015, 16], he also begins by making the fair case that literary studies in general should move on from its outdated reliance on the psychoanalytic idiom which has dominated it in the twentieth century. His study addresses cognitive literary studies specifically, but one of Ciccoricco’s aims is to contribute to the larger ongoing re-evaluation of the “mistaken mechanisms and flawed foundations” of the Freudian model of the unconscious, memory, and repression [Ciccoricco 2015, 16]. Almost twenty years after the first excited manifestos for cognitive literary studies, Ciccoricco’s book soberly demonstrates that literary studies need not necessarily aim to run alongside the “cutting-edge” of cognitive science, but it has to at least be responsibly “current” [Ciccoricco 2015, 16].

The book as a whole serves as a strong example of how literary studies might productively draw on the contemporary sciences of mind. Ciccoricco is extremely diligent throughout, and his assimilation and explication of a wide range of cognitive reading alone will make his study hugely beneficial to others working in the burgeoning field. His cognitive research is matched by an equally impressive engagement with both long-established and very new narratological and literary theory. One of the central theoretical problems with which Ciccoricco opens his study concerns the relationship between representation and simulation. As Ciccoricco explains, “digital media push the project of cognitive literary and narrative theory into new (kinetic, cybernetic, ludic) territory” [Ciccoricco 2015, 15]. Once we begin to read minds in other media, we have to ask new questions about how those minds are both represented to, and enacted within, the reader/player. This complex theoretical area is the thread with which Ciccoricco subtly ties the whole study together.

The book is divided into two parts, “Attention and Perception” and “Memory and Emotion.” Each part contains three chapters, the first of which explains an exemplary work of printed literature, the second a digital fiction, and the third a video game. In the first chapter Ciccoricco rereads Patrick White’s *The Solid Mandala* (1966), a novel about the relationship between twins. While acknowledging that White’s novel was informed by Jungian psychology, and that Jung...
In the fifth chapter, Ciccoricco takes Judi Alston’s digital fiction Nightingale’s Playground (2010) as an exemplary text in
order to demonstrate how literary study might approach memory in fiction by moving away from the outdated Freudian model of repression. This digital fiction, in which the central character, Carl, must “come to terms with the likelihood that his problematic memories are false ones” [Ciccoricco 2015, 162] is educative because the marriage of its content and form raises interesting, difficult questions about narration and reader-agency. Does the ambiguously italicised text in this fiction represent thought or speech, from the present or past? Is the digital space the reader navigates an objective reality or Carl’s subjective reality? Grounding his discussion in the contemporary sciences of memory, Ciccoricco demonstrates just how literary studies can benefit by departing from the Freudian model in order to better read fictions such as Nightingale’s Playground as enacting the “inescapably context-bound and eminently fallible nature of human memory” [Ciccoricco 2015, 189].

The final chapter, in which Ciccoricco turns to the video game God of War (2005), serves both as a defence of the merit of video games and of the need to have a specific language to talk about their unique potential. Through his reading of God of War’s complex temporal staging, Ciccoricco argues that video games, which are uniquely participatory, have the potential not just to make the player “read the minds” of the characters onscreen (as you would when passively watching a film), but also to make the player enact the character’s conscious experience as they effectively live the story through that character. As he points out, “if we limit our model of player emotion to the effects of [characters’] facial expressions […] then we have not gone any further than treating a game as a kind of movie” [Ciccoricco 2015, 210]. Ciccoricco consequently addresses the potential criticism of God of War as a game that has players enact rage and violence. As in his discussion of attention span in Chapter Two, Ciccoricco points to the tension in the game between “the murderous and the methodical, the need to battle and the need to solve puzzles” [Ciccoricco 2015, 218], to undercut any prejudice the cognitive literary field might have that video games are necessarily mindless.

Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media is an excellent illustration of the strengths of cognitive literary studies, grounded as it is in diligent research and deft movement between narratology and the contemporary sciences of mind. It also shows some of the field’s weaknesses. Chapter Three in particular reads, at times, more like a scientific paper which treats Journey as evidence for its hypothesis than as a piece of literary criticism informed by contemporary science. Part of the problem with this chapter is that while Ciccoricco moves impressively between a number of theorists and fields, the chapter is limited to a single game. Though the other chapters are much stronger because they strike a better balance between art and theory, they each share this problem to an extent. In the two chapters on video games, for example, we are left wondering how we might apply a cognitive approach to video games that aren’t in the third person, or are in entirely different genres? Ciccoricco occasionally mentions some other games but his treatment of them is very brief and does not tie significantly into the chapter’s larger discussion. Similarly, in his discussion of The Mezzanine’s interesting use of footnotes, Ciccoricco makes brief reference to other famous users of footnotes (from Jorge Luis Borges to David Foster Wallace to Terry Pratchett) but makes no mention of cognition in any of their works. Ciccoricco’s reading of Baker’s novel is convincing, but the novel is only understood in isolation, with no sense of the broader literary movements in which it plays a part. Ciccoricco’s book lays very firm ground for a cognitive approach to old and new media. That one text per chapter felt insufficient is a sign of the quality of its scientific and theoretical research and of the extent to which it conceptually expands the field.

Works Cited
