

A Comparative Study: Gadamer’s “Effective History” and the Receptional Aesthetics

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Abstract: Gadamer is one of the eminent thinkers of the 20th century, who presented various theories such as “philosophical interpretation” that have left a profound impact on subsequent theoretical frameworks. Among them, his theory of “effective history” served as a solid foundation for the development of “Receptional Aesthetics”. However, it is important to note that Gadamer maintains a critical stance when it comes to the aesthetic theories of reception. Therefore, a meticulous and comparative analysis of these two theories, exploring their nuanced similarities and differences, holds significant scholarly value.

Keywords: Gadamer; Effective History; Receptional Aesthetic; Textual Interpretation

1. Introduction

In his work *The Mirror and Lamp*, Abrams presents four essential elements in literary activities: the author, the reader, the work, and the world. Based on these elements, he proposes four theories: mimetic theory, pragmatic theory, expressive theory, and objective theory. These theories explore the dimensions of the relationship between the work and the world, the work and the reader, the work and the author, and the work itself, respectively, in the context of literary interpretation [1]. In this study, we aim to delve into the similarities and differences between the theory of “effective history” and Receptional Aesthetics, building upon these four fundamental elements.

2. The Meaning of Effective History and Its Tendency Towards Textual Interpretation

Effective history, as posited by Gadamer, emerges from a reflection on historicism. It recognizes the existence of both “true

anticipation of understanding” and “false anticipation of misunderstanding” within literary activities, which are influenced by the temporal gap between the reader and the text.

To differentiate between these two anticipations, a historical consciousness becomes essential. The conventional objectivity of historical positivism neglects its own historicity. In contrast, the theory of effective history emphasizes that the “true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity or relation between oneself and the other, where the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding coexist. A truly authentic interpretation should reveal the reality of history within the act of understanding” [1].

Diverging from the one-sided emphasis on subjectivity or objectivity in research, Gadamer believes that the consciousness of effective history is a theory that encompasses both the past and the present, integrating old and new perspectives. Within this framework, individual anticipations are not simply set aside or replaced; instead, they retain the potential for active engagement.

Through the exploration of effective history, the obscure becomes clear, shedding light on the work. Similarly, in the process of merging subject and object, the question of the relationship between self and other arises. Unlike historical positivism, which dissolves the arbitrariness and subjectivity of actual encounters, effective history posits that within the interplay between self and other, a historical perspective reveals a certain reality. In this reality, the subject can attain a genuine understanding of truth through their limited self-understanding.

The consciousness of effective history is, first and foremost, an awareness of the hermeneutical condition” [2]. Due to our inherent nature as historical beings, we can never fully escape our historical existence,

which implies that self-understanding is perpetually elusive. However, our present condition is finite and its limitations contain certain constraints. Within these limitations, there are focal points that restrict our vision, forming what is known as a horizon. Those who possess a horizon understand how to evaluate things according to certain standards. The consciousness of effective history enables the subject, through a dialogue between self and other, to create a proper and insightful perspective by posing a series of appropriate questions. Furthermore, the subject engaged in the act of understanding also possesses historicity. The subject, through the integration of oneself with the unfamiliar world, creates a broader horizon that encompasses both the present and the past. Additionally, the subject must not only attend to the historicity of others but also be mindful of their own historicity in relation to the present, considering oneself within the act of attending to others.

Since the formation of the horizon stems from one's anticipatory understanding, the subject needs to continually examine their anticipations through ongoing dialogue with others to further clarify their own past and, in turn, grasp their anticipations more profoundly. Likewise, during the process of understanding, the subject themselves is not stagnant. As the subject's horizon undergoes replacement, a newly formed fused horizon replaces the previous historical perspective. "It is precisely because of this that authors can create classic works, and readers can interpret the original meaning of the work better than the authors themselves" [3].

From Gadamer's perspective, he believes that effective history is "the unity of oneself and the other, or a relationship" [4]. From the viewpoint of the four elements of literary activity, this relationship considers the work as the specific object of historical research, encompassing both the truth claims of the self and the author's understanding rooted in the traditions of their time. Gadamer argues that the text itself cannot be simply seen as an objectified existence; instead, it is an open and temporally characterized entity. Time, being fluid, endows the text as the embodiment of meaning with its own fluidity. In this process, the semantics of language find their full expression, and the text acquires a proactive vitality and value in its fluidity.

As the subject of understanding, the reader not only engages in the interpretation of the text but also recognizes the inherent limitations of their own subjectivity. Being situated within history itself, the essence of the reader's being prevents them from escaping historicity. Therefore, to achieve a better understanding in the process of textual interpretation, it is essential to engage in a dialogical exchange rather than engage in a unilateral exposition.

In seeking understanding, an effective conversation and interaction between the text and the reader are established. The reader poses questions within the text and expects responses in return. The reader, as the questioner, is not only the present subject but, from a temporal perspective, is also a constituent within the river of history, receiving the cries from the past. This spiral and ascending process of dialogue and understanding is precisely the process of fusing horizons.

To approach a more precise and coherent understanding in the pursuit of truth, it is crucial to maintain an open relationship between the reader and the text. This openness extends beyond the text being a subject of interpretation or a product of tradition; the reader, too, must adopt an attitude of openness. By engaging in a reciprocal question-and-answer process, a dynamic interplay is established, allowing for a deeper level of comprehension. As Gadamer eloquently suggests, "Each reading breathes new life into the work, presenting it through a unique lens, taste, and personal interpretation" [5].

Consequently, through the act of rereading, both the work and the reader, with their respective historical contexts and diverse experiences, contribute to the emergence of novel meanings within the process of understanding. This interweaving of the work and the reader forms what Gadamer refers to as "effective history", a continual exchange where they coalesce, interact, and give rise to fresh significance.

3. The Intricate Scroll Created Through the Depiction of Colors on a Two-dimensional Plane

Receptional Aesthetics, which emerged in the 1960s, encompasses the perspectives of Hans Robert Jauss's horizon of expectations and Wolfgang Iser's appeal structure. Jauss argues

that the historicity of literature relies on the reader's pre-existing experiences. Before engaging in the creative act of reading a text, readers establish a system of expectations based on their previous reading and aesthetic experiences. This system of expectations, objectified within the horizon of expectations, shapes the process of understanding a literary work. From the standpoint of the horizon of expectations, the process of understanding a work is the actualization of the reader's personalized system of expectations.

The completion of understanding is determined by whether the expectations formed prior to reading the work ultimately align with the content of the work. Should the reader's formed expectations clash with the implicit core of the work, the reader must timely adjust their horizon of expectations in order to attain a more fulfilling reading experience. By aligning expectations with the content of the work, the reader can achieve a deeper level of comprehension and enhance their engagement with the text.

Jauss distinguishes between the individual horizon of expectation and the public horizon of expectation based on the scope of objects they encompass. After comparing the relative determinacy of these two, he chooses the latter as the main focus of research. This choice is driven by the complex and diverse nature of individual horizons of expectation, while "the public horizon of expectation exerts a hidden influence on the formation of individual horizons and determines the depth and breadth of literary reception during a certain historical period" [6]. By studying the relative stability of textual historicity, efforts are made to identify the elements that contribute to the formation of a more stable system of expectations.

Following Jauss, Wolfgang Iser further enriches the content of Receptional Aesthetic with his theory of "the appeal structure". Iser's theory is rooted in literary ontology, asserting that "one pole of literary artwork is the textual creation by the author, while the other pole is the aesthetic realization by the reader, emphasizing that the work itself is neither the text alone nor the reader who realizes it" [7]. It becomes apparent that Iser's theory encompasses the subjects of the text and the reader. In response to these distinct entities, Iser introduces the notions of the "the appeal

structure" and the "implied reader".

The concept of "the appeal structure" suggests that there are blank points in the text that readers need to fill in based on their own experiences during the process of comprehension. Whether the reader's fillings align with the intended meaning of the text becomes crucial to sustaining the reading experience. These textual blanks stimulate the reader's interest in participating in the process of understanding, allowing them to construct a textual world based on the given text through imagination.

The reader continuously engages in reading and self-confirmation to evaluate the reasonableness of their understanding. Within the framework of Receptional Aesthetics, scholars argue that the meaning of a work is continually excavated as readers actively and creatively engage in the process of creation and reception. In this process, the reader's subjectivity is magnified, as they creatively supplement and interpret the blank text, presenting fresh and intriguing perspectives that further captivate the reader to engage in the process of comprehension.

The implied reader, a concept introduced by Iser, is a specific construct that emerges from the description of the reader's process and is solely derived from the structure of the text itself. This implies that the author, prior to the act of creation, has predetermined the responsibilities each reader undertakes in the interaction with the text. The implied reader is both the reader of the text's structure and the reader engaged in the process of comprehension. Consequently, the implied reader exists prior to the actual reader and does not originate from the actual reader.

On the contrary, the actual reader, in the process of comprehension, needs to align themselves with the characteristics of the implied reader in order to navigate their relationship with the text. The ability to conform to the characteristics of the implied reader serves as the standard for the actual reader during the act of reading, establishing a connection between their individual reader persona and the text. This way, the differences among readers do not hinder the progress of the comprehension activity, and every interaction that takes place on this basis becomes unique and irreplicable.

Receptional Aesthetics emphasizes the

subjectivity of the reader, whether it is the filling of textual blanks or the role of the reader's imagination within the text, all from the perspective of the reader. Jauss establishes the reader's dominant role in the process of understanding literary works by expecting a certain viewpoint. According to Jauss, the reader, representing the general public, possesses the intellectual capacity to comprehend the work within the context of a pleasurable reading experience. In contrast to Jauss, Iser's theory emphasizes the limitations imposed by the text on the reader. However, these limitations are always finite, and the reader's historicity and individual subjectivity are relatively downplayed within Iser's framework.

4. The Differences between the “Theory of Effect” and Receptional Aesthetics

The “Theory of Effect” and Receptional Aesthetics differ in several aspects. Gadamer's theory of effective history emphasizes the historicity of the reader's understanding process, while also highlighting the communicative process between the reader and the text during the act of comprehension. In this process of understanding, the meaning of the text continues to unfold. The true significance of literary works does not diminish with the passage of time; instead, it becomes clearer through ongoing acts of comprehension.

Literary and artistic works are truly completed in the act of reading and cannot exist separate from the recipients. The meaning of a literary work flows across different historical periods, and the interpretation of the text is influenced by various social concepts in different historical periods. The horizon of expectation refers to the continuous integration of the original horizon of expectation in the literary work and the reader's horizon of expectation throughout the historical process. It is through the engagement of readers from different eras that the meaning of the text becomes rich and enriched.

The theory of effective history provides an important theoretical foundation for the development of Receptional Aesthetics. Building upon the works of Gadamer and Dilthey, it regards the literary work as a dynamic existence from the perspective of the reader. It emphasizes the significance of the

reader in the textual activity and underscores the crucial role of the reader's reception and interpretation in preserving the cultural and symbolic meaning of the text. The meaning of the work continually evolves and crystallizes through the process of interpretation, revealing its essence. However, there are notable differences between Receptional Aesthetics and the reception of Gadamer's theory.

In contrast to Gadamer's artwork-centered ontological approach, Receptional Aesthetics places a greater emphasis on the reader as the central figure [8]. It is precisely because Receptional Aesthetics is primarily based on the centrality of the reader that it can sometimes encounter difficulties regarding subjectivity. The emphasis on the reader's aesthetic experience presupposes that the reader possesses a relatively comprehensive aesthetic background. However, this also means that the theoretical foundation has certain limitations and a relatively narrow scope. Similarly, during the process of reading, readers can easily be guided or controlled by their aesthetic experiences, leading them to an extreme standpoint and losing a proper understanding of reality.

Gadamer emphasizes the fusion of horizons in effective history, while Receptional Aesthetics, although acknowledging this point, tends to overly emphasize the role and value of the reader in its practical application, leaning toward a reader-centric standpoint and placing excessive emphasis on the subjective role of the reader. Gadamer consistently advocates for the dialectical relationship between the identity of the artwork and the diversity of interpretation. When discussing the involvement of the interpreter, he does not forget to point out the “directive” of the artwork, whereas Receptional Aesthetics considers this claim to be relatively contradictory. Gadamer believes that the textual interpretation is bound by the spirit of the text itself and the author. The reader's interpretation must be based on respecting the spirit of the text and the author, thereby completing the textual interpretation.

Within the realm of effective history, Gadamer asserts the right and freedom of the self to engage in self-expression. In this relationship, the readership is relatively extensive. However, in Receptional Aesthetics, there exists a certain gap between the ideal nature of the theoretical

reader and the reality of actual readers [9]. To reconcile the contradiction between the relativity and determinism of interpreting the meaning of a work, it is necessary to fluctuate the scope of reader subjectivity, sometimes enlarging it and sometimes narrowing it. Simultaneously, due to the limitedness of readers' personal experiences and the fictitious nature of literature itself, a subjective inclination persists. Unlike Gadamer's theory, Receptional Aesthetics fails to approach the entire process of understanding dialectically and does not philosophically examine the entirety of the understanding process. As a result, the content of Receptional Aesthetics is relatively one-sided [10].

5. Conclusions

In essence, the theory of "effective history" emphasizes the historicity of the subject, placing importance on the reader's reading experience while respecting the historical context. It strives to establish a fruitful interaction between the text and the reader, enabling a more coherent interpretation through their continual engagement. On the other hand, Receptional Aesthetics places a stronger emphasis on reader subjectivity. While it may yield satisfactory interpretive results to some extent, it also runs the risk of deviating from the essence of the object being interpreted, thereby influencing the final outcome of the interpretation.

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