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On Implicated Readers and Spectators: A Response Piece

Hanna Meretoja

This special issue explores what it feels like to be implicated in histories of violence – to be part of intergenerational communities in which we inherit responsibility by inhabiting and benefiting from regimes of domination. It has been a pleasure to read these three articles, which address in a multifaceted way the potential of narrative fiction and film to create a sense of implication in readers and viewers. They develop useful vocabulary for analysing how works of art can self-reflexively draw attention to the positionality of those who engage with them. In particular, the articles explore and flesh out the concepts of the implicated reader and the implicated spectator. These refer to positions of receivers who are addressed by works of art in such ways that they become aware of their own position as an implicated subject, as someone who is neither a victim nor a perpetrator but rather part of regimes of injustice by indirectly contributing to them or benefiting from them.[1]

I will here comment on the articles from three intertwined perspectives: reader-response studies, narrative studies, and affect theory. My approach is informed by my own work in which I have dealt with issues of implication from the perspective of narrative hermeneutics and an interest in the connections between narrative studies, memory studies, and ethical inquiry revolving around the notion of collective responsibility.

Reader-Response Studies: The Implicated Reader and Spectator

Michael Rothberg uses the notion of *implicated reader* in his monograph *The Implicated Subject* (2019), Jennifer Noji fleshes it out as a theoretical concept, and Arielle Stambler further develops it in her article. Noji links her work on reader implication to recent scholarship that examines 'how literary form, and not just content, can implicate readers in political violence as well as investigating how real readers actually respond to such works'.[2] In my view, the work by Noji and Stambler makes an important contribution to recent efforts to build bridges between narrative studies and cultural memory studies.[3] It is important to pay attention not only to thematic aspects of narrative fiction but also to its formal aspects, to how narrative structures participate in creating the position of an implicated reader. While the study of the implicated subject benefits from close attention to narrative practices, narrative studies also benefit from close attention to the ways in which narratives implicate readers. For this dialogue to be productive, however, it is important to go beyond the formalist and cognitivist approaches that dominate

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contemporary narratology and be attentive to the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which narrative practices are entangled, to the traditions they perpetuate and challenge.

Noji discusses the use of second-person address in Jamaica Kincaid's book-length essay *A Small Place* (1988), in particular how it 'creates an "I"/"you" division, situating readers in the position of white tourists located in opposition to Black Antiguans' and how it formally and rhetorically situates 'you', the reader, in the position of an implicated subject, responsible for the suffering of the 'I/we', not only in terms of present-day Antiguans' suffering from poverty and exploitation but also in terms of the longer history of colonialism and slavery. Stambler, in turn, discusses how the 'we narration' of Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) hails readers who consume oil, invites them to imaginatively inhabit the role of an implicated subject, and 'encourages an attention to positionality that is both self-reflexive and de-centring'. Both Noji and Stambler insightfully analyse how the implied reader is also an implicated reader with respect to the structural violence that the analysed texts depict.

In developing the concept of the implied reader, Noji draws on Wolf Schmid, who defines it in terms of 'the image of the recipient that the author had while writing […] that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs'. She argues that here the implied reader refers to 'a text's intended recipient *and* points to aspects of its structure, because whom an author imagines while writing influences how the text is written, which ultimately affects how real readers experience the text'. She also refers to Wolfgang Iser's idea of the implied reader that 'designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text'. There seems to be a certain tension between, first, Schmid's notion, which (in the tradition of Wayne Booth's rhetorical approach) ties the implied reader to the author's intentions and involves the psychological idea of 'an image of the recipient' in the author's mind, and, second, Iser's phenomenological reception aesthetics which distances itself from the idea of authorial intention, analyses the readerly position constituted through the narrative structures of the text, and, in line with the attempt of the Constance school to bring together poetics and hermeneutics, pays close attention both to aesthetic form and to interpretation understood as historically mediated interaction between the text and the reader, a process in which the meaning of a text only takes shape when it is read.[4]

To my mind, a psychological understanding of the implied reader as an image in the mind of the author is problematic not only because we cannot have access to the author's mind but also because it presupposes a psychologistic understanding of meaning as if it were something that can be traced back to the author's mental images. I suggest that for the study of the implicated subject a theoretically more productive approach would be a historically, culturally, and socially oriented understanding of meaning-production, which acknowledges that the implicit readerly position of a text cannot be

reduced to the intentions of the author but, rather, emerges from the broader cultural and social world in which the text is produced and of which the author can only be partly aware. As Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it, to be 'historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete'.[5] Hence, from a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, meaning emerges in the encounter between the world of the text and the world of the interpreter, in how readers negotiate the readerly positions offered to them. This means that as we interpret, through careful attention to the text, the reading position that it proposes, we also need to consider what contextual knowledge it expects readers to have and what evaluative positions it invites readers to take, acknowledging that these may go beyond the conscious ideas the author may have had.

Such acknowledgment is in line with the approach of Iser who hails from the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition and sees reading as a creative process that unfolds the text's 'inherently dynamic character'.[6] Iser emphases that the formal structures of a text affect the reception but do not unequivocally determine it. The ambiguities of texts allow readers to take on an active role as interpreters who produce meaning while using their imagination in their engagement with the text. In narratology, in contrast, the phenomenological and hermeneutic (and more broadly contextual) aspects of how readers make sense of the text and give meaning to it tend to be sidelined and the implied reader is generally seen in terms of the author's intentions and/or merely formal aspects of the text.[7]

The perspective of the implicated reader requires taking readers to be socially and historically situated, part of histories of violence and injustice, not merely abstract readers with certain cognitive competences. It calls for a historical, social, and cultural approach that goes beyond the formalist, rhetorical, or cognitive focus of narratology. In fact, even Iser's approach can be criticised for being too abstract from the perspective of scholarship on the implicated subject, since he does not pay differentiated attention to the different heterogeneous, historically situated reading positions from which readers engage with literary texts. As Kaisa Kaakinen points out, Hans Robert Jauss (who is also part of the Constance school of reception aesthetics but draws more on a Gadamerian historically sensitive approach) is more attentive to the changing historical conditions of reading, and he analyses 'the way in which a literary work is both a mediated response to the context of its production and responded to by readers, who read it in relation to their specific expectations that change through time', but in order to be sensitive to contemporary contexts of decolonisation and globalisation, we need even 'more differentiated tools able to distinguish between different kinds of historically situated reading positions and conditions of interpretation active in the same present'.[8]

In fact, I see the contributions by Noji, Stambler, and Maria Anna Mariani as addressing the need for tools or reading strategies that pay differentiated attention to historically situated, heterogeneous positions of reception. Despite Noji's reference to 'the image of the recipient' in the author's mind, the way I see it is

that in practice, rather than basing their argumentation on authorial intention, all three of them show how the works they analyse create the position of an implicated reader or spectator through their narrative strategies, by hailing the readers and spectators as part of the histories of violence depicted by the texts/film.

In focusing on actual reader responses, however, Noji moves beyond the notion of an implied reader to study the actual responses of real readers, as they are formulated on the online review platforms of Goodreads and Amazon, and thereby interestingly shows how readers can respond to the position offered to them in varying ways, either taking it up or refusing it or relating to it ambivalently or indifferently. Noji suggests that we can answer the question 'what does implication actually feel like?' by analysing such online reviews. However, there seems to me to be a certain tension between the complexity of actual reader experience and the short responses invited by the online review platform through its specific affordances and limitations. It would be worth reflecting on the implied reader evoked by the platform itself, as it invites readers to take on a position based on a scale from one to five stars and expressing the evaluative response in a brief, affectively charged form, basically urging the reader to say whether the work is 'good' or 'bad'. It would be interesting to see, in future work, if it were possible to study, through other methods (such as interviews or creative writing exercises), the complexity of actual readers' engagement with the position of an implicated subject.

Stambler interestingly refers to Mihaela Mihai's idea of how works of art can trouble our 'attachments to dominant – comfortable and reductive – narratives' and analyses how Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* interrogates narratives that 'we tell ourselves about our places-in-the-world'. Perhaps it could be said that the novel has *metanarrative* aspects, thematising dominant narratives and critically engaging with them.[9] In future work, it could be productive to further elaborate on the potential of narrative fiction to make us aware of culturally dominant narratives that reinforce structural injustices. This perspective also points to the insight, elaborated in narrative hermeneutics, that narrative is not merely an object of interpretation but a 'mode of interpretation' in its own right.[10] The novel Stambler analyses provides a critical interpretation of culturally dominant narratives and explores alternatives to them. In further research, it would be interesting to study the potential of metanarrative strategies to create a sense of being implicated in problematic webs of narratives, in narrative traditions that perpetuate regimes of domination.

The interpretative role of the receiver emerges explicitly in Mariani's article, which brings out the value of the affect of rage in disrupting the equation between distance and indifference. She analyses how Pier Paolo Pasolini's essay film *Rage* unsettles this equation and invites us to recognise our implication in injustices that may feel distant from us:

> '*Rage* critiques the emotionally sterile, passive, and disinterested gaze of the spectator who watches other people's suffering as a

> bystander. Pasolini calls for the opposite: a gaze that must actively interpret what unfolds before it. This is the gaze of someone who recognises that they are fully implicated in the events shown, someone who, despite remaining a spectator, loses the privilege of distance and the brazen luxury of indifference.'

The film can be seen as a fragmented narrative that encourages the spectator to take on an active role in interpreting the fragments and in reflecting on the associations created through the technique of montage. Mariani perceptively analyses the work the film requires spectators to do: by undoing chronology, it invites viewers to search for alternative ways of linking the fragments together, and this is clearly a process of interpretation and a process of meaning-making. From political apathy and numbness, we need to be awakened, time and again, to feel outrage about the injustices of the world. This is precisely how the film works: it provokes readers to feel rage and thereby activates them to demand justice. By inviting spectators to critically engage with its material the essay film urges us from passivity to activity. Pasolini advocates 'a gaze that is transformed into an active interpreter of what unfolds before it and that, despite the distance, feels implicated in the events shown'. By foregrounding the process of interpretation Mariani shows the relevance of issues of meaning-making to the study of the implied receiver as an implicated receiver.

Narrative Studies: The Relevance of Narrative Hermeneutics

Even though the concept of narrative is important for cultural memory studies, not least because narrative practices play a crucial role in shaping cultural memory, there is surprisingly little sustained theoretical discussion on the concept of narrative in this field. Often memory scholars who refer to narrative do not explicate what conception of narrative they employ. In particular, I would welcome awareness of how not all approaches to narrative are theoretically compatible with historically, socially, and culturally oriented approaches to memory. Narratology, the most dominant field of theorising narrative in literary studies, has its starting point in the universalistic, ahistorical traditions of structuralism and (more recently) cognitive studies. Neither one of these traditions approaches narrative as a historically changing, socially embedded, and culturally mediated phenomenon.[11] Narrative hermeneutics provides an alternative to ahistorical narratological approaches. It conceptualises narrative as 'a *culturally mediated practice of sense-making* that involves the activities of *interpreting* and *presenting* someone's experiences in a specific situation to someone from a certain *perspective* or perspectives as part of a *meaningful, connected account,* which has a *dialogical* and a *productive, performative* dimension and is relevant for the understanding of *human possibilities* (past, present, and/or future)'.[12]

This approach suggests that narratives provide interpretations of the world, interpretations that are relevant for how we understand ourselves and our place in the world. It sees narratives as fundamentally cultural and social phenomena that are entangled with practices of power. That narratives are dialogical means

that they take shape in relation to other narratives they draw on, modify, and challenge; they are not mere representations but performative in their ability to create and shape intersubjective reality and our ability to imagine different possibilities of thought, affect, and action. Narrative practices are, hence, integral to our agency, and they have 'bearing on our sense of who we are and who we could be'.[13] This perspective allows acknowledging narratives as cultural practices that contribute to structural injustice. Thinking about narratives as practices of sense-making leads me to wonder whether it might be helpful to include the perspective of meaning-making in the discussion on what it feels like to be implicated. This special issue addresses questions of implication from the perspective of affects, but perhaps we should also include the perspective of meanings, sense-making, interpretative practices in which understanding inextricably involves an affective, evaluative dimension? Such a broad conception of understanding is central to the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition, in which affectivity is arguably an important aspect of understanding as our mode of being in the world.[14] As Rita Felski articulates, the Heideggerian notion of understanding is characterised by 'care' (*Sorge*) and 'mood' (*Stimmung*), which '"sets the tone" for our engagement with the world, causing it to appear before us in a given light'.[15] She acknowledges that interpretation 'constitutes one powerful mode of attachment', and she contributes to 'affective hermeneutics' by analysing how not just our beliefs but also our attachments and moods are transformed through interpretative processes.[16] The hermeneutic tradition sees interpretation as our basic relationship to the world: we always see 'something as something', that is, we give meaning to what we see even in simple sense perception.[17] Narrative hermeneutics suggests that narratives are complex interpretative practices that organise and articulate the world and therefore help us orient ourselves in it. This perspective allows seeing meaning in connection to both affect and action: structures of meaning elicit affective responses and orient our actions, since what is meaningful for us prompts us to act.

As I already mentioned, Mariani's piece alludes to a hermeneutic perspective by emphasising the importance of interpretation in how the spectator gazes at the material put forward by the film. It could also be argued that the film itself provides interpretations of the world, instead of being a mere object of interpretation. The same applies to the texts analysed by Noji and Stambler. Works of art have potential to provide alternative interpretations of the world, ones that help us understand complex issues that are otherwise difficult to understand. In fact, in Stambler's article, one important point is that Mbue's novel succeeds in conveying a sense of structural violence, which (e.g. violence linked to postcolonial environmental degradation) is often more difficult to apprehend than event-based violence suffered by individuals. This raises an important question of how narratives orient us to understand the world and what are the limits of narratives in providing or blocking understanding of certain complex phenomena.

In Noji's article, I am wondering if it is slightly simplistic to focus on positive and negative feelings as articulated in the reader reviews, even though the

online platforms encourage such binary evaluative responses. Reading implication from the perspective of meaning and meaningfulness could help us move beyond the positive–negative dichotomy. In fact, what Noji calls ‘expressions of guilt, self-critique, and resolve to enact change’ is a complex combination of affective and sense-making responses. Meaningful reading experiences are often such that they transform us in one way or another, which means taking distance from our pre-existing views – a process that is existentially charged and can be painful, difficult, and messy.

Noji’s approach also has interesting links to Felski’s work on literary attachments. Felski has discussed ways in which literary attachments are unpredictable and do not necessarily follow our social identities in the real world.[18] Noji makes a similar point: ‘Of course, real-world social identity does not offer a one-to-one correspondence with whom we feel called by or identify with in fiction.’ Perhaps in the future the discussion of what it feels like to be an implicated subject could be broadened to include consideration of the role of (narrative) imagination, for example in connection to the ability to inhabit different subject positions, including those of victims and perpetrators, and of how such imagination can cultivate a sense of responsibility. Narrative imagination, in turn, is one of the dimensions of narrative agency – our ability to navigate our narrative environments.[19] Acknowledging that narratives are not only about texts but that the histories and regimes of domination that implicate us are also narratively mediated opens up a broader perspective for studying the intersections of cultural narratives and a sense of being implicated.

Affect Theory and Empathy

One of the key tenets of this special issue is that ‘the possibility of transforming structures of violence and inequality will require grappling with the problem of affect’.[20] Affect helps explain both why and how systems of oppression persist and why and how it might be possible to change them. The special issue develops a useful vocabulary of affective entanglement, of ‘feeling implicated’. This umbrella terms brings together a wide range of emotions from shame and denial to love, solidarity, and indifference.

Rothberg presents a useful survey of affect theory that has been most relevant to his own ways of thinking about feeling implicated, from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s approach and the Deleuzian tradition to Sara Ahmed’s and Lauren Berlant’s work. Rothberg sees affect as a ‘connecting ligament’ between subjects and histories. Taking distance from Deleuzian approaches that are not historically sensitive, Rothberg sees affect doing ‘work of mediation’ in the context of implication. It mediates between social structures and personal experiences. Although implication primarily concerns relations of power and privilege, affect can explain how individual subjects attach themselves to these structures and relations, even when not accepting them on a conscious level.

This section of three essays shows the power of fiction to reflect on what feeling implicated might feel like. These three articles do not explicitly position themselves in the field of affect theory, but they provide valuable insights on how the affective aspect is part of being an implicated reader or implicated spectator.

In Noji's article the way in which a readerly sense of implication is aligned with positive reviews strikingly demonstrates the importance of emotions in moral psychology and in making ethical evaluations. It may be helpful here to make a broad distinction between two main traditions of theorising moral agency. The sentimentalist tradition, major figures of which are David Hume and Arthur Schopenhauer, argues that emotions play an important role in ethical agency: we are moved by emotions to action. This contrasts with the tradition, reaching from the Stoics to Immanuel Kant and beyond, that takes morality to depend on rationality, our ability to follow universal moral laws.[21] Over the past few decades, affect theory has provided us with rich tools to discuss the role of affects in moral agency; the current contributions on the role of affects in thinking about the implicated subject add a crucial dimension to these discussions.

Mariani's article makes an important contribution to understanding the significance of negative feelings, such as rage, for moral agency. It also shows how affects are not pure, unmediated, or direct but rather entangled with a process of interpretation. A gaze fuelled by rage is a gaze that organises the material it perceives and interprets it from certain perspectives. The intensity of rage indicates that important issues are at stake; it has potential to push us from passivity to actively practicing our agency.

One of the key affects that is framed as problematic in Stambler's article is that of empathy. In her discussion, she draws on Suzanne Keen's approach that defines empathy as 'feeling with' the other. Stambler develops this by discussing the notion of 'white liberal empathy', which is a 'feeling that creates and maintains a power differential between the subject and object of empathetic feeling'. She contrasts Mbue's novel to 'conventional human rights narrative' that aims to elicit empathy in the reader and argues that 'the production of white liberal empathy positions readers as detached witnesses – by which I mean not emotionally detached but imaginatively separate from the injustice they read about'. Throughout the article, she distances her position from that of the 'empathy paradigm'. But is there such a thing as a single empathy paradigm or are there, rather, different conceptions of empathy?

Just as there are different conceptions of narrative, there are also different conceptions of empathy. It is only a certain conception that takes empathy to be about putting ourselves in the shoes of the other, feeling with the other. From a hermeneutic perspective, it is important to retain a sense of distance in attempts at empathy, not pretending to be able to jump into the shoes of another but rather reflecting on the otherness of the other and recognising the necessary

distance between oneself and another.[22] Towards the end of her essay, Stambler writes about 'trying on a new position by seeing oneself refracted in the eyes of another'. From a hermeneutic perspective, this is precisely what an empathetic relation based on dialogue and respect of the otherness of the other should look like. It is about a genuine ethical encounter in which one does not pretend to erase oneself but, rather, puts oneself at play, exposes oneself to the critical gaze of the other. Hence, here again, it is important to acknowledge different traditions of theorising not only narrative but also empathy, and to define one's particular understanding of these concepts. In any case, I fully agree with Stambler's analysis of the kind of experience of being an implicated subject the novel proposes to the reader, and how it involves self-understanding that emerges from the ability to look at oneself from a new perspective, provided by the interpretative horizon of the other who suffers from the regime of violence from which the implicated reader benefits.

In future research, tying affect to issues of sense-making, interpretation, understanding, and narrative agency could be a way of discussing responsibility as something that is not merely a matter of subjective feeling but something very real and intersubjectively grounded. Collective responsibility emerges from our positions in histories of violence, and certain reader/viewer positions can cultivate a sense of feeling implicated because they create an understanding of this positionality in the readers/spectators. Hence, understanding complex historical processes of violence and domination, and a concomitant sense of history, are integral to how narratives affect us affectively, politically, ethically, and existentially.

Conclusion

To conclude, the three essays in this section of the special issue make a significant contribution to our understanding of how literary fiction and film explore issues of implication and collective responsibility. They provide valuable analyses of the diverse ways in which works of art can provoke readers and spectators to recognise their own implication in violent structures. They powerfully show the importance of acknowledging both the temporal and spatial aspects of political responsibility – ways in which we are implicated by what may seem distant to us in time or space and to which we are nevertheless tied whether through intergenerational heritage or through flows of global capitalism. These articles are important contributions to a dialogue between narrative studies, affect theory, and the study of the implicated subject. Further dialogue in this area is much needed, and it is important to clearly articulate what conceptions of narrative and affect are at play in various discussions.

Here I have suggested some possible avenues for further work in this area. It is only through processes of imagination, interpretation, and sense-making that we are moved by literary works and films, and I hope we will see in the future further discussion on the entanglements of affect, understanding, narrative, and agency in the processes of feeling implicated when works of art urge us to

move from passivity to active reflection and action. A culturally and historically oriented line of narrative studies, such as narrative hermeneutics, is highly relevant to the study of the implicated subject if we acknowledge that not only fiction provides us with narratives but histories and regimes of violence that implicate us are also narratively mediated. It is our entanglement in problematic narrative webs that makes us implicated subjects, but often these webs remain invisible and taken for granted. Fiction, film, and other works of art have ethical and political potential to draw our attention to our implication in these problematic narrative webs and to provide us with interpretative resources to resist and challenge them. Hence, it is important to analyse in depth what work different narrative practices do in thwarting or contributing to a sense of feeling implicated in regimes of injustice.

Notes

[1] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*.
[2] Noji refers, in particular, to Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling* and Mihai, *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care*.
[3] See, for example, Laanes and Meretoja, "Cultural Memorial Forms."
[4] Schmid, "Implied Reader"; Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; Iser, *The Implied Reader*.
[5] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302.
[6] Iser, *The Implied Reader*, 275. The implied reader has competences that the text requires so that its meaning potential can be realised. For example, if the text is richly intertextual or satirical, the implied reader is competent in recognising this intertextuality and satirical elements.
[7] See, for example, Schmid, "Implied Reader".
[8] Kaakinen, *Comparative Literature and the Historical Imaginary*, 7.
[9] On metanarrativity understood in terms of 'self-aware reflection on the narratives' own narrativity, on cultural processes of narrative sense-making, and on the roles that narrative practices play in our lives', see Meretoja, "Metanarrative Autofiction: Critical Engagement with Cultural Narrative Models," 121.
[10] Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, 44.
[11] On the ahistorical aspects of narratology, see Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, 7-8, 189.
[12] Ibid., 48.
[13] Ibid., 7.
[14] Ibid., 46.
[15] Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 20.
[16] Ibid., 175.
[17] Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, 6, 44-45.
[18] Felski, *Hooked*.
[19] On narrative agency, see Meretoja, *The Ethics of Storytelling*, and Meretoja, "Implicit Narratives and Narrative Agency: Evaluating Pandemic Storytelling."
[20] Rothberg, "Feeling Implicated: An Introduction," 267.
[21] See Kauppinen, "Moral Sentimentalism."
[22] Meretoja, "Non-Subsumptive Memory and Narrative Empathy."

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