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Opponent's review of *The understood author: a hermeneutical exploration of audiences' interpretation of the author as productive practices behind a text* (diss.) by Tereza Pavlíčková

It has been a rewarding task to review Tereza Pavlíčková's Ph.D. dissertation which, briefly put, investigates Czech media users' situated understandings, or emergent folk theoretical notions, of the productive practices behind factual media content. Tereza does a remarkable job letting the reader in on her thinking and scholarly passion, located in the nexus of philosophical hermeneutics, literary/media theory, and socially equitable audience research, thus inviting a fluent read despite the complexity of the arguments presented. She also persuasively explains the need for her research and its niche within existing scholarship, giving a disciplinary outsider such as myself a multifaceted education in the process.

An in-depth interview study was set up with twenty-eight participants, recruited from among 50-65-year-old Czech residents, a population doubly marginalised in research given its age and place of origin. The participants were invited to reflect on their daily encounters with various factual media, on their idiosyncratic responses and related imaginaries and, crucially, their expectations/preconceptions (this being a hermeneutically informed endeavour) concerning authors and authorship as emergent in such encounters. Tereza's main interest seems to lie in theory building and the empirical report is framed by a comprehensive theoretical overview of relevant notions across multiple scholarly fields. Much laudable work underpins the dissertation and especially the theoretical section; hence I recommend that a doctoral degree is awarded. That said, I wish to raise critical observations in my role as opponent, to scaffold discussion at the defence but also to aid repurposing of the material for publication in shorter formats.

Let me open with a question: How does the theory-driven approach to data analysis adopted in the dissertation agree with the basic tenets of philosophical hermeneutics? I spent my reading of the entire Section III (pp. 98 onward) asking this because the theoretical Section I (pp. 19-78) had led me to expect a strongly inductive approach (declaring to aim at the "diversity of understandings...and how these are being brought into the interpretative acts," p. 17). In between came indeed Section II (pp. 79-97) which announces an inductive-deductive procedure but alas refrains from providing a visual – an analytical flowchart or at least a glimpse of the coding scheme. Additionally introducing



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new concepts whose mutual boundaries and links to analysis remain opaque (“familiarity” and “experience”, p. 96; reduced to “familiarity” on p. 97), Section II thus adds less toward clarity and replicability than one would expect from a procedures section.

To anchor my above question more closely in Tereza’s argument, one may for example consider “understood voice” as presented in subsection 8.1 (pp. 102-105). Four participants, Martin, Milada, Rudolf and Vlasta are quoted in this subsection. Given the dissertation’s focus on “the *becoming* of a [*sic*] meaning rather than its acquisition” (p. 22), i.e., on the lived, procedural aspects of understanding, I am struck by the absence of participant quotes that would warrant the use of “voice” as an auditory metaphor. For the sake of a thought experiment, how would subsection 8.1, and the quotes included therein, change if the framing was a visual metaphor such as “perspective,” or indeed a concept such as “truth”? “Voice” seems to have been imposed deductively, an impression further reinforced by the unconventional wealth of theoretical references interspersed throughout this subsection (meanwhile, subsections 8.2 and 8.3, which complement the triad of “understood voice” – “understood audience” – “understood intention,” more conventionally refrain from referencing). Similar questions might arise over other analytical categories, e.g., “access” and “bias” (pp. 113-116).

Elaborating on theory (even adding new literature, e.g., Cavarero, 2005), subsection 8.1 is not the only one diverging from the conventional logic of empirical reporting (i.e. IMRAD: introduction – methods – results – discussion). For example, a fair bit of methodology is described in Section I, Section II features selected results amidst explaining data analytical procedures, and several other subsections of Section III seem to mix results with discussion. One curious artifact of this phenomenon is that we are given the timing of the empirical research in three different places and three different versions: “January and November 2013” (p. 16); “Nov 2012 – Nov 2013, with the first half of the data collected in autumn 2012 and the second half of the fieldwork spread over spring, summer and autumn 2013.” (p. 89); “at the end of October 2013 and at the beginning of the first public campaign for presidential elections in the country’s history; the second set (...) in January 2014.” (p. 93). This is confusing. Meanwhile, information is missing entirely on other key aspects of the empirical research, e.g., the mean duration of the interviews, whether ethical clearance was obtained and a pilot study conducted, or what thinking underpinned the specific design of the interview guide.

Tereza’s writing is linguistically flawless (bar occasional syntactic mishaps, example below) and sets a very high standard in terms of style, effectively mixing the registers of a rigorous, impersonal theoretical treatise, a more broad-strokes overview of other existing research traditions, and a personally engaged narrative on the practical and intellectual challenges that had to be overcome in the work’s course. The latter rhetoric is a little



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surprising at the beginning of Conclusion (pp. 147), where I would expect a more detached conceptual synthesis, but otherwise the different registers work together well.

On higher levels of text construction, the dissertation can be wordy, in several respects. Sometimes the same or near-identical content is repeated in much detail, e.g., explanations of the fundamental principles of philosophical hermeneutics (e.g. pp. 21-24, 82-83 and more). Some topics in turn seem only marginally conceptually relevant, e.g., the treatment of authorship in the mediaeval era (pp. 44, 49-51) or the reflection of ditto in contemporary fiction film industry (pp. 51-53). Finally, a large proportion of the text is dedicated to countering potential criticisms and making explicit what Tereza is *not* attempting to say or do. This strategy may add conceptual depth in places, and perhaps some of it has grown out of the minor defence or other collegial review; yet in the present quantity it is very distracting. For instance, pp. 17-19 feature at least seven instances of such expressly negative argumentation (e.g. “Therefore the empirical exploration is not driven by the question of what is [*sic*] an author”, p. 17); pp. 111-112 feature eight such instances (“The discussion does not aspire to place a fixed definition on what the understood author is”, p. 112). In a thinker of Tereza’s maturity, this defensive style is unnecessary and should be cut down in any published outputs.

My critical opponent task aside, the central concept of “understood author” is intuitive, practically applicable, and treated with a degree of complexity that makes it theoretically enriching – even for fields beyond those charted in the dissertation, e.g., empirical literary studies where related thinking and evidence can for instance be found in Claassen’s *Author Representations in Literary Reading* (2012). I wish to thank and congratulate Tereza for having accomplished a large piece of work worthy of academic recognition.

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