

The Politics of Play: The Social Implications of Iser's Aesthetic Theory

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FROM THE EARLY DAYS of reader-response criticism, Wolfgang Iser's literary theory has been accused of apolitical idealism. This charge represents a fundamental misunderstanding of his thinking about the social functions of literature. *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, the culmination of his reflections about the art of representation, does not explicitly engage the question of the politics of literature, and its emphasis on the value of "play" and the "as if" might seem to disengage the aesthetic experience from worldly concerns. What Iser means by "play," however, is a profoundly important social activity that would facilitate productive uses of difference to create forms of community among decentered human beings whose dissonances and dislocations resist unification.

As an instrument for staging various kinds of open-ended exploratory interactions, Iser's notion of literature offers a model of the emancipatory uses of power in the service of communicative democracy. The politics of Iser's theory of nonmimetic representation foregrounds the role of the "as if" in producing, questioning, and overturning different forms of life. The playful, nonteleological functioning of fictive acts of staging in turn makes possible the reciprocal but nonconsensual exchange of power on which democratic mutuality depends. *The Fictive and the Imaginary* engages the question of power in representation in order to affirm the liberating and community-building capacities of literature in a perpetually unstable, decentered world. It is thus an important response to the political challenges of our time.

The Fictive and the Imaginary moves beyond Iser's earlier concern with reading to offer a general theory of textuality in the service of what he calls "literary anthropology." Two questions drive this anthropology: Why do human beings seem to need fictions? And what does the capacity to make fictions reveal about the being of human being? Iser approaches these questions not by undertaking a transcendental phenomenological reflection but by looking for patterns in several historically and culturally specific domains that he thinks provide especially illuminating examples of how human beings have made and thought

about fictions. Hence the long chapters that make up the bulk of the book on pastoral poetry, the role of fictions in philosophy, and different theories of play and the imaginary. This procedure reflects in part the realization of hermeneutic phenomenology that epistemological and ontological constants, if they exist, cannot be grasped through immediate reflection but must be teased out through cultural interpretation of their varying manifestations.¹ It also suggests Iser's doubt that a single, univocal definition of fiction can be found: "Context-bound, fictions in general elude clear-cut definitions, let alone ontological grounding. Instead, they can be grasped only in terms of use. As their use is potentially manifold, fictionalizing manifests itself in constantly shifting modes of operation in accordance with the changing boundaries to be overcome."² The multiplicity of fiction not only eludes any essentialist characterization; it also suggests that a central task for a theory of fictionality is to account for the variety of modes of fiction-making.

Iser is interested in reading the literary as evidence of culture-forming processes. The seemingly boundless variety of the fictional, which would seem to thwart any general theory, turns out to have enormous value as anthropological evidence of the capacity of human beings to generate versions of themselves: "Literature . . . has a substratum . . . of a rather featureless plasticity that manifests itself in a continual repatterning of the culturally conditioned shapes human beings have assumed. . . . If literature permits limitless patternings of human plasticity, it indicates the inveterate urge of human beings to become present to themselves; this urge, however, will never issue into a definitive shape. . . . [L]iterature reveals that human plasticity is propelled by the drive to gain shape, without ever imprisoning itself in any of the shapes obtained" (*FI xi*). For Iser, fictions are attempts by human beings to give form to themselves which reveal in the process that human beings have no definitive form. Without a shape to present itself as, human being would be nothing, but since we can only grasp ourselves as a form that is not what we are, there is no limit to the shapes human beings can try on. The plasticity of human beings gives rise to the multiplicity of fictions and makes possible cultural differences. Accounting for fictional multiplicity may consequently help explain how different cultures are constructed. The ways in which fictional worlds interact might then also offer models for how cultural differences can be mediated. As an exploration of the implications of human plasticity, Iser's anthropology constitutes a response to the contemporary political dilemma of negotiating differences between incommensurable worlds.

Iser describes "the act of fictionalizing" as "a crossing of boundaries" (*FI 3*). New meanings are generated, in his view, when limits are overstepped. He therefore rejects the notion of representation as

copying because fictions do not merely mirror reality but instead transform the materials they take from the pre-given world. The opposition of “fiction” and “reality” seems faulty to him because fictions always contain elements of reality (“a piece of fiction devoid of any connection with known reality would be incomprehensible” [FI 1]) and because reality includes many fictional elements (narratives, beliefs, and myths, for example, that are part of the texture of the real). He proposes “to replace this duality with a triad: the real, the fictive, and . . . the imaginary. It is out of this triad that the text arises” (FI 1). The imaginary is the featureless, otherwise inaccessible capacity for making meaning to which fictions give form. As what Iser calls “the generative matrix of the text” (FI 21), it is the ability to play with elements of the real and to transform them by selecting and combining them in ways they cannot determine or predict. The imaginary mediates between the fictive and the real and animates their interaction, but it is knowable only through its effects. Not a faculty or an essence, it is the power of human plasticity to create forms, play with the given, and overstep limits.

Iser calls representation “an act of transgression” (FI 3) because it entails the crossing of boundaries. This is true of each of the three dimensions of fictionalizing he describes: selection, combination, and self-disclosure. For example, if a literary text is constructed by selecting “from a variety of social, historical, cultural, and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text,” then this process involves “a stepping beyond boundaries, in that the elements selected are lifted out of the systems in which they fulfill their specific function” (FI 4–5). Taking the given out of its original context changes it by de pragmatizing it—suspending its instrumental activity and thereby making it observable. The context from which it is taken is altered as well because it is highlighted as the background against which the selected item emerges: “It is as if what is present in the text must be judged in the light of what is absent” (FI 5). Selecting materials to create a text is not a mechanical act but a transformative process, then, because it changes what it picks out by crossing over the boundaries that had previously defined it.

The act of combining similarly crosses boundaries by staging possibilities of relationship not necessarily prescribed by the context out of which the selected elements came. According to Iser, otherwise “mutually contradictory elements” can be made to coexist in a text “through the relations that are established among them,” and “the fact that such connections appear to be convincing” is due not primarily to “any code-governed rules” but “mainly to the manner in which the linked elements are made to extend beyond the borders of their previous validity” (FI 9). New combinations of elements from the given overstep the limits that had previously defined them by establishing different patterns of

connection, thereby extending their ability to enter into relations of meaning. Combination emancipates elements from the limits of their prior situation even as it liberates them to join new relations. Combination has transformative power because it “transgresses the semantic enclosures” (FI 19) that had previously defined the materials it realigns.

“Transgression” for Iser is first a semantic process rather than a political act, but as such it is the capacity for innovation and critique without which interventions to change the world or expose its deficiencies would not be possible. Iser’s argument that boundary crossings of various kinds open up semantic possibilities does not imply that texts are invariably emancipatory but shows how changes in meaning can occur through particular activities that can be used for different purposes. Those aims are not defined or constrained in advance by the functions that make them possible. The different ways in which acts of textual construction can step across boundaries allow them to take on different social and political significance and do various kinds of cultural work. Iser’s explanation of how acts of semantic transgression can transform textual materials does not prescribe a particular politics of literature but demonstrates how literature can serve a variety of social ends.

Because crossing boundaries carries what is transgressed in its wake, fictionalizing acts entail a “doubling” of worlds, which Iser finds most evident in the “self-disclosure” of literary fictions—their exhibition of the “as if” structure of fictionality, which instrumental fictions often mask. The structure of what Iser calls the “split signifier” is fundamental to the “as if” of fictionality—its projection of a world that both is and is not what it claims to be (as in the common narrative formula “it was so, but it was not so”). According to Iser, “the ‘as-if’ construction discloses the fictionality of fiction” and “shows that the represented world is only to be conceived *as if* it were a world in order that it should be taken to figure something other than itself” (FI 19–20). “Whenever realities are transposed into the text,” Iser argues, “they turn into signs for something else” (FI 3). The “as if” allows the materials selected and combined into fictions to assume purposes not immanent within them. This doubling brings into observability processes of fiction-making that the pragmatic use of fictions in everyday life conceals. It also provides a “vantage point” for viewing the world that is not part of it (FI 16). These epistemological gains are produced because the three basic dimensions of fiction all cross boundaries and do not simply copy the given.

The “doubling” that characterizes the various fictionalizing acts has broad anthropological implications for Iser. In his view, “the simultaneous presence of doubled positions” in literary fictionality “makes it representative of the nature of doubling itself” (FI 82), and this is a useful function because, with Helmuth Plessner, Iser finds that “division

is characteristic of human beings”: “Being oneself . . . means being able double oneself” (FI 80, 81). Iser cites with approval Plessner’s argument that human being has a “*doppelgänger*” structure: “human being as a being . . . is generally related to its social role but cannot be defined by a particular role. The role-player or bearer of the social figure is not the same as that figure, and yet cannot be thought of separately from it without being deprived of its humanity. . . . Only by means of the other of itself does it have—itself.”³ Iser describes this duality as evidence of “our decentered position—our existence is incontestable, but at the same time is inaccessible to us” (FI 81). We are, but we do not have a being that absolutely and essentially defines us, and we can be and know ourselves only through roles that we both are and are not. As Iser explains, “the fact that we cannot capture ourselves in any absolute role lifts all limits on the number of roles that can be played” (FI 82). Fictionalizing acts “present the constitutive dividedness of human beings as the source of possible worlds within the world” and “point to an anthropological disposition that eludes grasping and that manifests itself only by way of its kaleidoscopically changing effects” (FI 84, 83). Textual acts of boundary crossing not only employ the transformative powers of doubling but also make them available for observation.

“Play” is an aesthetic as well as an anthropological phenomenon of special interest to Iser because it is a particularly pervasive, useful, and revealing manifestation of doubling. In his vocabulary, play is not just a formal category but a general term for how differences engage one another. The basic structure of play is oscillation, or to-and-fro movement, a notion Iser borrows from his teacher Gadamer:

If we examine how the word “play” is used and concentrate on its so-called metaphorical senses, we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end; . . . rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. . . . It is the game that is played—it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays it. The play is the occurrence of the movement as such.⁴

Play is not a subjective attitude or exclusively an aspect of the aesthetic experience but a potentially never-ending, ever self-renewing movement to and fro. Play sometimes shows itself in games that have a particular goal—the victory of one side or the determination of a single result—but this “instrumental play” (as Iser calls it) only achieves its end by

stopping play (the game is over). By contrast, “free play has to play against endings” (FI 237) and seeks to keep the back-and-forth of play in motion.

In practice, free play is an idealization that can only be abstracted from the different ways games are played under specific conditions, with particular rules, toward determinate ends. As Iser explains, “the endlessness of play has to be conveyed by playing through specific possibilities, and this is done by means of games” (FI 257). Games are characterized by a “contraflow of free and instrumental play” (FI 247) that can take various forms. Games combine free and instrumental play according to different ratios. Keeping the to-and-fro in motion and aiming to establish a particular result are in a sense two aspects of play which may contradict each other, but they also depend on each other. On the one hand, no game can be purely instrumental without ceasing to be playful and becoming merely a means to an end. On the other hand, there is an instrumental quality to free play itself to the extent that each move back-and-forth is an attempt to establish meaning and decide the outcome. Even in instrumental games, however, no move has its meaning intrinsic to itself, but depends on a reply and a result it cannot entirely control: “every game begins with a move whose consequences can never be totally foreseen” (FI 261). The element of free play in all games is that no move is complete but always depends on what it is not, a future it has not yet reached. “Free play” and “instrumental play” are opposites that are deeply and profoundly linked to one another.

The four categories of games, which Iser borrows from Roger Caillois—*agōn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilīnx*—show how free and instrumental play may combine to make games more open-ended or more directed toward finality.⁵ As Iser explains, “the endlessness and the finality of play” are “two countervailing tendencies” (FI 264) that can interact differently in various kinds of games. Although *agōn* (games of contest or struggle) and *alea* (where chance rules) are both defined by the ends of winning and losing, their valence may change in textual games. There “*alea* plays against *agōn*, whose antithetical arrangement reduces the element of chance, whereas *alea* explodes” oppositions that seek to control or structure meaning and limit the play of accident (FI 261). “If *agōn* aims to overcome the difference that arises out of antagonistically arranged positions, *alea* aims to intensify it, thereby making it into a rift that cannot be overcome, and reducing all play to mere chance” (FI 261). Textual games where conflict seeks resolution in the triumph of one position are countered by strategies aimed at opening up the possibility of unforeseeable, uncontrollable consequences. If there are already elements of both free and instrumental play in games of conflict and of chance, then the counterflow between endlessness and finality becomes

even more complicated and contradictory when the different kinds of games combine.

Iser describes *mimicry* as a game tending toward closure because it promotes “the forgetting of difference” (FI 262) between the copy and the original and opposes disruptions that might undermine the illusion of reality. But the element of free play in imitation’s pursuit of verisimilitude is exposed by *ilinx*, the game of subverting all fixed positions in order to induce vertigo. This “carnivalization of all the positions assembled in the text” (FI 262) exposes the boundlessness and multiplicity of possible illusions given the ultimately ineradicable difference between the fictive and the real: “Ilinx may therefore be seen as a game in which free play is at its most expansive. But for all its efforts to reach beyond what is, free play remains bound to what it overshoots, because it can never quite extinguish the undercurrents and overtones of instrumental play” (FI 262). Even the subversion of roles in the interests of opening up meaning depends on instrumentally directed ends for it to undermine. Its liberating aims are significant only against the backdrop of the games of finality it undercuts.

Free play and instrumental play are inextricably intertwined in the games texts play as they range between open-endedness and closure. According to Iser, “the text game is one in which limitation and endlessness can be played to an equal degree” (FI 265). On the one hand, “because of their forms, games must inevitably be limited; in contrast with play, they are designed for endings. The result ends play” (FI 265). Even with the most anarchic, disruptive, open-ended text, “the endlessness of play cannot be maintained, since the text itself is limited” (FI 257). On the other hand, in contrast to “result-oriented games, especially mathematical, strategic, and economic ones, as well as those of chance and skill, all of which are designed to remove existing play spaces,” a text can take as its game the multiplication of opportunities for play, whether by “play[ing] against each other” the various games it includes or by demonstrating that they can be played without end, so that the “game is not ended by itself but by its player” (FI 265, 266). Although some determinate or didactic texts may aim to close off play in the interests of the results they desire, it is possible to play the games of even these texts in ways that keep open and expand their potentiality for meaning. Even the most instrumental text can, because it is a text, be read in ways that open it up to meanings and purposes it cannot limit (offering its games up for observation as games, for example, rather than submitting oneself to their ends, or engaging them with other modes of instrumental play governed by different notions of finality). Paradoxically, although all texts have limits because they are finite ways of playing particular games, the only ultimate limit on their capacity to

mean is the resourcefulness and energy of the player (or the history of readers) in keeping their play in motion.

Because of these contradictions, textual games are especially illuminating models of the anthropological and social functions of play. Iser's exploration of the paradoxes of play is important not only as a clarification of the games of texts but also as an explanation of the usefulness of play as a particular way of deploying power. Both the endless to-and-fro of free play and the result-oriented moves of instrumental play entail the use of power. But the opposition of free and instrumental play distinguishes helpfully between ways power may be employed. In contrast to the widespread contemporary assumption that power aims only and always for dominance, the aim of instrumental play, to achieve victory and end the game by determining the result, contrasts with the uses of power for expanding the potential for meaning, which the to-and-fro motion of free play makes possible. The element of potential open-endedness in instrumental play suggests that even the use of power for masterful ends is not monolithic but contains a counter-movement onto which the subversive counterflow of free play can cathect. The need that free play has for limits and aims offers a critique of the dream of innocence of open-ended play without finality, but the disclosure of the playful element of instrumental games opens up the possibility that power can be used without the inevitability of coercion or violence.

The mutually illuminating interaction of free and instrumental play in textual games can be seen as a model for the ethical use of power. Guided by such an ethics, instrumental play would become ironic about its ends by recognizing their limits and contingency. Such an ethics would also instruct instrumental uses of force that the achievement of their aims can be ironically self-defeating by putting an end to the game that had defined them. But such an ethics would also inform free play that its subversive, anarchic advocacy of an endless to-and-fro is empty without the forms and aims that give play meaning. The will to infinite expansion of free play would be countered by an ironic awareness of its inability to sustain itself without the other it opposes. The counterflow of free and instrumental play informing such an ethics would have the aim of preventing any one game from dominating all the others in the interests of keeping the space of play open. It would seek to have rival games engage each other with the recognition that their conflicts do not simply frustrate the will to dominance of each but can be mutually enhancing because opposing modes of play typically depend on and benefit from one another. The play-space opened up by such an ethics would be a democratic community of often incommensurable games

whose principle of interaction is not indifferent tolerance of the other but ironic and energetic engagement with difference.⁶

An Iserian ethics of play would seek reciprocity but not consensus. This can be seen in the role of doubling in fictional play. Play is central to fictionality because, as a structure that doubles worlds, meanings, and forms against one another, the fictional is characterized by “the coexistence of the mutually exclusive” (*FI* 79). This “coexistence of the mutually exclusive” can be seen in the doubling of the fictive world and the real (from which it selects and combines its materials), in the kaleidoscopic multiplication of perspectives in a text (which may refuse to coalesce), in the interaction of opposing games (which pursue incompatible ends), or in the juxtaposition of the reader’s experiential horizon with the worlds opened up by the text. In each case there is reciprocity between the doubled parties in that meaning is generated not by either pole on its own but by the to-and-fro between them. This doubling need not lead to resolution in order to be productive. The playful interaction of differences acquires energy and creativity from the resistance of doubled pairs to coalescing in a final synthesis. If and when unity is achieved, the play of doubling ends. The to-and-fro of play resists consensus because it depends on difference to keep it in motion, even as it requires reciprocity between the parties it engages so that the back-and-forth is not halted by violence or a lack of response.

The doubling of play suggests that social and linguistic relations can be productive even if—or precisely because—they do not end in agreement. An important lesson of play is that difference need not issue in either solipsistic disconnection or violent discord if it can be staged as reciprocal exchange. The doubling of play shows that consensus is not necessary for reciprocity. Prior or final agreement is not required for meaningful exchanges to take place if conditions facilitating the to-and-fro of play between differences can be maintained. By the same token, reciprocity between opposing partners in an exchange need not thwart their ability to make and invent moves in the games through which they pursue their interests and aims. Indeed, opposing games often need one another more than they realize, and they can find their differences from one another mutually beneficial if conditions of playful doubling allow meaningful exchanges to occur. The ideal polis of play would be a community of difference based on nonconsensual reciprocity. The politics of play would entail the pursuit of this ideal.

Such a politics offers an important response to the alternatives widely thought to represent the primary options available for addressing the challenges of difference. An ideal of play based on nonconsensual reciprocity opposes Habermas’s notion that cultural oppositions constitute

a condition of fragmentation that should be overcome by noncoercive, cooperative negotiation guided by the goal of agreement.⁷ Iser's explication of the values of doubling suggests that Habermas errs in assuming that consensus is an implicit ideal of language that successful communicative action undistorted by force aims to bring about. Differences may not be the result of a splitting off of faculties in the interests of specialization, but may reflect irreconcilable oppositions between games based on mutually incompatible rules, assumptions, and aims.

Habermas's goal of establishing conditions of undistorted communication where no force rules other than the force of the better argument may still be valuable. But its value arises not because agreement about the "better argument" will result from uncoerced exchanges or even because power can ever be banished from such interactions (as the contradiction in the formula "no force other than . . ." implicitly recognizes). Rather, as an attempt to establish conditions of reciprocity that rule out violent intervention to decide the to-and-fro of an exchange, Habermas's model of uncoerced negotiation would facilitate play in Iser's sense of a potentially ever-renewing doubling of positions which resist synthesis or unification. The counterflow of various forms of play that Iser describes would help to establish and maintain such exchanges not by banishing force—an impossible dream—but by setting up interactions between opposing assertions of power that would counter each other's will to dominance. A play-space of reciprocally interacting positions offers an alternative to the model of consensus as an image of how communication undistorted by violence might enable differences to engage one another.

Such a play-space also opposes the notion that the only alternative to the coerciveness of consensus must be to advocate the sublime powers of rule-breaking.⁸ Iser shares Lyotard's concern that to privilege harmony and agreement in a world of heterogeneous language games is to limit their play and to inhibit semantic innovation and the creation of new games. Lyotard's endorsement of the "sublime"—the pursuit of the "unpresentable" by rebelling against restrictions, defying norms, and smashing the limits of existing paradigms—is undermined by contradictions, however, which Iser's explication of play recognizes and addresses. The paradox of the unpresentable, as Lyotard acknowledges, is that it can only be manifested through a game of representation. The sublime is, consequently, in Iser's sense, an instance of doubling. If violating norms creates new games, this crossing of boundaries depends on and carries in its wake the conventions and structures it oversteps. The sublime may be uncompromising, asocial, and unwilling to be bound by limits, but its pursuit of what is *not* contained in any order or system makes it dependent on the forms it opposes.

The radical presumption of the sublime is not only terroristic in refusing to recognize the claims of other games whose rules it declines to limit itself by. It is also naive and self-destructive in its impossible imagining that it can do without the others it opposes. As a structure of doubling, the sublime pursuit of the unrepresentable requires a play-space that includes other, less radical games with which it can interact. Such conditions of exchange would be provided by the nonconsensual reciprocity of Iserian play.

Iser's notion of play offers a way of conceptualizing power which acknowledges the necessity and force of disciplinary constraints without seeing them as unequivocally coercive and determining. The contradictory combination of restriction and openness in how play deploys power is evident in Iser's analysis of "regulatory" and "aleatory" rules. Even the regulatory rules, which set down the conditions participants submit to in order to play a game, "permit a certain range of combinations while also establishing a code of possible play. . . . Since these rules limit the text game without producing it, they are regulatory but not prescriptive. They do no more than set the aleatory in motion, and the aleatory rule differs from the regulatory in that it has no code of its own" (*FI* 273). Submitting to the discipline of regulatory restrictions is both constraining and enabling because it makes possible certain kinds of interaction that the rules cannot completely predict or prescribe in advance. Hence the existence of aleatory rules that are not codified as part of the game itself but are the variable customs, procedures, and practices for playing it. Expert facility with aleatory rules marks the difference, for example, between someone who just knows the rules of a game and another who really knows how to play it. Aleatory rules are more flexible and open-ended and more susceptible to variation than regulatory rules, but they too are characterized by a contradictory combination of constraint and possibility, limitation and unpredictability, discipline and spontaneity.

As a rule-governed but open-ended activity, play provides a model for deploying power in a nonrepressive manner that makes creativity and innovation possible not in spite of disciplinary constraints but because of them. Not all power is playful, of course, and some restrictions are more coercive than enabling. But thinking about the power of constraints on the model of rules governing play helps to explain the paradox that restrictions can be productive rather than merely repressive. Seeing constraints as structures for establishing a play-space and as guides for practices of exchange within it envisions power not necessarily and always as a force to be resisted in the interests of freedom; it allows imagining the potential for power to become a constructive social energy that can animate games of to-and-fro exchange between participants whose possibilities for self-discovery and self-expansion are

enhanced by the limits shaping their interactions. Whether the one or the other of these possibilities prevails in any particular situation is not intrinsic to the structure of power; it depends, rather, on how games are played.

Iser summarizes much of his thinking about literature, play, and human being in his notion of “staging.” According to Iser, “staging is the indefatigable attempt to confront ourselves with ourselves, which can be done only by playing ourselves” (*FI* 303): “Staging in literature makes conceivable the extraordinary plasticity of human beings, who, precisely because they do not seem to have a determinable nature, can expand into an almost unlimited range of culture-bound patternings. The impossibility of being present to ourselves becomes our possibility to play ourselves out to a fullness that knows no bounds. . . . If the plasticity of human nature allows, through its multiple culture-bound patternings, limitless human self-cultivation, literature becomes a panorama of what is possible” (*FI* 297). The ultimate political value of literature lies not so much in the content of any particular representation as in its laying bare for observation and analysis the power of human plasticity to stage itself in ever-changing cultural forms. As a demonstration of how play can facilitate the productive doubling of mutually exclusive forms of life, literature also offers a model for how the differences through which human plasticity stages itself can beneficially interact. If “only by being staged can human beings be linked with” one another (*FI* 303), then playful nonconsensual reciprocity is a political form of life particularly conducive to enacting socially useful relations of difference. Iserian play has political implications because it would allow decentered human beings to produce and exchange versions of themselves in a kaleidoscopic social world.

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NOTES

1 Because characterizing the being of human being through the evidence provided by fiction-making is Iser’s ultimate aim, “anthropology” is a better description of his project than “politics” or “sociology” would be. In the lexicon of phenomenology, “anthropology” refers to the attempt to understand human being by examining its concrete, historical particularity as opposed to ontological or metaphysical inquiries which try to take a more direct route to being. My aim in this essay is to show the political implications of the model of human being and cultural production that emerges from Iser’s anthropologically-motivated analysis of fiction-making. As a German intellectual in the tradition of the great phenomenologists, Iser is primarily concerned with making epistemological and existential claims. As an American pluralist in the late twentieth century, I am interested in how these claims can contribute to the reevaluation of the meaning of democracy that recent neoliberal thinkers have undertaken in light of the challenges of postmodernism and

multiculturalism. Although one would expect an anthropology to have a political dimension, the differences between Iser's defining intellectual traditions and my own may make me more inclined to bring to the fore the implications of his thought for reconfiguring democracy.

2 Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, 1993), p. xv; hereafter cited in text as *FI*.

3 Helmuth Plessner, "Soziale Rolle und menschliche Natur," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Günter Dux et al. (Frankfurt, 1985), 10:235, qtd. and tr. in Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p. 80.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York, 1989), p. 103, qtd. in Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p. 237.

5 See Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, tr. Meyer Barash (Glencoe, Ill., 1958).

6 See my essay "Play and Cultural Differences," *Kenyon Review*, 13.1 (Winter 1991), 157–71.

7 See Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash., 1985), pp. 3–15; *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1987); and *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, tr. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, 1984). Also see my analysis of Habermas in "The Politics of Reading," *Culture and the Imagination*, ed. Heide Ziegler (Stuttgart, 1995), pp. 117–45.

8 See Jean-François Lyotard's essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" as well as the monograph with which it is collected, in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984). Also see my essay "The Politics of Reading" for an elaboration of this analysis of Lyotard.

