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## Kafka's Cognitive Realism

This book uses insights from the cognitive sciences to illuminate Kafka's poetics, exemplifying a paradigm for literary studies in which cognitive-scientific insights are brought to bear directly on literary texts. The volume shows that the concept of "cognitive realism" can be a critically productive framework for exploring how textual evocations of cognition correspond to or diverge from cognitive realities, and how this may affect real readers. In particular, it argues that Kafka's evocations of visual perception (including narrative perspective) and emotion can be understood as fundamentally enactive, and that in this sense they are "cognitively realistic". These cognitively realistic qualities are likely to establish a compellingly direct connection with the reader's imagination, but because they contradict folk-psychological assumptions about how our minds work, they may also leave the reader unsettled. This is the first time a fully interdisciplinary research paradigm has been used to explore a single author's fictional works in depth, opening up avenues for future research in cognitive literary science.

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# **Kafka's Cognitive Realism**

**Emily T. Troscianko**

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For Tom  
*Here he lies where he long'd to be;  
Home is the sailor, home from the sea.*  
(R. L. Stevenson, "Requiem")



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*St John's College, Oxford*  
16 July 2013



# Introduction

## Cognitive Realism, Kafka, and Literary Studies

### 1. REALISM, COGNITIVE REALISM, AND KAFKA

Realistic would be [. . .] something which corresponds to reality, [. . .] a description of how things really are.

Something's realistic if it's mirroring the reality.

Something that mirrors reality; something that reproduces what exists, what actually exists around us.

Within art and literature, realism is the actual depiction of the way things are, so a realist story and a realist painting would be almost photographic, if that makes sense.

In an experiment I designed to investigate readers' responses to Kafka (see Appendix 1 and Troschianko in preparation [a]), participants were also asked to give (speaking into a digital recorder) definitions of terms including "realistic". The above remarks are taken from four participants' definitions (Pts 28, 13, 27, and 14).

More formal definitions are essentially very similar: in invoking "correspondence" to reality, "mirroring" of reality, and almost photographic "depiction of the way things are", the participants echo principles expressed in, for example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "realistic, adj.": "Characterized by faithfulness of representation, *esp.* in reference to art, film, and literature; representing things in a way that is accurate and true to life".<sup>1</sup> Here "faithfulness" and "accuracy" of "representation" fulfil the same functions as the key terms in the participants' definitions, and unfortunately also leave just as many questions unanswered: what does it mean to "represent", "mirror", "depict", or "correspond" to reality "faithfully", "accurately", "(almost) photographically", or in a "true-to-life" fashion?

These questions go to the heart of what it means for a fictional text to do or to be anything at all—and this book isn't long enough to answer them. It isn't clear that such encompassing questions about "representation" or about "reality" in relation to literature can ever be answered—or even asked—satisfactorily without making textual reception a key criterion. If we do this, then instead of asking what makes a fictional text realistic, we may

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ask instead: what makes it *seem* realistic to a reader? This also has the happy consequence of narrowing down impossible ontological questions about the unlimited “reality” being invoked, to the (only slightly) more manageable cognitive question of what factors are involved in creating an *effect* of reality. In this vein, Roland Barthes has famously discussed the “reality effect” (see Chapter One, p. 61), and other critics have also stressed the importance of “verisimilitude” to readers’ responses to literature: in his important work of early cognitive literary criticism, Jerome Bruner (1986, 52) suggests that literature needs to be “recognizable as ‘true to conceivable experience’”, i.e. to “have verisimilitude”. Further questions then follow on from the question about “seeming” realism: does a realistic text have systematically different effects on readers than an unrealistic text has? And what specific textual features are responsible for creating these effects?

The concept of “cognitive realism” is intended to provide a framework for asking and beginning to answer such questions in a directed and delimited manner. Cognition is the mediator between the fictional world and the reader on two levels: as it’s evoked in the fictional characters, the narrator, or both, through whom the fictional world is made available to us, and as it operates in the embodied mind of the reader. Investigating how the connections between these two levels are established is therefore likely to tell us a lot about how an effect of reality is created by a text. A text can be cognitively realistic in any area of cognition, but given that it isn’t really feasible to deal with every aspect of cognition at once, in this book I have chosen one aspect to concentrate on: visual perception. Later in this section I give reasons for making this choice, and in the Conclusion I describe the beginnings of related work on memory.

I suggest, then, that a text may be considered cognitively realistic in its evocation of, for example, visual perception if that evocation corresponds to the ways in which visual perception really operates in human minds and bodies, according to the best understanding available in current cognitive science (see p. 14 on my pragmatic but optimistic attitude in this regard). Here “to correspond” means to describe, in this case vision, in a way that can most economically be accounted for with reference to the relevant cognitive facts. (Again, I know the word “facts” will raise some hackles, or at least some eyebrows; as before, please see pp. 14–15 for a few caveats and clarifications.)

Cognitive realism can also be a feature of artworks in other media, but I’ll restrict myself in this book to the medium about which I know most—literature. Literary study structured by the concept of cognitive realism is fully compatible with the notion that both individually and culturally specific aspects of text-processing affect experience and interpretation, but in this book I focus primarily on the commonalities which are likely to underlie those variations. The concept of cognitive realism also doesn’t presuppose or entail any blanket value judgements, such as a belief that it’s better to be cognitively realistic than to be cognitively unrealistic (Troscianko 2013a).

Classification of texts according to categories such as cognitively realistic and cognitively unrealistic should be a means rather than an end: that is, it should be something that allows us to ask and answer interesting questions that couldn't otherwise be asked or answered. While classificatory precision is helpful, therefore, the point of applying the concept of cognitive realism to literature is not to create a rigid taxonomy of realistic versus unrealistic, but to make use of a framework for identifying certain features and groups of features which recur in texts. This in turn allows us to ask how these features may create certain connections with the cognitive processes of readers and hence affect the reading experience. This then allows us to make informed predictions, which may serve as the basis for empirical testing, as well as to start drawing systematic comparisons between different texts and groups of texts—and indeed between different readers and groups of readers.

The term “cognitive realism” may prompt associations with notions of “psychological realism” and the “psychological novel”. Although these terms and concepts are often used to frame debates about characterisation and narrative technique in the history of the novel, they are rarely defined in very clear or thorough terms; often they seem to come down to a somewhat vague notion that this is a genre in which the characters' thoughts and feelings take priority over action or plot (other synonyms include “novel of character”). In this sense, while psychological realism may, by definition, place emphasis on the mental and emotional life of fictional characters, the resulting evocations of cognition need not have a close relationship to cognitive realities; they may, as Gregory Currie (2011) has argued, rather be eloquent expressions of common misconceptions about cognition—but this would also not necessarily be relevant to analysis from the perspective of psychological realism. Features like temporal fluidity or indeterminacy which characterise narrative constructions such as those of Virginia Woolf (whose name very often comes up in the same breath as the psychological novel) may be cognitively realistic in the sense outlined in this book, but other features may instead express prevalent folk-psychological constructs and hence have quite different effects—and psychological realism offers no way of distinguishing between the two. Indeed, the generally introspective nature of the texts bracketed under the heading of psychological realism is often informed by problematic notions such as the stream of consciousness (mentioned at several points in my discussion), as well as, from the early twentieth century onwards, by Freudian notions of the unconscious. Furthermore, psychological realism in practice often attributes disproportionate importance to the “inner life” of characters' thoughts and feelings, in isolation from physiological and situational cause and effect, which I will argue are central to all cognitive activities. Cognitive realism therefore offers analytical purchase of a kind distinct from what these other concepts offer, not least because, being better defined, it can also be better operationalised in analysing specific texts. Similarly, although it might be argued

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that psychological realism rather than nineteenth-century Realism should be used as a reference point, it's the latter which was the primary context for the complex poetological debates about Realism that I'll be drawing on in what follows. More specifically, literary Realism can be considered the literary culmination of the history of pictorially configured thought about perception and language with which I want to suggest that Kafka's writing presents a contrast. Realism, in its broad nineteenth-century incarnation, is therefore the more appropriate choice.

My subject is the writing of Franz Kafka (1883–1924). My love of Kafka goes back to reading *The Trial* (in English translation) at secondary school, and has managed to survive twelve years of academic study. My love of Kafka (or at least of his writing—the personal idolatry is another matter) created an obvious question to be answered: why do I, and lots of other people, find his writing so appealing? Why do his stories about (to name his two best-known plots) waking up as a giant insect and waking up to be arrested for an unknown crime continue to exert such fascination? Surely mere weirdness alone isn't an adequate answer; if it were, absurdist literature would be much more popular than Kafka. This question of Kafka's appeal was, for me, the origin of the questions listed at the outset, because it seemed that this Kafkaesque fascination had something to do with the balancing act which Kafka's texts perform on the tightrope between the "realistic" and the "unreal-seeming". This is not a new idea: Ritchie Robertson, for example, said something similar in an essay for the edited volume *The German Novel in the Twentieth Century: Beyond Realism*, discussing how Kafka both makes use of and moves beyond the "semiotics of Realism" (1993, 77). It's also an intuitively reasonable idea, one that fits with impressions of Kafka beyond literary studies, which is always encouraging. A participant in the above-mentioned empirical study, when defining the term "Kafkaesque", noted that "You have instantly to think that realistic is the opposite of Kafkaesque. Although Kafka refers to real life, he's moving beyond what we really see of the material life, in a way, and talking about your feelings behind that, and the internal psychological life of man, and how that is influenced by outside, 'real' life; and how that can distort our internal life" (Pt 34). It's important to bear in mind that, as indicated in these remarks, Kafka is very much still "refer[ring] to real life". Robertson (64) notes, similarly, that in many respects—for example, in his evocation of character and setting—Kafka's work "lies beyond but still in sight of Realism", particularly in the sense that his "descriptions of physical objects hover between metaphor and metonymy", between the ordering systems of contiguity amongst objects in space and similarity amongst spatially unrelated objects. In the very movement "beyond" Realism, Kafka nonetheless remains deeply indebted and connected to it. Indeed, this study will suggest that instead of configuring Kafka's relationship with Realism in terms of transcendence, we might instead think of it in terms of simplification: less "going beyond" than "returning to the (cognitive) roots of"—even if this isn't quite as catchy.



Numerous other studies of Kafka's relationship to Realism have been published over the decades. These discussions often draw on considerations relating specifically to descriptive detail and to narrative perspective, and I'll refer to these in Chapters Three and Four. Many present Kafka's work in simple opposition to Realism. This kind of contrast often relies on a simplifying and dismissive attitude to Realism; for example, Hans Kügler contrasts Kafka's writing with that of "[die] sogenannt[e] realistisch[e] Dichtung, die mit der Wirklichkeit gleichsam im vertrauten 'Du auf Du' zu stehen glaubt, je direkter und ungebrochener sie im Schreiben darüber verfügt" (so-called realistic literature, which believes itself to be on first-name terms with reality, the more directly and unbrokenly it takes linguistic possession of it; 1970, 110). It's very easy to make this kind of statement about Realism and argue for Kafka's deviation from it, but the trouble is that no Realist writer or commentator on Realism would ever make such a claim about its relation to reality. The appeal of these claims is obvious, though: they allow Kafka's practices to be presented as more sophisticated because he supposedly rejects naïve Realism in favour of a non-Realist mode such as parable:

Diese ungebrochene Vitalität der realistischen Dichtung bewirkt für Kafka gerade die platteste Form der künstlerischen Aussage, deren Ausagewert schon dadurch zweifelhaft ist, daß jeder Realismus, indem er die Wirklichkeit sucht, hinter ihr herläuft. [. . .] Entlarvung der Welt, nicht ihre Abbildung, Einsicht in die Wirklichkeitsstruktur, nicht Besitzergreifung der Realität, dies kann für Kafka nur im Gleichnis geleistet werden. (This unbroken vitality of realistic literature produces, for Kafka, the most platitudinous form of artistic statement, whose significance is made doubtful by the mere fact that any Realism, by seeking reality, ends up merely chasing it. [. . .] Exposing the world rather than reproducing it, gaining insight into the structure of reality rather than taking possession of it—this can be achieved, for Kafka, only in parable.) (1970, 110)

Other commentators acknowledge, as Robertson does, the lines of continuity between Realism and Kafka's works. Stephen Dowden remarks on how "The purport of his language would seem to overlap with that of the realist tradition", citing his "meticulous attention to accuracy of detail and his admiration for prose that is evocative of lived reality", while suggesting that the difference lies in how "Kafka's style exploits the conventional illusionism that is so firmly entrenched in the reading habits of the realist novel's popular audience. He turns this convention against itself by using the language of the real to invent an impossibly unreal world. In this way Kafka parodies the representational conventions of realism" (1986, 102–3). Dowden sees Kafka as lacking confidence "in the power of language to mirror the truth of things", and as "seiz[ing] the language of realism and turn[ing] it against itself" by demonstrating its opacity (103–4). In apparent contrast, Arnold Heidsieck's general argument is that "Kafka's mature style cannot

be traced to his immediate literary precursors or contemporaries" (1994, 3) and that it is better understood as a response to contemporary "paradigms of perception, consciousness, referential and propositional knowledge, positive law, natural law, and ethics" (13). However, he does also consider Kafka's relation to Realism, and in this regard demonstrates continuities as well as divergences: he notes how Kafka's early works "*Beschreibung eines Kampfes*" (Description of a Struggle) and "*Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*" (Wedding Preparations in the Country) are "saturated with youthful autobiography and the geography of Prague and share certain stylistic elements with the impressionists and the writers of fin-de-siècle decadence. Yet they also mimic and ironically subvert features of realist representation and naturalist determinism"(3). Specifically, he points out that "Kafka's fictive descriptions occasionally provide, within realistic everyday settings, supernatural entities and events" (3). Similarly, Norman Holland analyses some of "the realistic elements in "*Metamorphosis*" that Gregor's predicament has charged with extra, nonrealistic meaning" (1958, 146), as well as the flipside of this: how the story not only "charges physical realities with spiritual significance" but also "represents abstractions physically" (150).

While the commentators above conceive of Kafka and Realism in terms of a coexistence of contrasting features, others suggest that this interaction can also be visible in Kafka's texts as an identifiable shift from one mode to the other. Ulrich Fülleborn notes how "*Das Urteil*" (The Judgement) manifests "einen Übergang von der psychologisch-realistischen Darstellung der Wirklichkeit als vermeintlich verfügbarer Umwelt Georg Bendemanns zur Gestaltung einer unheimlich eigenmächtigen, grotesken Welt, als deren Repräsentant Georgs Vater erscheint und die geistig-sinnbildliche Bedeutsamkeit erlangt" (a transition from the psychologically realistic depiction of reality as Georg Bendemann's supposedly accessible environment to the formation of an uncannily arbitrary, grotesque world, represented by Georg's father and achieving spiritually symbolic significance; 1969, 298). Even before this transition occurs, Fülleborn suggests that the perspectival mode Kafka uses at the start of the story creates a certain "Beunruhigung" (unsettledness; 298). This remark on experiential effects relates to issues that I'll consider in more detail in the section below (pp. 33–37) on contradictory dualities in responses to Kafka.

Kafka's poetics developed in the context of a widespread engagement, at the turn of the twentieth century, with the term "Realism". Kafka is most obviously classifiable, of course, as a Modernist rather than a Realist writer; indeed, he has often been described as an "Autor der Klassischen Moderne" (author of classical Modernism; Hiebel 1999, 9; see also Engel 2006), suggesting that Kafka is an exemplar of Modernism and, as a representative of its most enduring, "classical", features, is slightly removed from its more contingent manifestations. The textual features with which the status of Kafka's works as Modernist are associated include their fragmentary character (e.g., Braun 2007, esp. 350) and their supposed negativity: James Rolleston asserts that "One of the few certainties of Kafka-criticism is that he was an aesthetic

modernist, that is, he strove for perfection in art through the demolition of life”, and that Kafka was “theologically insistent on the negative” (1988, 59). An oft-cited characteristic is also Kafka’s focus on the “inner life” (e.g., Zymner 2010, 39) that supposedly contrasts with Realism’s concentration on externals. Like fragmentation and negativity, this is a commonplace of scholarship on Modernism, but it’s one that has rightly been challenged (Herman 2011)—indeed, Rüdiger Zymner himself equivocates about it, suggesting at one point that Modernism is also defined by a heightened interest in external facts (2010, 38). I’ll come back to this question when I talk about descriptive detail in Chapter Three.

The relationship between Realism and Modernism is traditionally conceptualised as a linear chronological progression in which Modernism reacts against the precepts of Realism. Esther Leslie (2007) describes the widespread tendency to see Modernism as the end of Realism (citing Lukács’s essay “Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?” as an important contributor to the linear model), before showing how various different types of “realism” coexist in the “modernist” era. This study will consider the nature and effects of Kafka’s texts by means of a contrast with nineteenth-century literary Realism, one of whose primary stylistic traits is a high level of detail in descriptions of visible aspects of the real world, or a potentially real world (see Chapter One, pp. 60–64). While the contrastive relationship between Realism and Kafka will be highlighted, the point is not to argue for a total disjuncture, but to suggest how, by quite different means, Kafka’s texts and those of literary Realism seek to create an effect of reality.

Writing about the famous “Realismusdebatte” (Realism debate) of the 1930s between Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács, John J. White notes that we should view texts contributing to this debate as existing within the context of “a rich and long-standing tradition of competing conceptions of realism” (2005, 145). The complexity of this debate, informed by both nineteenth-century Realism and Russian Formalism, is symptomatic of the entire history of the use of a term which has intuitive appeal and apparent transparency, but which has in the practice of definition of and application to specific texts proven remarkably opaque and multifaceted. Even just in literary (as opposed to philosophical) contexts, the term is plagued by excessive generality and by the multiple ideological investments of its users. Although I don’t by any means claim ideological neutrality, focusing on how Kafka’s texts evoke cognition and may therefore engage the reader’s cognitive processes in particular ways will allow me to develop a cognitive account of Realism that may serve as a newly precise point of reference from which to assess other conceptions of Realism or “realism”.

A few practical points, before I go any further. “Literary” and “nonliterary”, and “fictional” and “non-fictional”, are two common spectra of textual classification, overlapping but by no means equivalent. However, given the canonical (i.e., prototypically “literary”) status of Kafka’s “fictional” texts, and the fact that the fiction he wrote was almost exclusively prose

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fiction, the distinction between the two will be unimportant to me here, and so I'll use the terms interchangeably, except in Chapter Two, where I investigate Kafka's "non-fictional" writings and will briefly discuss his blurring of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. The term "Realism" will be capitalised when referring to Realism as a literary period or movement, primarily in its nineteenth-century incarnation; lower-case "realism" will be used when referring to cognitively orientated aspects of texts that aren't necessarily encompassed by the literary periodisation. The term "evocation" will be used to denote the textual communication of (information about) aspects of the fictional world, because, unlike common alternatives such as "representation", "depiction", "portrayal", and similar terms, it has no overt pictorialist/representationalist connotations. "Description" will also be used occasionally, but given its emphasis on denotation rather than on the act of calling forth to the mind, and its stronger implication of detailed specification often of static elements of the world (Sternberg 1981, 61), I generally prefer "evocation". The verbs "evoke" and "induce" are quite often confused when talking about texts and reader responses, but I'll use them consistently to refer to what texts communicate ("evoke") and what effects they may cause ("induce") in readers. Readers' "responses" are assumed, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, to include the broad range of possible cognitive facets, including the emotional, the perceptual and sensorimotor, and what might often be called the "interpretive" (see also p. 31). Finally, I'll give all quotations from German in the original and in my own English translation, and I'll usually present accounts of what's happening in a given section of text by Kafka in passive/impersonal forms, to avoid naïve attributions of direct authorial intention implied by the use of "Kafka writes", "the author describes", and similar (though see p. 9 below).

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND RELATION TO OTHER AREAS OF LITERARY STUDIES

In order to contextualise my cognitively orientated interrogation of realism, I'll now briefly consider how the cognitive methodology I shall be employing connects with and differs from several important twentieth-century traditions in literary theory, before proceeding to situate my approach with reference to key areas within cognitive literary studies. I'll also consider a couple of key methodological issues: the status of science as a hermeneutic tool, and questions of subjectivity and generalisability in critical and ordinary reading.

### a) New Criticism

An important though sometimes neglected requirement of any theoretical approach to literature must be that its postulates or hypotheses end up enriching close reading, i.e. help us read literature more insightfully. New

Criticism is the best-known promoter of close attention to the structure and formal elements of the text itself, but the attempt to eliminate authorial intention and reader response from literary analysis, most notably in the two (in)famous essays by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley (“The Intentional Fallacy” [1946] and “The Affective Fallacy” [1949]), gave New Criticism a direction incompatible with cognitive approaches. A cognitively sensitive programme of literary study must acknowledge that questions of intention and effect can’t simply be evacuated from the set of questions that will always be asked about literature. This doesn’t mean that we need to aim, for example, at recovering an originary authorial intention of which we can only ever have indirect evidence, but given the importance of intention in any communicative act (e.g., Wilson and Sperber 2004), literary criticism’s now deeply ingrained suspicion of intention (most famously embodied in Barthes’s “death of the author”—even if for him the author’s death also means the “birth of the reader” [1977, 148]) seems problematic. We needn’t exchange this suspicion for a more simplistic understanding of intention, however. On the contrary, a better understanding of the neuroscience and psychology of intention compels us to question the folk notions of intention and execution even for the simplest actions and decisions (see, e.g., Wegner and Wheatley 1999; Haggard 2008; Soon et al. 2008; and, with reference to literature, Troscianko 2012a). In line with the literary-critical angle, a cognitive approach must also conclude that it’s impossible to posit, say, an intention (let alone a freely willed intention) to write *The Trial*. However, an approach based on neuroscientific and behavioural evidence provides purchase on the complex question of what causal and correlational connections might be relevant instead. The concept of extended mind or extended cognition may also help enrich our understanding of authorial intention as inseparable from spoken or written language (Bernini, forthcoming). These seem considerably more productive ways of approaching the question of authorial intention than pretending that it’s simply irrelevant. The present study won’t foreground this question (see Crane 2001 for a good example of a study that does), but it seems to me an important selection criterion for any research programme in the broader sense that it not preclude significant questions like this one.

Wimsatt and Beardsley get it wrong in the other direction too, as I see it. In their second essay on fallacies of literary criticism, they condemn the “affective fallacy” as consisting in “a confusion between the poem and its *results* (what it *is* and what it *does*). [. . .] It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism” (1949, 31; authors’ italics). This study will proceed from the diametrically opposed assumption that what a literary work “is” can best be understood by investigating what it “does” (because words on the page are not literature until they start to do things cognitively), and that there is therefore no better starting point for literary investigation than the “psychological effects” of great works of fiction—like Kafka’s, say.

It's certainly possible for cognitive approaches to end in "impressionism and relativism", but this is arguably less likely than in other areas of literary studies, given the wealth of precise scientific data, results, and terminological distinctions at one's disposal. Indeed, the opposite attack to Wimsatt and Beardsley's is also often made: that cognitive literary studies imports inappropriately scientific and absolutist methods and arguments into the study of inherently non-generalisable literary effects (see also p. 15). It's clearly impossible to get it completely right, in everyone's eyes. I will try to tread a careful but not too hesitant path between impressionism and reductionism, though the observant reader may note that my inclinations lead me closer to the latter.

## **b) Reader-Response Studies**

Another field of literary criticism that would, to judge from the name, seem to be highly relevant to a study of cognitive realism is reader-response studies, which posits that the meaning of a text can't be investigated independently of how it engages the reader. Yet in practice, reader-response studies have produced numerous conceptualisations of text-inherent readers (readers constructed by and in the text) that bear no necessary relation to any real flesh-and-blood reader, whether individual or typical. In her introduction to the reader-response school of criticism, Elizabeth Freund (1987, 7) draws attention to the plethora of personifications of the reader that it has spawned, including the mock reader (Gibson), the implied reader (Booth, Iser), the model reader (Eco), the super reader (Riffaterre), the inscribed or encoded reader (Brooke-Rose), the narratee (Prince), the ideal reader (Culler), the literent (N. Holland), and the informed reader or interpretive community (Fish). Although the concept of "audience" or "reader" can in theory include an actual, historical, idiosyncratic personage, the focus of these critics is always precisely on the concept rather than any actuality.

The lack of clarity in the relationship between different types of text-inherent readers (e.g., fictive versus intended or implied readers), both within and between individual theorists' accounts, is highlighted in W. Daniel Wilson's explanatory discussion of "Readers in Texts" (1981). Even Hans Robert Jauss's (1982) "actual reader" is subordinated in terms of evidential validity to the "implied reader". Moreover, reader-response critics have tended to elevate the quest for "meaning" in the text over considerations of emotion or imagination evoked as a "response" in even a theoretical reader (see, e.g., Esrock 1994, 25–31, on theorists including Ingarden and Iser). The text's meaning is often presented as something to be "solved", reinforcing the notion that "truth" is located in the text and the words on the page, just as for the Formalists and New Critics, and not in fact in the interplay between the text and the (real, live) reader. That isn't to say that no reader-response critics pay attention to the real reading experience. Stanley Fish relocates meaning in the reader's "experience" rather than in

the text, and counters Wimsatt and Beardsley's "affective fallacy" with his "affective stylistics", which helpfully reconfigures each sentence in a text as "an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader" (1970, 125, author's italics). But in Fish's later work (e.g., 1980), the notion that both reader and text are primarily functions of "interpretive communities" responsible for their reality becomes increasingly dominant, so that reading risks becoming an undifferentiable manifestation of the "context" of interpretation. It's tempting to conclude, as Freund does, that the multiple "displacements and substitutions" of conceptualised readers in reader-response studies culminate in an abolition of the "irksome dichotomy of reader/text [. . .] by an assimilation of the text into the reader or the reader into the text" (1987, 10). In her opinion, this fundamentally undermines the reader-response project: "In this last phase of 'reading-as-textuality', reader-response criticism as a coherent, total and theoretically viable project is extinguished" (10).

More broadly, reader-response studies also provides a good example of the problematically divergent basic assumptions held by cognitive science and literary theory. Catherine Emmott highlights the potential difficulties of an interdisciplinary approach combining these two areas, remarking that "Cognitive psychology takes the role of the reader for granted—after all, it is the science of the human mind. By contrast, the major contribution of literary theory's 'reader response' work is to argue this very fact" (1997, viii). In the eyes of other disciplines, calling for a "return to the reader" might easily seem like belatedly stating the obvious. The challenge for the current generation of cognitive literary studies is to demonstrate that, while the obvious may for some time have needed (re)stating in literary studies, cognitive approaches to literature can do more than that: they can yield valuable insights into literary texts and their effects, and even perhaps into the embodied minds that read them.

Text-inherent readers can, of course, be useful constructs for conceptualising how texts encourage real readers to respond to them. It's debatable whether another stage needs to be included in the chain connecting author, narrator/characters, and real readers, but if the extra stage is incorporated, it's important that it be just that, rather than a replacement of the final one. The real reader, after all, may or may not respond to the invitations made by the text to read in a certain way (i.e., to align himself or herself with a certain text-inherent reader). As already noted, this study won't explore in detail the many possible dimensions of individual variation in reader responses, but will focus instead primarily on the commonalities of likely responses. What I'll try to show, however, is that these commonalities have a cognitive as much as a textual origin. Ignoring cognition is therefore as odd as ignoring the text would be. Not ignoring either allows the specific interactions between text and mind to be interrogated in detail, rather than text and mind being conflated and therefore unsusceptible to being analysed as interacting.



c) **Structuralism**

The question of commonality and difference arises in the context of Structuralist criticism too. Structuralism is interested in individual literary texts primarily as manifestations of macrostructures: the individual subjectivity in relation to which a literary work might be studied is a subject within a system, that is, to be “classified in certain describable categories of a ‘world view’” (Fokkema and Ibsch 1995, 56), in an anthropological sense. Although Structuralist criticism acknowledges that the variable counterpart to the constant text is the reader’s response, the focus is less on how meaning (let alone experience) is created in response to a particular text than on how meaning in general is created, through the combination of a culturally variable signifying system and unchanging cognitive universals—yet rarely with any detailed engagement with the sciences that might have something to contribute as to the nature of these “universals” (though see Gavins and Steen 2003, 5–8, on Structuralism’s affinities with cognitive poetics). Cognitive approaches at their best have the means to counteract the ideologically dangerous tendency often encountered in the humanities to deny all human commonalities, whilst also being able to accommodate and account for individual variation. Structuralism’s dependence on the structures of binary opposition and their mediation is another quality which cognitive approaches may, in practice, often serve to counter, simply by virtue of their object being the complexities of human cognition, which are rarely reducible to neat opposites (see Chapter Four).

Sadly, Structuralism has also been the setting for the some of the worst excesses of intellectual pseudo-science, as exposed in the area of cultural studies by Alan Sokal’s famous hoax. Sokal submitted an article entitled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” (1996) to *Social Text*, and revealed in *Lingua Franca* on the day it was published that it was a spoof, “liberally salted with nonsense”: “Nowhere in all of this is there anything resembling a logical sequence of thought; one finds only citations of authority, plays on words, strained analogies, and bald assertions” (Sokal 1996; see also Sokal and Bricmont 1998). Julia Kristeva’s *Sēmeiōtikē: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (*Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*) provides some of the most baffling examples of pseudo-science in the area of literary criticism. I’ve resigned myself simply to never understanding, for example, how the “axiom of choice”, which apparently specifies that there exists a single-valued correspondence, represented by a class, which associates to each non-empty set of the theory (of the system) one of its elements, and is represented by the equation

$$(\exists A)\{U_n(A) \cdot x[\sim E_m(x) \cdot \supset \cdot (\exists y)[y \in x \cdot \langle yx \rangle \in A]]\}$$

can really be a way of showing, as Kristeva claims it does, how every sequence contains the message of the book, or indeed how that could be useful to anyone (1969, 128; see also Sokal and Bricmont 1998, 37–48).



#### d) Psychoanalytic Readings

Psychoanalytic (especially Freudian) criticism has been one of the most popular ways of incorporating questions of psychology into literary studies (e.g., N. Holland 1990), and psychoanalysis has arguably been subjected to less critical scrutiny in this area than it has been from within the sciences of the mind. Given that Freudian psychoanalysis is primarily a system for telling stories about the mind, rather than an eliminative method of finding things out about the mind, its use in the context of literary studies isn't surprising, but nor is it cognitively informative, except in yielding a kind of cognitively interesting intertextuality or in manifesting the tenacity of certain folk-psychological modes of thought. Because psychoanalysis can neither generate adequate explanations nor provide more than poor descriptions of psychological phenomena (Macmillan 1997), there would be little to gain from including it in a cognitively orientated study of Kafka's writings.

It could nonetheless be argued that given Freud's profound influence on early twentieth-century culture, a cognitive study of Kafka should include some consideration of Freud. Kafka probably first encountered Freud's work at the salon of Bertha Fanta in 1912, and made a throwaway but oft-cited remark in his diary after having completed "Das Urteil": "Gedanken an Freud natürlich" (Thoughts of Freud, of course; 23 September 1912, T 461). It seems undeniable that Kafka would have been acquainted with texts such as *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*) (Marson and Leopold 1964; Campbell 1987), and Peter Beicken has argued that Kafka was relatively sympathetic to psychoanalytic premises, while objecting to their "Heilanspruch" (curative claims; 1974, 201). On the other hand, Judith Ryan suggests that "Freud did not really begin to capture the literary imagination until the second decade of the twentieth century, finally becoming more directly assimilated in the 1920s" (1991, 16). She argues that Franz Brentano, Ernst Mach, and William James were the key figures in psychology who attracted most of the attention of writers on both sides of the Atlantic in the two decades before and after the turn of the century, and shows that Kafka was exposed to a broad range of areas in the new psychology relatively early on (from secondary school onwards), notably the psychophysics of Weber and Fechner and the work of Mach and Brentano. Ultimately, because there is already so much work considering the connections between Kafka and Freud (e.g., Sussman 2008), and because I have yet to read a psychoanalytic interpretation which substantially enriched my understanding of Kafka's work (see also Robertson 1985, 26–27), I prefer to leave that line of inquiry to others.

#### e) The Status of Science

The dubious status of psychoanalysis as a scientific discipline, in combination with its undeniable cultural influence, raises the broader question of how the findings and debates of current cognitive science employed in

this study are conceived of: are they seen as historically and conceptually relative, or as providing access to fundamental truths about human cognition? To some extent, I believe that both can apply at once. I've set out my position on these questions in Troschianko (2013a), and will summarise here several points made there. Firstly, the cognitive sciences are a disparate and rapidly changing field, with as many divergences as there are collaborative convergences. As in all the sciences, any given finding is necessarily provisional, and whole research paradigms are subject to replacement (Kuhn 1970). Nonetheless, the scientific method is the most refined and effective method we have for generating, testing, and disproving hypotheses, and thereby making progress towards a better understanding of the world and ourselves. Kuhn's model makes clear that a given paradigm will prevail over its predecessor only if it's better in important ways—allowing, for example, for strikingly better quantitative precision and the prediction of previously unsuspected phenomena (153–54). Even if the evolution of scientific ideas doesn't constitute progress towards “the truth”, nonetheless its “successive stages are characterized by an increasingly detailed and refined understanding of nature” (170). As for truth itself (like “facts”, both words that literary scholars rarely use without scare quotes, actual or implied), it's clear that there are things that are true and not true about human cognition, just as there are about the structure of DNA and the composition of the Earth's atmosphere. The maximum degree of certainty available to and achieved by humanity about any of these truths is less clear, and highly variable, but it is possible to claim with substantial confidence that our current understanding of, for example, the numerous processes that contribute to visual perception is both more accurate and more complete than that of a century ago. Furthermore, it is, of course, all we have to work with. A decision not to engage with scientific findings simply because they can never be entirely accurate or complete would be a sadly defeatist response, given how much is already known with some confidence about how the mind works, and given how much a cognitive approach to literature can draw on scientific findings about cognition and ultimately perhaps also contribute to them. Happily, visual perception, the cognitive focus of this book, is an area of cognition to which a great deal of research in a number of convergent areas has been dedicated and in which substantial increases in understanding have resulted: “The understanding of vision must stand as one of the great success stories of contemporary science” (Findlay and Gilchrist 2003, 1).

That isn't to say that fundamental questions of epistemology don't arise when we try to bring literary studies into dialogue with cognitive science. The gulf between the sciences and the humanities is a relatively recent phenomenon: Alva Noë (2009, xv) remarks that the German term “*Literaturwissenschaft*” (literary criticism, literally the science of literature) denotes the common origins of literary studies (like all the “*Geisteswissenschaften*” [the humanities]) and the natural and social sciences. However, for the last century or so, the sciences-humanities divide has been real and growing,

as Postmodernism and scientific/philosophical realism have polarised and increasing specialisation has made it even harder to engage meaningfully with the debates of other subdisciplines, let alone to connect fields as seemingly disparate as literary studies and cognitive science. There are many realms, including cognitive literary studies, in which the sciences-humanities divide can and has begun to be bridged, but the challenges being faced include big questions concerning the aim of intellectual inquiry and the nature of knowledge and evidence.

These challenges are strikingly apparent, not least at the level of (relatively) casual conversation with literary scholars: quite often when I mention trying to find answers to questions about literary texts by employing scientific insights and methodologies, the response is a more or less passionate defence of the irreducible multiplicity of ways of being uncertain about texts. Similarly, I often encounter suspicion and defensiveness when I suggest that confidence in scientific progress towards truth might even have any legitimacy as applied to the attempt to develop an HIV vaccine, let alone be applicable to the study of literature. There are plenty of others who respond more constructively, if with equally strong convictions that I'm wrong. It often appears, however, that a perceived state of embattlement with the higher-status and better-funded sciences causes these kinds of anti-science arguments to be expressed more vehemently than they otherwise might be—which is, of course, highly counterproductive. The only useful response to these kinds of objections is, I think, to counter them with a detailed demonstration of what kinds of answers to important questions about literature become accessible if we take the findings and debates of the sciences seriously. This depends on some degree of openness to the very concept of an “answer” being a reasonable aim, but engagement with textual specifics can be a constructive way of sidestepping this issue.

## f) Cognitive Literary Studies

Cognitive approaches need not, in any case, be considered as competing with all other areas of literary studies. Peter Stockwell notes that whereas literary criticism has witnessed many shifts of focus “around the triangle of ‘author-text-reader’, with different traditions placing more or less emphasis on each of these three nodes” (2002, 5), cognitive approaches (for Stockwell, specifically “cognitive poetics”) have the advantage of being able to illuminate all three equally and, if appropriate, in conjunction with one another. Also in a conciliatory vein, Alan Palmer suggests that cognitive approaches should be considered fundamental, not alternative, to other (e.g., historical, feminist, rhetorical) approaches to the study of literature, and that cognitive approaches can be practised with a “pragmatic, undogmatic, and unideological” attitude (2010, 7).

This may be easier said than done, however, and is sometimes not even desirable: some other approaches may be considered incompatible with

cognitive approaches in particular ways. For example, it would be hard to use a cognitive-scientific framework to support a psychoanalytic reading of a text without some glaring inconsistencies emerging, although even these might be made productive rather than problematic if analysed in the context of, say, a comparative study of cognition itself and its historical conceptualisations. Norman Holland's article "The Brain of Robert Frost" is an early and very interesting example of a work that does try to combine psychoanalysis and cognitive science. A critic famous for his psychoanalytic readings here presents psychoanalytic theory as consistent with computer-science feedback models of the brain, replacing the "standard" and the "system" in an information-processing feedback loop with "identity" and "self", and insisting on the existence of "a governing and permeating identity" governing the multiple feedback loops (1984, 383). Holland also espouses principles key to embodied and social cognition ("The ground of our lives is physical and biological, yet our cultural values can either limit our physiology [. . .] or enlarge it" [376]), but preserves the concept of "a higher level of our minds" (379) where all the important decisions are made, in a space apparently unaffected by the body or society. This is partly attributable to the insistence of the computer scientists whose work he draws on that there are distinct "higher" and "lower" feedback loops, but it's hard to reconcile this stance with more recent models of mind and brain that demonstrate the constant interplay of the different "levels". Choices may sometimes need to be made between different approaches if inconsistencies are to be avoided. Regardless of the outcome, being forced to make such choices may in itself be an epistemically useful process.

Cognitive literary studies is, in any case, far from a monolithic threat to existing critical traditions; indeed, it's defined more than anything by its disparate, not to say fragmented, character. Even its relationship with science is far from clear cut or unified. My own view is that critically assimilating scientific insights is the prerequisite of any valid cognitive approach. However, it is not uncommon for scholars in cognitive literary studies to be very happy to call what they do "cognitive", but to be uncomfortable with the "scientific"/"scientifically informed" label. This is just one manifestation of the unstable epistemological and methodological basis of cognitive literary studies.

In the effort to provide an overview of the field, Palmer (2010, 5–6) distinguishes between three main types of cognitive approach: cognitive narratology, cognitive poetics, and cognitive approaches to literature. As Palmer characterises them, cognitive narratology applies the findings of cognitive science to various aspects of the narrative comprehension process; cognitive poetics is a form of applied cognitive linguistics; and cognitive approaches to literature have emerged from literary criticism generally, rather than specifically from narrative theory. Cognitive cultural studies (e.g., Zunshine 2010) and ecocriticism (e.g., Glotfelty and Fromm 1996) are other subsections that might be added to the list. It's also worth mentioning that there is a substantial tradition of "literature and science studies" (represented, for

example, by the British Society for Literature and Science), whose primary aim is to illuminate the form and content of literary texts with reference to relevant historical incarnations of scientific discourse and practice (e.g., Meyer 2001). Scholars such as Judith Ryan (1991) and Heidsieck (1994), who compare Kafka's texts with contemporary psychology, pursue this kind of aim. I don't, primarily because of the complex issues of influence raised by it (Troschianko 2013a), as well as the more mundane question of whether it can be proven that a given author actually read the texts he or she is supposed to have responded to in his or her fiction. Although I show in Chapter Two that Kafka's engagement with perceptual questions was substantial, my argument about their significance in his fiction doesn't depend on his intentions or direct intellectual influence.

In what follows, I'll use the terms "cognitive literary studies" and "cognitive approaches (to literature)" in their most general sense, only occasionally adopting Palmer's distinctions as necessary. Using Palmer's characterisations, my methods and aims are probably most closely aligned with what he calls "cognitive approaches to literature", but there are significant differences between my approach and those of the three exemplars listed by Palmer: Elaine Scarry's *Dreaming by the Book* (1999), Mark Turner's *Reading Minds* (1991), and Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction* (2006). Specifically, I don't employ the strongly introspective method favoured by Scarry, I don't focus primarily on language as Turner does (indeed, I would classify *Reading Minds* as cognitive poetics in Palmer's schema), and unlike Zunshine I don't aim at evolutionary explanations. I also focus here on the work of a single author, unlike most other book-length publications in cognitive literary studies, with the notable exceptions of Mary Crane's *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* (2001) and Nancy Easterlin's *Wordsworth and the Question of "Romantic Religion"* (1996).

The variety of subdisciplines within the broad field of cognitive approaches to literature is a strength of the area, meaning that research covers a wide range of angles on the cognitive aspects of literature. However, it's also a weakness, in that, as noted, the area is highly fragmented and characterised by differences of focus and method that are sometimes more divisive than productive. Another consequence of the field's newness is arguably a tendency to overcomplicate the critical frameworks used to mediate between cognitive science and literary studies, at the expense of forging direct, intuitively graspable, straightforwardly illuminating connections between the two. Despite its importance in bringing cognitive approaches towards the mainstream, various paradigms within cognitive poetics, such as "text world theory" (Werth 1999; Gavins 2007), might be characterised in these terms. Stockwell, much of whose work builds on text world theory, expresses a common opinion of cognitive approaches when he argues that

A trivial way of doing cognitive poetics would be simply to take some of the insights from cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics, and

treat literature as just another piece of data. In effect, we would then set aside impressionistic reading and imprecise intuition and conduct a precise and systematic analysis of what happens when a reader reads a literary text. Given this methodological perspective, we would probably be mainly interested in the continuities and connections between literary readings and readings of non-literary encounters. We would not really have much to say about literary value or status, other than to note that it exists. (2002, 5)

It's interesting to note the shift between the impassioned attack on "impressionism" in Wimsatt and Beardsley (1949, 31) and the equally passionate defence of it here. At least three unnecessary assumptions are, however, constitutive of this line of argument. Firstly, that "taking insights" directly from cognitive science necessarily entails treating literature as "just another piece of data", that is, solely as a source of further insights about cognition rather than as an object of study in its own right. (In practice, doing things this way round may be more difficult than using science to illuminate literature; Burke and Troschianko 2013.) Secondly, that "impressionistic reading and imprecise reading" are inherently valuable, more so than "precise and systematic analysis of what happens when a reader reads a literary text" (which is, by implication, "trivial"). And thirdly, that appreciation of the specifics of "literary value" depends on its hard-and-fast demarcation from nonliterary value. The present study hopes to show by example that none of these assumptions is necessary or helpful, and that cognitive literary studies can put literature and the experience of reading literature at the centre of its inquiry precisely by drawing directly on insights from the cognitive sciences, precisely by aiming at precise and systematic analysis, and precisely by assuming literature's continuity with "nonliterary" modes of expression and experience. This profound divergence in outlook, which may be partly attributed to Stockwell's concern to distinguish his research paradigm from cognitive linguistics, is certainly also a telling example of the fragmentation of cognitive literary studies—a state of affairs which has arguably not changed much in the decade since Stockwell published *Cognitive Poetics*.

While the other traditions in literary studies discussed above emphasise meaning, cognitive approaches tend to emphasise effects. Peter Dixon, Marisa Bortolussi, and colleagues (1993), for example, distinguish between "text features" and "text effects" as part of a framework that foregrounds interpretation as a contingent cognitive activity of interest in itself rather than subordinate to the conclusions yielded by it. An effect of a literary text is initially an effect on a mind and a body—that of the reader. (A point that will become a key principle of my analysis is that a cognitive effect is always a physical effect as well as a mental one, but I'll return to that in a moment.) That effect, or those effects, may—and usually do—include interpretive, emotional, perceptual, kinaesthetic, and behavioural components, all interacting reciprocally with the others in the context of an aesthetic experience.

These primary effects may cause and merge with secondary effects: the text may be employed in subsequent cognitive acts (including memory acts, evaluative and conceptual acts, etc.), or the reading experience may alter one's medium- to long-term (self-reported) moral attitudes or behaviours (Hakemulder 2000, 39–45)—or indeed one may end up writing a piece of criticism on the text.

In seeking an alternative paradigm for studying “reader response” in relation to real readers, cognitive-textual interactions rather than finalised textual “meanings” will be my focus of attention. As Stockwell puts it in the introduction to *Cognitive Poetics*, “Meaning [. . .] is what literature does” (2002, 4). Areas of literary study such as narratology have long recognised that it can be fruitful to investigate how, as well as what, a text means. In “The Empirical Study of Literature. How Empirical Can It Be?” (whose concerns are still as relevant today as when it was published), Dieter Freundlieb suggests that some of the problems inherent in the empirical study of literature derive from “[the] fact (if it is a fact) that statements about textual meanings in the context of literary interpretations are not empirically true or false” (1989, abstract). Freundlieb here highlights one aspect of the more widely problematic project of scientifically investigating subjective responses—a problem arguably most pressing in empirical work, but present across the field—and his parenthetical equivocation draws our attention to debates about what the limits of empiricism may or may not be. For Freundlieb, these difficulties can be mitigated by shifting the emphasis of investigation from meaning to interpretation: “An empirical study of literature would make interpretation one of its objects of study and explanation” (abstract). The term “interpretation” is used by Freundlieb to denote the cognitive sense-making that any text demands of its reader, rather than any more esoteric form of exegesis. This accords with the focus of the present study, which is concerned with “interpretive” commonalities (how textual elements tap into specific human cognitive—including perceptual and emotional—processes, giving rise to trends and patterns of response that are likely to be common to a majority of readers) rather than with individual “readings” (how a single reader's personal history and attitudes affect other aspects of his or her response to the text). The empirical work to which I refer at various points does, however, seek to take account of individual differences in the participants, and describes individual responses as well as giving generalised conclusions.

A privileging of generality over specificity when it comes to readings of texts arguably accords more closely with traditional literary criticism than would an insistence on individual readings: critical interpretations very rarely take the personal history or character traits of individual readers into account, for example. Of course, literary studies has generally been highly aware of social and historical context, and this is one of the major potential points of contention with cognitive approaches, but in practice, there need be no fundamental conflict. Cognitive approaches are, indeed,



uniquely able (even if in practice they aren't always used) to account for different timescales in the development of cognitive architecture and phenomena, by helping elucidate how different cognitive faculties such as, say, vision and language adapt—at dramatically different speeds—between generations. Importantly, this also means that scientific evidence can be used as a solid basis for arguing, for example, that the neural architecture of vision has changed very little in the evolutionary blink of an eye that separates us from Kafka's era. A cognitive approach to Kafka can therefore work on the assumption that the twenty-first-century reader will have more commonalities with than differences from the early twentieth-century reader as regards perceptual responses, although it can also be used to nuance this basic position with evidence of, say, cognitive-linguistic shifts on a smaller timescale.

Scepticism as to the sensitivity of cognitive approaches may often be voiced with specifically evolutionary approaches in mind: although Patrick Colm Hogan's (2003) *The Mind and Its Stories*, for example, presents hypotheses of an admirable scope and falsifiability about universal prototypical narrative structures, his recourse to evolution as the ultimate explanatory force results in an unresolved tension between biological and social factors, which leads away from a focused discussion of literature itself. These kinds of issues, and the ease with which evolutionary approaches, not just to literature, can end up telling superficially satisfying but explanatorily empty “just so” stories (Schlinger 1996), shouldn't be overgeneralised in challenges to cognitive approaches more broadly.

Cognitive literary studies has its problems, as I've indicated, but it also has great promise, both in its own right and as part of a network of cognitive-scientific approaches to art. “Empirical aesthetics” is bringing together scientists and humanities scholars through a wide range of experimental work on many kinds of art (e.g., Augustin and Wagemans 2012), and “neuroaesthetics” is also a burgeoning area in which scientists seek to add either “deeper descriptive texture” or “added explanatory force” to our understanding of art (Chatterjee 2010, 60). There are lots of challenges involved in this kind of work, not least that of bridging the potential ontological gulfs between domains like neural activity, behaviour, and experience (Kuzmičová 2012b). But the challenges seem well worth tackling.

## g) The Reader and the Status of Subjectivity

Cognitive approaches that foreground literary effects at some point always have to confront the difficult question of how far my (the critic's) own responses to a text can and should be used as a source of hypotheses or even working assumptions about how a given text makes “us” feel. On the one hand, for the critic to assume that his or her own responses are typical of a general readership is not only mildly solipsistic but very likely just wrong: someone trained in close reading and familiar with a number of theoretical approaches is by definition not a “normal” reader. Whether the



difference is a qualitative or quantitative one—whether such training alters responses or primarily increases awareness of them, or conversely reduces their intensity through reflexive distance—is a separate question, and one that requires empirical investigation. Several existing studies have begun to address this issue: Dixon, Bortolussi, and colleagues (1993), for instance, find that experienced readers are more sensitive to and more appreciative of narratorial ambiguity, and Sotirova offers provisional evidence that interpretation of perspectival, or “voicing”, effects depends on linguistic experience (2006, 124–25), concluding that further research might be carried out “to show that dual voicing is perhaps a rather subtle effect of free indirect style to which only some ‘untrained’ readers respond, but which is felt more strongly by ‘experienced’ readers” (125). And although it may simplify matters to assume that the expertise developed by the critic is primarily a distorting factor to be maximally eliminated from, for example, empirical studies of responses to literature, it can certainly also be argued that this is a rather perverse waste of valuable expertise, based on a concept of a “blank-slate” reader which is in any case untenable. Indeed, seen from the other side, the attempt in empirical work to control for contextual knowledge by, for example, removing the name of the author from a literary text may in practice itself end up distorting the “natural reading experience” (to the extent that there is such a thing) by trying to orchestrate an artificial “blankness”.

In practice, perhaps the most we can conclude with confidence is that no critical discussion of literature should pretend to be independent of the responses of the critic-as-reader to the text in question, because this can never be the case. The approach espoused in this study is certainly informed by my own specific responses to Kafka’s texts. I hope that I’ll avoid giving the impression of assuming those responses to be typical, universal, or (perish the thought) in some way “ideal”. The reader will notice that in my discussions of individual texts, I make frequent use of qualifying particles and conditional verbal constructions—“likely”, “probably”, “may (well)”, and so forth—as well as other kinds of reminders that a certain effect is only what the text “encourages” or “makes likely”. These linguistic features are intended to maintain an awareness of alternative responses as eminently possible, while using facts about the text and cognition to make well-grounded hypotheses about likely responses.

In this sense, my claims, or suggestions, about reader response are meant in the spirit of hypotheses about what effects I think the textual features may have. To avoid being too stylistically cumbersome, I don’t present every hypothesis in the conditional or with qualifications to draw attention to its hypothetical status, but they are all hypotheticals, and should in principle all be empirically testable. Daniel Allington and Joan Swann (2009) have empirically analysed the ambiguities and idealisations inherent in critics’ use of the term “the reader”, and Allington argues that while “phrases like ‘some people’ read as references to actual readers who might respond in a particular way, [. . .] ‘the reader’ evokes an ideal reader, and statements about ideals

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are normative rather than empirical”.<sup>2</sup> To my mind, however, this is a matter of phrasing: the shorthand of “reader” in the singular doesn’t materially alter the nature of the suggestion about potentially testable real readers. As I see it, any statement about a textual effect rather than a textual meaning is from the outset a statement that is amenable—and susceptible—to empirical testing. As soon as an effect on a/the/any/all reader(s) is posited, it becomes possible for a/the/any/all reader(s) not to manifest the posited effect; thus it’s a hypothesis that can be falsified and refined. I will also assume that shared semantic knowledge used in language processing results in responses that are to some extent “predictable and normative” (Fish 1970, 141); Stanley Fish’s concept of “linguistic competence” seems a reasonable way of formalising the constraints that can be assumed to exist on the range and direction of responses, without eliminating individual variation.

There’s always a balance to be struck between claiming too much, or arguing too inclusively, and being too circumspect to argue anything much at all. I may well have erred on the former side, but in order to provide some counterbalance to unbridled theorising, I also refer as appropriate to the beginnings of a programme of empirical research designed to help flesh out not only the common features of readers’ responses but also their individual differences. This investigation really is only in the early stages, however, so for now many questions must remain just questions, if better defined ones than they might otherwise have remained.

In any case, it’s important to remember that literary interpretation is not an *a priori* mode of explanation; it can itself benefit from investigation which seeks to explain its processes. Analysis that encompasses both the text and the human mind can aid such explanation. My research is informed by both the theories and the empirical practice of science, and, as appropriate and useful, by parts of the emergent discipline of cognitive literary studies. It combines these with the practice of close reading that has always been central to “traditional” literary criticism, and must remain central to any meaningful analysis of literature. This book will also engage with existing criticism on Kafka and on literary Realism, to show where and how the method espoused here connects with critical conclusions reached by different means. In these ways my project will explore the cognitive underpinnings of the experience of reading Kafka’s fiction, and try to open up ways of understanding a wide variety of other experiences of literature.

### 3. EMBODIED COGNITION

Despite the inevitable difficulties of interdisciplinary research (especially humanities-sciences crossover endeavours), this is a deeply exciting time to be engaging with the cognitive sciences in a literary context. The last two decades or so have witnessed a remarkable cognitive-scientific revolution: the body has been brought back into the study of the mind. This revolution

involves a renewed appreciation for the work of early twentieth-century philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, and psychologists such as James Gibson, but it also can't be reduced to or equated with the disciplines of Phenomenology or ecological psychology. The new cognitive science provides more precise findings than Phenomenology (see also Chapter One, pp. 73–74), and, in contrast to Gibson's approach, uses evidence of, for example, the role of action and sensorimotor invariants in vision to better understand not only the sources of information used to drive perception, but also the contributing factors in the subjective experience of perceiving (e.g., O'Regan and Noë 2001a, 1019). Despite appreciating the importance of vision's role in directing action, Gibson's work also puts undue emphasis on optic flow (i.e., relative movement of eye and environment) and on environmentally determined eye movements (Findlay and Gilchrist 2003, 6). The newly embodied strand in cognitive science has expanded the scope of the contributions that psychology, neuroscience, artificial-intelligence research, cognitive linguistics, consciousness studies, and philosophy of mind are able to make in furthering our understanding of what it means to experience the world around us, substantiating with detailed evidence the thesis that "Conscious experience is fundamentally grounded in perceptually guided activity in the environment" (Gibbs 2006, 265).

This new cognitive science, which places strong emphasis on embodied cognition, represents a significant enough change, or set of changes, that it can be considered a new cognitive-scientific paradigm in a substantive, if not strictly Kuhnian, sense (Froese 2007), and has been termed "second-generation" cognitive science (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 77–81). This label is intended to highlight its difference from the "first-generation" cognitivist and computationalist paradigm, which more or less ignored the body, considering it primarily an extra-cognitive interference, or at most allowing it a role as a source of inputs into the rule-based manipulation of symbols that, in the computationalist view, constitutes cognition. The strength of the claims made about embodied cognition varies significantly, and cogent arguments have been made, for example by Andrew D. Wilson and Sabrina Golonka, that the "replacement hypothesis"—according to which complex internal control structures are replaced as the constituents of cognition by bodies coupled (through perception and movement) to specific environments (Shapiro 2010)—needs to be the guiding criterion in research on embodiment if we are to "follow through on the necessary consequences of allowing cognition to involve more than the brain" (Wilson and Golonka, 2013, 2). Wilson and Golonka are therefore critical of research which shows merely that some cognitive process "can tweak or be tweaked by a state of the body" (8). Others are more willing to embrace a wide range of kinds of embodiment, stronger and weaker—Margaret Wilson (2002), for example, identifies six—and my overview of the field will include research that takes up different positions on the spectrum of claims about embodiment, although the sensorimotor theory of vision on which I draw in the

following chapters posits a strong embodiment thesis. Before I go any further, it may also be worth making explicit the fact that arguing for embodied and enactive cognition isn't the same as arguing that the brain has no role in cognition; it clearly does, in vision as much as in everything else that the mind and body do, and the challenge is to integrate findings about the neural mechanisms of vision into a coherent explanatory framework. The present discussion isn't a neuroscientific one, but I'll refer to findings from neuroscience where they help to refine my argument.

In these paragraphs I've introduced the core of the second-generation cognitive sciences as consisting in "embodied" cognition. The three other key elements of the paradigm are enactive, embedded (or situated), and extended cognition (see, e.g., Menary 2010 on "4E" cognition). Different researchers in different research areas tend preferentially to emphasise one or more of these four elements, and to conceive differently of their interrelations. Embodiment (or embodied cognition, or embodied mind) is arguably the most basic concept of the four, since embodiment contains within it the embedded and enactive aspects (a body being inherently situated, and always in action) and is the first step in conceiving of cognition as extending beyond the boundaries of the skull or of the skin. Theories of embodied cognition posit that human cognition is determined by the specifics of human physiology; the thesis of embedded or situated cognition posits that cognition is inseparable from its social, cultural, and physical contexts; while proponents of enactive cognition argue that the effects of context on cognition always occur through active motor interaction; and the theory of extended cognition focuses on the use of environmental props as parts of cognition in a coupled system. Subsequent chapters of this study will focus primarily on the enactive aspect, but in the rest of this section I'll give a contextualising outline of the broader area to provide evidence of how integral the body is to the mind. Given the focus of the following chapters, the points I make will often be exemplified through visual perception, but almost all apply similarly to other sensory modalities.

The work of the philosopher Susan Hurley has been very influential in this field (she died, too young, in 2007). Hurley remarks that it's common to think of perception and action as peripheral "buffer zones mediating between mind and world", and more specifically to think of "perception as input from world to mind and action as output from mind to world", with cognition sandwiched in the space between the two (1998, 1)—this is what she describes as "the classical sandwich model" of the mind (e.g., 20–21, 401). Hurley argues that this conception of the nature of our existence in the world is mistaken: cognition is not simply the sandwich filling, but is inseparable from the sliced white, as it were, of perception and action. Research in areas ranging from psychology and philosophy to neuroscience and artificial intelligence supports this view (see, e.g., M. Johnson 1987 for an early study; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991 for an overview from a Phenomenological perspective; and Hurley 1998 for a more philosophical angle). The instinctive one-way input-output model therefore has to be replaced with

a model which acknowledges that the functions of the “output” back to the “input” are as complex as those from “input” to “output”, and causally continuous with them. As B. F. Skinner puts it, “The skin is not that important as a boundary” (1963, 953; cited in Palmer 2004, 157). Much scientific research on perception and cognition concentrates on the internal workings of the eyes, brain, neurons, and so on, but a full understanding of these processes as embodied suggests that the boundary of their scientific study shouldn’t be the human body. “To understand the mind’s place in the world,” Hurley suggests, “we should study these complex dynamic processes as a system, not just the truncated internal portion of them” (1998, 2). The world must be considered as a determining part of how we think and perceive.

Crucially, thinking is at issue here as well as seeing. It may seem quite obvious that visual perception should be fundamentally embodied, since sensory perception seems to have more to do with the specific organs subserving it (eyes, ears, tongue, etc.) than does thought, which can easily seem just to happen in the brain. Sensory perception may also seem more closely linked to action than is thought: we have to swivel our eyes to see, for instance, and reach out to touch things. Beyond a certain point, however, it becomes impossible to maintain a categorical distinction between thinking, perceiving, and acting: our embodied state determines how we perceive, what (and how) we think, and the types of action patterns that we can perform. These perceptions and actions in turn shape our cognitive functions, notably how we can conceptualise and categorise; those concepts and categories feed back into our perceptions and actions, and so on.

In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson offer extensive evidence for the thesis that “[t]he same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around also create our conceptual systems and modes of reason” (1999, 4). The linguist Eve Sweetser also discusses how earlier concrete sense-perception verbs yielded historically later abstract meanings (1990, 28–48), emphasising in particular the importance of vision’s capacity to “reach out” (39) and “seize on” (32) distant objects. Our embodiment obviously determines our interactions with the world, but it determines also how the world appears to us, in the fullest cognitive sense. We don’t passively retrieve representations of the external world and employ these in an unchanging manner in thought; rather, we select environmental features that are relevant to the task at hand and to the functioning sensorimotor modalities. We see, for instance, a stretch of grass quite differently when we are preparing to mow it from when we’re about to play football on it. How we conceive of and categorise “grass” is then altered by every such enactive perceptual experience, and this in turn feeds into how we conceive of grass, mowing grass, playing football on grass, or spending our free time in grassy spaces, increasing our sensorimotor fluency in a way that then has myriad forms of feedback into the rest of cognition.

Second-generation cognitive science is contributing to an important change in cognitive literary studies. A forthcoming special issue of *Style* explicitly employing the “second-generation” epithet (Caracciolo and Kukkonen, forthcoming) seeks to increase the coherence and impetus of this new area, which has already been embraced by scholars such as Guillemette Bolens, David Herman, and Alan Palmer. The introduction to Bolens’s *The Style of Gestures* (2012) makes a powerful case for the importance of second-generation approaches (without explicitly designating them “second-generation”), citing a wide range of evidence for the fundamental interconnectedness of cognition with its embodied and enactive context. Bolens draws on diverse kinds of evidence for the embodiment of cognition, ranging from how social cognition—the ability to understand other people’s emotions, intentions, aims, beliefs, expectations, and states of mind—is connected with the ability to understand actions, movements, and gestures (2012, 40–41; citing Decety and Stevens 2009) to the finding that motoric aspects of the meaning of action verbs aren’t represented solely through abstract symbolic representations, but are linked with frontal cortical structures that subserve action execution and observation (2012, 37; citing Kemmerer 2006).

#### 4. EMBODIED COGNITION AND LANGUAGE

These examples begin to suggest how the science of embodiment might have relevance specifically to language. Language is processed by both the perceptual and the motor systems (Bolens 2012, 11; citing Jeannerod 2007, 140). Specifically, there is evidence that reading words that denote particular actions activates regions in the premotor cortex that are also active when making the same movements (Hauk, Johnsrude, and Pulvermüller 2004). Barsalou (2008, 628–29) cites a range of research that uses measures including judgement times and eye movements to investigate the parameters of motor responses, or “simulations” (but see Chapter Four, pp. 174–76, on the problems with this concept), while reading about action and metaphorical motion (e.g., “the road runs through the valley”). Similar evidence has been gathered regarding embodied emotions and reading: judgement times were reduced when participants’ covertly manipulated facial expressions (smiling or frowning) matched the valence of textual events (Havas, Glenberg, and Rinck 2007).

The discovery in experiments during the 1980s and 1990s of “mirror neurons”, which fire not only when performing but also when observing an action (see also Chapter Four, pp. 175–76), was an important step in providing neurophysiological evidence for “motor resonance”: covert recapitulation of an action being observed or read about (Kemmerer and Gonzalez-Castillo 2010, 55). Although the question of whether motor resonance in linguistic contexts is inherent to semantic access or part of post-semantic processing is not yet resolved (63–64), and although not all lexical items necessarily have

sensorimotor elements (Mahon and Caramazza 2008), this sort of work poses a significant challenge to the common understanding of concepts as “representationally ‘stable’ neurocognitive constructs” (Kemmerer and Gonzalez-Castillo 2010, 66) devoid of sensorimotor connections.

The science of embodiment has especial relevance to metaphorical language. Lakoff and Johnson’s well-known work on conceptual metaphor (e.g., 2003) presents metaphor as deriving from our embodied experience of the world: given that, to borrow Stockwell’s nice exposition of it, “we are all roughly human-sized containers of air and liquid with our main receptors at the top of our bodies” (2002, 4), large sets of linguistic constants have arisen, such as the multifaceted associations based on the “good is up” and “bad is down” metaphorical mappings (happy is up, sad is down; health and life are up, sickness and death are down; foreseeable events are up and ahead; etc.).

This and other work in cognitive linguistics has more recently been complemented by a substantial interest in metaphor processing in neuroscience and cognitive psychology. There is a rich and growing body of work on the patterns of neural activation in response to metaphor, usually finding bilateral hemispheric activation, which implies that visuospatial processing is more involved in the comprehension of metaphor than of literal language (e.g., Gibbs 1994; Brownell 2000; Van Lancker Sidtis 2006). As Lakoff and Johnson have shown, however, “literal” language is permeated with expressions that are metaphorical in an embodied sense: for example, my use of “permeated” derives from the basic conceptual metaphorical equation of language/discourse with a container, as in “his arguments were full of rubbish” and “I couldn’t keep the sadness out of my voice”. Correspondingly, the neuroimaging literature provides evidence that it may be more cognitively relevant to distinguish between “lexicalised” and “novel” metaphors than between “literal” and “metaphorical”/“figurative” language (e.g., Mashal, Faust, and Hendler 2005). Research of this kind both offers evidence of the continuity of literary and everyday language and suggests ways of accounting for their differences: metaphor is a feature of both (see also Turner 1996), but novel metaphor is more common in literature. And tempting as it can be to try to separate literature from the rest of language use as a profoundly special case, it’s important to retain awareness of how grounded it is in the embodied ways we use language every day, even while acknowledging its differences of degree in style, function, and effect.

## 5. EMBODIED COGNITION AND LITERARY LANGUAGE

The essentially embodied nature of language yields numerous possible approaches specific to literary effects. Bolens notes that an embodied approach helps us account for literary effects particularly in the realm of “figurality”, given that sensorimotor information contributes to the “full” representation



of a given concept—"And this is what matters to literature" (2012, 16). The focus of Bolens's book is "kinesic style" (e.g., 21), by which she means the centrality of "references to movement, gesture, and action when reading a literary text" and responding to it in an embodied fashion (18). The kinesic style of a text—which includes "narratological, lexical, syntactic, grammatical, rhetorical, figural", and other aspects (28)—creates a complex network of effects mediated by descriptions of bodily movement in the text and sensorimotor responses in readers. Bolens's intention is to highlight "kinesic expression as complex sensorimotor dynamics, elaborately semanticized by the author by means of her literary style" (33). In practice, Bolens's subsequent close readings seem to me largely divorced from the rich scientific theory and findings set out in the introduction—inspired by the general idea but departing rapidly from the specifics—but in principle the scientific and the textual details are, I believe, eminently susceptible to a fully dovetailed treatment at both the micro and the macro levels.

In a very obvious sense, literature is all about embodiment: literary (and indeed all fictional and many non-fictional) texts evoke characters who are embodied, situated, and acting in fictional worlds. These characters are more or less closely modelled on real people, actual or potential. In this respect alone, literary texts and readers' experiences of them are fundamentally embodied, prompting suggestions like Palmer's that the notion of "physically distributed cognition" could fruitfully be used in the literary analysis of fictional minds (2004, 157–61). Other scholars have used principles of embodiment to challenge *idées reçues* in literary studies, such as the commonplace that Modernism is defined by an "inward turn". Plenty of Kafka critics have espoused this point of view: Dowden, for instance, talks about the "extraordinary inwardness of Kafka's prose" (1986, 103). Herman (2011) uses an enactivist framework to argue that minds in Modernism are instead evoked through an especially rich interplay of "inner" and "outer", and suggests that rather than conceiving of Modernism as constituting "a movement inward, an exploration of the mind viewed as an interior space" (248), we might usefully think of it as a new "foregrounding of the inextricable interconnection between 'inner' and 'outer' domains—with the scare quotes indicating the extent to which the narratives in question undermine the classical, Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body, the mental and the material" (253). As I hope will become clear in my discussion, this revised conception of what Modernist prose is doing certainly fits the details of Kafka's prose better than the solidly internalist model it replaces.

If we accept the theoretical importance of embodiment to the study of literature, the next big question is how we actually put the science of embodiment to practical use in analysing individual texts. Bolens suggests that the reader of fiction, if she wishes to access the "kinesic intelligibility of the artwork", needs to "attun[e] herself to the work's kinesic style" (2012, 179). My own assumption is that a kinesic (or other) style is something which will have experiential



and interpretive effects whether or not a reader deliberately attunes himself or herself to it, although the effects may be strengthened by doing so. In terms of a critical approach aimed at understanding and explaining rather than at creating experience, however, the concept of attunement is an essential one. The aim of this book is to attune the reader to Kafka's "cognitive style" (with its inherently kinesic—or, to connect the sensory with the motional, "sensorimotor"—elements) by drawing attention to its cognitive structure, in order that some of its effects become more comprehensible. This will in turn allow us, I hope, to start to answer not only the question of why Kafka's writing continues to fascinate a twenty-first-century readership, but also—in suitably circumscribed and provisional form—the question of what makes a text realistic and what the effects of such a text might be and why. These inquiries may in turn also form a useful basis for making predictions and drawing connections with texts by other authors.

In summary, then, the question of cognitive realism in Kafka's evocation of perception and emotion, combined with the insights yielded by second-generation cognitive science (specifically regarding enactive cognition), together provide us with the two main starting points that I'll use to explore Kafka's realism or otherwise, and its effects. In the rest of this introduction, I'll narrow the focus somewhat, to explain my choice of vision as the primary cognitive subject matter, and to outline how a number of scholarly and popular perspectives on Kafka fit into the framework constituted by the science of embodiment and the cognitive realism of perception.

## 6. WHY VISION?

Visual perception is the focus for this study partly because it can be argued that vision is the primary human sense: the one by which we obtain our most precise sensory information about the world around us (e.g., Milner and Goodale 1995, 1; Lukas 2001, 16274; Findlay and Gilchrist 2003, 180). It certainly, for most sighted people, *feels* this way (Gregory 1998, 1). All the senses in fact calibrate and depend on each other, so it isn't necessarily very meaningful to identify one as more important than the others, but given that my focus here is on subjective experience, the *feeling* of primacy matters. Vision is, furthermore, developmentally fundamental in terms of cognition and language acquisition; young children have been shown to use visual features to discriminate between verbal categories (e.g., Sweetser 1990, 39). Vision (and its imaginative corollary) has also—not least because of that feeling of primacy—long had a preeminent status in the theory and practice of literary evocation, and therefore offers a promising testing ground for an approach that seeks to interrogate the cognitive underpinnings of literary effects in conjunction with insights from literary theory broadly construed.

Finally, the imaginative corollary of the visual sense, "mental imagery" or vision-like imagining in the absence of the relevant external stimuli, is also

the modality that dominates our imaginative experiences. I'll go into more detail on the close connections between vision and (vision-like) imagination in Chapter One (pp. 86–92), but for now it's enough to observe that we can usefully conceive of a cognitively prominent continuum established between vision, as evoked in the fictional characters within the text, and (vision-like) imagination, which mediates the reader's connection with those characters (and the rest of the fictional world). "Imagination" has a highly contested status either as a "faculty" or as a "facility" (e.g., Mooij 1993, 1–3; Thomas 2003a, 79–80). However, the term will be used in this study in a relatively narrow sense, as "imagining seeing" (see Chapter One, p. 90): imagining the fictional world, and in particular imagining seeing it as the fictional characters do. In accordance with my generally anti-representationalist approach, I'll refer to "imagining" (as a process) rather than to "mental images/imagery" (as representations), except when referring to the established field of mental-imagery research. When I use the term "imagining" to refer to imagining in the visual modality, this is merely a convenient shorthand, and not at all meant to deny the importance of the other sensory modalities of imaginative experience. Indeed, the claim that visual imagining (like vision itself) may be subjectively privileged doesn't alter the fact that other senses may be more powerful in various ways. Although it's notoriously difficult to imagine (or to remember) smells, for instance, olfaction has a uniquely direct neuroanatomical connection with the amygdala-hippocampus region of the brain, the "neural substrate of emotional memory" (Herz and Schooler 2002, 22; see also LaBar and Cabeza 2006), which gives it a potency that's been exploited in literature and is relevant to readers' responses to literature, very prominently in passages like Proust's famous "madeleine episode" (Troscianko 2013a; see also Conclusion, p. 214). I simply haven't space here to do justice to the other kinds of imagining, so they will have to wait for another time, but it's worth noting that vision conceived of as inseparable from motor processes is a far less reductive way of thinking about imagining than is the emphasis on visual mental imagery in the absence of kinaesthetic elements, with its limiting "mind's-eye" configuration (Gibbs 2006, 136; see also 124–25).

There are general facts about imagining, at the neural and the experiential levels, but individual variation is also clearly significant in people's tendencies and abilities to have vivid imaginative experiences (Cui et al. 2007). Sweeping statements like the claim at the centre of Scarry's argument in *Dreaming by the Book* (drawing on Sartre's *The Psychology of Imagination*), that "what the imagination is best at" is "dry, thin two-dimensionality" (1991, 23), are therefore unhelpful to a nuanced exploration of readers' imaginative responses. Quite apart from the fact that it's far from clear what "dry" is meant to convey as a descriptor for mental imagery, for some people visual imagining is more or less nonexistent, while it isn't at all uncommon for others to rate their imaginative experiences as "perfectly clear and as vivid as normal vision" (on the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire, Marks 1973), or for high proportions of respondents to indicate in Burke's

Novel-Reading Questionnaire that they can “readily visualise” the persons and places described in a novel or short story, and that they imagine “clearly” rather than “indistinctly” (Burke 2011, 80–81). There are reasons to think that the empirical study of mental imagery as a whole could do with rethinking, because imagery questionnaires like David Marks’s may not capture what happens, in individual cases or in general, when imaginative experiences are induced by stimuli other than those questionnaires (Troscianko 2013b). For my purposes here, however, I’ll take the pragmatic approach of assuming that there’s likely to be a generalisable pattern in readers’ imaginative responses to certain kinds of textual features, and, as noted above, I’ll supplement that basic stance with references to my own and others’ empirical research with real readers who both resemble and differ from each other.

Just as readers are more complex than any single study can do justice to, so literary texts are richer than any single perspective can capture. With any study of literature structured by a single angle or theme, there’s a danger of seeming to reduce the texts under scrutiny to little more than a lot of blank spaces separated by the isolated passages in which the theme in question is salient. There’s of course a great deal going on in Kafka that can’t be taken into account in a study on visual perception (even when understood as bound up with action). However, given that our imaginative experience of literature is our basic cognitive means of engaging with it, and given that visual imagining is so important a part of that engagement, I hope that the following analysis of perception won’t seem too arbitrary in its selectiveness—and that it might in practice also illuminate indirectly some of the gaps in between, by offering new ways of thinking about how our imaginative experiences affect other experiential and interpretive aspects of our responses to Kafka. Or, to put it differently, I hope that thinking about cognition and literature using a second-generation paradigm, and hence in a more inclusive way than is usually the case, might make the gaps in between my visuo-perceptual focal points more tractable too. As a matter of terminology, “cognitive” and “cognition” will be assumed (in line with the preceding discussion of cognition as an integrated set of processes encompassing the physical and the emotional) to have perceptual, sensorimotor, and emotional components, but the latter aspects may also be enumerated separately when the context requires that they be emphasised or differentiated. In general, I hope this inclusiveness will prove useful, at the level of textual analysis and for higher-level reflection on literature as an object of academic study.

## 7. VISION IN KAFKA STUDIES

Visual perception is a relatively common theme in literary studies, in the sense that visual perception, or visual culture, or the visual world, has often been interrogated either as a trope within literary works or as an extratextual point of reference. Vision has also been crucial to the definition and/or

self-definition of literary “movements” or “periods” such as Realism (as I’ll show in Chapter One) and Expressionism (see, e.g., Sokel 1959, 50–51). To my knowledge, however, no critical work on specific literary texts has yet explored in detail how vision and visual imagination might operate in the reading process, in a cognitively literal sense.

Given the fantastically large number of critical works on Kafka, it’s surprising how few critics have concentrated specifically on visual perception, with regard either to how the fictional characters see or to how the reader experiences these acts of perception. Carolin Duttlinger (e.g., 2010) has explored the question of attention—which in Kafka often, though not always, means visual attention—with reference to the contemporary scientific understanding of its mechanisms, and suggests that an interplay of attention and distraction characterises texts such as *Betrachtung* (*Meditation*) (see also Fuchs 2010). If they deal with perceptual themes at all, Kafka scholars often examine Kafka’s textual constructs specifically of spatiality rather than visuality. Although space is closely connected with perception (i.e., space is the three-dimensional extent in which we perceive objects and events), the German critical tradition in particular tends to focus on Kafka’s idiosyncrasies in this regard in quite abstract terms: scholars often concentrate on themes such as spatial incoherence (Sussman 1979), enclosure (Karl 1977), centrifugal or centripetal dynamics (Fiechter 1980), and motifs of abstract geometry (Steinsaltz 1992). Even spatial evocation itself is often less the object of interest than is the “functionality” or “symbolism” of space (Frey 1965; Ramm 1971; Fiechter 1980; Kim 1983), its thematic framework (Duttlinger 2007), or its historical context (Anderson 1992), leading frequently to the construction of incredibly complex spatial typologies. A great deal of Kafka criticism touching on perceptual issues thus reduces the richness of the fictional world primarily to space. Similarly, such criticism often reduces perception and perspective to elements of an abstract critical terminology which can supposedly be elucidated only by “Erzählforschung” (narratology) (e.g., Busse 2001) or “Kafka-Deutung” (Kafka studies) (e.g., Walter-Schneider 1980), rather than being susceptible to cognitive analysis. Much of this work implicitly prompts a connection of intratextual vision and perspective with perspective in an extra-literary sense—for example, by referring in passing to the reader’s imagination in connection with narratological concerns—but it rarely pursues this kind of connection.

Many other studies dealing with perceptual questions in Kafka consider them from one of two main angles, which will be the themes of subsequent chapters. Firstly, the level of descriptive detail, mostly of visible aspects of the fictional world, has often been the subject of discussion, and relevant remarks will be outlined in Chapter Three. Secondly, vision is often discussed in terms of “narrative perspective”, a term which denotes both the “angle” from which things are “seen” in a text and the more broadly cognitive “perspective” from which things are thought or uttered; I’ll discuss Kafka’s characteristic use of narrative perspective in Chapter Four.

## 8. KAFKAESQUE DUALITIES

My basic argument about what the experience of reading Kafka is like and why will be based on two observations: firstly, that the non-representational, enactive way in which vision is evoked by Kafka seems to connect with some fundamental qualities of vision, and secondly, that this is at odds in important ways with our folk-psychological understanding of it. Because of these two points, we might expect to observe an opposing duality of response in readers of Kafka: the sense of being both compelled by the cognitive realism and unsettled by its divergence from familiar ways of thinking (and reading) about perception. In the last part of this introduction, I'll describe some supporting circumstantial evidence for the dual nature of the experience of reading Kafka, and in the chapters that follow I'll go on to explore the details of how this kind of effect might be induced and manifested, and also refer to two empirical studies designed help establish to what extent these hypotheses are borne out in the experiences of real readers (see Appendices 1 and 2).

Within quite different analytical contexts, numerous Kafka critics have come to strikingly similar conclusions regarding a contradictory duality in responses to Kafka. This dual effect is often linked to Kafka's use of perspective. Robertson, for instance, discussing "Die Verwandlung" (Metamorphosis), suggests that the text "makes us experience what it is like to have one's knowledge contradicted by one's sensations, when the latter are more immediate and more powerful", and that this effect, mediated by a narrative technique which creates "a disturbing empathy" despite our "superior knowledge", is part of how the text induces an experience that is both "so compelling and so uncomfortable" (1985, 75).

The dual response can be linked to the relationship between characters and events, and to the kind of descriptive detail that baffles as much as it clarifies. Gregory Triffitt (1985) discusses "Ein Landarzt" (A Country Doctor) with reference to the effects on the reader's experience of "the relationship between the representative figures [fictional characters] and the disconcerting, even baffling phenomena confronting them", in particular "the relatively stringent limitations Kafka places on his empirical representatives' ability to actively participate in, to influence and even to understand the situations and events with which they are faced" (113). In combination with this, the disconcerting phenomenon in question is described in such detail that it "assumes a strongly tangible quality and cannot be lightly dismissed, while at the same time it is made as elusive as possible" (115). This combination, Triffitt suggests, is likely to contribute to the mixture of "identification, tension, ambivalence and uncertainty" (119) that characterises the relationship between Kafka's readers and his characters. He notes also how point of view is constituted partly through action, and this is a key point which will recur in my exploration of perception in Kafka as cognitively realistic.

In her study on Kafka and photography, which explores Kafka's "visual imagination" as influenced by the "visual culture" of his era, Duttlinger (2007, e.g., 11) has argued that Kafka exploits the dual capacities of the new medium of photography to contradictory effect: "while photographs bring the world within the viewer's reach, rendering it accessible and apparently comprehensible, they also contribute to a profound sense of distance and alienation" (14). This can be observed in Kafka's descriptions of people, objects, and scenes: The emphasis on apparently random details which suddenly undermine the overall meaning of a scene; the focus on surface, facades, and appearances; and, above all, the rift between photographically detailed descriptions and their promise of underlying meaning are all strategies which Kafka adopts and appropriates from his engagement with photography (258–59). Duttlinger also situates these considerations within a discussion of the meaning and nature of "realism", showing how reflections by theorists like Kracauer and Benjamin dismantle the cliché of photographic realism and immediacy, and how photography—and in particular Kafka's literary engagement with it—can be used to create antirealist effects of distortion (e.g., 15–16, 67–69, 179).

The ontological questions raised by Kafka's fictions are analysed by Richard Murphy, who applies the concept of the fantastical (between the marvellous and the uncanny) to Kafka's work. He suggests that Kafka's creation of fantastical effects in combination with a particular version of Realism (1999, 181, 187) results in a hesitation on the reader's part as to the status of subjectivity, and that, in response to Kafka's writing, readers engage in a process of "self-dramatization" which consists of "bringing into co-presence these two mutually contradictory worldviews" (200–201). The result of this "process of performative reception" initiated by Kafka's distinctive representational strategies is, he argues, "that the paradoxical is achieved: the projection of the reader into an unknown and imaginary realm, which is his own life" (201).

Gerhard Neumann coins the term "gleitendes Paradox" (sliding paradox) to describe how Kafka's works confront us with paradoxes, but not in a simple, statically oppositional way: "es erfolgen Schwenkungen, aber diese verklammern sich nie zu krassem Widerspruch" (there are vacillations, but they don't become interlocked in a stark contradiction; 1968, 709). He argues that through the use of devices like semantic displacements or alienating metaphor, and by consistently countering readers' expectations (an expectation of the meaning of an image becoming clear, for example), Kafka leads the reader into a space where "alle starre Begrifflichkeit ins Gleiten kommt" (all rigid concepts begin to slip; 722), resulting not only in a comprehensive disorientation (726) but also in a positive movement away from schematised patterns of thought and imagery (736). Whether or not this is enjoyable will, of course, depend on the individual

reader: one participant in my “Schakale und Araber” (Jackals and Arabs) study expressed frustration with the withholding of clear real-world relevance and meaning: “I find the whole nondescriptness of the story a little bit irritating, inasmuch as I’d quite like to know where a story fits in within the bigger picture, and what it is meant to tell me” (Pt 18). But the same person also spoke of “alternating between yeah this is cool and no, this is not going anywhere”, so it clearly needn’t be all bad.

The notion of an opposing duality occurs not only in critical studies of Kafka’s fiction, but also in definitions of the term “Kafkaesque”. Quite striking resemblances to these reflections on Kafka’s works are found in (oral) definitions of the term “Kafkaesque” provided by participants in the “Schakale und Araber” experiment. The term seems to bring with it questions of ontology similar to those addressed by the critics just mentioned, with participants often drawing distinctions between “reality” and “fiction”, the “real” and the “surreal”, the “realistic life” and the “internal life”. They also referred to different layers of “reality”: “his stories are pointing to a deeper reality, or a different reality”, for instance (Pt 17). These comments again provide support for the association I’m making between the effects of Kafka’s prose and its relation to an effect of reality. In particular, several participants speak of an encounter, in the “Kafkaesque”, with aspects of reality that are deeply strange even while being wholly normal, and/or make rapid transitions from the normal to the strange:

Kafkaesque is associated with Kafka, obviously, and I’m not an expert in this, but I would associate it with things in a story, or in the course of the events, that you didn’t expect, that come as a surprise, and that don’t really make sense, that don’t really follow from what was there before; so that it is a kind of chaos that something moves from reality to perhaps fiction suddenly, without warning, and nevertheless—and this is also part of Kafkaesque, of the term—and nevertheless nobody really seems to mind. So it is in a sense, Kafkaesque to me means a break—something goes from real to surreal, perhaps—but this seems to be fairly normal, for whatever reason, and nobody really minds. (Pt 16)

As another participant more succinctly put it: “somehow you accept it, because it’s Kafka” (Pt 12). This statement in fact echoes early Kafka criticism, in which the notion that we simply “accept it, because it’s Kafka” already finds expression: “Es gibt gar keine Frage mehr, ob es das Alles gibt—das gibt es, [. . .] das ist so” (There is no longer any question at all as to whether all that exists—it does exist, [. . .] it is so; Born 1983, 110).

More formal definitions of the “Kafkaesque” are also helpful here. The English term was first used in 1938 by Cecil Day Lewis, describing a novel by Rex Warner as “Kafka-esque in manner” (Jakob 1988, 98; see Jakob



1971, 1: 226–27 for the original article). A German alternate form for “kafkaesk”, “kafkasche”, seems to have been used from the late 1920s onwards, primarily as a descriptor of Kafka’s works, encompassing features from their gripping quality to their meta-realities (Born 1983, 125, 231, 237, 251, 389, 392).<sup>3</sup> The term can most basically be taken to mean “characteristic of Kafka or his works”, but beyond that, dictionary definitions can offer a little more precision. For example, *Duden* (1999, s.v.) defines “kafkaesk” as “in der Art der Schilderungen Kafkas; auf unergründliche Weise bedrohlich” (in the manner of Kafka’s descriptions; unfathomably threatening). The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* (2002, s.v.) gives a fuller definition of the “Kafkaesque”: “(of a situation, atmosphere, etc.) impenetrably oppressive, nightmarish, in a manner characteristic of the fictional world of Franz Kafka”.<sup>4</sup> The English definition makes reference to a state of affairs or atmosphere that is equated with an experiential state, or qualified in experiential terms: a “situation” which is “nightmarish”, for instance. The German definition focuses on the experiential quality alone, as mysterious threat rather than nightmarish oppression, and without linking it to any particular sort of situation. Nonetheless, in the essential qualities of the “impenetrable” and the “unfathomable” *Duden* and the *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* clearly converge.

These dictionary definitions, like the colloquial definitions given by experimental participants and the characterisations of Kafka’s works by critics, yield an overall sense of the “Kafkaesque” as a descriptor of an experience which is highly compelling, yet at the same time somehow unsettling: *Duden*’s reference to that which feels “unfathomably threatening”, for instance, invokes an element of threat, but also a mystery that invites or even demands unravelling. The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* speaks of an “impenetrability” that implies a desire to get beyond the oppressiveness to its cause. This kind of ambivalence is nothing unusual in aesthetic responses. Ernst Jentsch’s (1906) characterisation of the uncanny as “psychische Unsicherheit” (mental uncertainty) invokes ambivalence too, and the striking popularity of “nightmarish” horror films is another example of how nightmares can be fascinating and compelling as well as repulsive. Indeed, a dramatic increase in production of horror films from the 1980s onwards has now reached such proportions that “the horror film has arguably come to saturate popular culture” (Prince 2004, 9); the equivocal experience of enjoying being frightened by films of psychological suspense seems so enduring that it can even be claimed that “the horror film has become coterminus [sic] with our contemporary experience of reality” (10).

Although aesthetic experience, especially when being investigated empirically, is often conceived of in terms of simple liking, preference, and pleasure—“The psychology of aesthetic experience is eerily close to the psychology of how much novices say they like something” (Silvia 2009, 48)—art of all kinds has always induced more complex emotional responses, including knowledge-related emotions like confusion, hostile emotions like



anger, and self-conscious emotions like embarrassment (48). The coders in my empirical study on “Schakale und Araber” compiled a list of no fewer than 14 categories and two dimensions of response in order to cover all major aspects of response—a much richer response than merely liking or disliking.

Empirical investigation thus allows us not only to test theoretical propositions, but also to add richness and nuance to them. First things first, however: the aim of this book is to argue the case for why we might expect the duality of the compelling and the unsettling to be a salient characteristic of the experience of reading Kafka, and to suggest one possible set of reasons for why this might be so.

## 9. CHAPTER OUTLINES

In Chapter One, I outline the long history of pictorialist accounts of perception and their effects on the history of literary representation, including literary Realism, before tracing the emergence of non-pictorialist strands of thought, which culminate in current enactivist theories of visual perception, imagination, and consciousness. This theory is intended to provide the tools necessary for the textual analysis in the following three chapters.

Chapter Two focuses on Kafka’s personal writings, showing how he grapples with problems arising from pictorialist conceptions of vision, imagination, and hence language, and how he finds a solution to these problems involving an enactivist mode of perceiving and writing. The chapter provides a first manifestation in textual practice of the principles set out more abstractly in Chapter One, so the two can fruitfully be read alongside each other.

Chapter Three deals with Kafka’s novel *Der Proceß* (*The Trial*), demonstrating how the novel’s evocation of perception is enactive rather than pictorial, and how linguistic concepts such as basic-level categorisation help to understand Kafka’s characteristic efficiently minimal mode of evocation. I hypothesise as to the effects of this aspect of Kafka’s poetics on the reader’s experience of the fictional world, and consider its relationship to cognitive and textual narrativisation.

The main focus of Chapter Four is narrative perspective. I discuss how Kafka’s typically shifting perspectival forms can be understood as inherently connected with his evocation of not only perception but also emotion as enactive, and give examples from a variety of Kafka’s short fictional works and all three of his novels. I suggest that perspectival instability has profound consequences for readers’ emotional experiences of the fictional worlds, as well as for their conceptions of consciousness and selfhood.

Finally, I conclude by proposing some ways in which cognitive realism might be used to inform the study of Realist, Modernist, and many other kinds of literature.

NOTES

1. OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. Accessed 9 November 2013. [www.oed.com/view/Entry/158933?redirectedFrom=realistic](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158933?redirectedFrom=realistic).
2. Daniel Allington, personal e-mail communication to author, 11 November 2013.
3. For studies on the Kafkaesque in Kafka see also Nagel 1983, 16; Anz 1989, 14–15; and Hiebel 1999, 13–14.
4. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., has a simpler definition: “Of or relating to the writings of Franz Kafka; resembling the state of affairs or a state of mind described by Kafka.” OED Online. September 2013. Oxford University Press. Accessed 6 November 2013. [www.oed.com/view/Entry/102331?redirectedFrom=kafkaesque](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/102331?redirectedFrom=kafkaesque).