

SHORT STUDY

What is Reception Study? A Proposal for Terminological Definitions Based on Christina Hoegen-Rohls' Article

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Abstract

A response to the article by Christina Hoegen-Rohls.

Keywords: Wirkungsgeschichte; exegetical practice; philosophical context; reception history

1. Introduction

What do we mean when we talk about reception? As Christina Hoegen-Rohls said in her article, the 76th General Meeting of the SNTS in Leuven was a *kairos* where several interventions were devoted to this theme. But it was also an opportunity to take measure of the variety of perspectives and understandings on this subject: are we speaking about an exegetical method (to be placed next to textual criticism and narrative analysis) or about a hermeneutic posture? Is it another task to be accomplished after having carried out the usual exegetical work, or is it a brand-new way of looking at the texts? This hesitation is quite understandable, as Christina Hoegen-Rohls shows: the philosophical concept elaborated by H.-G. Gadamer is easy to confuse with a series of practices that are ultimately heterogeneous, and that we try to identify—it is the way research works—with a ‘school’ that must make itself known through its method. It also proves the difficulty of naming what we do: shall we speak of *Wirkungsgeschichte*? of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*? of *Rezeptionskritik*? This terminological ambiguity is redoubled in translation. In my language, French, *Wirkungsgeschichte* is rendered as *histoire des effets*, an expression that means nothing, because the word *effets* (effects) is extremely vague. The best French dictionary, the *Trésor de la langue française*, which can be consulted online (www.atilf.fr), provides the following definition: ‘What is produced by a physical or moral cause.’ And the literary quotation exemplifying the definition, from the popular novelist Ponson du Terrail (1829–1871), illustrates perfectly that French has no direct equivalent for *Wirkungsgeschichte*: *Si c’était un effet de votre bonté (...), de me faire seulement donner un peu de vin* (‘Were it an effect of your kindness [...], to make me give only a little wine’). This is a far cry from the untranslatable German term *Wirkung*, which combines the idea of strength, of impetus, with that of influence and mutual dependence.¹ In order to avoid confusion and to know what we are talking about, it is crucial to adopt a series of terminological definitions. The text by Christina Hoegen-Rohls (from now on, CHR) is a solid basis to help us ‘thinking between languages’.

¹ Françoise Balibar, ‘Force/Energy’, in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (ed. Barbara Cassin; trans. Steven Rendall et al.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 343–9.

2. A Fundamental Distinction: A Philosophical Concept vs. Exegetical Practices

A first distinction must be made to avoid any misconception: distinguishing the philosophical concept of reception from the exegetical practices of studying the impact of biblical texts. For Gadamer, understanding is not the encounter between a given text and any human mind that, transcending place and time, would invariably grasp the unique ‘meaning’ of a text. It is therefore not, as Heidegger would say, an existential-ontological event, but also a historical, linguistic and dialectical event. Gadamer explores the issue of ‘historical consciousness’ as being the awareness, not only of the conditions of existential understanding but also of all the factors that have a decisive impact on our situated understanding, which allows us to establish a relation between the living present and the historical past. Drawing heavily on Hegel, Gadamer asserts that we understand a text against the background of a historical horizon produced by the tradition of those who read before us. This is what Gadamer calls *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or more precisely *wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewußtsein* (effective historical consciousness). The consciousness in question is aware that every interpretation is dictated by the historical situation of its interpreter, who is subject to the effects generated by previous textual interpretations.² In other words, every reading of a text is determined by the particular existential, cultural and religious concerns that the reader is experiencing. Interpretation cannot escape from its sociocultural or historical-existential context. This application of a historically situated reading to a text coming from another context constitutes the privileged moment that Gadamer calls the ‘fusion of horizons’: the interpreters, overcoming the temporal distance that separates them from a text and its author, really begin to widen their own interpretative horizon, allowing the hypotheses of the past to be the necessary elements enriching their understanding.³

The concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* is thus a descriptive concept. It expresses the fact that no commentator can escape the force of the interpretations that have preceded him or her and, as Hegel says, cannot jump over his or her time.⁴ It does not, therefore, refer to a knowledge that can be accessed by an appropriate method. Nor is it even an operative concept that can serve as a foundation for such a method. Accordingly, the term *Geschichte* is misleading. It does not seek to found a new part of the academic historical discipline understood as the recounting of past things (*historia rerum gestarum*), it evokes this unfolding of events in time (*res gestæ*). To put it simply, one cannot ‘do the history of reception’. It is therefore appropriate to reserve this concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* for this unravelling of understanding in history that philosophical hermeneutics describes. To do justice to what has just been said, the translation should not be “history of effects” or *histoire des effets*, but undoubtedly *effets de l’histoire* or ‘effects of history’. In this translation, we follow the very relevant remark of Jerome Veith:

Thus, when Gadamer develops his central concept of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, or consciousness of historical effect (often also translated as historically effected consciousness), the effect here denotes not an effect *in* history—as if it

² Consciousness of being affected by history (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall; Continuum Impacts; London/New York: Continuum, 2004) 301; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit Und Methode*, 7th ed. (Uni-Taschenbücher 2115; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 307.

³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301–7; Gadamer, *WM*, 308–10.

⁴ ‘It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age.’ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (trans. T. M. Knox; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1952) 11.

involved tracing an idea's influence over time or some event's causal repercussions like ripple dynamics in a wave chamber—but an effect of history, a genitive in which history itself bears the character of an active and transmissive event.⁵

While it is impossible for the *Wirkungsgeschichte* to be accessible to any investigation, it is quite possible to identify these different *Wirkungen* or effects. Each interpretation, as mentioned above, represents an individual grasp resulting from the fusion of the historical reader's horizon with the text. By analysing these interpretations and comparing them, both the common elements (the expectation horizon of an epoch) and the singularities (the originality of an interpretation) can be revealed.

3. Disciplines Studying Effects in History

According to the corpus of effects studied and according to the hermeneutic posture adopted, several different disciplines can be distinguished. CHR proposes three terms that can be separated into two groups: *Auslegungsgeschichte*, *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, and *Rezeptionskritik*.

Auslegungsgeschichte and *Rezeptionsgeschichte* are two disciplines which intend to write history, in the sense of *historia rerum gestarum*. It seems to me that the divergence between them lies only in the corpus studied. *Auslegungsgeschichte*, as its name indicates, seeks to make the history of interpretations of the text. The model of Ulrich Luz, often invoked (also by CHR), tells us clearly what it is about: to make a history of the way in which the early Christian writers, the mediaeval scholars, the interpreters at the time of the Reformation, the historical turn of the 19th century, etc. read the text. This research field, therefore, belongs to historiography, that is, the history of a discipline. When he delivered the Sprunt Lectures in English at Union Theological Seminary in 1990, Luz spoke of the 'Classical Hermeneutic of the Church.'⁶ To some extent, *Auslegungsgeschichte* is also similar to Gadamer's *Begriffsgeschichte* (concept history),⁷ since it strives to identify alterations in the semantic application of a particular term during history, changes in the understanding of a given character or a specific episode throughout history. The name *Auslegungsgeschichte* (or **history of biblical interpretation, *histoire de l'exégèse biblique***) is therefore used to describe this discipline which works exclusively on interpretations of biblical texts, whose evolution in the course of history it seeks to perceive. If the corpus of this *Auslegungsgeschichte* is broadly clear, its precise boundaries are not. Will it be devoted solely to the exegetes identified by an academic tradition and contained in large collections such as the *Sources chrétiennes*, the *Corpus reformatorum*, the *patrologiæ greca et latina* and the *corpus christianorum*? Will it be possible to invoke poets and people of letters? For example, for the 19th century, should we limit ourselves to Eichhorn or Strauß, without looking at Victor Hugo, Klopstock or William Blake? Is it necessary to include the great preachers Gregory the Great and John Chrysostom, but not Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet or Laurence Sterne? And what about the novelistic allusions, sometimes found in Dostoyevsky or C. S. Lewis?

If *Auslegungsgeschichte* questions the borders of its textual corpus, *Rezeptionsgeschichte* cheerfully crosses the barrier of the media and proposes to study music, painting and sculpture. It thus assumes that an artistic work also constitutes an interpretation which can be compared to the textual interpretation. The works of Walter Melion, who

⁵ Jerome Veith, *Gadamer and the Transmission of History* (Studies in Continental Thought; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015) 3.

⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History. Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 34–8.

⁷ Hans Georg Gadamer, 'Begriffsgeschichte Als Philosophie', *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 14 (1970) 137–51.

develops the concept of visual exegesis, go in this direction.⁸ One might also contend that the same is true of music, which is not merely an illustration of the biblical text, but an interpretation, emphasizing one word rather than another, or constructing emotions through melody and mode. *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (*histoire de la réception biblique*, **biblical reception history**) is therefore defined as a historical discipline that includes non-textual interpretations of the Bible in its scope of study. If it crosses the media frontier, this does not mean that questions of corpus are not pertinent. CHR argues for a conventional demarcation, which she labels *Schöne Künste*. Her distinction between *Dichtkunst*, *darstellende Kunst*, *bildenden Kunst* and *Musik* is based on traditional categories. The definition of the precise boundaries of these *Schöne Künste* is complex because every language and almost every country delineates culture differently. Does it mean what the Germans call *Kultur*, a set of productions that defines the genius of a people and that has affinities with *Bildung* (education) and even *Zivilisation* (civilization)?⁹ Is it what the Anglo-Saxons designate as the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement of a particular people or society, which allows them to precede the noun with a qualifier (other languages are reluctant to do so): pop culture, Afro-American culture, mass culture...? Is it what the French call *culture* or *bonne éducation*, which is an instrument of domination of a privileged class over other classes since it determines participation (and especially non-participation) in 'noble' practices (the opera, the museum...) in opposition to 'popular' ones (the soccer stadium, the rap concert)?¹⁰ In short, will manga and television series, non-European cultural productions, productions of subcultures or microcultures be included in the *Rezeptionsgeschichte*?

CHR finally introduces a third discipline: *Rezeptionskritik*. Once again, this term is not perfectly translatable into another language, since the German *Kritik* recalls the philosopher Immanuel Kant and his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* and designates the use of reason, its rigour and its principles to study a phenomenon. However, the Latin languages from which the term *critique* is borrowed have retained the negative meaning of the Greek word κριτικός. In Italian, French and Spanish, there is no distinction between 'criticism' and 'critique'. A *critique de la réception* is therefore likely to be very unfavourable. English is probably halfway there, since 'critical' can be a synonym for rational or scientific, but at the same time 'a critical commentary of the Bible' implies an opposition to a dogmatic reading. The word 'study' or 'analysis' is maybe better. In reading what CHR means by this *Rezeptionskritik*, one understands that it pursues the same goal as the *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, but without bending to the methodological rules of history: inscription in a chronology, periodization, evolutions, etc. The implicit concept is found in Gadamer: *die Sache*.¹¹ For him, the meaning of the text does not lie in the succession of grasping of it over the centuries, but rather there is a cognitive content, something that is meant to be said, a 'content of the text', that is the *Sache*. It can therefore be assumed that a particularly perceptive individual capture (a great interpreter, a striking work of art) will tell us as much – and perhaps even more – about the text as the patient

⁸ *Imago Exegetica: Visual Images as Exegetical Instruments, 1400-1700*, *Intersections* 33 (ed. Walter S. Melion, James Clifton, and Michel Weemans; Lovis Corinth Colloquium; Leiden: Brill, 2014). See also *The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images* (Emory Studies in Early Christianity 19; ed. Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Melion, and Roy R. Jeal; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017). The expression comes from Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (Cambridge Studies in New Art History and Criticism; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁹ Michel Espagne, 'Bildung, Kultur, Zivilisation', in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (ed. Barbara Cassin; trans. Steven Rendall et al.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 111–19.

¹⁰ Concerning these questions the essential book remains: Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Le Sens commun; Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

¹¹ Jean Grondin, *The Philosophy of Gadamer* (Continental European Philosophy; Chesham: Acumen, 2003) 85–7.

elucidation of the way in which an interpretation has been constituted. In short, there is perhaps as much to learn about John 11 from the analysis and contemplation of Rembrandt's *Resurrection of Lazarus* (c. 1630, Los Angeles County Museum of Art), as from trying to understand how this passage fits into a *Sitz im Leben*. We will therefore call *Rezeptionskritik* (*étude de la réception* or *reception analysis*) the analysis of cultural productions inspired by, influenced by, under the effect of the biblical text without seeking to make it the object of a historical narrative. The difference between *Rezeptionskritik* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte* lies precisely in this relation to history as a narrative of past things (*historia rerum gestarum*). While acknowledging that the studied artifacts are situated in the past (*res gestæ*), *Rezeptionskritik* does not seek to establish chronologies, to perceive reciprocal influences, etc., whereas *Rezeptionsgeschichte* does.

4. An Impossible Undertaking?

Usually, when these three methods (*Auslegungsgeschichte*, *Rezeptionsgeschichte* and *Rezeptionskritik*) are presented to an audience of biblical scholars, the reaction is unanimous: it is an impossible undertaking, you will never be exhaustive. First of all, let us note that this argument would not apply to any other field of historical science, let alone the humanities. Our biblical corpus is extremely reduced, and the documents at our disposal are limited in number so that we can aim at exhaustiveness. It is quite obvious that a subject like 'The Figure of Melchizedek in Second Temple Judaism' can be covered in an exhaustive way: only eight references exist.¹² On the other hand, how can one study 'the figure of Sherlock Holmes in the second half of the 20th century' in an exhaustive manner? One must make choices and establish criteria, and this is exactly what CHR proposes in the last part of her article.

There is no need to repeat here what is perfectly well synthesized by her. Let us simply note the central character of the remark made by CHR:

Die Grunddimension der nicht-auslegungsgeschichtlichen Rezeption [ist] die Veränderung. Art und Weise sowie Ausmaß solcher Veränderung müssen durch das komparatistische Verfahren des Vergleichens ermittelt werden.

The basic dimension of non-interpretive reception [is] change. The nature and extent of such change must be determined by the contrastive process of comparison.

The set of criteria she develops is governed by this remark: any undertaking to study reception is based on a comparison. However, the use of comparison requires the scholar to ask three questions: 1) the legitimacy of the comparison; 2) the scope of the comparison; 3) the relevance of the link between two elements constructed by the comparison. It also requires an answer to a question that runs through the entire end of CHR's article: implicit influence. Is it legitimate to make comparisons with artifacts that do not openly state that they are dependent on biblical texts? For example, can we read a Christian quest in *Lord of the Rings* and is Frodo a Christ-like figure? To what extent can we recognize a visual exegesis of the stories of Gn 1–2 in the multiple appropriations of the *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo? Is David Bowie's ultimate video clip *Lazarus* an exegesis of John 11?

The answer to these questions is decisive, for it makes this analysis of reception possible. Whatever option is taken, it excludes all the others and ends up with a limitation to what is likely to be studied, which will define a corpus of research. The result produced is therefore always partial since it depends on this corpus, but it is solid. It can always be

¹² Gen 14.18–20; Ps 110.4; 11QMelch; He 5.6; 6.20; 7.17; Philo, *Leg All.* III 25–6 §§ 79–82; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.10.2 §180.

completed by other research, just as partial, which will end up giving a less imprecise image of the question. The main interest of the study of the reception of biblical texts lies in this always eminently partial character. It reminds us of the impermanence and relativity of our interpretations and the very limited character of our syntheses. Forbidding by nature any totalizing enterprise, it cures us of any dogmatism.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Cite this article: Burnet R (2023). What is Reception Study? A Proposal for Terminological Definitions Based on Christina Hoegen-Rohls' Article. *New Testament Studies* 69, 271–276. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688523000024>