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The Neurohermeneutics of Suspicion. A Theoretical Approach

Renata Gambino e Grazia Pulvirenti

Abstract • In this paper we argue that Ricoeur's concept of suspicion is significant for present-day neurocognitive studies on literature, with regard to the issues of embodiment, bodily simulation, and interpretation of textual latent meanings. Ricoeur's practice of suspicion is one of the two poles of our present inquiry on literary texts, being the second a neurohermeneutic approach that we have developed in past studies (Gambino and Pulvirenti, *Storie, menti, mondi*; "Neurohermeneutics. A Transdisciplinary Approach to Literature").

We will refer to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, a principle which is often quoted in literary critical discourse but not always precisely defined, considering it as an act of mistrustful interpretation, which bases on intersubjectivity and aims to disclose latent and hidden meanings in sign systems, specifically in literary texts, which is the field of our inquiry.

In the perspective of what we here define as *neurohermeneutics of suspicion*, the reader becomes an interpreter, questioning the text with regard to its multilayered surface features as marking inferential clues unveiling secondary meanings. The meaning-making process depends on a creative act of the reader's imagination embodying mental (re-)construction of the situation described by a text. Therefore, suspicious interpreting does not rely in either the text, the author, the reader or the cognitive and cultural context, but in their complex and dynamic relationship, pivoting around the common human nature rooted in corporeity. We claim that particularly in the postcritical venture, Ricoeur's hermeneutics may be helpful in refiguring the pleasure of deciphering the fictional worlds of literature, challenging the reader to "play" with the text intended as a terra incognita of inexhaustible multiple meanings.

Keywords • Neurohermeneutics; Hermeneutics of Suspicion; Embodiment; Situation Models

The Neurohermeneutics of Suspicion. A Theoretical Approach

Renata Gambino e Grazia Pulvirenti¹

I. Introduction

This paper aims to highlight how Ricoeur's principle of "hermeneutics of suspicion" is significant to present-day neurocognitive studies on literature, with regard to the issues of intersubjectivity as a result of embodiment, and of interpretation as cognitive act that creatively reconfigures textual latent meanings. Ricoeur's "suspicious reading" may be considered as both a demystifying intellectual attitude and a mistrustful critical stance to literary texts' interpretation. It allows to gain otherwise inaccessible meanings and amplify the pleasure of reading literature.

Within the relatively new venture of cognitive poetic studies, narration has been understood as a fundamental knowledge-oriented activity of the mind; language has been interpreted in terms of its cognitive features constructing our way of inhabiting the world and making sense out of it.² One of the most articulated discourses on the construction of meaning has been developed in philosophical terms during the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties of the past century by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who transdisciplinary linked anthropological reflections and a hermeneutic phenomenology with anticipatory views on intersubjectivity, the human mind and its imaginative and meaning-making processes.

We will focus on Ricoeur's conception of language as a locus of complex intertwined significations, where meanings are not only explicit and univocal, but also hidden and plurivocal. With regard to the double existence of "apparent and latent meanings," Ricoeur puts forward a "hermeneutics of suspicion" intended in terms of both demystification of illusionary meanings and restoration of latent ones (*Freud and Philosophy* 9). The principle of suspicion moves a radical critique against the illusion of a positivistic truth, as it has been shown by his analysis of the thought of the three "masters of suspicion"—Freud, Marx and Nietzsche—, who were able "to clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a 'destructive' critique, but by the invention of an art of interpreting" (33), which is therefore intended as the result of a continuous meaning reconstruction.

Why do we go back to Ricoeur's theory of suspicion as particularly promising in the frame of the actual transdisciplinary venture linking humanities and neurocognitive studies? The hermeneutics of suspicion opens a new perspective on the process of reading literary texts, which surprisingly meets with many results attaining the mind-brain functions in the reading experience. Therefore, in our neurohermeneutic approach, suspicious reading can be considered as an act of interpretation based on intersubjectivity and on the disclosure of multiple meanings, arising at Ricoeur's hermeneutical crossway between language and lived experiences.

¹ Sections 1-3 are by Grazia Pulvirenti. Sections 4-5 are by Renata Gambino. Conclusions are by both.

² See Lakoff and Johnson; Turner.

In the recent past, not only religious and anthropological studies,³ but also critical approaches to literature have referred to Ricoeur's method of a rigorous reading "performed against the grain," as Rita Felski pointed out ("Suspicious Minds" 222). Their aim is to highlight the latent or concealed meaning-complexity of literary texts and to establish "not just a cognitive exercise but an orientation . . . a distinct sensibility or disposition whose parameters exceed the specifics of its intellectual content . . ." (219). It is therefore possible to discover in Ricoeur's approach "an ethos of restless questioning and self-questioning" (219). With regard to the role of literary criticism, Felski claims that "a wider history of suspicious interpretation . . . has yet to be written" (*The Limits of Critique* 18). The concept of suspicion has been reintroduced in literary criticism by some scholars, underlying its positive implications,⁴ pointing out the similarity to the detective's attitude and the game theory, although other scholars, like Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, have stigmatized the suspicious style of reading as "paranoid" ("Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading") and constrained by outdated methods of critical theory. On the contrary, we argue that, particularly in the postcritical venture, Ricoeur's hermeneutics may be helpful in reconfiguring the pleasure of deciphering the fictional worlds of literature, challenging the reader to "play" with the literary text intended as a *terra incognita* of inexhaustible multiple meanings.

The framework in which we inscribe the concept of suspicion is not that of post-structuralist or deconstructive literary criticism, but that of neurocognitive⁵ studies about literature. In this frame the attitude of suspicion seems to forecast some theoretical developments with regard to two main issues: a) the neurohermeneutical circle intended as a dynamics instantiated by the suspicious reader questioning the text on cognitive bases, involving his/her sensorimotor system (Gambino and Pulvirenti *Storie, menti, mondi*; "Neurohermeneutics. A Transdisciplinary Approach to Literature"); b) intersubjectivity intended in terms of embodiment. Within this new perspective we will inquire how the suspicious reader is triggered by the literary text to construct and reveal meanings inscribed in the inferential clues, emerging out of linguistic, stylistic, and rhetoric foregroundings. This process leads the reader to reactivate the physiological response addressed by the above-mentioned features of the text, reconfiguring the relation between body and brain in terms of an embodied conception of the reading experience with regard to intersubjectivity.

The theory of intersubjectivity is already present in Ricoeur: "all our relationships with the world have an intersubjective dimension" (*Freud and Philosophy* 386). For him, the whole question of meaning relies in the phenomenon of intersubjectivity: "Every meaning ultimately has intersubjective dimensions; every 'objectivity' is intersubjective, insofar as the implicit is what another can make explicit" (386). The issue of intersubjectivity is at the core of recent theories on cognition as embodied, embedded, enacted, extended, as it has been formulated in the concept of *4E Cognition*,⁶ regarding the coupling of brain, body, environment and action in cognition. Within this frame, the role of body, environment and action has become extraordinarily relevant especially with regard to perception, intentionality, social cognition, culture production and evolution.⁷ Embodiment has been at the core of a radical paradigm-shift in relation to the way of studying brain processes, which are active during the human interaction with the environment, with other humans and objects of experience, during the processes of meaning-making, of knowledge

³ For review, see the works by Felski.

⁴ For review, see Felski, "Suspicious Minds."

⁵ For other attempts of linking Ricoeur's theories with cognitive studies, see Dierckxsens.

⁶ See Neuwen et al.

⁷ See Neuwen et al.

acquisition and therefore also during aesthetic experiences, as the act of reading. The cognitive processes have been studied as rooted in corporeity, while aesthetic experience has been reconducted to the phenomenon of embodied simulation as source of empathy and enaction.⁸ The concept of embodiment puts at the core of the reflection the phenomenon of intersubjectivity as rooted in intercorporeality: it constitutes the basis for human interaction, social mediation and communication, since it determines an agreement about the definition of a set of meanings or about the evaluation of a situation (Gallese and Cuccio, “The Paradigmatic Body”). The assumption that intersubjectivity and therefore creation of meaning are based on common physiological, neurological and cultural dynamics shared by humans leads us to re-consider the hermeneutics of literary text on a new basis.

We have developed a neurohermeneutic approach to literature, considering the literary text as hierarchically constructed and responsive to the functioning system of the embodied mind both from a cognitive and a physiological point of view (Gambino and Pulvirenti, *Storie, menti, mondi*; “Neurohermeneutics. A Transdisciplinary Approach to Literature”). According to our hypothesis, the multilayered surface structure of a literary text prompts specific bodily, emotional and cognitive processes in the mind of the reader. The author, by shaping the surface features of the text —at linguistic, stylistic and rhetoric level—, tries, more or less consciously, to selectively influence specific cognitive processes in the reader, thanks to his/her sharing the same basic human physiological structures and cognitive faculties (*Zeki, Inner Vision; Splendors and Miseries*).

A neurohermeneutics of suspicion, which takes over such issues and Ricoeur’s concept of suspicion, gives back to the reader his/her body and the possibility to question the text with regard to its hidden meanings as not directly expressed by the author’s mind, but as multilayered in the surface features of the text within inferential clues marked by foregroundings (phonological, morpho-syntactic and rhetoric features).

2. Suspicious Mind

Ricoeur theorized the principle of suspicion in his book *Freud and Interpretation* (1970) as the tension to demystification of false truths and lies. He was inspired by the tree masters of suspicion: Freud, who unveiled the dynamics of the psyche, Nietzsche, who questioned the biological reality of false moral assumptions, and Marx, who denounced economic determinism. In their work the very act of understanding is a hermeneutic one, i.e. that of deciphering meanings according to the existence of a primary and secondary level of expression. Therefore, hermeneutics stabilizes the double condition of consciousness rooted in the antinomies “hidden-shown” or “simulated-manifested” (34). In the case of the three thinkers, their act of deciphering is related to an opposite work of ciphering, respectively produced by the social being (Marx), the will to power (Nietzsche) and the unconscious (Freud). In order to deconstruct “the illusion of consciousness” derived by such instances, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud built up their procedures of demystification, all based on the practice of suspicion.

At a linguistic level, suspicion is referred by Ricoeur to the attitude emerging out of the question of interpreting double meanings in utterances and sign systems. Alison Scott-Baumann claims that Ricoeur’s use of the concept of suspicion is not a stable one. In her opinion, the term *hermeneutics of suspicion* does not overlap with the precise meaning attributed by the philosopher in his inquiry about the masters of suspicion. Scott-Baumann

⁸ See Gallese’s studies.

also claims that other scholars' usage of this term does not always coincide with Ricoeur's original intention:

The phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" is often used in philosophy, theology and literature, yet frequently misunderstood: it is usually mistakenly attributed to Ricoeur's book on Freud and seen as almost synonymous with the phrase "masters of suspicion." . . . The phrase is seldom contextualized as part of the significant debate about meaning that Ricoeur conducted. (59)

This statement requires a brief contextualization of the problem, before we go through Ricoeur's argumentation conducted in *Freud and Philosophy*. Scott-Baumann refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer postulating a dichotomy between "hermeneutics in the classic sense," i.e. the interpretation of the manifest meanings of a text, and "the radical critique of and suspicion against understanding and interpreting." The dichotomy between "hermeneutics of respect" and "hermeneutics of suspicion" cannot be overcome in Gadamer's opinion, since this last implies a radical challenge to the "validity of ideas" (Gadamer 313).

By contrast, Ricoeur himself did not consider the two types of hermeneutics as opposed: "One is oriented towards the resurgence of archaic symbols and the other towards the emergence of new symbols and ascending figures" (*The Conflict of Interpretation* 56). Therefore, we claim that the significant point in Ricoeur's theory of suspicion is the association of a negative tension (doubting and unmasking) with a positive one, i.e. the process of recovering meaning, since language itself is conceived by Ricoeur in terms of a "mode of being" (Preface XV). The two different stances, that of suspecting and that of restoring meaning, are deeply intertwined and construct a palimpsest to the whole framework of Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology.

The practice of the masters of suspicion fights firstly against the unconscious act of deceiving others and ourselves in relation to motivations, actions and beliefs. Freud, Marx and Nietzsche deconstructed the principle of conscious, self-conscious and self-knowledge. Already during the basic cognitive process of perceiving and elaborating percepts, the human being is deceived by the fact that perception is not neutral, but influenced by many features, in particular subjective experiences and memories, desire and narcissism (*Freud and Philosophy* 127). In this perspective, the great contribution of the masters of suspicion consisted in unmasking the false principle of consciousness and in putting in action a practice of refusing apparent meanings, doubting profoundly on their true motivations, in search for deep meanings about being human.

Coming now to the hermeneutics of suspicion—which is relevant for our inquiry—it refers to the field of meanings, intended as a substratum hidden under the layer of appearance. Also the process of self-understanding is considered by Ricoeur as "always indirect and proceed[ing] from the interpretation of signs given outside me in culture and history. . . . The self of self-understanding is a gift of understanding itself and of the invitation from the meaning inscribed in the text." (Preface XV). Meaning is therefore situated in words and signs. The hermeneutics of suspicion inquiries the question of meaning in any sign system, from the linguistic one to those expressing human constructs, such as figures, symbols, stories and subjectivity, intended not as impersonal models, but as living bodies embedded in specific historico-political contexts.

Although Ricoeur claimed for the limits of self-knowledge, he believed in the human power of deciphering signs. This gnoseological credo in reading signs is a fundamental attitude of his hermeneutic phenomenology, anticipated in *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967),

and developed in *Freud and Philosophy*, as well as in his studies about hermeneutics. He gave great relevance to the interpretation of symbols as the “place of greatest density”:

It is in the symbol that language is revealed in its strongest force and with its greatest fullness. It says something independently of me, and it says more than I can understand. The symbol is surely the privileged place of the experience of the surplus of meaning. (Preface XVI)

Ricoeur draws back to Aristotle’s *Peri Hermêneias* [*On Interpretation*], arguing that for the Greek philosopher interpretation already means “to say something of something,” and that signification itself is already present in nouns, verbs, propositions and discourse in general (*Freud and Philosophy* 21). Therefore, the act of interpretation begins during the very process of creating an utterance, since “interpretation is any voiced sound endowed with significance—every *phônê sêmantikê*, every *vox significativa*” (21). In Aristotle’s view, interpretation regards the utterance, since “we say the real by signifying it; in this sense we interpret it.” The “signification of the sentence,” i.e. the declarative proposition is already an interpretation of the world: “The break between signification and the thing has already occurred with nouns, and this intervening distance marks the locus of interpretation” (22). With regard to the plurality of meanings which arise from the unicity of life essence, he argues that the unity of references does not make one signification: “The many meanings of being are the categories—or figures—of predication; hence this multiplicity cuts across the whole of discourse” (23).

Apart from the specific practice of suspicion seen as a key to get to different meanings, Ricoeur recollects a sort of history of hermeneutics, starting by the Biblical exegesis, for which the textual interpretation is understood as a precise “science of the rules,” and goes further with the extension of the concept of hermeneutics to an “interpretation *naturae*.” The pivotal point of his concept of hermeneutics is the double concept of restoration and manifestation of meaning:

Hermeneutics is understood as the manifestation and restoration of meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation, or as is sometimes said, a kerygma; . . . it is understood as a demystification, as a reduction of illusion. (27)

Drawing back to Husserl’s *epoché*, Ricoeur anchors his theory in the truth of symbols considered as the fulfillment of the signifying intention; from this assumption he derives the concepts of second meaning (secondary signified) as dwelling in the first meaning (primary or literal signifier). For Ricoeur, hermeneutics is animated by a double motivation:

Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience. In our time we have not finished doing away with idols and we have barely begun to listen to symbols. It may be that this situation, in its apparent distress, is instructive: it may be that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning. (27)

Ricoeur understands human knowledge as tension, *eros*, desire, love, and describes it as consubstantial to the nature of the human being. From this ontological assumption derives the necessity of considering also the act of reflecting as an act of interpretation, rooted in the act of existing “in signs scattered in the world” (46). In fact, the way in which human beings exist is in Ricoeur’s philosophy deeply interconnected with language, as he apodictically points out: “men are born into language, into the light of the logos who

enlightens every man who comes into the world” (29-30). From this assumption follows that the act of using language can be considered under different perspectives: an ontological one, a philosophical one (with regard to the question of consciousness), a hermeneutic one (with regard to the question of symbols and double meanings’ interpretation), all of them unified under the sign of tension.

For the purposes of our research, we are particularly interested in drawing back to Ricoeur’s theories with regard to what he calls “the symbolic,” in which our self-understanding is determined by symbols’ expressivity, temporality and ontological import that they confer to human life. A further significant epistemological issue of Ricoeur’s theory deals specifically with the concept of double meaning in language. His idea of the symbolic goes back to the definition given by Cassirer, who intended the symbolic as referred to the cognitive processes of the human mind involved in organizing the experience of the self and of the world: “*The symbolic* designates the common denominator of all the ways of objectivizing, of giving meaning to reality” (10). Therefore, the symbolic is used by Ricoeur as an umbrella-definition to indicate the cultural tools through which we apprehend and organize cognition: “language, religion, art, science” (10). The symbolic is therefore a field of double or plurivocal meaning expressions. The deriving instability demands a work of interpretation intercepting the multiple meanings intertwined in the semantic texture:

Symbols occur when language produces signs of composite degree in which the meaning, not satisfied with designating some one thing, designates another meaning attainable only in and through the first intentionality. (16)

The symbolic function is also understood as an act of “mediation by which the mind or consciousness constructs all its universes of perception and discourse” (10). Ricoeur claims that symbols attain three main spheres: the first one, the most pervasive, is the sacred, in which actions and expressions of everyday experiences designate analogously other experiences in the universe of discourse, like rituals of purification, i.e. washing, burning, burying, or symbolic images, i.e. the crooked path, the heaven, the water: “The world’s expressiveness achieves language through symbol as double meaning” (15). The second field of the symbolic is the oneiric one, in which it is attested that manifest meanings, which can be reconstructed in the narration of the dream in a wake condition, are only “translations” of hidden meanings, which must be unveiled. The third field of the symbolic is “that of poetic imagination” (15), whereby Ricoeur does not conceive imagination as a process of presenting absent things or of giving form to mental images, but as a linguistic act that creates a new dimension of being through the expressive power of language and “at the origin of articulate being” (15).

What have these different symbolic fields in common? The principle of the *analogon*. It gives rise to the shift from the literal meaning to a “second degree” meaning:

I am carried by the first meaning, directed by it, towards the second meaning; the symbolic meaning is constituted in and through the literal meaning which achieves the analogy by giving the analogue. (16)

This relationship is not stable, but variable, and it may be an “innocent” one or a “cunning distortion” (without excluding the psychoanalytic latent one): this is a relevant issue for our interpretation of literary texts, since both forms—the innocent analogy and the cunning distortion (camouflage)—may be present in different proportions, according to different textual typologies and to the author’s communicative intentions. For instance,

the stratification of meaning in poems is more complex than in narration, because of poetry's extreme linguistic, stylistic and rhetoric formalization. In poetry as well as in narration we may find different proportions of innocent analogy and cunning distortion, according to precise or unconscious choices of an author. In any case, Ricoeur considers the first meaning—explicit at the level of the literal expression—as disguising or revealing a “second meaning.” It is up to the reader to discover the second meaning by undergoing a process of skeptical questioning, discovering the ambiguity that characterizes the symbolic:

[Ambiguity] is not a lack of univocity but is rather the possibility of carrying and engendering opposed interpretations, each of which is self-consistent. (496)

According to this view, we claim that what Ricoeur postulates about the symbolic may suit literary texts, if we consider them as complex devices with plurivocal meanings, i.e. as verbal textures in which meanings coexist and are not only given in immediate ways, but also hidden or concealed in apparently plain expressions. In his article entitled “Existence and Hermeneutics” (1974), Ricoeur defines the symbolic as the “structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first” (12). The act of understanding goes in one with that of interpreting and is rooted in the double meaning of language, since “interpretation organically belongs . . . to double meaning” (*Freud and Philosophy* 19).

How is it possible to understand the second meaning? This question has induced us to put in relation Ricoeur's concept of multiple meanings and the principle of suspicion to the neurohermeneutic approach that we have developed in previous studies (Abramo, Gambino and Pulvirenti, “Cognitive Literary Anthropology”; Gambino and Pulvirenti, *Storie Menti Mondì*; “Neurohermeneutics. A Transdisciplinary Approach to Literature”). The common issue regards the consideration of the literary text as a device and source of an abundance of meanings. This “density of manifold meaning” (*Freud and Philosophy* 4) prompts the very process of understanding, leading to an act of interpretation which consists “less in suppressing ambiguity than in understanding it and in explicating its richness” (49). In a literary text, the presence of multiple meanings activates in the reader the process of interpretation, i.e. moves the need of stabilizing the horizon of understanding: “the very excess of meaning puts the interpretation in motion” (17). The structure of a literary text with its ambiguities prompts interpretation: “there is something to unfold, to dis-implicate” (16). Double meaning prompts the reader's mind “to unfold” the textual ambiguities, getting sense out of the text.

3. Multiple Meanings

Ricoeur addressed the question of multiple meaning in “Structure and Hermeneutics” and in “The Problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem,” understanding it as a linguistic phenomenon deriving from the fact that one expression, while signifying one thing, at the same time signifies another one, providing a meaning by means of another one in a semantic perspective (28). He explains this phenomenon as implicit in any linguistic attempt of expressing extralinguistic reality, requiring to consider the text as an open universe of signs, functioning in the relationships with external instances as the reader, and his/her subjective experiences, knowledge and cultural context. The question of multiple meanings is situated by Ricoeur at the crossway between hermeneutics, intended as understanding of the self and of the existence, and structuralism,

focusing on a system comprehension, linking them as the existential and the objective (“Existence and Hermeneutics” 30).

In the field of structuralism, the question of multiple meanings had been extensively treated by Jurij Lotman in his *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Lotman conceived the “poetic language”—referring in general to the literary one—as a “second degree system,” in comparison to natural language, on the grounds of the peculiar relation of the language features producing multiple meanings (104). In his approach, he regards meaning and its ideological implications as relying in the poetic structure of language: “The idea content of a work is its structure” (12). The “structural” features of a literary text, its specific “artistic model”—as it is constructed by the author—display the author’s mental and inner world and consequently his/her way of thinking about the world (12). Lotman understood the meta-structured poetic text as different from communicative and informative ones, because of its pre-communicative features, i.e. the literary text does not intend to communicate, but to trigger experience in virtue of its formalized features. The relationship between idea content and structure reflects that between life and the biological mechanisms of the living world: life is the function of the living organism and cannot be conceived outside it:

Life, the main property of a living organism, is unthinkable outside its physical structure; it is a function of this working system. The literary scholar who hopes to comprehend an idea independent of the author’s system for modelling the universe, independent of the structure of a work of art, resembles an idealist scholar, who tries to separate life from that concrete biological structure whose very function is life. (12)

Formalized features are not just ornamental or persuasive elements, they are ambiguous and communicative at the same time, i.e. they produce a “noise,” using the concept of William Paulson (*The Noise of Culture*), leading to the emergence of infinite new levels of meaning (Lotman 66) and stimulating a creative *longing* in the reader. In fact the organizational nature of the poetic text displays an infinite potentiality relying on the peculiar play “between redundant order and informative surprise” (Paulson 43). The poetic text goes beyond a conventional, causal and linear word-sign system, compelling the reader to create new secondary or tertiary signifying systems and codes. This multiplication of levels of meaning, relations and codes constitutes the essence of the literary language and elicits the emergence of meaning out of the literary reading process: “What is extra-systemic in life is represented as poly-systemic in art” (Lotman 72). The peculiar qualities of a literary text are emergent, context-dependent and complex. The reader does not disclose all the various semantic layers implied in the literary text, so that some of them remain not decoded, or, as Paulson says, “noisy.” The literary text—more than any other—drives the reader to activate unique and specific dynamic relations between all elements of the text, in order to construct meaning.

4. Embodiment and Intersubjectivity

Literature can be seen as rooted in corporeality and as mirroring a process of complex interactions between brain, body, environment and its historical, cultural and social contexts.⁹ The reader may discover the most refined inferential and representational mechanisms, which preside over the creation of a fictional world of inexhaustible

⁹ See Thelen.

meanings, by enacting the literary representations, i.e. by *embodying* the fictional world with his/her own background knowledge, emotions, memories and experiences.

At the origin of the complex and only partially known process of reading a literary text there is the phenomenon theorized and defined by Vittorio Gallese as “embodied simulation.” It functions on the basis of motor simulation, which is part of the phenomenon described by Gallese as “motor cognition,” whereby cognitive abilities, such as the identification of motor purposes in the behavior of others, as well as the anticipation of actions, are possible because of the functional architecture of the motor system, which is organized in terms of motor actions with specific purposes. In the words of David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese:

Our capacity to pre-rationally make sense of the actions, emotions and sensations of others depends on embodied simulation, a functional mechanism through which the actions, emotions or sensations we see activate our own internal representation of the body states that are associated with these social stimuli, as if we were engaged in a similar action or experiencing a similar emotion or sensation. Activation of the same brain region during first- and third-person experience of actions, emotions, and sensations suggests that, as well as explicit cognitive evaluation or social stimuli, there is probably a phylogenetically older mechanism that enables direct experiential understanding of objects and the inner world of others. (198)

Motor processes imply not only the kinetic or dynamic components of actions, but also the motor representations of the purposes of actions. They are perceived at the level of the motor system in the interaction with others. In fact, there is a close anatomical and functional relationship between action and semantics, that is, a sensorimotor integration between the action of the subject in relation to an object and its meaning: some areas of the brain (including the frontal, parietal and temporal) produce something like a *copy* of the motor patterns in order to perform actions with respect to things in the world and in relation to the coding of meaning in reality.¹⁰ According to the concept of embodied simulation, as Vittorio Gallese and Valentina Cuccio pointed out, the common denominator given by the physical body and its characteristics allows to infer emotions and moods also through reading:

Compelling evidence shows that humans, when processing language, activate the motor system both at the phono-articulatory and at the semantic level. When listening to spoken words or looking at someone speaking to us, our motor system simulates the phono-articulatory gestures employed to produce those very same words. Furthermore, processing action-related linguistic expressions activates regions of the motor system congruent in somatotopic fashion with the processed semantic content. Reading or listening to a sentence describing a hand action activates the motor representation of the same action. (11)

As a consequence, the bodily, i.e. the physiological and emotional substratum, amplifies the possibility of “inferring” significant qualities in the text well beyond the rhetorical categories. The possibility of such a form of “inference” is based on the concept of “intersubjectivity,” which takes part in the process of embodied simulation. Gallese and Cuccio theorized the concept of intersubjectivity as a consequence of the discovery of mirror neurons:

¹⁰ See Gallese et al. “Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex”.

One of the consequences of the discovery of mirror neurons was the possibility of deriving subjectivity from intersubjectivity at the sub-personal level of description. The sense of self is precociously developed, beginning from a self that is first of all physical and bodily, and which is constituted precisely by the possibility of interacting and acting with the other. Embodied simulation can provide the neurobiological basis for early forms of intersubjectivity, from which the sense of the self is built. The discovery of mirror neurons and the simulation mechanism would therefore seem to further stress that being a self also implies being with the other. . . . The discovery of mirror neurons gives us a new empirically-grounded notion of intersubjectivity connoted first and foremost as intercorporeality—the mutual resonance of intentionally meaningful sensorimotor behaviors. (8-9)

Intersubjectivity implies our ability to share emotions and sensations with others, recruiting the same visceromotor and sensorimotor brain areas activated when experiencing the same emotions and sensations of others. Intersubjectivity may be seen as the result of embodied simulation, letting us “feel for” and “empathize with” other human beings. This process is especially prompted by literature, when the reader experiences images and fictional characters as if they were part of the real world. This perspective changes radically our way of regarding literary production and reception, since it sheds new light on the pivotal role played by the sensorimotor engagement of our body in aesthetic experience.

5. The Dynamics of Neurohermeneutics of Suspicion

The activation of the sensorimotor system is implied by any production of mental imagery and reception of literary texts. It presides over the complex dynamics that the author carries out in the elaboration of his/her own experience of the world in mental representations transformed into language, thus becoming symbols and metaphors of a “second degree” world, i.e. the fictional world, characterized by what Ricoeur defines double meaning. Embodied simulation presides also over the act of the reader,¹¹ who is *guided* by the text in creating his/her own imaginal world according to his/her perceptiveness, cultural background, experiences, memories, emotions and imaginative faculties.¹² Ricoeur assigns to the reader the meaning-making process, intending it as subjective reconfiguration of the author’s fictional world¹³ and as disclosure of secondary meanings out of the primary ones.

How is it possible to disclose secondary meanings assuming a suspicious stance? Drawing back to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics (*Hermeneutik und Kritik; Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*), we have proposed to describe the relation among author, text and reader as a circular dynamics, involving bodily, emotional and cognitive processes, i.e. in terms of a neurohermeneutic circle. This holistic perspective intends to phenomenologically observe the reader’s meaning-making process while reading a literary text, by reconfiguring some of the bodily, mental processes, conceptual attitudes and intentions, put at stake by the author, organizing his/her own world in terms of the “formalized language” of literature. In this perspective meaning does not rely in either the text, the author, the reader or the cultural and cognitive context, but in the complex and dynamic relationship involving all of them within a productive act of imagination. In the

¹¹ According to reception theory studies, we refer to the “actual reader” responding to a text in different subjective ways and at different levels of awareness, while receiving and modifying mental images during the reading act, in relation to his/her subjective knowledge and experience of the world and of the self. In this regard see *The living Handbook of Narratology*.

¹² See Abramo, Gambino and Pulvirenti.

¹³ See Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*.

perspective of our neurohermeneutic approach (Gambino and Pulvirenti, *Storie, menti, mondi*; “Neurohermeneutics. A Transdisciplinary Approach to Literature”), the text is considered as a cognitive device reflecting basic mental dynamics, which are selectively elicited by the author through the linguistic, stylistic and rhetoric features of the formalized language of literature. These affect the body and the imaginative, emotional, cognitive processes of the reader while identifying the inferential clues of a text, starting by the analysis of the structural, stylistic and rhetoric foregrounding features. In this way the question regarding the reception of literary texts, already studied by Wolfgang Iser within the frame of reader-response theory (*Der Akt des Lesens; Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*), transdisciplinary converges with the linguistic, stylistic and semantic analysis of literary criticism and with cognitive discourse analysis. The neurohermeneutic approach gives back to the reader and the author the presence of their body and brain functions in the creative and interpretative act, reintroducing in literary discourse the concept of the author’s intentionality, this time at the cognitive level and in the act of creative production.

Intentionality is a key-issue in many critical discourses and requires here some explication, since it is the pivot principle of our shift from Ricoeur’s philosophical perspective to the cognitive studies about the act of reading literary texts. Intentionality as attributed to the real author has been concealed from the heuristic frame of New Criticism and Poststructuralism. But studies in psychology and in cognitive linguistics have rediscovered this concept at the crossway between language and cognition. In fact, assuming with the cognitive studies on conceptual metaphors by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (*Metaphors We Live By*), that metaphorical thinking is one of our main mental faculties, it should be possible to interpret the textual web of structures and formal features of a text as *traces* unveiling “the author’s conceptual attitudes and motivations,”¹⁴ prompting specific mental processes in the reader. In the words of Margaret Freeman:

Following new discoveries in psychology and neuroscience, literary critics are beginning to reappraise the roles of writer, reader, and text. With the rise of Cognitive Linguistics came the idea that conceptual metaphorical structure could provide insights into the human mind, so that a natural move is to explore what these structures might reveal about the author’s conceptual attitudes and motivation. (1181)

We refer also to the concept of the author’s intention put forward by Mary Crane, who understands it as the “conscious and unconscious mental experiences of perception, thought, and language” (*Shakespeare’s Brain* 4) imaginatively reconfigured by the author’s embodied mind in linguistic *traces* inscribed in the structure of the text. Such *traces* are the result of specific choices among the various phonological, syntactic and rhetoric possibilities which emerge out of language as expression and extension of cognitive processes. Linguistic choices happen at an unconscious level, as already theorized by Saussure for the linguistic laws in general. Therefore, with *intentionality* we do not refer to a conscious faculty of the author conveying contents and ideas, but to his/her choice of linguistic tools in order to trigger in the reader some peculiar mental processes.¹⁵ What is

¹⁴ See Freeman and Crane.

¹⁵ Such assumption takes over the groundbreaking neuroaesthetic studies conducted since the Nineties by neurologist Semir Zeki, who demonstrated through his research on the visual brain that “the overall functions of art is an extension of the function of the brain” (*Inner Vision* 72). In the same frame he argues that “artists are neurologists, studying the brain with techniques that are unique to them. . . . Or, rather, that they are exploiting the characteristics of the parallel processing-

significant is the way in which the reader processes textual features as traces of conscious and unconscious intentions of the author, since the very act of reading does not entirely rely on rational or linear processes, as it has been empirically proved by Arthur Jacobs' *fiction feeling hypothesis*¹⁶ (Schrott and Jacobs, *Gehirn und Gedicht*).

By linking Ricoeur's principle of suspicion with neurohermeneutics, we are able to focus on the reading act while the reader's mind is triggered by the authorial conscious and unconscious intentional instances hidden in the text, to creatively activate his/her own exegetical process among a plurality of meanings. In Ricoeur's perspective this means that the reader's task is to dive into the text-structure to discover latent or ambiguous meanings. The perspective of suspicion is what transforms a common reader in a suspicious interpreter:

Interpretation, we will say, is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning. In this way, I retain the initial reference to exegesis, that is, to the interpretation of hidden meanings. Symbol and interpretation thus become correlative concepts; there is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning, and it is in interpretation that the plurality of meanings is made manifest. ("Existence and Hermeneutics"¹³)

In the frame of the neurohermeneutics of suspicion, we see the reader as the initiator of the dynamical process instantiated by his/her tension to decipher the inferential clues in relation to their textual situatedness and sub-textual domains and to the broad background of linguistic, ideological, social, political, cultural constructions. This is not due to the text being "symptomatic" of social or economic conditions, but to the fact that the text interacts with the context in which it is situated because of the intersubjective relationship of readers and authors.

The reader's interaction with the real world makes the neurohermeneutic process become an open circular system that involves the author, the text and the reader in a

perceptual systems of the brain to create their works, sometimes even restricting themselves largely or wholly to one system, as in the kinetic art" (*Inner Vision* 77).

¹⁶ According to the fiction feeling hypothesis no proper neuronal system for art reception has been developed during human evolution. Therefore, the affective and aesthetic response that we experience during the reading act must be processed by ancient emotion circuits, which are shared with mammals. The dual system mode refers to different modalities of processing reading: the first system, which involves an implicit processing, instantiates an automatic route which processes the background elements in the text. This route relies on the left hemisphere reading network, evoking non-aesthetic fiction feelings. The second system is based on the activation of a slower route processing foregrounded elements in the text, mainly employing the right hemisphere reading network. The first route is faster and operational in activating situation models. The second route is slower and is activated in aesthetic processes, supported by emotions and basic neural systems related to pleasure. As Arthur Jacobs has proven, the faster route involves fluent reading (with short fixations, large saccades, and low affect ratings), whereas the slower route involves slowed reading (with long fixations, small saccades, and high affect ratings) ("Towards a Neurocognitive Poetic Model" 142). Any text presents in different proportions background elements (e.g., familiar words, motives, scenes) and foreground elements (e.g., defamiliarizing stylistic and rhetoric devices). The background and foreground elements activate separate routes (immersion vs. aesthetic appreciation). Following Arthur Jacobs and Roel Willems, these routes depend on "different neurocognitive processes (i.e., implicit vs. explicit processing) and reading behaviour (i.e., fluent vs. not-fluent reading)" ("The Fictive Brain" 5).

dynamic of continuous hiding and unveiling.¹⁷ This process may be described as exquisitely dialogical, based on the assumption that processing language corresponds to the activation of the same sensorimotor region engaged during perception and action according to the above mentioned theory of embodied simulation.

In order to achieve a comprehension of the text that goes beyond the surface level, activating the principle of suspicion, the reader has to capture and *decipher* the “inferential clues” inscribed in the text as *traces* of the authorial intentions, which *guide* the reader towards the determination of latent meanings. Inferences occur by reading a text and are related to the process of drawing a conclusion from supporting evidence. The interpretive stance, implied by the principle of suspicion, orients the reader to integrate the literal meaning of the text with prior knowledge of a variety of sorts, since “comprehension is a constructive process reflecting interactions among reader, text, and task occurring in a particular sociocultural context” (Goldman, McCarthy and Burkett 387). The adoption of such an interpretive stance depends on the task endorsed by the reader and on the reader’s prior knowledge of the world, the domain, the text characteristics and coherence standards and also on the communicative intent of the author. In contemporary theories of discourse, the interpretive stance is characterized by comprehension and representation, i.e. the literal level—or textbase—either reflects the explicit information given in the text or can be inferred with use of prior knowledge. The reader’s production of the situation model put forward by a literary text goes beyond what is explicit in the text and needs to operate at a more deep or global level (so for instance: psychological instances of characters or thematic interpretive inferences¹⁸). As Arthur Jacobs and Roel Willems claim:

Making meaning of a literary text or poem requires more than comprehending words and sentences, in particular the mental (re-)construction of the situation described by a text—situation models—hypothesized to arise through the integration of a reader’s knowledge of the world with information explicitly presented in the text. (2)

Specific patterns of language or rhetorical devices may be understood as *traces* of the author’s communicative intentions. Therefore the interpretive stance not only draws on the literal meaning but also connects or associates literal with contextual knowledge, general tendencies about human nature, life’s principles, personal experiences, etc. This happens on the basis of a mutual resonance of intentionally meaningful sensorimotor behaviors and of principles that seem to govern the way the world operates. Empirical studies have revealed that by assuming an interpretive stance, text-inferences are mainly text-derived instead of simply text-based, i.e. the interpretive act (exercise of suspicion) activates personal, creative and imaginative faculties in the reader.¹⁹

Literary texts are characterized by a surface and a deeper level of meaning, i.e. the surface text purposefully “uses conventions providing clues to deeper meaning” (Goldman, McCarthy and Burkett 395). Some elements of literary texts are charged with potential relevance, appear in privileged positions, are phonologically, syntactically and semantically stressed, create breaks, seem obscure or out of place, are metaphoric, symbolic, satiric, etc., i.e. they are foregrounded and therefore build inferential clues for the interpretive stance, as McCarthy and Goldman pointed out (“Reading beyond the lines”; “Constructing Interpretive Inferences about Literary Text”).

¹⁷ See Ricoeur. *The Rule of Metaphor*.

¹⁸ See Goldman, McCarthy and Burkett.

¹⁹ See Kintsch and Van Dijk.

The identification of such clues requires the suspicious reader to bring together information from different parts of the text, putting them together with prior knowledge, producing a personal mental imagery and activating the process of meaning-making beyond the apparent univocal meaning.

Inferential clues emerge out of the phenomenon of foregrounding, as already theorized by David Miall and Don Kuiken (“Foregrounding, Defamiliarization and Affect”), provoking defamiliarization. Such features should be detected in relation both to the inner coherence of the text and to the contingent epistemological frames reconstructed by the investigation into the historical, social, cultural, philosophical, linguistic and aesthetic specificities of the epoch. An interpretive stance generally involves the active participation of the reader in moving beyond the specific text or situation, and in elaborating the explanatory inferences of the clues that operate in the text. In this sense, we consider the foregrounding features as the pivot around which the literary text can be interpreted, thus disclosing what is latent, plurivocal or ambiguous.

The term *foregrounding*—presumably introduced by Paul Garvin (19) as an English translation of Mukarovsky’s Czech term *aktualisace*²⁰—appears closely linked to Rosenblatt’s second level of text understanding (interpretation) in Geoffrey Leech’s linguistic poetry theory. In linguistic terms, the foregrounded figure appears “on the language background which a reader picks out as the most arresting and significant part of the message and interprets by measuring it against the background of the expected pattern” (57). According to Miall and Kuiken, foregrounding elements are supposed to prompt defamiliarization in the reader, are referred to a range of style effects and are considered as “the hallmark of literariness” (“Foregrounding, Defamiliarization and Affect” 337). Their hypothesis states that “when perception becomes deautomatized, a reader employs the feelings that have been evoked to find or to create a context in which the defamiliarized aspects of the story can be located” (392). Defamiliarizing elements often violate the expectations created by the narration and more often regard: a) time sequence (e.g. flashbacks, time shifts, time compression or time expansion); b) space organization (e.g. narration situated in fantasy worlds, narration developed in parallel worlds; environment obeying to conditions different from the natural laws); c) characters’ motivations (e.g. aims of actions which are not clearly defined or contradict themselves); d) characters (e.g. with regard to his/her identity, purposes and behaviors); e) cause-effect relations (e.g. expected events do not happen or unexpected ones break the logical emplotment).²¹ The identification of foregrounding features has inspired a lot of empirical work not only with regard to narration, but also to poetry,²² trying to understand whether and how rhetoric figures prompt specific forms of emotional experience and elicit the meaning-making process and the aesthetic response.

To study the significance of these elements in interpreting a literary text, in creating the corresponding mental imagery and in activating the readers’ meaning-making process, we have developed the Foregrounding Assessment Matrix (FAM), trying to define and shed light on the basic linguistic foregrounded features at sub-lexical, lexical, inter-lexical and supra-lexical level, featuring them within phonological, morpho-syntactic and rhetoric categories (figures of sound, speech and thought). Though these categories may imply a certain degree of simplification, this analysis has revealed that most foregrounding strategies are applied on the same parts of the text, giving rise to what we have called

²⁰ See Leech.

²¹ See Norenzayan et al.

²² For a review, see Schrott and Jacobs.

density fields, i.e. parts of the text where more foregrounding features overlap, becoming a sort of “attention attractor” (*Storie, menti, mondi*). These fields, so highly foregrounded against the background,²³ seem to be relevant in predicting the aesthetic and cognitive response of the reader and correlate with stronger semantic activations and meaning-acquirements (95-100). Density fields are plurivocal and ambiguous, because they are the result of overlapping foregrounded features, and elicit to adopt the suspicious interpretive stance in order to acquire their hidden or secondary meanings. Density fields are therefore hallmarks that can be considered also as clues inducing suspicion and may be detected according to the “cognitive principle of relevance” (Sperber & Wilson), i.e. analyzing the mental representation of the “state of affairs” denoted by that part of the text, as Rolf Zwaan notes (“Situation Models, Mental Simulations, and Abstract Concepts” 1028) and of the deautomatization of an intuitive or situated processing. Therefore, density fields, which possess greater qualitative diversity than everyday stimuli,²⁴ may be considered as triggering the reader’s sensorimotor system, since the reader imaginatively enacts an own inner experience to mentally create the fictional world. Despite individual predispositions towards imagery, recent researches have proved that all readers experience mental images grounded in all sensory modalities.²⁵ By creating a mental image of what is proposed in the foregrounded stretch of text (“Situation Models, Mental Simulations, and Abstract Concepts” 1028), the reader becomes the *experiencing body*: personal phantasmata, memories and emotions become alive in order to enact an individual sensorimotor representation of that experience.

Following the research conducted by Rolf Zwaan, the sensorimotor and symbolic representation, elicited by the interpretive stance, mutually influence each other. Therefore it is plausible to assume that reading a text requires not only the cognitive process of unfolding the symbolic figurations—in Ricoeur’s terms—but also the activation of sensorimotor representations.

According to our hypothesis, different inferential clues and foregrounding features *guide* the reader “to fill in the gaps” of the text, with regard to its latencies, ambiguities and fluctuations, in order to stabilize the imaginal experience, rooted in the embodied reality of the personal memorial, emotional and cognitive background. The reader is triggered by suspicion—which is induced by textual foregrounded features—to unfold the condensed world of the linguistic, stylistic and rhetoric features, allowing his/her body and perceptiveness to interpret the inferential clues emerging out of the foregrounding by means of the common instance of having a body. In fact, the act of interpreting literary texts starts by the authorial imaginative process of a lived experience which becomes symbolic in the text and finds a suspicious interpreter in the reader, who is able to *unfold* the hidden or latent meanings into the whole range of physical, emotional and cognitive elements of a fully lived experience.

²³ Much less research has been devoted to the role of backgrounding features of literary texts, i.e. what Iser called the “repertoire” of a text. We claim that focussing on foregrounding features needs to take into account the background, because the reader’s meaning-making process results out of the relation among contrastive elements. Only with regard to the “repertoire” of a text it is possible to assess textual features “defamiliarizing” the “base-line” either at linguistic, rhetoric and semantic level or at logical level with regard to the textual coherence and to the respect of the vital relations, expressed in specific situation models (time, space, entity, causation, and motivation) as Arthur Graesser and Rolf Zwaan pointed out (“Inference Generation and the Construction of Situation Models”).

²⁴ See Cupchik

²⁵ See the studies of Kintsch and Kuzmičová.

6. Conclusions

The goal of this essay is not to prove how Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion has become attractive to recent literary criticisms. Instead, this paper tries to recover the practice of reading texts "against the grain," in order to highlight the circularity of reading and interpreting within a dynamics involving the author's communicative intentions, the text with all its features, the reader with his/her body and mind and the external historico-political and cultural context. In this perspective, reading literature can be studied as an enacted, embodied and embedded process by which both understanding and the aesthetic response mainly rely on the author's possibility of intercepting and influencing the reader through language, thanks to the fact of sharing the same basic instances of having a human body and mind processes common to all and peculiar to none. We have drawn back to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion, since in our opinion it opens new perspectives on the embodied cognitive processes involved in the interpretive stance, meeting recent theoretical, cognitive and neurological studies on the act of literary reading.

At the crossway of Ricoeur's practice of suspicion and our neurohermeneutic approach, it is possible to highlight the circular dynamics within a unique creative process involving perception, emotion, memory, cognition and imagination. The fictional representation of feelings and emotions, of actions and motions, produces an intense activity of the imagination appealing to the bodily simulation and the sensorimotor system. The reader, who is driven by the stance of suspicion, is able to discover and unfold the inferential clues of the fictional world of the literary text, focusing on the counterintuitive features and responding with his/her embodied involvement in the text, imaginatively simulating through his/her body and mind the literary world.

This perspective allows us to gain new interpretations of the literary text, searching for latent and hidden meanings that the human mind needs to construct or recover in order to stabilize unstable elements of the real world as well as of the literary one. The phenomenological analysis of this process highlights how the interpretation of literary texts engages the reader into a dialogical experience based on the common instances of sharing a language and a body situated in the world. Driven by the stance of suspicion, the reader is able to enact the text letting the two imaginative worlds (that of the author and that of the reader) resonate²⁶ in the interpretative experience, thus recovering the latent meanings through a process of questioning manifest features, ambiguities and inferential clues multilayered at the surface of the literary text. Suspicion is the motor of this process which rewards the interpretative effort through the aesthetic pleasure of discovering and constructing meanings, giving sense to our human existence in this world.

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²⁶ See Zwaan, "Motor Resonance as a Function of Narrative Time."

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