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

Jamie Peter Redgate <j_dot_redgate_dot_1_at_research_dot_gla_dot_ac_dot_uk>, University of Glasgow

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[Ciccoricco 2015, 16], he also begins by making the fair case that literary studies in general should move on from its outdated reliance on the psychoanalytic idiom which has dominated it in the twentieth century.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]. [1]

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. [2]

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 [3]

is therefore a necessary figure for understanding the novel (which has been the approach taken in much of its criticism), Ciccoricco demonstrates the potential of updating "prevailing literary-critical treatments of the (Freudian and Jungian) unconscious" with the more contemporary model of the "adaptive unconscious" popularised in particular by Timothy D. Wilson [Ciccoricco 2015, 35]. In this chapter, which is grounded in careful use of interdisciplinary terms such as social psychology's "attribution" (denoting the "*psychological* act of assigning mental states" [Ciccoricco 2015, 53]), Ciccoricco develops a persuasive reading of the novel that accounts for the way that one of the twins, Arthur — like the reader — is persuaded by his brother's misattributions of Arthur's own mental life.

The second chapter is devoted to Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI)'s "The Last Day of Betty Nkomo" (2005), which, like most digital fictions, implicitly challenges our "traditional reading practices" [Ciccoricco 2015, 72] and our ways of talking about reading. Building on recent criticism around reading practices, such as N. Katherine Hayles's distinction between deep and hyper attention, Ciccoricco challenges the popular view that a digital fiction such as "Betty Nkomo" — which flashes "150-odd screens" in the space of "one minute and twelve seconds" [Ciccoricco 2015, 82] describing the death of an "ill or elderly, impoverished" woman — spells the death of modern attention spans. Betty takes Ciccoricco into a detailed discussion of the "cybernetic narrator" and "cybernetic narration" – terms which, like those in the first chapter, work to take account of the minds involved in the reading process: how is the fiction produced or altered, and how therefore is the reader's experience changed, in the interaction between human and machine? Though YHCHI's text works like speed-reading software to leave no time for conscious readerly reflection, Ciccoricco persuasively argues that "Betty Nkomo" is a kind of cybernetic loop, a marriage of content and form: it self-consciously points to its demands on our attention because the fact we are "require[d]" to pay extra attention is itself part of the text's meaning [Ciccoricco 2015, 89].

<div style="float:right">4</div>

The third chapter's explication of the video game *Journey* (2012) brings the *player*, rather than the reader, into cognitive literary studies. Though this chapter moves deftly between Gestalt psychology, mythology, and the concept of narrative universals, the stakes of the chapter are less clear and some of the limitations of the cognitive literary project became particularly apparent here. At its weakest, this chapter tends to read far more like the largely discredited sibling of cognitive literary studies: literary Darwinism. Jonathan Kramnick remarked of literary Darwinism that it ultimately has nothing to say about literary texts, "apart from what it would extract elsewhere from the evolutionary psychological edifice (claims about mate selection or aggression, for example)" [Kramnick 2011, 327]. Unlike the previous chapters, where Ciccoricco's use of the cognitive sciences to illuminate the minds of readers and characters felt appropriate and persuasive, here the gestures to a larger evolutionary narrative are less so. When discussing how *Journey*'s players control a wordless avatar who comes across other wordless avatars (controlled by other players), and the ways in which they have to try and communicate, Ciccoricco offers a scientific explanation of this phenomena: "The theory of inclusive fitness establishes the benefits of social altruism among group members based on the greater likelihood of it leading to the perpetuation of genes among one's in-group […] we have the obvious instinctual mandate to tend and befriend" [Ciccoricco 2015, 115]. The scientific explanation is not *wrong*, but this mundane evolutionary fact does not enrich our understanding of the text in the way that the cognitive science in the previous chapters — which was at the scale of individual human beings, not the whole species — did.

<div style="float:right">5</div>

Ciccoricco begins the book's second half on "Memory and Emotion" with a chapter on Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* (1988), a novel about the digressing thoughts of the narrator, Howie, on his lunch break. The chapter's overarching discussion of the reconstructive nature of memory is particularly interesting – in part because it works as a persuasive example of how contemporary models of mind can inform our understanding of character and memory in fiction, but also because Ciccoricco establishes that Baker was likely engaged, to some extent, with the cognitive science that was becoming more widely known at the time of writing, thus making such a scientific reading of his work seem more warranted than it was in the *Journey* chapter. Ciccoricco convincingly argues that as the novel "explores Howie's higher-minded meditations on the everyday," Baker's footnotes, which are ultimately more substantial than the text from which they digress, "animate[…] his lower-level cognitive activity" [Ciccoricco 2015, 128]. The novel thereby enacts the fact that most of what the mind does is largely unconscious and, like the footnotes themselves, below the level of what we might think of as our primary conscious narrative.

<div style="float:right">6</div>

In the fifth chapter, Ciccoricco takes Judi Alston's digital fiction *Nightingale's Playground* (2010) as an exemplary text in

<div style="float:right">7</div>

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.

8

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.

9

Works Cited

Ciccoricco 2015 Ciccoricco, David. *Refiguring Minds in Narrative Media*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.

Kramnick 2011 Kramnick, Jonathan. "Against Literary Darwinism." *Critical Inquiry* 37.2 (2011): 315-347.