Ralf Schneider

Embodiment and Narrative Theory: Potential and Limitations

- Marco Caracciolo/Karin Kukkonen, With Bodies: Narrative Theory and Embodied Cognition. Columbus: Ohio State University Press 2021. vii + 226 p. [Price: EUR 125,10 (hb), EUR 36,33 (pb)] ISBN: 978-0-8142-8161-1.

The acknowledgment that human cognition is shaped by, and thus indissolubly linked with, lived bodily experience in spatial and social surroundings – embodiment, for short – has given rise to an approach that ranks among the most successful ones in the recent development of literary theories, beside some others, such as Queer Theory and Ecocriticism. The study of the role of embodied cognition in literature, and narrative in particular, links up easily with (neo)phenomenological conceptions of the experiential qualities of human thought, feeling, and action; furthermore, its underpinnings in the broad and multi-disciplinary field of the Cognitive Sciences connects it with a range of current linguistic, psychological, and philosophical research interests in the humanities. Approaches to literature based on theories of embodiment should therefore meet with broad acceptance and approval. The field, however, also has the power to polarize: since it offers some very fundamental new insights into the human mind, it is likely to shake some of the foundations of existing theories; at the same time, to what extent the practice of literary analysis and interpretation, as well as the study of reader response, will be revolutionized on a large scale by the concept of embodiment remains to be seen.

The volume under review, co-written by two of the most prolific contributors to contemporary Cognitive Literary Studies and most ardent advocates of embodiment theories, links the study of embodied cognition (or, »4E cognition«, see below) to central questions of (cognitive) narratology and reader response. It comes at a point in time when, on the one hand, embodiment is on everybody's lips, but on the other, many literary scholars still wonder how precisely embodiment will add to, modify or in some other way affect their own work. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that this book proposes some basic re-conceptualizations of notions prominent in classical and post-classical narratology and reader-oriented literary scholarship, while at the same time highlighting some of the open questions and problems that current cognitive (and, by extension, empirical) literary scholarship is riddled with. In the combination of these two aspects, the book is an extremely valuable contribution to an ongoing discussion, and the (rather unwieldy) title in fact encapsulates both: Yes, we read – always

and necessarily – *with* our *bodies*, i.e., on the basis of our cognitive dispositions, which are formed under the impact of our embodied experiences in the world, and the bodily aspects of narrative storyworlds need to be taken seriously; but to what extent our reading is predominantly or even exclusively shaped by embodied cognition, is still far from clear.

The authors set out to provide a whole range of answers to such questions, and they do so by referring to '4E cognition' as their theoretical basis. It has become common parlance in the cognitive sciences and beyond to address the relevance of bodily experience for the development and use of the mind's conceptual apparatus under that summary label. The term '4E cognition' has emerged almost as a shorthand for approaches that reject both the fundamental 'Cartesian split' between the mind and the body, and all approaches to the human mind that considered it a program that can run independently of its physical entrenchment, as 'first-generation' cognitive science with its conceptualization of the mind in terms of a computer is frequently blamed for doing.[1] The mind, according to the 4E label that represents the 'second generation' in cognitive science, is embodied, embedded, enactive and extended: »embodied« here means that the mind springs from the body's state as a biological organism that is in contact with its surroundings, linked to other human beings, involved in cultural practices and the locus of every single experience a human being is capable of; it is »embedded« by being always tied to its particular surroundings, and »enactive« in so far as the interactions between the mind and its surroundings need to be taken seriously (rather than considering the mind a passive recipient and processor of external stimuli). Finally, the mind can be called »extended« because the way it works is also shaped by the artifacts and technologies with which humans interact (cf. 5-6). Apart from the fact that there is some overlap between these areas, there are hints that within the Cognitive Sciences there is much less unanimity than the single label suggests, and that proponents of, say, extended cognition do not necessarily share much research interest, let alone methodology, with representatives of enactive conceptions of the mind.[2] Although the authors are fully aware of this problem, they have decided that »the shared emphasis on the body« and the »primacy of embodiment« that characterizes scholarship on all of the four 'E's provides enough common ground to continue using it (6, footnote 5). This gives rise to my first question: Would it not be more accurate and helpful to acknowledge that some of the ›E‹s may be more relevant to the study of literature and its effect on readers than others, and that the effects of the individual ›E‹s may prove to be quite different? Extended cognition, for instance, does not really feature much in the book under review, while the embodied and enactive aspects are predominant, and embedded cognition comes into play only here and there (in particular in references to Laurence Barsalou’s notion

of situated conceptualizations; see chapters 7 and 9). It appears that with embodiment, as elsewhere, when concepts travel from one discipline to another, differentiations of relevance in the field of origin are sometimes lost.

The book consists of two parts, part I being titled »The Embodied Dynamics of Storyworlds« and part II »The Embodied Dynamics of Time and Plot«. As these titles emphasize, literary reading and its effects are conceived as dynamic experiences unfolding throughout reading, which links the study to the tradition of such reader response theories from Stanley Fish to Wolfgang Iser and beyond, with their focus on the active role of the reader's mind in meaning construction, and their emphasis on the processual, dynamic aspects of reading, that have provided some of the foundations for contemporary Cognitive Literary Studies. Theories of 4E cognition, on the one hand make an even stronger claim for the dynamic and active role of the reader, since meaning is massively shaped by the bodily, emotional, social, and cultural experiences a particular mind brings to and employs during reading. On the other hand, as the book under review suggests, texts have considerable power triggering responses in readers, because readers will react with the (unconscious) activation of sensorimotor neural patterns and traces of lived experience when encountering words that resonate with such patterns and traces.

Chapter 1 engages with the experience of what is metaphorically called »immersion«, »transportation«, and »presence«, i.e., the reader's impression of being somehow ›inside‹ the storyworld. The authors plausibly argue that the series of situation models readers continually construct and modify during reading can feel »thick«, or »fleshed out« to them if the textual descriptions trigger traces of embodied, real-world experience. It is a problem inherent in the description of mental activities that one set of metaphors (»immersion«, »transportation«) that, due to the fuzziness of metaphors, may contain aspects unrelated to the phenomenon (see 41) can only be exchanged for another set of metaphors (»to thicken«, »to flesh out«). It is to be hoped that at some point we can exchange the metaphors for more precise process models of the cognitive and emotional operations of the mind that occur during the experiences addressed in the book. Chapter 2 looks at the way that authors, narrators, and characters may emerge as embodied entities in the reader's mind by degrees, in opposition to the usually hard-and-fast narratological categorizations of different types of narrators and characters, as well as the ontological divide between authors and the text-internal agencies of communication. Chapter 3 maintains that »characters' bodies play a key role both in how internal focalization is textually implemented and in guiding readers' responses to the text as a whole« (67),

since many of a characters' perceptions rendered in passages of focalization trigger the reader's own bodily experience of the world, contributing to the thickening of his or her situation model. Here and elsewhere in the book, the examples from literary texts are wisely chosen, because in them, bodily experience is invariably foregrounded. The protagonist's experience in Julio Cortázar's short story »The Night Face Up« (»La noche boca arriba«), for instance, is so densely sensory that even theorists unconcerned with embodied cognition are certain to acknowledge that as a central feature of the text. While the authors cannot be blamed for selecting texts that support their argument about the centrality of embodiment, the present reviewer wondered what else occurs in literary reading that might *not* be exclusively or predominantly informed by embodiment, since not all, and perhaps not even the majority, of passages in prose fiction foreground the corporeal presence of the characters or the impressions of their senses. What are readers' situation models like if the experience rendered through internal focalization happens to focus on something else than bodily experience? What if the character ponders, e.g., about the relationship between other characters, as Lily Briscoe frequently does in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (one of the texts used as an example in *With Bodies*)? It stands to reason that a reader in the habit of thinking about other people's relationships will be able to construct a »thick« situation model that does not, however, focus on some sort of embodied experience, but is rather »fleshed out« by their experience and skills in social cognition. Proponents of embodiment theory might argue that even Lily Briscoe's and the reader's social cognition skills are ultimately based in bodily experience; while I agree here in principle, I wonder whether the embodied basis is what makes the reading of Lily's ponderings personally meaningful? Although our bodies are always there, and the basis for all cognition, mental processes can and will also entail thought processes that do not evoke embodied experience and may well appear ›bodiless‹ to the reader. The main question here – and the one that may be most difficult to answer – is which kinds of embodiment are conscious, whether embodied response exists on either side of a consciousness-threshold, what it takes for that threshold to be crossed, and how that would change readers' response to a text. The authors refer to many of the processes they describe as being unconscious over the chapters of the book, but a more systematic account of conscious and unconscious embodiment effects is called for. I would argue that mental processes which focus on other issues than embodiment, even if they involve the body on a basic and unconscious level, should not disappear from view if we do not want to end up with only a partial and particular understanding of the affordances of literary reading. A strong point of the third chapter is that

the authors go on to criticize the notion of mental imagery, which has too often been misunderstood as imitating film-like visual representation; rather, Caracciolo and Kukkonen argue, following philosophers like Alva Noë, it is the multimodal sensorimotor traces of lived experience that add to readers' thickening of situation models. Another important discussion follows in the section on empathy (74-79), which deals with the notoriously difficult and fuzzy concepts of empathy and sympathy. The authors convincingly propose a differentiated conception of empathy as comprising such diverse aspects as perceptual, somatic, emotional, epistemic, and axiological facets or readers' impression of being close to characters (76), and they point out that it depends on both the individual reader's dispositions and the textual signals whether, and to what extent, those different facets of empathy materialize. In connection with my suggestion to keep the less embodied aspects of the reading experience in mind, such a differentiated model of empathy would certainly enrich our understanding of different ways of readers cognitive-emotional engagement, even if the authors (unsurprisingly) place most emphasis on the somatic and perceptual aspects. Chapter 4 considers how the experience of fictional spaces is shaped by the structural analogies between them and the real-world spaces readers have experienced. It is especially when spatial descriptions entail an affective dimension that the imagination of a fictional space gains relevance and, again, thickness: »readers' engagement with narrative space is driven by emotion, not by the need for pictorial completeness or even coherence« (93) That affective dimension also informs and structures the immediate experience of a narrative: »As readers experience an atmosphere, or feelings of immersion in a story, they are already interpreting it in affective terms.« (96)

The second part of the book opens with chapter 5, which focuses on the processual dynamics of narrative understanding and engagement, in particular on the fact that readers do not simply process information on story and plot as delivered by the text, but rather establish a scaffold of predictions that interact with the unfolding events. Chapter 6 looks at narrative action which Caracciolo and Kukkonen also regard as »deeply and fundamentally embodied« (123) through the characters, because the description of their physical actions can trigger motor resonances in the reader, and the emotional valence of their actions is apt to generate expectations as to the development of whole action sequences. Again, some caution is due with regard to the text's power: since no single word, sentence or passage can coerce the reader into performing any kind of cognitive-emotional reaction, the question whether descriptions of actions trigger sensorimotor experiential traces in all readers, and if not, under which conditions they do and under which they do not can only be answered by more empirical research, and on the basis of more elaborate theorizing. Of particular interest in this chapter

(admittedly because it overlaps with this reviewer's current preoccupations) is the section on image schemas, i.e., the result of very basic spatio-temporal encounters of the body with the forces of its environment that according to Mark Johnson and others fundamentally shape our conceptual apparatus.[3] Such image schemas as PATH, COUNTERFORCE, or BLOCKAGE, as Caracciolo and Kukkonen plausibly argue, play a role in the reader's (unconscious) understanding the general »drift« of the plot and its emotional valence, and they entail a dynamics of prediction that structures the reading. Chapter 7, on »Plot, Abstraction, and Situated Conceptualization«, is the least convincing one in making a point for the relevance of embodiment. Although the authors concede that the concept of plot »seems difficult to reconcile with an embodied approach to narrative« (145), they propose to use Barsalou's »situated conceptualizations« to do precisely that. According to Barsalou, when we learn abstract concepts, the traces of the concrete situation in which we have encountered the examples of a concept are activated in the brain.[4] However, the authors' arguments that »[a] literary narrative can arguably build up its own ›situated conceptualizations‹ through patterns in its embodied language« and that »[p]lot […] comes from the situated conceptualizations developed in tandem with embodied resonances« (145 and 147, respectively) strike me as rather laboured. Wouldn't this be a case in which it makes sense to give those mental operations their due whose embodied aspects may turn out to be less relevant than their non-embodied ones, i.e., mental operations that, in spite of their necessary grounding in concrete bodily experience, involve other and more dominant constituents of meaning for the reader than bodily ones? With a universalist claim such as the claim that embodiment is at the root of literally all human thinking, feeling, and action, the literary theorist is bound to search for and claim the importance of the embodied aspects of all issues to do with literature. For theory-building, this does not appear to be a wise move. Not everything the first generation of cognitive approaches suggested about text understanding and the role of knowledge was utterly wrong, after all, in spite of an undue dissociation of mind and body, and the authors also use concepts like frames and schemata, core concepts in first-generation cognitive theory that are established concepts for the description of human cognition. An integration of first-generation insights on the one hand, and second-generation shifts in emphasis and re-conceptions on the other might salvage what ca. three decades of research have achieved in the way of understanding the complex interrelatedness between the mind and (narrative) text, without understating the role of embodiment. Chapter 8 returns to authors and narrators, this time with a focus on the dynamics of joint attention, which is an instrument of temporal control employed by authors and narrators to influence narrative speed and viewpoint changes. In that chapter, Caracciolo and Kukkonen also point

to the fact that the reading of a book, in particular a printed one, involves the reader's body on an additional level. Future research is likely to continue exploring the differences in embodied response to narrative presented in different media, such as e-readers or as audiobooks.[5] The final chapter then presents thumbnail sketches of more potential applications of an ›embodied narratology‹ to a range of narratives that focus of themes. These readings, which are given a bit more space than the necessarily brief discussions of sample texts in the preceding chapters, demonstrate that there are a culturally specific and hence varying ways in which embodiment informs the meaning of narrative. This is an important addition, since embodiment is a concept that comes with quite a strong universalist claim. Literary and cultural scholars will always be interested in the ways that universal human abilities and dispositions interact with their particular surroundings.

In conclusion, the book under review is a most welcome contribution to an ongoing debate. It makes a number of important suggestions about the role of embodied cognition in narrative, and it reminds us that there are still some open questions concerning the exact kind and intensity of embodiment effects in narrative reading. Although without doubt *all* thinking results, at some level, from the mind's situatedness in a body in an environment, the concept of embodiment risks losing its power of making a substantial contribution to our understanding of how literature works if it is not spelled out in more detail when, under which conditions, and in reaction to which textual features readers actually mentally perform the cues to a heavily embodied mode of reception, whether this occurs consciously or unconsciously, and in which ways interpretations of literary texts can be enriched by the acknowledgment of embodiment. This also entails the question whether there are different reader types with regard to their ability or willingness to engage in embodied reading experiences. Throughout the book, Caracciolo and Kukkonen state that many of theoretical constructions they propose are precisely that: theoretical and personal, i.e., they are based on the authors' own reading experience, not on empirical findings that could corroborate or falsify the assumptions. The proliferation of the word »arguably« (and comparable formulations) in the volume testifies to the caution with which Caracciolo and Kukkonen approach their suggestions. This is not a problem in itself – other approaches to literature are no less speculative when it comes to assumptions about reader response, either. However, in spite of their frequent use of cautious formulations, the authors also make quite a number of very strong claims about how the reader reacts to embodiment cues, as for instance in the opening passage: »By the end of the passage, Calvino has his readers upside down, imagining themselves in a yoga position.« (2). Although the consequence seems to be a plea for extensive empirical testing of such claims, a

fundamental problem stands in the way as yet: as we have seen a number of times, and as the authors also repeatedly remark, many of the processes dealt with in this book occur below the threshold of consciousness. How to generate data on unconscious processes without either disturbing them while they occur, or biasing respondents towards constructing a certain intended outcome when enquiring after them retrospectively, is a massive challenge for empirical literary studies. It seems plausible to look for mixed-method approaches, and combinations of qualitative and quantitative strategies of data elicitation. To get at operationalizable hypotheses that are fine-grained enough for the further empirical testing, the theory of embodied cognition in narrative understanding could profit from more detailed process models based on both phenomenological approaches to meaning constitution and cognitive-linguistic conceptions of the impact of textual features, as in, say, cognitive grammar or text-world theory, to name only two relevant candidates for a more intensive dialogue with theorization in cognitive narratology.

Ralf Schneider
Institute of English, American, and Romance Studies
Aachen Center for Cognitive and Empirical Literary Studies (ACCELS)
Aachen University

Anmerkungen

[1] Cf. Albert Newen/Leon de Bruin/Shaun Gallagher (eds.), 4E Cognition: Historical Roots, Key Concepts, and Central Issues. In: Newen/de Bruin/Gallagher (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition*. Oxford/New York 2018, 3–18. See also Karin Kukkonen/Marco Caracciolo, Introduction: What is the ›Second Generation‹? *Style* 48:3 (2014), 261–274.

[2] For such criticism, see, for instance, Richard Menary, Introduction to the Special Issue on 4E Cognition, *Phenomenology and The Cognitive Sciences* 9:4 (2010), 459-463; Jesper Aagaard, 4E Cognition and the Dogma of Harmony, *Philosophical Psychology* 34:2 (2021), 165-181; Rolf A. Zwaan, Two Challenges to 'Embodied Cognition' Research and How to Overcome Them, *Journal of Cognition* 4:1 (2021), 1–9.

[3] See Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind*, Chicago 1987; Beate Hampe (ed.), *From Perception to Meaning: Image Schemas in Cognitive Linguistics*, Berlin 2005; Michael Kimmel, Analyzing Image Schemas in Literature, *Cognitive Semiotics* 5 (2009), 159–188; Todd Oakley, Image Schemas, in Dirk Geeraerts/ Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, Oxford 2007, 214–235.

[4] See, e.g., Laurence Barsalou, Situated Simulation in the Human Conceptual System, *Language and Cognitive Processes* 18:5-6 (2003), 513–562 and Situated Conceptualization: Theory and Applications, in Yann Coello/Martin Fischer (eds.), *Foundations of Embodied Cognition: Perceptual and Emotional Embodiment*, East Sussex 2016, 11–37.

[5] For promising work in this field, see for instance studies by Anne Mangen and collaborators: Anne Mangen/Don Kuiken, Lost in the iPad: Narrative Engagement on Paper and Tablet, *Scientific Study of Literature*, 4:2 (2014), 150–177; Anne Mangen/Gérard Olivier/Jean-Luc Velay, Comparing Comprehension of a Long Text Read in Print Book and on Kindle: Where in the Text and When in the Story? *Frontiers in Psychology: Cognitive Science* (2019) https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00038

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