Reading Under Circumstances: Technicity and Design in Interpretative Social Theory

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Abstract

This paper responds to Edward Said's criticism that Ricoeur's philosophy takes insufficient account of "worldliness." Rather than simply defend Ricoeur, I take Said's criticism as a challenge to consolidate resources in Ricoeur's philosophy that might be useful to non-specialists skeptical of its social theoretical relevance. First, I summarize Said's critique of Ricoeur and formulate the enduring challenge I take from it. Second, I turn to Ricoeur's model of the threefold mimesis of action in relation to both time and space and propose that the capabilities of narrating and building he identifies should be subsumed under the more general capacity of *designing*. Third, I turn to Ernst Wolff's interpretative social theory of the "technicity" of action, which I argue that is the most productive way of conceptualizing the central role of material (or technical) circumstances in Ricoeur's work. Finally, to alleviate Said's concern I suggest that Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics is useful for emphasizing the inherent asymmetry between actors and their technical circumstances without committing to Said's exaggerated conclusion that this asymmetry is constitutively oppressive.

*Keywords: Certeau, design, mimesis, reading, Said, technicity*

Résumé

Cet article répond à la critique d'Edward Said selon laquelle la philosophie de Paul Ricœur ne tiendrait pas suffisamment compte de la « mondanité » (*worldliness*). Plutôt que de simplement défendre Ricœur, je prends cette critique comme un défi : celui de consolider, au sein de sa pensée, des ressources susceptibles d'intéresser des non-spécialistes sceptiques quant à sa pertinence en théorie sociale. Premièrement, je résume la critique de Said à l'égard de Ricœur et formule le défi durable que j'en retire. Deuxièmement, je me tourne vers le modèle ricœurien de la triple mimesis de l'action, en lien avec le temps et l'espace, et je propose que les capacités de narration et de construction qu'il identifie puissent être subsumées sous une capacité plus générale de conception (*designing*). Troisièmement, j'examine la théorie sociale interprétative de la « technicité » de l'action développée par Ernst Wolff, qui, selon moi, constitue la manière la plus féconde de conceptualiser le rôle central des circonstances matérielles (ou techniques) dans l'œuvre de Ricœur. Enfin, pour répondre à la préoccupation de Said, je suggère que la distinction établie par Michel de Certeau entre stratégies et tactiques permet de souligner l'asymétrie inhérente entre les acteurs et leurs conditions
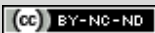
techniques, sans pour autant adhérer à la conclusion exagérée de Said selon laquelle cette asymétrie serait constitutivement oppressive.

Mots-clés : Certeau, conception, mimèsis, lecture, Said, technicité

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This paper responds to Edward Said's criticism that Paul Ricoeur takes insufficient account of "worldliness" in his depiction of the act of reading. By "worldliness," Said means something like the total set of social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances that motivate and constrain the interpretative activity of the reader or critic—whether they are aware of this influence or not. While many have expressed doubts about Ricoeur's reliance on textual metaphors, and more generally his use of textuality as a paradigm for conceptualizing human action, Said's criticism is particularly scathing. For Said, the problem is not so much to do with the limitations of the text as a model but with Ricoeur's very depiction of textuality. Indeed, according to Said, Ricoeur paints an overly rosy picture of the discursive situation: the relation between text and reader is less like a "conversation between equals" than "the unequal relation between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed."[1]

As I presume most readers of this essay will be inclined to defend Ricoeur, my aim here is not so much to respond to Said (which Karl Simms has already done)[2] as to take his criticism as a *challenge*, as an opportunity to give a more precise response to those who, like Said, remain skeptical of Ricoeur's social theoretical utility in matters of material conflict. Given the anxiety-inducing variety of theories, frameworks, approaches, and perspectives that proliferate in academia today, the burden of proof must lie with those who want to insert a philosopher into debates where, other than in specialist circles, they are not usually to be found. This essay is therefore an effort to consolidate some of the resources in Ricoeur's philosophy, and those who have developed his work, that I take to be useful to non-specialists in coming to grips with the material circumstances of human action and the conflicts that these circumstances give rise to.

In the first part of the essay, I summarize Said's critique of Ricoeur's theory of the text and formulate the enduring challenge I take from it. Second, I turn to Ricoeur's development of his theory of the text into a broader theory of action. Specifically, I summarize his model of the threefold mimesis of action in relation to narrative in *Time and Narrative* and in relation to space in "Architecture and Narrativity." From this discussion I then suggest that the capabilities of narrating and building Ricoeur identifies should be subsumed under the more general capacity of *designing*. Third, I then turn to the most interesting and systematic treatment of Ricoeur's action theory to date, Ernst Wolff's interpretative social theory of the "technicity" of action. After summarizing Wolff's account of the technicity of action, I argue that his approach is the most productive way of conceptualizing the role of material circumstances in Ricoeur's work. In a final

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[1] Edward Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 48.

[2] See Karl Simms, "The Materiality and Ideality of the Text: Said and Ricoeur," in *Edward Said and the Literary, Social, and Political World,* ed. Ranjan Ghosh (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 65-74.

step, I suggest that those using Ricoeur for social theoretical purposes would benefit from adopting Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics as a way to emphasize the inherent asymmetry between actors and their circumstances—whether reader and text, inhabitant and built environment, or user and technical configuration—without committing to Said's exaggerated conclusion that this asymmetry is constitutively oppressive.[3] Importantly, my point here is not to deny that there are oppressive relations—there most certainly are. My point is rather that Ricoeur would not want to define the relations between actors and circumstances as distorted in their very constitution but as relations that are only secondarily distorted.

Said's challenge

In his 1983 essay "The World, the Text, and the Critic,"[4] Edward Said sets his sights on a "misleading and largely simplified" way of marking the difference between speaking and writing that severs the text's connection with the world. Said's targets here are postmodern theories of literature that play fast and loose with the material world, preferring to focus instead on questions of meaning and the "limitlessness of interpretation."[5] To illustrate the sort of position he opposes, Said selects, curiously, Paul Ricoeur's treatment of textuality in "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," first published in 1971 and later included in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II* (1986).

Said reads Ricoeur along the following lines: unlike the hearer in a situation of direct interlocution, the reader of a text is removed from the motivating world of the author. The unwelcome implication of this view, Said argues, is that the confrontation between text and reader takes place entirely in the reader's head. For Said, this is a grave theoretical mistake because it brackets what he calls "worldliness," the effects and influences of the reader's concrete circumstances. Against Ricoeur's alleged oversight, Said proposes an alternative:

> My contention is that worldliness does not come and go; nor is it here and there in the apologetic and soupy way by which we often designate history, a euphemism in such cases for the impossibly vague notion that all things take place in time. Moreover, critics are not merely alchemical translators of texts into circumstantial reality or worldliness; for they too are subject to and producers of circumstances, which are felt regardless of whatever objectivity the critic's methods possess. The point is that texts have ways of existing that even in their most rarefied form are always enmeshed in circumstances, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly. Whether a text is preserved or put aside for a period, whether it is on a library shelf or not, whether it is considered dangerous or not: these matters have to do with a text's being in the world, which is a more

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[3] Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," 48.

[4] A slightly different version of Said's essay was first published in 1975 as "The Text, the World, the Critic" and was first delivered as a keynote lecture at the annual meeting of the Midwest Modern Language Association in 1974. As Karl Simms observes, Said tones down his attack on Ricoeur in the 1983 version, excising lines such as, "There are so many things wrong with this set of ideas I scarcely know where to begin my attack" (cited in Simms, "The Materiality and Ideality of the Text: Said and Ricoeur," in *Edward Said and the Literary, Social, and Political World,* ed. Ranjan Ghosh [New York, NY: Routledge, 2009], 65).

[5] Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," 9.

complicated matter than the private process of reading. The same implications are undoubtedly true of critics in their capacities as readers and writers in the world.[6]

Said's point is clear: Ricoeur—the stand-in for the "centrist" critic—is fooling himself if he really believes that readers stand at a distance from circumstantial reality. Whatever freedom the reader might feel as they negotiate a text's meaning, both the text and the interpretative activity of the reader remain worldly, all too worldly. By failing to capture the enduring presence of actuality in the act of reading, Ricoeur's position thus deprives readers of the critical awareness they need. After all, reading, like all action, takes place in and through the world, and not merely in the "mind" of the reader.

Responding to Said, Karls Simms offers a convincing defense of Ricoeur in "The Materiality and Ideality of the Text: Said and Ricoeur" (2009). Simms argues that Said's critique is largely unfounded and misses the entire point of Ricoeur's analysis. In brief, Simms argues that Said overlooks Ricoeur's distinction between a "situation" and a "world."[7] Where the former refers to the shared set of references between interlocutors in speech or direct dialogue, the latter refers to the set of second-order references "opened up" by a text. With this distinction Ricoeur is not so much trying to emphasize how texts break with circumstantial reality, as Said thinks, but rather the *different ways* that speech and writing relate to circumstantial reality. By equating Ricoeur's terminology of "situation" and "reference" with "worldliness," Said misses the point. As Simms puts it: "contrary to Said, worldliness encompasses, but exceeds, mere situatedness. Hence writing does not intercept or suspend speech's worldliness, but rather replaces speech's situatedness by worldliness or, what amounts to the same thing, replaces dialogue by discourse."[8] To Simms's patient response, we might also add that Said entirely overlooks why Ricoeur turns to the textual paradigm in the first place: to emphasize the importance of *distanciation*, or the need for critical distance-taking, in any interpretative process, especially in the social sciences.[9]

In any case, my aim here is not to pick on Said—and not only because Simms already does a good job of clarifying the dispute, particularly in drawing attention to the different concerns of Said's materialist point of departure and Ricoeur's more phenomenological orientation. Rather, what interests me here is a more general point about Ricoeur's reception—a point that could equally be raised with similar misunderstandings of Ricoeur's interest in textuality.[10] Despite

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[6] Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," 34–35.

[7] Karl Simms, "The Materiality and Ideality of the Text: Said and Ricoeur," 70.

[8] *Ibid.*, 72.

[9] Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, *II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, [1986] 1991), xiii-xiv.

[10] For example, the historian Richard J. Evans also takes issue with Ricoeur's "postmodern" treatment of textuality in *In Defence of History*. In fact, Evans also cites a passage from "What is a Text?" (though he does so via an essay of historian David Harlan). While the context of Evans's criticism is somewhat different than Said's, the point is much the same. Evans's book aims to defend historiography from postmodernism's efforts to undermine confidence in historical objectivity. According to Evans, postmodern theories tend to exaggerate certain difficulties of historical research and writing without following through far enough to see how, in practice, these difficulties are effectively overcome. It is in this context that Evans targets Ricoeur: "The French theorist Paul Ricoeur argues, for example, that 'the reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading… the text thus

Ricoeur's numerous studies that highlight the *conflicts* at the heart of human action at every level and in every form—and not only reading—in many circles he retains the reputation of an idealist hermeneut who, in the final analysis, downplays material circumstances in favour of meaning.

For this reason, I see Said's critique as something of a challenge for those hoping to do something *with* Ricoeur's writings in a field of heavy theoretical competition; I see it as an opportunity to provide a clearer response to those who remain skeptical of Ricoeur's social theoretical utility in matters of material conflict given his seeming overreliance on textual metaphors.[11] Said's challenge could thus be formulated this way: How exactly does the "world" intervene in the interpretative process for Ricoeur? After all, if interpretation is about meaning, some account is needed of the difficult and often vague relation it has to material circumstances. To consolidate some of the resources in Ricoeur's work that can help us respond to this challenge, in the following section I turn to *Time and Narrative* and some later texts where he expands on his model of threefold mimesis. While there is clear continuity between Ricoeur's work in the 1970s and his work on narrative, it is only around the period of *Time and Narrative* that the fuller picture comes into focus, namely how Ricoeur's theory of texts is embedded within a wider action theory.[12]

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produces a double eclipse of reader and writer.' But this is not so. A text is always written for a readership and framed according to the writer's expectations of how the intended readers will take it. Similarly, the reader is always mindful of the purposes of the writer during the act of reading. All this remains true even if a document is read by people for whom it was not intended—people like historians, in fact" (Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* [London: Granta, [1997] 2018], 104–105). Like Said, Evans just misses the point. For Ricoeur, the reciprocal absence of reader and writer in their respective activities is simply an honest description of the way things are at a certain level of analysis. For Ricoeur the point is of course that, *despite their absence*, reader and writer are nonetheless subject to constraints, even at this high level of abstraction: the writer is constrained by, among other things, the audience they want to address and must therefore adapt their discourse accordingly if they want to be effective; the reader is constrained by, among other things, the text's determinate configuration and must therefore adapt their strategy of reading accordingly. Evans thus misses the chance to find a philosophical ally precisely where he needs one—and this is clear even without reference to Ricoeur's efforts over five decades to philosophically bolster the legitimacy of the historian's craft.

[11] Shortly after citing Ricoeur, Evans goes on to criticize the metaphor of the text as "unhelpful" for discussing the work of the historian (Evans, *In Defence of History*, 111). Evans puts it bluntly: "The past is much more than a mere text, and to attempt to read it as a text is to capture only a small part of its reality. Social and political events are not the same as literary texts" (Evans, *In Defence of History*, 110).

[12] I should also emphasize that Ricoeur's writings on the text and textuality in these years do not tell one unitary story. The questions Ricoeur poses and the problems he responds to in these writings are often slightly different, making it difficult if not impossible to present anything like his final theory of the text. In view of my aim here, however, this should not keep us from trying to provide a plausible account of how Ricoeur's general notion of the text from the 1970s fits into his later conception of threefold mimesis in *Time and Narrative*. What follows should thus be taken as a preliminary sketch that requires further clarification and development. I am grateful to Cristina Henrique da Costa for her insightful suggestions on Ricoeur's ambiguous notion of the text.

2. Threefold mimesis, in time and space

In chapter 3 of *Time and Narrative: Volume 1* Ricoeur provides his readers with a "reduced model" of the thesis he attempts to prove throughout the three volumes of the work.[13] To recall, Ricoeur's argument is that time becomes "human time" to the extent that it is narratively articulated and, conversely, that narrative achieves its full meaning when it is taken up and incorporated as a mediating layer of our temporal existence. The "healthy circle" between these two terms, time and narrative, is not accidental; Ricoeur insists that it presents a "transcultural form of necessity."[14] In other words, the way human beings mediate the dizzying vastness of cosmological time and the frustrating slipperiness of phenomenological time is by constructing narratives, a basic human capacity expressed in activities ranging from telling our children bedtime stories to the writing of methodical and rigorous academic histories.

It is to account for these diverse mediations between time and narrative that Ricoeur first introduces his conception of threefold mimesis—that is the three ways that the act of emplotment refers to human action. In opposition to literary formalists who focus only on the "semiotics of the text," Ricoeur explains that the task of hermeneutics is "to reconstruct the entire set of operations by which a work lifts itself above the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and change their acting."[15] Unlike semiotic theories, then, which focus exclusively on the inner composition of a text, a hermeneutic approach "is concerned with reconstructing the entire arc of operations by which practical experience provides itself with works, authors, and readers."[16] Ricoeur's personification of "practical experience" here is telling: it is not the text as such that matters most; what matters more is the way that texts or poetic configurations of any sort (mimesis II) mediate the circle of time and narrative by creatively imitating practical life (mimesis I) and actively refigure that life through the active reception of a reader (mimesis III). What this personification glosses over, though, is that for Ricoeur the mediating function of mimesis II between mimesis I and III is always dependent on the *initiative of someone*; texts are not impersonal processes but activities or operations carried out by agents of one sort or another. Simply put, texts do not write or read themselves.

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[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, [1983] 1984), 52.

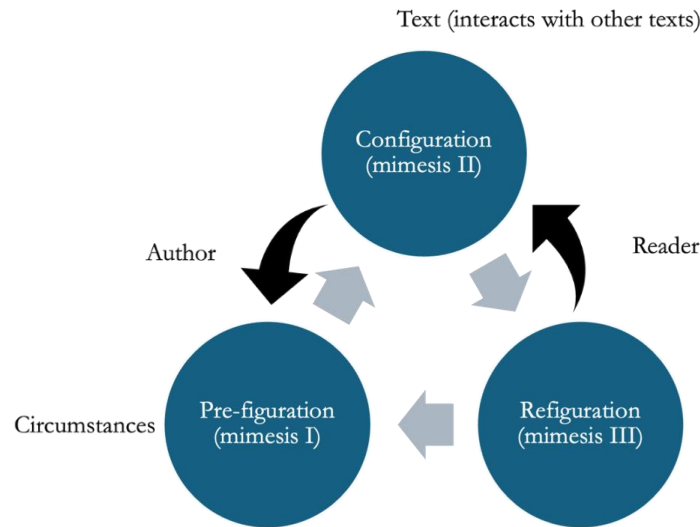[14] *Id*.

[15] *Ibid*., 54.

[16] *Id.*

Figure 1. Ricoeur's model of threefold mimesis.

This more complete picture of the text as but a moment of this process—an important moment, but a moment nonetheless—shows that Said is knocking on an open door with Ricoeur. In fact, Ricoeur's discussion of configuration, mimesis II, reveals that for him "the text" is little more than a useful abstraction. While books certainly subsist as physical objects on their own, *texts*—units of meaning larger than words and sentences—require the active support of *readers* for their existence. To show this, all one needs to do is consider certain properties of texts such as "schematization" and "traditionality."[17] Without drawing on the sedimented meaning of past readings, with all the conflicts of interpretation this involves, how would we be able to account for our ability to discriminate between different genres and styles? Without drawing on the sedimented meanings of such schematizations, how could we discriminate between repetitive or uninspired works from truly innovative works that breathe new life into the traditions they inescapably relate to? Indeed, these meanings that texts take on are not properties of the texts in isolation, they emerge only *for readers*. While Ricoeur does not deny the advances made to the study of texts at the atomic level, these important properties of texts only appear when we lift our head, step back from the semiotician's theoretical microscope, and adopt the wider vantage point of the hermeneutician.

Now, although Ricoeur's model of threefold mimesis appears in a work dedicated to the narrative function in history and fiction, it clearly has wider theoretical implications for action theory. As Ricoeur himself points out in the preface to *From Text to Action*, the trajectory his work had followed in the fifteen-year period from which the essays in this collection were chosen (1970–1985) was the "gradual reinscription of the theory of texts within the theory of action," and, in this way, his focus on textuality was thus motivated from the beginning by its usefulness for understanding practical life.[18]

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[17] *Ibid*., 68–69.

[18] Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, xiv.

But there is no need to simply take Ricoeur at his word. We can look at his own attempt to extend the model of threefold mimesis to other aspects of practical life, as he did in his 1996 essay "Architecture and Narrativity." This essay has drawn attention in recent years for its potential to connect Ricoeur's work with the "spatial turn" in the humanities and social sciences.[19] While some have argued that Ricoeur's focused treatment of temporality comes at the cost of the "occultation of spatiality,"[20] the wealth of fruitful studies developing themes of space and place in Ricoeur raise doubts about this—as do his own frequent references to spatiality throughout his treatment of historiography in *Time and Narrative*. As I see it, there is no good reason to draw such a strong conclusion. There is nothing in Ricoeur's treatment of time that precludes the incorporation of space, it is simply a matter of emphasis. Moreover, given Ricoeur's long-standing philosophical interest in history, how surprising is it that he devoted so much time to the subject later in life?[21] In any case, let us briefly retrace Ricoeur's argument in "Architecture and Narrativity."

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[19] An important step in this direction was taken by volume 12 of this journal, a special issue dedicated to the problem of space edited by Maria Cristina Vendra and Paulo Furia. For their introduction to the special issue, see Maria Cristina Vendra and Paulo Furia, "Introduction—Paul Ricœur: Thinker of Space. Envisioning a Ricœurian Spatial Turn," *Études Ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies*, vol. 12, n⁰ 2 (2021), –7. Notable contributions that develop and extend Ricoeur's relevance for architectural theory, urban studies, human geography, and other disciplines implicated in the spatial turn include Jean-Philippe Pierron, *Ricœur. Philosopher à son école* (Paris: Vrin, 2016), particularly chapter 9; Johann Michel, *Qu'est-ce que l'herméneutique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2023), particularly chapters 5–8; Christina M. Gschwandtner, "Space and Narrative: Ricoeur and a Hermeneutic Reading of Place," in *Place, Space and Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce B. Janz (Cham: Springer, 2017), 169–182; Sebastian Purcell, "Space and Narrative. Enrique Dussel and Paul Ricoeur: The Missed Encounter," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 54, n⁰ 3 (2010), 289–298; Marc-Antoine Vallé, "L'esquisse d'une herméneutique de l'espace chez Paul Ricœur," *Arguments. Revue de philosophe de l'université de Montréal*, vol. 2 (2007), 49–59; Marc Breviglieri, "L'espace habité que réclame l'assurance intime de pouvoir. Un essai d'approfondissement sociologique de l'anthropologie capacitaire de Paul Ricœur," *Études ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies*, vol. 3, n⁰ 1 (2012), 34–52; Francesca D'Alessandris, "La durée dans la dureté. Espaces de la mémoire et mémoires de l'espace chez Paul Ricœur," *Études ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies*, vol. 10, n⁰ 1 (2019), 58–72; Paolo Furia, "Landscape as a Text. Ricœur and the Human Geography," *Discipline Filosofiche*, vol. 30 (2020), 239–260; Paulo Furia, "A Hermeneutic Introduction to Maps," *Études ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies*, vol. 12, n⁰ 2 (2021), 57–71; Rita Messori, "Mémoire et inscription. Temporalité et spatialité de l'architecture selon Paul Ricœur," in *Erinnerungsarbeit. Zu Paul Ricœurs Philosophie von Gedächtnis, Geschichte und Vergessen In Breitling*, eds. Andris Orth and Stefan Ort (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2004); Giovanna Costanzo, "Telling the Story of Space: Between Design and Construction," *Études ricoeuriennes/Ricoeur Studies*, vol. 12, n⁰ 2 (2021), 72–84; Anna Borisenkova, "Reading the City: From the Inhabitant to the *Flâneur*," in *Paul Ricoeur in the Age of Hermeneutical Reason: Poetics, Praxis, and Critique*, ed. Roger W.H. Savage (Lanham, MD: Lexignton Books, 2015), 86–98; Jérôme Porée, "Le philosophe, l'architecte et la cité," in *L'existence vive. Douze études sur la philosophie de Paul Ricœur*, ed. Jérôme Porée (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2017), 147–163.

[20] Alain Loute, "Ricoeur and E-health," in *Interpreting Technology: Ricoeur on Questions concerning Ethics and Philosophy of Technology*, eds. Wessel Reijers, Alberto Romele, and Mark Coeckelbergh (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 202–203. According to Sebastian Purcell, Enrique Dussel's critique of the Eurocentric bias in Ricoeur's work is also based on his failure to appreciate the role of space, which Purcell attempts to remedy (Purcell, "Space and Narrative," 289).

[21] Ricoeur explains his philosophical and personal interest in history in his 1981 interview with Peter Kemp, see Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative as Narrative and as Practice," in *Philosophy, Ethics & Politics: Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Catherine Goldenstein, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), 45–47.

If the thesis of *Time and Narrative* is that there is a necessary correlation between time and narrative, the thesis of "Architecture and Narrativity" is that there is an equally necessary correlation between space and building. Just as narrative mediates the aporias of cosmic time and lived time, the act of building mediates absolute physical space and lived space. As Ricoeur summarizes his trajectory in the essay:

> I will follow a parallel movement [as narrative] on the side of building in order to show that we can also pass…from a stage of "prefiguration," which will be linked…to the act of *inhabiting*… to a second stage, more overtly interventionist, of the act of *building*, to reach a third and final stage of "refiguration": the rereading of our towns and of all our dwelling places.[22]

In this short essay, Ricoeur thus adapts his mimetic model from *Time and Narrative* to account for the mediating function of building (mimesis II) between the prefigured built environment (mimesis I) and the refiguration of that built environment through the act of inhabiting the newly built space (mimesis III). For example, imagine that an empty lot, long used by neighborhood children as an improvised park, is purchased by a developer who proceeds to build commercial real estate on the site. The new building (mimesis II) relates to the prefigured neighborhood (mimesis I) just as the narrative relates to the prefigured world of the author. And just as the narrative relates to the reader, the new building is refigured into the neighborhood (mimesis III) by the new influx of people who now frequent the businesses on the site as well as the children who now avoid the area altogether and look elsewhere for a space to play. Ricoeur's analogy thus opens up new ways of extending his model of threefold mimesis beyond the strictly temporal.

But Ricoeur does more than draw a simple analogy here. What he really wants to do is push the analogy further, "to the point of a genuine intertwining, an entanglement between the architectural configuring of space and narrative configuring of time."[23] As Ricoeur explains:

> it is really a matter of crossing space and time through *building* and *recounting*. Such is the horizon of this investigation: to entangle the spatiality of the narrative and temporality of the architectural act by the exchange, as it were, of space-time in both directions.[24]

Indeed, the most interesting parts of Ricoeur's discussion are those where he points beyond a simple analogy to the following chiasma: that there are spatial consequences of narration and temporal consequences of building. While it is true that he never devotes a full-length study to the entanglement of time and space, he emphasizes the point again a few years later in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000):

> Whether it be fixed space or space for dwelling, or space to be traversed, constructed space consists in a system of sites for the major interactions of life. Narrative and construction bring about a similar kind of inscription, the one in the endurance of time, the other in the enduringness of materials. Each new building is inscribed in urban space like a narrative

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[22] Paul Ricoeur, "Architecture and Narrativity," *Études Ricoeuriennes/ Ricoeur Studies*, vol. 7, n° 2 (2016), 32–33.

[23] *Ibid*., 31.

[24] *Ibid*., 32.

within a setting of intertextuality. And narrativity impregnates the architectural act even more directly insofar as it is determined by a relationship to an established tradition wherein it takes the risk of alternating innovation and repetition. It is on the scale of urbanism that we best catch sight of *the work of time in space*. A city brings together in the same space different ages, offering to our gaze a sedimented history of tastes and cultural forms. The city gives itself as both to be seen and to be read. In it, narrated time and inhabited space are more closely associated than they are in an isolated building.[25]

There is thus nothing like a simple "occultation of spatiality" here. If that interpretation was correct, why would Ricoeur be emphasizing the importance of spatiality precisely where one would not expect to find it: in a book devoted to the uses and abuses of memory and the epistemology of history?

What can we make of Ricoeur's attempt to extend and develop his conception of the threefold mimesis of action in this way? Rather than argue about the priority of space or time, what I want to suggest is that the set of competences related to the configuration of built space and narrated time—these two ways of practically resolving the aporias resulting from theoretical reflection on our two pure forms of sensibility—point towards a more general competence or capacity presupposed by both: the human capacity for *designing*. In other words, it seems to me that what Ricoeur is getting at is something like the capacity for producing and receiving design in its many modalities. This reading makes sense of Ricoeur's repeated emphasis on understanding narration and building as competences and could thus be used to simplify Ricoeur's list of basic capabilities under a more encompassing term within his philosophical anthropology of the (in)capable human being.[26]

Integrating Ricoeur's account of narrating and building as expressions of the human capacity for designing finds support elsewhere, too. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, for instance, insists in *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (2013) on the importance of designing in accounting for what is spontaneously experienced by most people, most of the time, "as given, as external to them, as relatively fixed, and as largely indifferent to their own preferences or desires."[27] Indeed, he argues that the apparent stability of the social world, even in those societies that appear the simplest and most traditional, is to a large extent the outcome of design. Or, in other words, that ordinary life is "the product of unrelenting efforts to make sure that

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[25] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, [2000] 2004), 150–151, emphasis mine.

[26] Although Said could not have known this at the time, Ricoeur's attempt to identify the basic set of human capabilities serves precisely as a response to the sorts of (post-)structuralist critiques of philosophical anthropology Said was also fighting against. Central here is Ricoeur's return to Marx in in the mid-1970s in response to the highly influential interpretation of Louis Althusser. Where Althusser's emphasis on the epistemological break between ideology and science forces readers to equate anthropology with idealism, Ricoeur's interpretation distinguishes the abstract, ideological conception of consciousness from the real human being acting in circumstance not of their choosing (Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor [New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986], 153). Even though Ricoeur does not sufficiently emphasize this, his argument in *Time and Narrative* should be read as the attempt to specify certain features of what he calls a "nonidealist anthropology" in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*—which had not yet been published when writing *Time and Narrative*.

[27] Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013), 253.

catastrophic change, entropy, disenchantment, and weak attachment [do] not take the toll they so easily could."[28] While Appadurai's focus in this essay is primarily on illustrating why design should be thought of as a "primary source of social order," where he dovetails most with my proposed reading of Ricoeur is the corollary to this claim, namely, that design should be conceived as a "fundamental human capacity." Rather than view social order as a byproduct of established systems like etiquette, law, or religion, he argues that viewing social order as a primary product makes it easier to see it "as the most important result of design and [design] as a capacity that we all exercise, all the time."[29] This convergence not only lends probative weight to the reading of Ricoeur I have proposed; more importantly, it helps build a bridge to ongoing debates in the philosophy of technology, where questions of design are of central importance and Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology has yet to have much influence.[30] Conversely, Ricoeur might also be helpful in developing Appadurai's provocative thesis that the social practice of design is not at all about the endless proliferation of material possibilities, as the term is often used to suggest, but rather about regulating and limiting them.[31]

Let us now pause for a moment and take stock of the discussion so far. By following the development of Ricoeur's philosophy in the 1970s and early 1980s, we have seen that (1) Ricoeur's model of the threefold mimesis of action shows that his theory of the text preserves a connection to the material circumstances of the author and reader and thus makes room for what Said calls "worldliness" and (2) that Ricoeur's theory of the text is by no means his only resource for thinking the complex relation between material and meaning; his model of threefold mimesis points towards a more general account of the human being as an active designer and sufferer of design. But we have left out an important voice in this discussion. To further develop this view, in the following section we turn to the most interesting and systematic adaptation of Ricoeur's work that seeks to coordinate the technical dimension of human action with the normativity that always permeates it.

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[28] *Ibid*., 254.

[29] *Id*.

[30] Ricoeur would thus prove useful in discussions such as those found in Ilse Oosterlaken and Jeroen van de Hoven, eds. *The Capability Approach, Technology and Design* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012) on the relevance of the capability approach, most associated with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, for the philosophy of technology. It is also striking that there is little systematic treatment of design in the only volume dedicated to Ricoeur and the philosophy of technology, Wessel Reijers, Alberto Romele, and Mark Coeckelbergh, *Interpreting Technology: Ricoeur on Questions Concerning Ethics and Philosophy of Technology* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021). However, Coeckelbergh and Reijers do develop Ricoeur's conception of the human capacity for narrative in relation to technologies in Coeckelbergh and Reijers, "Narrative Technologies: A Philosophical Investigation of the Narrative Capacities of Technologies by Using Ricoeur's Narrative Theory," *Human Studies,* 39 (2016): 325–346. For a helpful synopsis of Ricoeur's relation to technology, see the opening essay of the above-mentioned volume, Ernst Wolff, "Ricoeur's Polysemy of Technology and Its Reception," *Interpreting Technology*, eds. Reijers *et al.*, 3–25.

[31] Appadurai, *The Future as Cultural Fact*, 262–263.

The technicity of action

Fortunately, responding to Said's challenge does not mean starting from zero. What is needed is a full-fledged account of the precise role that material circumstances play in Ricoeur's philosophy, where the various layers of reality—from matter to meaning—come together in his philosophical anthropology, his hermeneutics of the capable self. The most promising innovation of Ricoeur's work in this direction is undoubtedly that of Ernst Wolff, whose interpretative theory of "technicity" allows us to integrate Said's concern with circumstances, in all their spatial and temporal complexity, within a coherent framework.

If Said's challenge is to specify how Ricoeur construes the relation between ideality and materiality, Wolff's treatment of technicity is an obvious place to start.[32] In *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest: Interpreting the Technicity of Action* (2021), Wolff explicates the simple fact that human action nearly always has a technical dimension. What he means by this is that all instances of action can be analyzed in terms of two constituent elements: (1) the *acquired capabilities* of the agent and (2) the *means* that materially support the action.[33] Let us look at both elements, in reverse order.
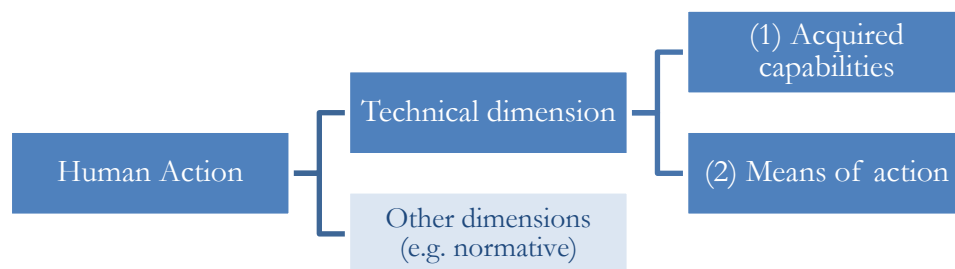

Figure 2. Overview of Wolff's account of the technicity of action.

When Wolff speaks about technical means, it is important to note that he is not only talking about the tools, technologies, and other medium-sized dry goods that human actors have come to rely on. More precisely, he is talking about what might be called the material infrastructure of action, the vast network of instruments, vehicles, and channels that ferry the journey of human action from idea to outcome. To introduce this, Wolff wisely selects the most apparently linguistic form of action to illustrate what he means.[34] Imagine I want to send a message: whether I communicate my message with my vocal apparatus, pen and paper, a series of electric signals

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[32] As I see it, Wolff's account is the most systematic development of Ricoeur's integration of narration and construction into a theory of human design. The reason for this is simple: Wolff's account of the technical milieu includes the temporal and spatial mediations described by Ricoeur (among many other things Ricoeur does not discuss) in his treatments of narrative and architecture. "Technicity" is also encompassing enough to resolve any lingering worries about the priority of space or time in Ricoeur's treatment.

[33] Ernst Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest: Interpreting the Technicity of Action* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), v.

[34] *Ibid.*, 34.

through undersea cables or via satellites in the Earth's atmosphere, I necessarily rely on some means to transmit my message to my intended recipient. Moreover, the efficacy of my message, that is whether or not my message will be successfully communicated, will depend in large part on the configuration of the medium I use and the sort of transmission it affords me. To exemplify this, simply think of the differences, at the purely technical level of means, between the transmission capacity of this journal and an algorithmically driven social media platform owned and operated by a multinational corporation motivated by the competitive pursuit of profit. I would not go so far as Marshall McLuhan to say that the medium is the message, but it certainly helps.

The second element of the technicity of action is what Wolff calls acquired capabilities. The starting point of Wolff's account is Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the self, his philosophical anthropology of the acting and suffering human. To recall, Ricoeur's work explores six central capabilities: saying, doing, narrating, imputing, promising, and remembering (and I have suggested above that narration might be better understood together with building as part of our more general capacity for designing). However, as Wolff observes, Ricoeur's notion of capability is insufficiently developed in relation to what we have just discussed, namely the technical means that materially support the expression of those capabilities in action. It is here that we can see how the two elements of technicity are interrelated. Let us return to the example above. Just as my intention to communicate a message depends on the technical means available to me, it also depends on the set of socialized skills I have acquired to carry out my communicative act. If I am trying to request the extension of a deadline in a professional context, the network of technical means supporting my email is insufficient to achieve my goal; I must strategically deploy these technical means with my acquired skills and capabilities. Here, this means drawing on linguistic and grammatical knowledge, my proficiency with the hardware and software of my computer, my tacit understanding of professional norms and customs, and so on.

In every instance of action, then, Wolff's analysis of technicity draws our attention to the way that acquired capabilities and means of action reciprocally shape one another: the acquired capabilities of social actors are enhanced or inhibited by the technical means at their disposal, but whether the potential of certain technical means is actualized or not also depends on the acquired capabilities of the actors using them.[35] One major consequence of this reciprocity is what Wolff calls the "technical paradox" of action, which, interestingly, he argues is the basis of Ricoeur's well-known "political paradox," rather than the other way round.[36] As Wolff formulates it:

> [The technical] paradox is in force on all scales of human action: to be effective, it is necessary to integrate dynamic abilities and powerful means into action, but these do not always serve the best interests of the agents nor do they always accurately reflect the intention of the action, the spirit in which the skills were taught or the purpose of the invention of the means. In this way, the augmentation and reduction that technicity brings

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[35] Importantly, Wolff's account is by no means limited to individual and extends to agents of every sort, whether they be individuals, groups, organizations, or institutions. See *ibid*., 103–158.

[36] *Ibid*., 100.

about in the relationship between capability and incapability accords a dramatic, even tragic potential to human action.[37]

Wolff's identification of this paradox lurking within human action is the point at which the political potential of his account, in the broadest sense, comes to the fore. As he puts it, "The point is not to reduce the political to the technical, but to grasp the technical dimension of the political to its full paradoxical extent."[38]

Thus for the purposes of social theory Wolff's account places an important check on those who might otherwise jump prematurely into normative theorizing, as he shows with several well-chosen examples—the most powerful of which is certainly his treatment of Nelson Mandela's delicate coordination of ethics and strategy in his justification of the limited recourse to violence in the struggle against Apartheid. Indeed, it is only by taking a descriptive detour through the technical dimension of action—that is by examining the conjunction of acquired capabilities and the available means of action in a particular situation—that normative question can be legitimately posed, that is without imposing external norms on a situation that have no operative traction or aims that are simply unachievable given an agent's available technical means.

What I now want to focus on is Wolff's adaptation of Ricoeur's threefold mimesis of action to account for the way that human beings engage with their technical milieu. In broad strokes, what Wolff wants to capture is "the general anthropological patterns of changing human technicity [as] an element of the formation of all civilizations."[39] In other words, what his account seeks to capture is how human action is responsible for both the stabilizing force of technical systems and also their evident ability to change over time. Recalling our discussion of Ricoeur's original formulation of his model in the context of the narrative function, and his later expansion to the broader configuration or design of space-time, we can see that Wolff's adopts the same structure. First, *technical prefiguration* (mimesis I) in this context refers to the habitus or technical pre-understanding of the agent, the subject of the "I can." Next, the *configuration of technical means* (mimesis II) refers to the technical analogue of "the text," which, even more evident than in the case of a text, engages the wider technical system of which it is a part. And once again, as with the text, a given technical means is strictly speaking an abstraction without the support of a reader.

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[37] *Id*.

[38] *Ibid*., 101.

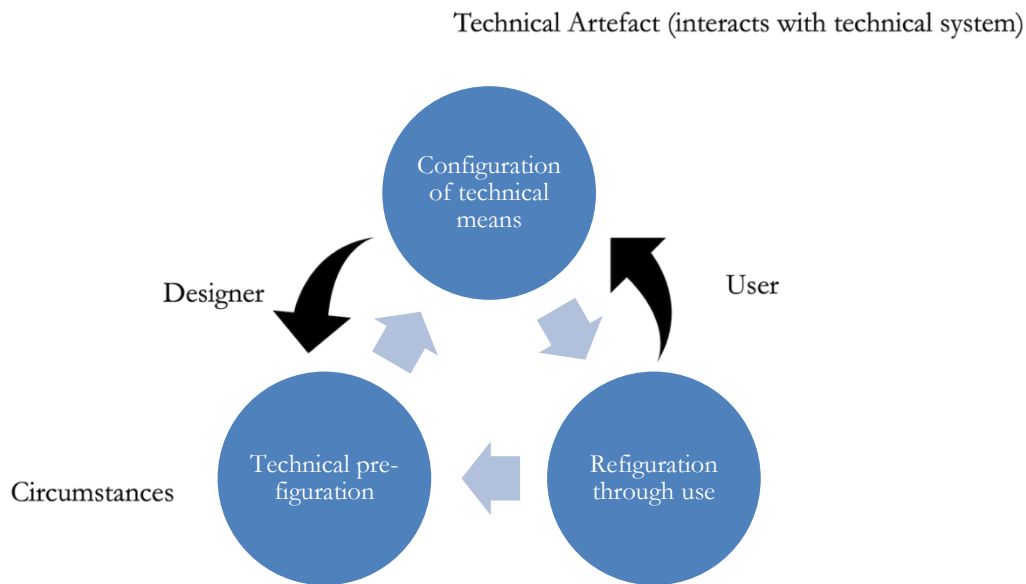[39] Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest*, 101.

Figure 3. Wolff's hermeneutic circle of human engagement with the technical milieu.

To capture the dynamism of Wolff's model, I will focus on his treatment of *technical refiguration*, that is "reading" the technical milieu (mimesis III). Just as narrated time requires a reader and built time requires an inhabitant, the refiguration of our technical milieu requires a *user*:

> Reading, as a metaphor applied to human technicity, refers to the confrontation of the agent's technical pre-understanding or habitus with the technical configuration of an object embedded as it is in the technical system. In this event, the agent responds to the "could be" that is facilitated by the technical object, by reactualising it or by reactivating it as a means to do something. What was a mere instant ago still a lifeless object is now used *as* a saw, *as* a table, *as* an oven. This holds equally for more complex examples such as air-conditioning, nuclear power plants, and banks.[40]

As with reading, then, the user suspends the autonomy (mimesis II) of the technical configuration in question and, depending on the user's technical competence, inserts it into a context (mimesis III). It is at this point that the user's appropriation of the technical configuration comes into contact with a wider technical system in relation to the user's projected goal.[41] Like Ricoeur's theory of the text, Wolff explains that it is in this process of recontextualization through use that the technical agent opens up "the *world* of technics." To adapt Ricoeur's definition of a "world" to the context of technicity, we could formulate it something like this: *the technical world is the whole set of actional affordances opened by every sort of technical means I have ever used that have enhanced or*

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[40] *Ibid*., 75.

[41] It is of course here, at the point where the user's intended project and the potential of the technical system intersect, that the issue of the technical paradox emerges.

inhibited my capacity for action.[42] In other words, the technical world is everything the agent can do in light of their experience with various technical means.[43]

With this summary of Wolff's adaptation of reading to the technical milieu, we return to where we started: Said's challenge. To recall, Said criticized Ricoeur's theory of the text for taking insufficient account of the extent to which readers—and critics in particular—"are subject to and producers of circumstances."[44] By allegedly adopting a conception of the text without any connection to actuality, Ricoeur depicts the reader as being free from any worldly constraints, thus leaving them even more susceptible to ideological influence than the reader who takes worldliness into account.[45] However, Wolff's interpretative social theory of the technicity of action has given us the wider picture of what seems to be driving Ricoeur's work—from the initial theory of the text targeted by Said to his model of threefold mimesis in *Time and Narrative* to his sketch of a model of the configuration of space-time in "Architecture and Narrativity" and *Memory, History, Forgetting.* In this sense, Wolff's account is a further fulfilment of Ricoeur's aim of moving from text to action.

But having said all this, one might still doubt whether Said's challenge has really been overcome. After all, is his more precise objection not that Ricoeur imagines "the life of texts as being pleasantly ideal and without force or conflict"?[46] Is Said's objection not that, siding with Foucault against Ricoeur, "the discursive situation is more usually like the unequal relation between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed"?[47] In the final section, I show that Ricoeur's account of reading is considerably more attentive to conflict than Said thought, regardless of whether we are talking about reading a text or its actional counterpart. Before concluding, I suggest that those who want to use Ricoeur for social theoretical purposes would benefit from adopting Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics, which emphasizes the weight of material, or technical circumstances without going quite as far as Said.

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[42] The passage I allude to here is cited in Wolff, *Between Daily Routine and Violent Protest*, 75. It is originally from Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, 80: "for me, the world is the whole set of reference opened by every sort of descriptive or poetic text I have read, interpreted, and loved."

[43] It is important to emphasize that Wolff's actional orientation by no means excludes the role of cognition or imagination; the affordances of a technical system are embodied, but not merely physical.

[44] Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," 35

[45] Once again, I would like to emphasize that my aim is not simply to adduce further evidence against Said's reading of Ricoeur. My point is rather to show that the theoretical resources in Ricoeur, and those such as Wolff who have developed these resources, are even better for making Said's exact point. There is no better encapsulation of this convergence in Said's essay than his praise for Marx's treatment of "circumstances" (*Umstände*) in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," 44–45). Not only does Marx's famous line that "men make history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing" neatly capture the dialectic of voluntary and involuntary running through Ricoeur's entire oeuvre, but Ricoeur himself often refers to this passage as well, remarking in 1994, for instance, that it is a formula he has "never abandoned" (Ricoeur, "Sketch of a Plea for the Capable Human Being," *Philosophy, Ethics & Politics*, 17).

[46] Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," 47.

[47] *Ibid*., 48.

Reading as a clash of strategies (and tactics)

While Ricoeur long emphasized the importance of conflict in interpretation, it is not until his writings of the early 1980s that he specifies the conflictual character of reading in terms of his model of threefold mimesis. Chapter 7 of *Time and Narrative: Volume 3*, "The World of the Text and the World of the Reader," is dedicated to the three "moments" that account for this conflict: (1) the specific strategy of persuasion adopted by an author in view of their imagined reader; (2) the inscription of that strategy within the literary configuration, and (3) the strategy of the reader.[48]

This chapter is a good place to start pushing back against the claim that Ricoeur views texts as "pleasantly ideal and without force or conflict"—as Said alleges. Even at an abstract level, there are a number of fault lines to the act of reading where worldly influence is likely to seep in. To begin with, the act of writing involves a split between the "real author" and the "author of the text," that is between the author's psychological intentions and the trace of the real author now inscribed in the text. It is only the author of the text, and not the real author, that lies in wait for the reader, who when reading will encounter the trace of this inscription as the "implied author." And a similar splitting happens on the side of the reader. In writing, the real author not only produces the "author of the text," but they also produce the "audience of the text" or "implied reader."[49] This asymmetrical splitting of author and reader is responsible for the reader's sense of recognition or misrecognition, familiarity or estrangement, as they navigate the space circumscribed by the textual configuration.[50]

Reading a text is thus a bit like trying to live in a house designed by somebody else, someone who could only *guess* what sorts of things you would like: how you want the furniture arranged, the art on the walls, the number and size of the rooms, and so on. In the best of cases, the author has got it exactly right: everything is just as you like it, or perhaps better than you would have done it yourself. In the worst of cases, the author has made such a mess of the place that the best they can hope from you, their startled reader, is a polite goodbye and a gentle closing of the door. In the majority of cases, however, it is likely to be somewhere in the middle: the author will have arranged some things better than you could have imagined, some things just well, some things less than well, and some things so utterly and miserably wrong that you even begin to suspect the things you do like.

What I am trying to get at here is that even at the purely rhetorical level of the conflicting strategies of author and reader there are many constraining factors on the simple act of reading— the reader, as with the inhabitant, has to start from the way that things are determinately configured. And, of course, the constraints imposed by this configuration are not ideologically or politically neutral; every part of the design is, in one way or another, influenced by the prefigured

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[48] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, [1985] 1988), 160.

[49] For a rhetorical nuance of Ricoeur's conception of the "audience of the text," see Blake D. Scott, *The Rhetoricity of Philosophy: Audience in Perelman and Ricoeur after the Badiou-Cassin Debate* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2025), 213–220.

[50] Ricoeur is careful to emphasize that the apparent symmetry of the respective splitting of author and reader is ultimately misleading, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 170.

world out of which the text was configured by its author—and all the symbolic mediations that designs carry throughout the mimetic circle.

On the part of the author, or designer more generally, this leaves plenty of room for ideology, namely ideas and symbols which motivate actions that reproduce existing relations of domination.[51] A good non-textual example of this given by Ricoeur in "Architecture and Narrativity" is the way that "competent authorities" often misrecognize the needs of certain populations in architectural or urban design. One can think here of a skyscraper that, on its own, is aesthetically innovative, but is neither aesthetically nor functionally well integrated into the prefigured neighborhood. Or one can think of gentrification processes, which often begin with well-intentioned plans to improve the quality of life in a neighborhood but effectively just drive out poorer residents who can no longer afford to live there.

But things are perhaps even more challenging on the part of the reader. Not only do readers have to deal with a text that may be ideologically suspect, they also have to manage their own relation to the prefigured world. For example, over time certain readers may become wildly overconfident in their interpretative abilities, just as the enthusiastic tourist might overestimate their ability to navigate the complex public transportation system of a new city. Or, conversely, the reader may grow to doubt their own abilities and mistrust their interpretative capacities altogether. An analogue here might be the timid suburbanite who experiences the hectic pace of city life as disorienting or even dangerous, preferring instead the predictable rhythms of highway traffic from the safety of their vehicle.[52]

Ricoeur's porous depiction of reading thus clearly makes room for the many influences, prejudices, distortions, and manipulations that can affect the reader. And Wolff's theory of technicity allows us to extend this picture of reading as much to the inhabitant fearfully walking to work in a hostile, car-centric neighborhood as the social media user attempting to stay in touch with friends while struggling to resist the lure of the algorithm. As these examples all confirm, the unyielding weight of material or technical circumstances is precisely why the name "Ricoeur" is rightly associated with the phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion": critique is necessary because texts, authors, and readers—as well as their actional counterparts—are not to be trusted without good reason.

To conclude, I would like to suggest a way for those using Ricoeur's philosophy for social theoretical purposes to emphasize the weight of material, or technical circumstances without going as far as Said in claiming that the discursive or actional situation as such is less like a conversation between equals than it is like the relation between colonizer and the colonized.

Ricoeur was of course not the only theorist writing about reading in the 1980s. The philosopher, historian, Lacanian psychoanalyst, and Jesuit theologian, Michel de Certeau, published *L'invention du quotidien* (translated into English as *The Practice of Everyday Life*) in 1980, the first volume of a project entitled *Arts de faire*. Although Ricoeur engages favourably with Certeau in *Time and Narrative* and *Memory, History, Forgetting*, and several related essays and

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[51] For a more detailed discussion of Ricoeur's conception of ideology, see Scott, *The Rhetoricity of Philosophy*, 245–250.

[52] Quill Kukla provides a helpful sketch of how city dwellers and suburbanites come to perceive disorder and risk differently in Kukla, *City Life: How Urban Dwellers and Urban Spaces Make One Another* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 63–71.

lectures written around the same time, nowhere to my knowledge does Ricoeur so much as mention this text.[53] This is a pity because Certeau's book is precisely about the sorts of things we have been discussing under the umbrella term of reading, namely *the ways that users operate*.[54] In broad strokes, Certeau sets out to refute the view that consumers, and more generally users of systems over which they have no overt control, are simply passive and guided by established rules. Similar to Appadurai, Certeau's claim is that everyday practices should not be seen as a static backdrop to what we call society, but part and parcel of what brings it about in the first place.[55] In this sense, the aim of Certeau's book is primarily methodological: he wants to show how a certain "strategic" model of rationality, historically dominant in the West, is responsible for occluding the hidden "tactical" rationality of what are often euphemistically called "consumers," those allegedly passive and docile pseudo-subjects whose everyday actions are deemed too insignificant to study.[56]

To make sense of this, we first need to explain Certeau's distinction between "strategies" and "tactics." Strategies are operations that delimit and isolate something from its environment (e.g. a concept, a physical space). In doing so, the strategic operation establishes a "proper place," which enables the new domain to generate relations with things outside of its borders.[57] Think here of a nation state, a scientific domain, a friend group, or a new real estate development. According to Certeau, a strategic conception of reason has served as the dominant model of political and scientific rationality.

"Tactics," on the other hand, work differently. This form of rationality—or, to simplify, this way of acting—has no proper place of its own, and thus cannot enjoy the benefits of a territory, a prerequisite for expanding and capitalizing on existing resources.[58] The place of the tactical operator thus belongs *entirely to the other*. Unlike the strategy, which Certeau describes as "a victory of space over time," the tactic, precisely because it has no place of its own, "depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing' [*saisir au vol*]."[59] For Certeau, many everyday practices are tactical in character: talking, reading, stealing time and petty resources at work, navigating public space, shopping for groceries, watching television, cooking, and a host of other things as well. What ultimately distinguishes a tactic from other ways of operating is that tactics involve a minimal effort to repurpose the resources of a given system (circumscribed by a strategy) towards the ends of the operator.

While there are obviously political implications to Certeau's account, what his distinction between strategies and tactics brings to light is the unavoidable fact that structural asymmetry is

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[53] For a discussion of Ricoeur's personal relation to Certeau and their missed opportunity for a productive dialogue, see François Dosse, *Paul Ricœur. Les Sens d'une vie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), 568–571. As the biographer of both Ricoeur and Certeau, Dosse's attempt to compare the two is of particular interest. See Dosse, *Paul Ricœur et Michel de Certeau. L'histoire : entre le dire et le faire* (Paris: L'Herne, 2006).

[54] Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, xi.

[55] *Ibid*., xi.

[56] *Ibid*., xii.

[57] *Ibid*., xix.

[58] *Ibid*., xix.

[59] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, [1980] 1984), xix.

constitutive of all action: between reader and text, inhabitant and built space, user and technical configuration, actor and circumstances. Because Ricoeur does not make such a distinction, it is perhaps not unreasonable to see why Said might take Ricoeur to be defending a "centrist" conception of the text[60] (even if Said, as Simms has shown, completely misunderstands Ricoeur's distinction between speaking and writing). Indeed, even though Ricoeur emphasizes that any symmetrical understanding of the relation between author and reader is misleading, perhaps we can concede that he fails to insist on this strongly enough.[61] After all, Ricoeur does depict the conflict at the heart of reading as a clash between rival strategies, the respective strategies of reader and writer. Ricoeur's likening of reading to a battle thus does not fundamentally undermine Said's point: sure, reading is like a battle, but it remains a battle *between equals*.

To remedy this, my suggestion would be to adopt Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics when using Ricoeur's model of action, thus making the structural asymmetry between actor and circumstances more prominent. The concept of tactics serves to emphasize just how durable and resistant to redesign the material or technical circumstances established by strategies are, even if these circumstances are ultimately sustained by the actions they support. In other words, the tactical actor is always at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the sophisticated designs instituted by strategic actors. Think for example of the social media user. Even if the user knows perfectly well how the algorithm works, in the long run they are no match for the accumulated knowledge and technical know-how embedded in the technology.

But does this then mean that Said was right all along? Not quite. It seems to me that Said overcompensates, ending up too far in the opposite direction. Recall Said's retort to Ricoeur that the discursive situation is much less like a "conversation between equals" than "the unequal relation between colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed."[62] First of all, who exactly is who here? Is the *text* the oppressive one, the colonizer imposing its configuration onto the reader? Or the *critic-reader* the oppressor, colonizing the text by imposing their foreign meaning where it does not belong? Either way, I would argue that this is an equally unhelpful generalization as the one Said accuses Ricoeur of making, though perhaps Said did not exactly mean it this way. For Ricoeur, any form of domination predicated on the asymmetry between tactical actors and strategically established circumstances would be better described as the *distortion of a constitution* than as something *constitutively distorted*.[63] In other words, the fact that actors stand in asymmetrical relation to their circumstances is not itself the problem; the problem occurs only secondarily, when this asymmetry is exploited in such a way that an actor's autonomy is systematically undermined. For this reason I would suggest that a more cautious and descriptively neutral approach here is best. To specify whether a given instance of this asymmetry is a source of genuine alienation rather than a benign objectification, for instance, as Ricoeur discusses in

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[60] Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," 50.

[61] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, 170.

[62] Said, "The World, the Text, and the Critic," 48.

[63] Ricoeur makes an analogous argument about the social imagination in *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, arguing that ideology's "distorting function covers only a small surface of the social imagination, in just the same way that hallucinations or illusions constitute only a part of our imaginative activity in general" (Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 8).

"Objectivation et alienation dans l'expérience historique",[64] further context-specific criteria are needed.

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[64] Here I have in mind Ricoeur's helpful distinction between the necessary objectification of historical experience and alienation proper in Ricoeur, "Objectivation et aliénation dans l'expérience historique," *Archivio di Filosofia,* vol. 45, nº 2–3 (1975), 27–38.

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