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Novel Reading and the Self in Flux

“No Two Persons Ever Read the Same Book” – Edmund Wilson

The quote from the American writer and man of letters raises the question as to what a book does to readers that they should come out not reading the same book. The meanings of words can derail in the most strange ways and when reading a novel it is not uncommon to hear people describing the experience as magical. But as this paper will show, the trick to this lies in the readers as much as it does in the text.

Lisa Zunshine, in her book *Why We Read Fiction*, asserts that our ability to attribute characters with inner life is what makes literature as we know it possible. The theory-of-mind, which explains that ability, rests on the notion that characters are at the heart of good stories. However, I believe Zunshine misses another process which takes into account the relationship between reader and text through hermeneutics, or the interpretation of text. Gabriella Starr's book, *Feeling Beauty*, which links hermeneutics with aesthetics, provides an opening to explain that “magical” experience of reading a novel that complements Zunshine's explanation of why we read fiction.

Combining the views of Zunshine and Starr, I therefore present the following argument: The novel reader fluctuates between two points of view, the fictional character and the detached observer, and that this dynamic is central to the reading experience. I further suggest the experience may lead to moments of self reflection without the autobiographical self that constitutes a reader's sense of identity. In *Feeling Beauty*, Starr does not directly make the

connection between aesthetics and novel reading, focusing instead on what she calls the sister arts of painting, poetry and music. Even so, if her explanation works for poetry then it should also help explain the pleasure we take in reading novels. In *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, Paul B. Armstrong shows how, just as in experiencing art, the act of reading requires the reader to engage in an openness of interpretation out of which not only meaning arises but also beauty. I will explain that the activity of interpreting text can only be done by a reader who has enough distance from the story to reflect back on the text. Thus I argue it is the reader as the detached observer who can enjoy the novel writing's aesthetics. Starr believes that central to aesthetic experience is the brain's Default Mode Network. She says the default network underpins our awareness of our surrounding and it "contributes to our ability to envision alternative states and futures, to imagine other people; and it helps shape our sense of self-awareness, both of our bodies and of our thoughts" (64).

In her research, Starr identifies components of the brain's Default Mode Network that she argues are engaged in intense aesthetic experiences and in the process of theory-of-mind. That the two processes possibly share the same network in the brain, suggests a fluid shift between the points of view of character and the detached observer, which I will point out, will have a bearing on our experiencing the novel.

This paper will be a literature review of recent research on the topics of novel reading and aesthetics. It will focus on the works of Zunshine and Starr as well as Armstrong whose explanation of hermeneutics and the brain is indispensable to my argument. The discussion on how the reader's self fluctuates between two points of view will tap into research that explain some of the neurobiological processes involved in reading. The premise is that we engage different components of the Default Mode Network when shifting between the two points of

view. It is however important to note that the nature of brain scans, on which some of the research is based, lend themselves for interpretations rather than definite conclusions and that therefore the representations provided by functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) cannot be presumed to be exact¹.

In laying out my arguments, I will divide the paper into six sections. I will start with explaining the brain's Default Mode Network in order to define the level of separation between the two points of view and thereby the way in which the reader fluctuates between them. This will be followed by a discussion on Zunshine's theory-of-mind to illustrate the process by which the reader navigates various levels of character intentions which permeate the story. I will explain how theory-of-mind affects the reader as she or he assumes the views of the characters. This requires a look into empathy, what functions it has and how it is wired to our brain. The third section shifts the discussion toward the other side: the reader as the detached observer. Here I will explain the role of hermeneutics in shaping our experience of novel reading and how it enables us to perceive the beauty of the novel's writing.

With both points of view explained, I will return in the fourth section to my argument of how the reader fluctuates between the points of view of fictional character and detached observer and what the implication is to our overall experience of novel reading. The fifth part will examine the possible transformation of the reader's self as a result of the dynamics between the two points of view, and this will be followed by the conclusion in the sixth part.

¹ See Ugurbil K, L Toth, Kim DS. in "How Accurate is Magnetic Resonance Imaging of Brain Function"

1. The Brain's Degrees of Separation

What is the Default Mode Network? Starr says it is an interconnected set of brain areas that contributes to our sense of self-identity as well as to our ability to imagine other worlds and other people, adding that it is continuously active when we are awake but not engaged in any particular task. In his book *Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect*, Matthew Lieberman admits that the default network is a “mystery that is still unsolved to this day” (16), asking why the brain becomes more active when the mind is at rest. Although the argument that the default network is in some way related to internally directed mental activity is not universally accepted, regions of this network, in particular the medial prefrontal cortex, have been linked to activities such as internal narrative and autobiographical self², the latter concerning awareness of our personal memories, life experiences and plans for the future. My argument rests on the premise that the reader activates the Default Mode Network when assuming the points of view of both the fictional character and the detached observer. Since they tap into the same network, one can further assume that the shift between the two points of view is not clear cut. This might not be a surprising observation, as character-focused passages can also invoke an aesthetic experience so that the shift between points of view seems indiscernible. But for the purpose of this paper it is important to highlight this ambiguity when showing how the reader's self fluctuates between points of view. In other words, it seems the transition is not as abrupt as when switching between attention demanding activities, which engages the brain's Task Positive Network, and being at rest which engages the Default Mode Network. And even then research has shown that the task and default networks interact with each other³. The transition between points of view might be

² See Fair et. al in “The Maturing Architecture of the Brain's Default Network”

³ See Chen in “Interplay Between Default-Mode and Task-Positive Networks”

analogous to how vision works. The eye sees everything in its field of vision but only focuses on what we want to look at. One might therefore say that the point of view of the detached observer is that of the all-present reader, continuously reading the text in the background and only aware of itself when reflecting back on the text. Outside of the moments of self awareness, the reader's self is immersed in the story through the point of view of the character. This fading in and out is how I believe the reader fluctuates between the character and detached observer's point of view.

2. Character Identification

Dwight V. Swain, whose 1965 book *Technique of the Selling Writer* is considered a classic, describes how a character can be transformed into a person by giving him something he cares about and place him in a situation where his principles are put to test. The core of the character, Swain says, lies in each individual person's ability to care about something, to feel implicitly or explicitly that something is important. The reason Swain places importance for characters to have something to care about is that it generates motivation. Motivation translates into intention, which according to Zunshine is critical to understanding why we try to read other people's minds. Zunshine says that mind-reading then, or theory-of-mind, is a term cognitive psychologists use to describe the ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and desires:

The very process of making sense of what we read appears to be grounded in our ability to invest the flimsy verbal constructions that we generously call "characters" with a potential for a variety of thoughts, feelings and desires, and then to look for the "cues" that allow us to guess at their feelings and thus to predict their actions. (10)

An example of such mind reading would be to make a poker face to bluff other players or trying to read through other people's poker faces. Intention is so central to story telling that it is considered the driving force of a story, as Swain explains "a story is a succession of motivation-reaction units" (60). All of this has the desired effect of propelling the characters, and with it the plot, towards the inevitable climax. Thus the ability to mind read is important to keep track of the various levels and changes of intentions that move the story forward. This may explain Zunshine's confidence when she says she does not think herself in danger of overstating anything with her claim that the novel exists because humans are creatures of theory-of-mind. However, it does not mean that navigating multiple layers of intention is easy. Theory-of-mind is defined as second-order intentionality in a statement such as "Peter thinks Margaret is hungry," yet some novels incorporate complex levels of intentionality. Zunshine says that once people get to the fourth level of intentionality in statements such as "A wants B who seeks C who in turn desires D," they have difficulty tracking intentions. Such prose demands careful attention from the reader. It therefore helps if characters are interesting enough to capture readers' attention and this is where developing empathy for fictional characters is important. The assumption is that if a reader identifies strongly with the fictional characters, he or she will develop enough interest in their fate to engage in the level of theory-of-mind needed to keep track of the plot and enjoy the story.

In *Empathy and the Novel*, Suzanne Keen defines narrative empathy as the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition. She writes character identification invites empathy but

spontaneous empathy may also open the way for character identification. Either way, empathy helps put the reader firmly in the point of view of the character.

This brings me back to the question of what happens to the reader as he or she is embedded in the character point of view. Starr suggests that two components of the Default Mode Network, the temporoparietal junction and the medial prefrontal cortex, are involved in theory-of-mind. She argues that “while the default mode network does subservise concepts and experience of the self, it is not a self in isolation, a self unmoored from the social world, especially the social world that is other minds” (61). But the default network may not be the only parts that are engaged in theory-of-mind, with research showing that the ability to empathize may be located in another part of the brain as well. Embodied simulation is an early system for empathy handled by the Mirror Neuron System, according to an article at the *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* that examines the link between the Mirror Neuron System and the Default Mode Network⁴. “Embodied simulation implies transforming perceived actions and emotions into our own inner representation of those actions and emotions” (3), the article says, adding that this involves the interaction between the Mirror Neuron System and the limbic system. The Mirror Neuron System may be interacting with the Default Mode Network which involves the higher-level cognitive empathy of theory-of-mind, as they integrate their signal to produce the required stimuli for future action, it says. Lieberman makes a clear distinction between theory-of-mind and empathy. Citing philosopher Robert Gordon, he suggests theory-of-mind and mirror neurons represent two different modes of predicting other people’s intention, the former through inference the latter through simulation. Therefore it seems that the two components of the Default Mode Network involved in theory-of-mind are not enough to explain our ability to

⁴ See research by Szakacs at al. “Self Processing and the Default Mode Network: Interactions with the Mirror Neuron System

develop empathy for characters considering that Mirror Neuron System is also involved even if it is for the lower-level cognitive version of empathy. In short, for readers to be immersed in the point of view of the character, they must likely also develop empathy alongside the ability to mind-read.

3. The Detached Observer

As the term suggests, in the detached observer mode the reader steps back from the characters and views the story or the passage with enough detachment to reflect on it as a reader. This account is called the pluralist approach which according to Amy Coplan in her article “Empathic Engagement With Narrative Fiction,” allows for readers to be deeply involved in characters’ experiences without relinquishing their separate identities. This is to say that the “reader empathizes but also reacts to what is learned through empathizing and to information he has access to that characters may not” (148). I therefore argue that the detached observer is also involved in theory-of-mind in the sense that this point of view helps the reader conjure mental images or understand the plot which are vital in learning characters’ intention. Zunshine says lush descriptions contain pathetic fallacy, meaning they attribute human feelings to inanimate objects and that therefore pathetic fallacy prompts readers to exercise theory-of-mind in a different way. For example a scene depicting a heavy thunderstorm at night enables readers to set the mood of the characters as they enter the villain’s castle. Reading these passages may elicit aesthetic experiences for readers yet are also important moments for mind-reading character intention.

Even so, throughout the novel readers may encounter passages that evoke a mental image which requires us to pause and reflect on it without thinking of any characters. Some novels

begin with long passages of descriptions or expositions before a single character is introduced. Descriptions are sensory, applying images, sound, smell, taste to create a world inside the reader's mind that serves as the setting for the characters to later come alive. The point of such description is often to help readers disengage with the real world and glide into the imaginary world, or to remain there if they are already deeply reading. As readers construct this fictional world they are absorbed with the image that gradually emerges inside their mind. What is important to note is that, unlike in a movie, building this mental image requires the active participation of the reader. In other words, it requires work. And that work is done by the detached observer, regardless of whether he or she works in the background or is quite conscious about it. The harder the image to construct, the more consciously the mind has to work on it. Zunshine claims that readers wishing for a more immediate gratification of her mind reading adaptations may find long descriptive passages as superfluous and tedious. To illustrate the point that such descriptions puts the mind consciously at work, I will quote a passage from the novel, *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem. Its protagonist observes a church spire outside his apartment, using this image as a way for self reflection. The description is necessary for theory-of-mind (the image of the church as validating his existence) but we are more likely to read the passage as a detached observer to evoke the image in our mind, despite the character at one point interjecting himself into the description:

Against a white sky the stones of the church are gray-brown. They're smutched, like scraped toast. Against blue, the stones reveal an earthiness. Sienna? Umber? In sunset, the church nearly looks blue. Darker stones are bricked at right angles, lines of mortar visible between them, while lighter stones form the tight-jointed and apparently seamless

triangular spires which cluster, one atop the other, each owned with a small stone cross, nesting toward the single highest cross at the peak. The long A-frame roof is dusky black, not shingled but smooth, and lined with a ridged ornamental top and gutter, both a shade of copper-gone-green like that of the Statue of Liberty. Windows framed in lighter stone take the shape of a snub, rounded cross (A Celtic cross possibly? Or do I just mean it reminds me of a shamrock?) Other windows, in the smaller spires, are formed in clusters of three upright lengths, with arched tops. I've never seen anyone in any of those windows. I doubt they open. You'd think they ought to be colored glass, and perhaps they are, but they appear black. (124)

Reading a passage like the one above requires us to stitch the image of the church spire piece by piece, and as we mentally work through the description of one piece we must at the same time hold on to the ones before it so that by the end the whole image is constructed mentally. Furthermore, from the above example a number of lines may prompt readers to involuntarily pause if only for a fraction of a second: smutched like scraped toast, nesting toward, copper-gone-green like that of the Statue of Liberty. For a moment we are to imagine scraped toast and apply that color to the stones of the church. Then we are to use the image of birds nesting and appropriate not the nest but the act of nesting to a small stone cross. These examples make use of metaphors and just like reading a passage of description, metaphors, if they are to be original, require the reader to work his or her imagination which therefore engages the detached observer more intensely. Metaphors such as "hot as hell" however are clichés, their overuse have exhausted them of their power to surprise. Making new connections between

seemingly unrelated ideas requires work but results in pleasure in reading in a work-reward process that I will later explain in more detail.

It is not only description that requires the active participation of the detached observer. Whenever the reader tries to make sense of the plot, be that retracing developments or figuring out the characters' positions within a setting, she does so as a detached observer. Without understanding what happened to a particular character for instance, the reader would have difficulty understanding the reactions of the other characters and thus their intentions in subsequent scenes. Taking pleasure in plot twists is also an experience that readers enjoy as a detached observer as it calls for the ability to see across multiple character intentions and map out the consequences when the story takes an unexpected turn. The surprise of finding out for example that the character's best friend turns out to be a serial killer is frightening for said character but for the reader it might be the novel's most memorable moments. Thus, as Coplan said, the reader is involved with the character without relinquishing his or her own identity.

As mentioned earlier, the detached observer is the one that does the actual reading but stays for the most part in the background as the reader experiences the novel through the lens of the characters. Through the use of descriptions and story developments, the reader may momentarily detach from the character not just to reflect on the writing's aesthetic but also to aide him or her with the comprehension of a passage or a plot development, which are vital for mind reading. Next I will explain the notion of hermeneutics and aesthetics to show how the detached observer reads and how this relates to the reward-pleasure process I mentioned above.

4. Free Play of Cognitive Modes

Considering the central role characters have in any story, every word in a novel should in theory contribute toward helping understand characters' intention, which in turn improves mind-reading. Yet in practice the author cannot control what the reader will actually do with the text or how the text will affect the reader. Consequently not all passages serve the author's intention of helping us read minds. This bit of uncertainty is not so much anyone's failure to either write or read correctly than it is a characteristic of the text itself, which opens up for interpretation. In his book *Is There a Text in This Class?*, Stanley Fisher makes it a point that disagreement over the meaning of a text are "the means by which facts are settled" (338) and not the other way around, saying "facts emerge only in the context of some point of view" (338). Inasmuch as the facts refer to extracting meaning out the text, this point of view I argue is that of the reader reading, the detached observer. A reader who is too immersed in the character lacks the space to interact with the text. When and how the text puts the reader into the detached observer mode depends not only on the author deciding what to write but also on how the reader as an individual person relates back to the text. The reader's personal history plays a role in deciding which passage of the text quiets his or her interest. As explained earlier the process by which the reader fluctuates between the points of view of the character and the detached observer is, I believe, similar to that of how vision operates. The detached observer in the background will emerge to the foreground, meaning that the reader's awareness of reading increases, when triggered by passages that require mental work which then sharpen into focus. These passages might be elaborate descriptive scenes, metaphors, twist developments or sometimes the giddy anticipation of the impending climax.

Again the uncertainty with which the reader interacts with the text is the result of the unique way each person can interpret a text. The interpretations of the text, or hermeneutics, plays an important role in our reading pleasure because passages that for instance contain descriptions of landscapes, outer and inner, can make the novel come alive. Ignoring hermeneutics, and with it the role of aesthetics, is where I believe Zunshine's theory-of-mind falls short of explaining the full scope of the reading experience. For her, long descriptive passages are a diversified form of theory-of-mind, engaging the readers in a different way of mind reading and thus it appears that in her view the aesthetic of the author's writings may be of little value. But for the detached observer, these passages may contain nuggets of beauty that are to be savored just as one enjoys mind-reading. Reading is not a linear process in which words are added together, according to Armstrong:

Reading a text requires the recognition of patterns, and a pattern is a reciprocal construction of an overall order and its constituent parts, the overarching arrangement making sense of the details by their relation to one another, even as their configuration only emerges as its part fit together. (54)

Thus, Armstrong claims, readers engages in hermeneutics whenever they attribute meaning to a text. The result is that of harmony which is "not uniformity or homogeneity but, rather, a structure of interrelated differences" (43).

We have seen how the detached observer plays a role in helping readers understand and enjoy plot twists. This enjoyment is not only the result of the detached observer's mind-reading ability but also of engaging in hermeneutics. Armstrong says that surprise is the disorienting

experience when parts do not fit our expectation of the pattern and we must reorient ourselves by reconfiguring those parts until they fit. This process, according to him, depends on our expectations and anticipatory understanding of part-whole relations. Once we have reoriented ourselves, the resulting new understanding produces pleasure, which Starr links to our reward system that is inherent in our aesthetic experience. Rewards, with the process of memory, binds experiences and perceptions in a web of associations, she says, adding “the engagement of the default mode network in intense aesthetic experience, however, may open wider horizons for such associations, reaching deeper into one’s sense of self and of social relations” (51).

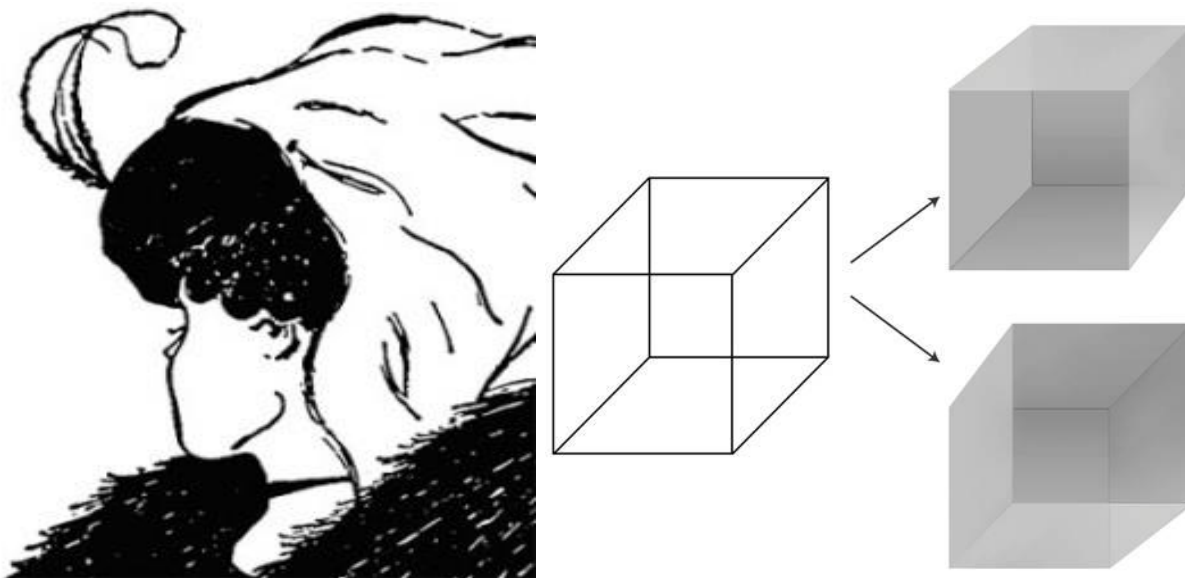
I argue that this reward system that is activated by our aesthetic experience from reading parts of the novels, be that metaphors or story twists, gives us pleasure that provides an alternative reason of why we read fiction outside the pleasure we take from engaging in mind-reading. And since interpretation requires the ability to reflect back on the text, it is the reader as the detached observer only who can derive meaning and beauty from a text.

I have explained how theory-of-mind and empathy engage certain parts of the brain, which although hypothetical, help us estimate which areas of the brain are active when readers take on the point of view of the character. I will now attempt the same for the reader assuming the point of view of the detached observer. Knowing the difference helps illustrate how the brain fluctuates between the two modes of reading and thus the dynamics of the reading experience.

Our ability for interpretation stems from the need to extract meaning from the uncertainty of life itself, according to Armstrong and Starr. We seek patterns to provide stable constructions of data from an ever changing external world, says Armstrong. He uses the example of vision to explain the neurobiological bases of hermeneutics, saying that the brain *sees* because it combines parts into meaningful wholes that in turn give meanings to parts. In the same way, he says,

language is made accessible to us as the brain creates patterns through reciprocal connections between different neurons in different parts of the brain. Armstrong describes the process as the bottom-up and top-down interplay of brain areas, explaining that the to-and-fro play through which neuronal assemblies form is the neurobiological basis of what he calls the hermeneutic circle. Again vision is an example where we can see the brain exercising this hermeneutic circle:

Fig. 1. Ambiguous figures, drawing of woman from W.E. Hill and of necker cube from Christof Koch, *The Quest for Consciousness* (270)



On the left we see a young woman turning her head away from us in an image that at the same time is also that of an old woman in a headscarf, her eyes being the young woman's left ear. The right image is that of a necker cube which prompts us to view it either slightly from above, with its open side facing left, or slightly from below with its open side facing right. The images change meaning depending on how the brain interprets the image it received. Engaging

in hermeneutics, Armstrong says, not only characterizes how we read text but also how we perceive the world.

Armstrong does not say which part of the brain we use in engaging in hermeneutics. But if hermeneutics plays a crucial part in our ability to experience aesthetic, which Armstrong emphasizes it does, then Starr's Default Mode Network may be involved in hermeneutics. Starr attributes the feeling of intense aesthetic experience to activity in the Default Mode Network, in particular the anterior medial prefrontal cortex, which gives weight to external sensations that have internal relevance and involve actions and experiences such as daydreaming, making judgments about oneself and assigning oneself personality traits. Intense aesthetic experience also involve areas in the posterior cingulate cortex, the substantia nigra and the hippocampus. She says the posterior cingulate cortex is the central node in the Default Mode Network, having the most active connections to the rest of this network and is closely linked to human awareness. The posterior cingulate cortex and the anterior media prefrontal cortex interact to create a platform for reflection on self and surroundings as well as for internal mentation, Starr says. While the substantia nigra is composed of neurons that produce dopamine that is essential for reward processing, while the hippocampus, along with the posterior cingulate cortex, is involved in memory processing. How all this ties up into one fluid operation Starr explains:

The rebound to baseline in the anterior medial prefrontal cortex, combined with the shift back toward baseline in the posterior cingulate cortex and similar activations in the substantia nigra and hippocampus, indicates that the default mode network is important to aesthetic experience in its ability to mediate the interconnectivity of the internal and external worlds, an interconnectivity lit up by pleasures and reward. (62)

Based on the apparent functions of the components in the Default Mode Network and her description on how it works during aesthetic experience, we may speculate as follows:

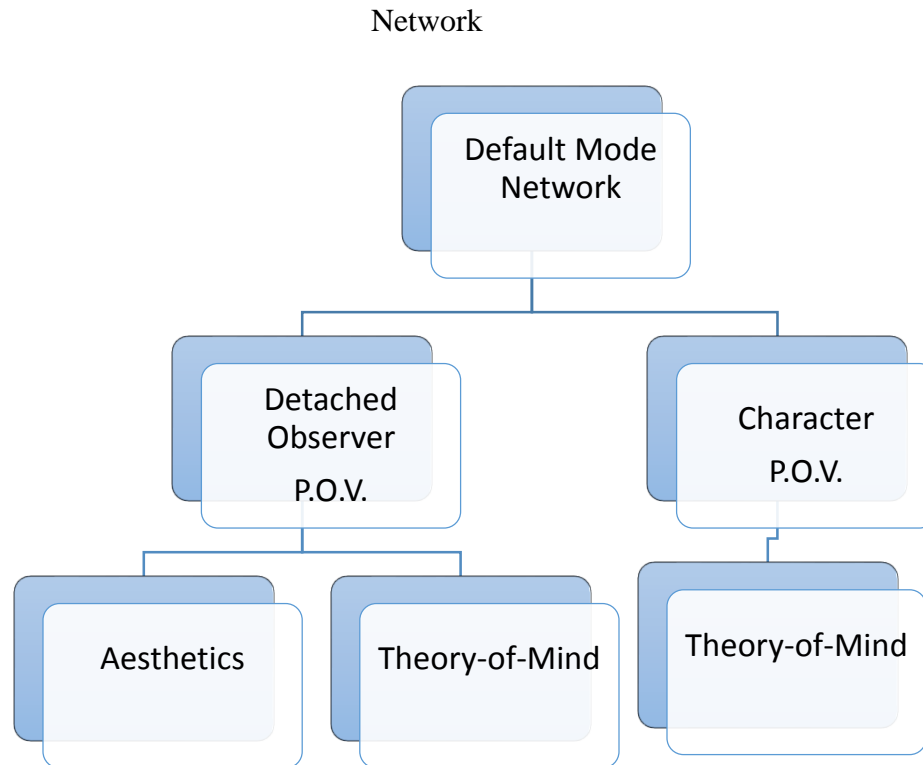
1. The posterior cingulate cortex and anterior prefrontal cortex engage in reflection, the back and forth play of the mind as it configures and reconfigures information
2. the hippocampus retrieves memory against which the text is compared
3. and assuming the resulting image of the back and forth play leads to an aesthetic experience, the substantia nigra will produce dopamine to reward the work

Starr's description of hermeneutic and in particular how intense aesthetic experience expands one's horizon for making associations is similar to Kant's notion of the free-play of cognitive faculties. By free-play he means that imagination and understanding ought to freely harmonize without the imagination being constrained by understanding as is in the case of cognition⁵. Here it is worth pointing out that Kant too sees judgment of beauty, as he calls it, as being based on feeling which hinges on the observer's disinterest in the object of beauty; in other words to prevent one's judgment of beauty from being clouded, a certain detachment from the object is required. Thus it is the reader as the detached observer who does the actual reading, reflecting the text back on him or her and thereby engaging in the act of hermeneutics that make possible our uncovering of the text's meaning and beauty.

The following graph summarizes the relationship between the points of view of character and detached observer, and between aesthetics and theory-of-mind.

⁵ See Ginsborg, Hannah "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology" for a more detailed explanation

Fig. 2. Graph on roles of detached observer, character identification under Default Mode



As the graph shows, the reader may be engaging the brain's Default Mode Network when assuming the point of view of the character and the detached observer. As both points of view engage in theory-of-mind, this might somewhat confuse the distinction. This is to say that theory-of-mind engages both parts of the Default Mode Network that are involved in the character and detached observer points of view. It is therefore easier to differentiate between the two points of view by looking at the different brain functions they may be using, the former uses hermeneutics while the latter uses empathy. Again the separation is not clear cut as hermeneutics may also help readers develop empathy for characters. Nevertheless, the reader as the detached observer appears to engage components in the Default Mode Network that are primarily self

reflecting whereas those components involved when the reader experiences the novel through the character are likely more related to the social world. The one is self-reflective, the other is social.

5. Transformation of Self

In this section I will discuss the part of my hypothesis that helps explain how reading a novel may affect the reader's self. Considering that mind-reading is key to functioning in a social setting, Zunshine argues that reading a novel allows us to test our cognitive adaptation for mind-reading, and as long as we are able to enjoy the story, it provides a pleasant confirmation of that ability. "Many of us enjoy such stimulation and need it as a steady supplement to our daily social interactions" (25), she says. Lieberman sees theory-of-mind as central in allowing us to imagine what other people think and feel and how their reactions to certain events would be, all of which he argues is part of evolution as we live in an interdependent world. He says mammals developed the ability for making social connection some 250 million years ago, primates evolved to mind-reading abilities 20 million years ago and homo sapiens evolved further to harmonizing, in which group beliefs can influence our own, 200,000 years ago. The self, Lieberman claims, exists primarily as a conduit to let the community supplement our natural impulses with social derived impulses that imparts a collective belief about ourselves, morality and social values. Lieberman cites George Herbert Mead and Charles Cooley, two psychologists in the early 1990, as saying that it is hard to look inside to know who we are and thus we tend to look to others intentionally and unintentionally to find out. This looking out is what theory-of-mind provides but the information needs to be reflected back on the reader in order for it to gain value and be absorbed as knowledge. Starr and Armstrong would argue that this is done through hermeneutics as we learn to appreciate art and reading.

The part of the brain that appears to be engaged in self-referential thought is the anterior medial prefrontal cortex, a component of the Default Mode Network, which as mentioned earlier is active during moments of intense aesthetic experience. The reader as the detached observer can experience beauty and engage in theory-of-mind and thus is able to reflect on outside information. Starr and Armstrong argue the benefit of experiencing aesthetic is in its ability to make new connection between values where previously there was none and in this way help us navigate ourselves in an ever-changing world. “I believe that aesthetic experience helps us understand a world we cannot fully predict, helps us value things that are new and learn how to compare what seems, at first, incommensurable” (26), Starr says.

What is intriguing is that in the case of the character point of view we become less aware of our identity, and our brain, wired for connection as Lieberman argues, takes over and directs us to think about others. And not just about the characters in the novel. The closest thing we can get to entering another person’s mind is through reading, according to author Siri Hustvedt. “We have access to a stranger’s internal narrative,” Hustvedt writes in her book *The Shaking Woman, Or, A History of My Nerves*. “Reading after all, is a way of living inside another person’s words” (104). In a novel this may be the downside of theory-of-mind, when the reader detaches from the story and mind-reads the intention of the author who is supposed to stay invisible.

Whether the reader is immersed in the novel through the point of view of its characters or immersed in the aesthetics of its writing as the detached observer, in both instances the reader’s autobiographical self is put aside. The reader may unconsciously tap into his or her personal memories (hence the involvement of hippocampus in aesthetic experiences) to make sense of what is being read, but there is little room for the autobiographical self to exert its presence during moments of either empathy or aesthetic experience. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in

his book *The Feeling of What happens* describes autobiographical selves as autobiographies made conscious. It is the self that is aware of our personal memories, the sum total of our life experiences and the plans we have made for the future. It seems impossible to think about the self without also thinking about one's autobiographical self, which after all produces one's very identity. But there is no room for consciously thinking about memories and plans if the reader is immersed in a novel, even the detached observer is too busy with the text (but not with the story itself). In fact, vital to any good story is its ability to detach us from our autobiographical selves and plant us firmly in an imaginary world. As the reader fluctuates between the two points of view of the fictional character and the detached observer, the reader's self becomes unmoored from its autobiographical self. Describing the impact of this on the reader's self is speculative at best, with Lieberman and Starr directing their discussion of theory-of-mind and aesthetics along the lines of their benefits in evolution. Even so, I will propose a different route, building on my discussion of the two points of view.

I earlier explained out how the transition between the two points of view is ambiguous, noting that theory-of-mind and aesthetic experience seem to engage both the Default Mode Network. I showed how the ability to mind-read relies on the reader being immersed in the character and be detached as well, producing moments of self reflection during aesthetics experiences even while thinking about others. This intersection of points of view, I propose, allows readers to combine two apparent mutually exclusive experiences which in the real world might not be possible. In other words, it may enable self reflection without the autobiographical self standing in the way between the "I" that reflects and the "I" in the reflection. The result might therefore be the effacing of the autobiographical self while still being aware of one's own consciousness.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out with the question of how reading a book leads to different experiences which some might call magical. Zunshine's theory-of-mind provides a compelling reason for our interest in novel reading, but as I have argued, does not quite answer our question. Because Zunshine did not set out to examine the effect of novel reading on the reader, I believe she missed an element that would have accounted for a fuller explanation of why we read fiction and a probable answer to our question. What she left out is the hermeneutic of the detached observer that triggers the imagination to play outside the bound of mind-reading. Hermeneutics enables us to access the novel's aesthetic elements and the pleasure it produces makes it another reason why we read novels. The interplay between engaging in theory-of-mind and aesthetic experiences has also a transformative effect on the reader as it seems that reading diminishes one's autobiographical self. This raises the question of what emerges in its place. In answering this, I made a speculative suggestion that the experience of novel reading produces moments where the reader reflects upon itself without the autobiographical self standing in the way. Precisely because this mode of being is the self without the autobiographical self, the latter cannot be aware of its own absence. Thus it seems to follow that when reading a novel the resulting dynamics of the reader's self engaging in theory-of-mind and reflecting upon aesthetic experiences can lead to moments of simple self awareness as such.

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