

The Range of Interpretation

There is a tacit assumption that interpretation comes naturally, that human beings live by constantly interpreting. In this sense, we might even rephrase Descartes by saying: We interpret, therefore we are. While such a basic human disposition makes interpretation appear to come naturally, the forms it takes, however, do not. In this work, Iser offers a fresh approach by formulating an "anatomy of interpretation" through which we can understand the act of interpretation in its many different manifestations. For Iser, there are several different genres of interpretation, all of which are acts of translation designed to transpose something into something else. Perhaps the most obvious example of interpretation involves canonical texts, such as the Rabbinical exegesis of the Torah or Samuel Johnson's reading of Shakespeare. But what happens when the matter that one seeks to interpret consists not of a text but of a welter of fragments, as in the study of history, or when something is hidden, as in the practice of psychoanalysis, or is as complex as a culture or system? Iser details how, in each of these cases, the space that is opened up by interpretation is negotiated in a different way, thus concluding that interpretation always depends on what it seeks to translate. For students of philosophy, literary and critical theory, anthropology, and cultural history, Iser's elucidation of the mechanics by which we translate and understand, as well as his assessment of the anthropological roots of our drive to make meaning, will undoubtedly serve as a revelation.



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