

Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History

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Ildiko Olasz and M. Genevieve West, "Follow the Reader: New Views and Inquiries in Reception Studies"

Early on a Sunday morning in September 2005, a group of twelve or so gathered at the University of Delaware. Philip Goldstein and James Machor had brought together scholars working in a variety of disciplines from around the globe for what might have been a one-time conference on reception studies. As we sat around the table getting to know one another, we decided to form a new professional society devoted to the study of reception. We elected officers and discussed the next conference. Thus our 2005 gathering birthed the biennial conference of the Reception Study Society (RSS)--a lively, diverse and growing professional organization. As the conference has moved from site to site, it has hosted scholars such as Janice Radway, Steven Mailloux, David Nord, John Frow, Patrocínio Schweikart, Janet Staiger, Michael Bérubé, Daniel Cavicchi, Shirley Samuels, and Jonathan Gray and created a fertile space for those interested in reception to engage in cross-disciplinary exchanges, to network, and to move the discipline forward. As an allied organization, the RSS has sponsored sessions at the national Modern Language Association conference and at a number of regional conferences around the country.

The 2007 conference in Kansas City, Missouri, was a particularly significant one. The presentations there culminated in *New Directions in American Reception Study*, edited by RSS stalwarts Philip Goldstein and James Machor, and the membership opted to take a new step by creating an online journal, *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*. Such publications

have created opportunities for scholars from a variety of disciplines to find an audience interested in the cross-disciplinary issues related to reception and audience. Philip Goldstein, always working behind the scenes and still leading us forward, has ensured other scholars will find the work published in *Reception* by successfully seeking to include the journal in the database JSTOR. Now with four international conferences and four annual volumes of online publication of *Reception* behind us, the RSS looks forward to the next major step: print publication of the journal with Penn State University Press. In 2013, the first print issue of the journal will appear under the editorship of James Machor and Amy Blair. Despite the growth in online publishing, the “gold standard” in scholarship remains tied to print publication. Thus, our transition into a bound volume will mark an auspicious new beginning.

As the rise of the RSS and *Reception* suggests, interest in issues related to reception--reception history, audience, book history, history of reading, reader-response criticism, and media studies--has exploded in the last two decades. A recent, quick survey of the *MLA Bibliography* using the key words of *reception* and *audience* during the last ten years yielded more than 6,800 hits, far more than anticipated. In such a rapidly expanding field, staying abreast of emerging scholarship challenges even the most dedicated scholar. To aid the scholar, to orient the newcomer, and to promote increased recognition of the field, this issue of *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* aims to provide a compact overview of some of the most recent and important contributions to this growing interdisciplinary area of study. Editors Amy Blair and James Machor bring together here book reviews by nineteen scholars of twenty recent studies, and the scope of texts reviewed reflects the breadth of interests of members of the Reception Study Society. Within the body of work examined, we see past trends continue, new areas of study emerge, and lacuna waiting for scholarly attention.

Strongly represented here is the trend of exploring reading as gendered practice. Perhaps inspired by Janice Radway's foundational *Reading the Romance* (1984), four of the twenty texts reviewed here focus specifically on women's reading practices. Joanne Wilkes' *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth Century Britain: The Critical Reception of Jane Austin, Charlotte Bronte, and George Elliot*; Megan Sweeney's *Reading is My Window: Books and the Art of Reading in Women's Prisons*; Barbara Sicherman's *Well-Read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women*, and P. Gabrielle Foreman's *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* all examine the ways in which women read (and are read) within individual socio-historical moments. Particularly exciting are treatments of groups of women typically marginalized, even within gender studies--women who are ~~also~~ in prison, or are members of a racial or ethnic minority. Such work continues to complicate and enrich not only the fields of reception and reading studies, but also women's and literary studies. Of the four, *Activist Sentiments* offers the most interesting possibilities for pushing the discipline in new directions as it coins new terminology and develops a methodology for exploring readers and audiences that might be inaccessible via more traditional methods.

Activist Sentiments also participates in the ongoing explorations of scholarship on nineteenth century American texts and reading practices. Focusing on the same period, James Machor's *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865* exerts a powerful presence owing to its scope and depth. The study is both firmly grounded in existing theory, and pushes into new areas with "historical hermeneutics." Barbara Hochman's *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911*--winner of the 2012 George A. and Jean S. DeLong Book History Book Prize--builds on a large body of work about nineteenth-century America's most influential novel,

looking at how the life of the text evolved over time to serve the needs of very different readers. Amy Blair's *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States* moves American reception study into the Gilded Age by examining reading advice rendered in the *Ladies' Home Journal*. While we might expect the original audience of the *Ladies' Home Journal* to narrow the scope of Blair's study to focus on women alone, her work demonstrates the ways in which advice and reading habits moved across social and gender lines.

Emerging in American reception studies are similar treatments of major twentieth-century historical and literary figures, as topics embedded within larger projects, as articles focusing on reception, or as book-length studies of reception. Timothy Parrish's *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America* exemplifies the former as he treats Ellison's reception within a broader project meant to establish the author's significance to American culture. Article and book-length studies devoted specifically to reception include Peter Freese's "The Critical Reception of Kurt Vonnegut," Peter L. Hays' *The Critical Reception of Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises*, and Lisa Marie Gill's dissertation *From Homeboy to American Icon: Image Transformation of Malcolm X, 1965-1999*. Janet Badia's incisive and highly readable *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers* makes the offerings still more diverse by adding Plath to the list of authors worthy of such study.

Many studies today take on a cultural studies bent as scholars explore the unique cultural webs in which reading takes place. William H. Johnson's *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* is unusual in its treatment of classical and elite culture. More commonly scholars (including many represented here) examine reading and audiences within mass culture. Juliet John's *Dickens and Mass Culture* and Robert McParland's

Charles Dickens' American Audience exemplify this trend. Particularly interesting is the turn to the less-obvious role of participant audiences, to the dialectic in which audiences not only consume various texts but also influence or shape texts. For instance, Elena Razlogova's *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public* demonstrates that long before the Internet allowed audiences to tweet their thoughts as they watch their favorite television shows, listeners of American radio were shaping the evolution of radio at macro- and micro-levels through letters, telegrams, and phone calls. Living within the age of crowd-sourcing and web 2.0, scholars will likely become increasingly attentive to the ways in which readers and audiences shape texts; consequently, more work along these lines seems likely.

Also increasingly common are what we call cross-cultural approaches to reception. Lauren Shohet's *Reading Masques: The English Masque and Public Culture in the Seventeenth Century* looks at the ways in which secondary, popular audiences responded to what was originally created for a privileged audience in an elite culture. Similarly Gillian Roberts' *Prizing Literature: The Celebration and Circulation of National Culture* explores the impact of elite book awards and international prizes on the formation of Canadian national mass culture and the acceptance of the authors. Hochman's work with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the twentieth century might also be included here for examining the text outside of its original cultural moment. More obviously cross-cultural studies treat canonical Western authors in non-Western contexts. Kwee-Ien Lee's dissertation, for example, looks at Virginia Woolf's reception and influence in China and Taiwan. A smattering of journal articles undertake similar efforts: Cuneyd Okay looks at Dante's reception in Turkey⁵; Giuliano D'Amico examines Ibsen's reception in Italy⁶; and Jincal Yang treats Melville's reception in China. Along less traditional lines, Lena Lee examines Disney in Korea.

We are also seeing work that focuses on technologically mediated reception, although far more remains to be done in this area. In his *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1991), George P. Landow has rightfully foreseen the digital text as the next major transformation in literary history, and Susan Schreibman's article "Computer-mediated Texts and Textuality: Theory and Practice" (2002) has remarkably pointed to the role reception studies can undertake in the emerging critical discussions. Since then, scholars in the field have added to the wide array of interests to which new digital media lend themselves. *Acts of Reading: Interpretation, Reading Practices, and the Idea of the Book in John Foxe's Actes and Monuments* edited by Thomas P. Anderson and Ryan Netzley dedicates the first section to the impact of digital books both on the reading process and on the scholarship in the field. While hypertexts invite readers into non-linear reading, scholars face more difficulties in tracking the paths and responses of individual readers. Several articles included in *The History of Readings* edited by Shafquat Towheed, Rosalind Crone and Katie Halsey, however, emphasize advantages of the online age such as the digital availability of reader responses on *Amazon.com* and *The Reading Experience Database 1450-1945*.

What digital media uniquely bring about is a renewed reflection on the print texts. Indeed, both hypertexts and online reader responses pave the way for a better insight into print culture and consumption in general. In *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*, Ted Striphas identifies the "space-binding" nature of e-books against the "time-binding" features of the print-book, in that the digital text reaches across space while the print book allows for ideas to endure across time. His comparison, however, leads to a rather pessimistic conclusion, when he warns us about the threat of a "controlled consumption" (a notion he borrows from Henri Lefebvre), which he sees emerging as a result of the indecisive

digital publication and reader ownership rights. Taking the assessment of the current print culture one step further, Donald Haase's "Hypertextual Gutenberg: The Textual and Hypertextual Life of Folktales and Fairy Tales in English Language Popular Print Editions" probes the ways in which print editions of folktales attempt to mimic hypertexts by organizing the texts into blocks, and inserting large note numbers and wide marginal notes. Haase's "Law of Approximation" and "Law of Replication" add valuable terms to the ever-changing field of reception, and his reflection on the scholarly shift to intertextual reading offers insight into critical reception trends.

Similar attention to the influence of the digital age can be observed in other media as well, and film reception seems an obvious area. Undeniably, film audience's online responses have amplified the exploration of fan reception, and Rhiannon Bury's "Textual Poaching or Gamekeeping? A Comparative Study of Two *Six Feet Under* Internet Fan Forums" reveals that these responses have redefined fans in contrast with earlier perceptions of them as "uncritical dupes of culture industry or as rebellious poachers [hijacking] meaning" (303). Some other studies push the boundaries of the reception field even further by looking into audience contributions across media and culture: drawing on Henry Jenkins' term, Mirko Tobias Schäfer's *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production* situates *Flickr* and *YouTube* users' work as a more recent example of "participatory culture," and he devotes special focus to the participatory nature of online hacking.

Nonetheless, the most compelling innovations in the digital subfield of reception studies are the interdisciplinary approaches that negotiate literary reception with other aspects of this multifaceted experience. "Meaning at the Interface: New Genres, New Modes of Interpretative Engagement?" by Ranjana Das reflects on successful ways to combine expectation and reception

research with cultural studies and media studies, and Das underlines the experimental nature of the methodologies incorporated as well as the need for further inquiry into the particulars of digital media and hyper-reader. In another media-driven approach, Anne Mangen's "Hypertext Fiction Reading: Hepatics and Immersion" investigates the effect of detachment on the reader brought about by the intangible nature of the digital text. At the same time, Mangen recognizes the added immersion value of the new medium that reminds her of the immersion of computer games and television. Reaching into psychological and media studies, and even linguistics, this article keenly demonstrates the unprecedented opportunities of an interdisciplinary reception focus, yet it also indicates the main reason behind the limited number of these studies: such a thorough look across perspectives and methods can easily become a challenge for both the author and the reader. It is no wonder, then, that the most successful recent publications in this interdisciplinary space offer a cohesive anthology of studies on a theme rather than any one author's combination of all of the relevant perspectives and methodologies. A case in point is the 2012 book *From Codex to Hypertext*, in which editor Anouk Lang suggests a more organic blending of reception scholarship and cultural studies to avoid the dangers of each of these individual venues, as well as to discover ways in which cultural texts and contexts are being read along with the literary texts themselves.

Similar interdisciplinary opportunities emerge in other areas of the reception field such as children's and adolescents' reception, although in this case we witness even fewer attempts to navigate the difficult waters of interdisciplinary reception. In a time period when discussions revolve around the latest text and its film adaptation--for children and adolescents alike--much has been written about the reading habits of these audience groups; nonetheless, most of them concentrate on literacy and other pedagogical aspects. The breadth of derivative works alone is a

testimony to the far-reaching effects of present-day literary production and marketing, and the scholarship written on these readers' interpretative processes reveals the fascinating potential of this subfield.

Hochman's *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution* dedicates an entire chapter to the 1853 children's illustrated edition entitled *Pictures and Stories from Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She contends that the abridged version invited young readers to focus on the threatened child and feel empathy, which represents a new feeling for the contemporary white audience reading about African Americans. Other studies about children's historical reading of literary texts demonstrate similar interests in the examination of cultural influences. In "Little Pilgrims' Progress: Literary Horizons For Children's Literature," Anne Lundin delineates the gender division in American children's literature as it became visible during the 1890s, and explores the influence of cheap publications on children's reading habits from the period. She uniquely situates these developments within the larger context of emerging cultural dynamics, concentrating especially on the "romantic myth of childhood" and the "Cult of the Child." Observing a much later period, but highlighting another case of cultural impact on children's reception, Susan Louise Stewart's "Beyond Borders: Reading 'Other' Places in Children's Literature" charts the "solipsistic attitude" children demonstrate while reading about other cultures. Such a personal focus during the reception process is much more palatable in children's reading processes than those of the adults, and the findings reiterate the value of studying children's reception more extensively.

Beyond what they reveal about social, cultural, and literary history, children's reception allows a closer look into the early stages of reading habit formation that is invaluable in the overall field. For instance, A. Robin Hoffman's "*The BFG and The Spaghetti Book Club: A*

Case Study of Children as Critics” offers a more comprehensive review of the ways in which fourth graders read and reflect on their reading. While the research demonstrates children’s bibliotherapeutic experience, it also recognizes their attention to the aesthetic and reveals children’s own perceptions of their status within the general reading community. Hence these children’s reading processes mirror not only a stage in their literacy development, but also a distinct level of self-awareness in the long process of becoming a member of the established reading community.

A similar attention to adolescent reception augments the picture of readerly identity formation, as in the case of Jie Park’s “Re-Imaging Reader-Response in Middle and Secondary Schools: Early Adolescent Girls’ Critical and Communal Reader Responses to the Young Adult Novel *Speak*,” which uncovers the community formation process of these age groups along the lines of reading the same novel. “Are You There God? Judaism and Jewishness in Judy Blume’s Adolescent Fiction” by Jonathan Krasner and Joellyn Wallen Zollman takes us full circle by illustrating the dynamics of readerly community formation as defined by a particular religion and culture. Although the scholarship in children’s and adolescent reception is quite limited, the common interests and methods define these as a continual resource about reading habit formation (culturally or individually) from childhood to adult age. In spite of the added difficulty of conducting such research, the examples show evidence that these subfields represent a vital division within the larger field, and they support the need for an improved communal belief in what this demographic can contribute to reception studies.

After looking at the recent history and future potential of such subfields, it is fitting to reflect on the latest efforts to redefine theories and practices in the field. Goldstein and Machor’s *New Directions in American Reception Study* (2008) is a compelling, multidisciplinary collection

of some of the most innovative case studies and theory revisions that have taken place in the field, and the book showcases many of the outstanding members of the Reception Study Society. Towheed, Crone, and Halsey's *The History of Reading* brings together excerpts of texts important to the field that might be particularly helpful for newcomers or to undergraduates. Such a move, while inevitably fraught with difficult editorial decisions and the realities of a limited number of pages between the covers of single volume, signals an important moment. First, making such a text available promises an increased awareness of the field, and as new readers become steeped in the discipline, we are likely to see new, fresh approaches that help address the gaps in scholarship we discuss above. At the same time, anthologies inevitably bring to mind issues of canonization. An anthology, merely by making a text readily available, can shape a canon. In her review of *The History of Reading*, Patrocinio Schweickart identifies other texts that she would have liked to see included in the volume, and we hope the exchange of ideas about what constitutes essential reading about the history of reading continues beyond this issue of *Reception*. Regardless of whether we work in cinema, popular culture, the history of the book, or literary studies, as the field of reception studies becomes more visible, we need to engage very deliberately the question of which texts are central to the types of work we do and why.

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