When I begin a class in fiction or poetry, I always talk for a few minutes about the various purposes of literature: escape, didactic, and interpretive. I tell my students that escape literature is a wonderful way to forget our problems for a while (less dangerous than drugs, alcohol, careless sex, or driving), but that escape literature can be harmful if one expects one's personal life to be as exciting, successful, or romantic as that in escape fiction. As Meg Ryan's friend says to her in *Sleepless in Seattle*, "You don't want to be in love. You want to be in love in a movie." Thus my title, "Excessive Suspension...."

In *The Literary Work of Art* (1931, trans. 1965), Roman Ingarden analyses the layers of meaning he believes exist within a work of fiction. His theories were popularized by René Wellek in *Theory of Literature* (Wellek and Warren). Ingarden identifies four strata.

The first is the sound stratum, which he defines as "the stratum of word sounds and phonetic formations of various orders: the second is "the stratum of units of meaning of various orders and phonetic formations of various orders"; the third includes objects represented in the "world" of the novelist, which he defines as "the stratum of manifold schematized aspects and aspect continua and series" (*Literary Work of Art*, 30); and the fourth includes the stratum of represented objectivities and their vicissitudes or the world as it "is seen from a particular viewpoint." As Ingarden complains in his preface to his second edition, Wellek had erroneously added a fifth layer, that of metaphysical qualities, which include "the tragic, the terrible, [and] the holy." Ingarden argues that this stratum is not inherent in the literary work but may be experienced in the minds of some readers.

Then in 1936 in *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (trans. 1973), Ingarden attempts to analyze the reader's experience while reading. The first two layers match those he found within a
literary work itself: written signs and verbal sounds. He assumes that as a reader sees words on a page, his or her subsequent response is to hear the sound of the word, an assumption that would only be true of lip readers. But on seeing the words, most readers would then decode the meaning of the words. Ingarden does recognize, as do reader-response critics that various people respond to a work in quite different ways. But most of Ingarden's work analyzes the philosophical nature of the reading experience, rather than the experience itself.

My own conclusion is that there are more possible levels of experiences at which a reader can experience a literary work.

Of the phenomenological levels at which readers can experience the literary work, three are essential and each level is dependent on the reader's integrating the previous levels. Both Raymond Jean [Kermer]'s novel *La Lectrice* and Michel Deville's film, which was based on it, show characters experiencing nearly all of these levels. The first level is a confrontation with the words, by seeing them as marks on the page, by hearing them as merely sound as one is read to, or by touching them using braille and merely feeling dots. At this level one may not be able to read them or understand. At this level, infants may first hear a Mother Goose story and be only able to recognize sound, and perhaps rhythm and rhyme. At this level I recently listened to Vietnamese poetry. In *La Lectrice*, all of the listeners focus and comment on the sound of the *lectrice*'s voice, including the husband in the frame story, who says, "You read very well.... You have a very pretty voice."

The second level involves recognizing the words as units of meaning being able to decode the words and the sentences they comprise. We've all watched the delight of a young child who is beginning to learn to read, who, as you drive through town, will repeat "Stop" at every single stop sign or "Coke" at every Coke ad. In *La Lectrice*, Eric's response is reduced to this level of decoding when the *lectrice* asks him if he knows the meaning of "marquetry" and when he asks her "What is the fleece?"

The third level goes beyond decoding individual words and sentences. It involves mentally perceiving the person, object, or action that is represented by a word or phrase. When one hears
or reads the word "cat," one mentally pictures a cat. At this level the reader recognizes what the words and sentences signify, but perceives only that which is specified. When one reads "See Jane. See Jane run," one "sees" Jane and the running, but may not think of Jane's surroundings or world. All of the lectrice's listeners respond at this level. These first three levels are the ones by which we learn about words and how to read when we are children and the ones by which we learn to access a foreign language. These three steps are essential to one's being able to read and understand a text.

The fourth level involves filling in or constructing the whole picture of Jane running-on a sidewalk, by the grass, in front of a white house, etc. (When I talk to my students about this level I say, "A cat ran up the tree" and then ask several of them the size and color of the cat, the kind of tree, etc. Their answers vary greatly because they have filled in different worlds around the cat. At this level, the reader's experience is like looking through a window at a scene or incident. One sees all that is going on, but one doesn't participate in it emotionally.

It is our personal filling in--and usually a vivid filling in--that we do when we read a novel that leads us to be so disappointed when we see a movie based on a novel we have read. In La Lectrice, when Françoise reads the story of the man and wife who visit the street of the prostitutes to the lectrice, the lectrice fills in unnarrated details of the setting and envisions Eric's mother as the wife. Going beyond seeing and filling in that world is the reader's actual "experiencing" of that world. One feels the emotions, excitement, suspense, joy, and sadness of the characters; one feels that one is living in the world depicted in the novel, perhaps as one of the characters. This is like the experience John Barth describes of going through the pages of The Arabian Nights into the world of the Arabian Nights. At this level we even cry or scream in terror. We all know the experience of being startled at the end of a film when the lights go on and discovering we aren't still in Casablanca. And even the wisest among us has sometimes, as the lights go on in a theater at the end of a particularly engaging film, been briefly shocked to experience ourselves as merely ourselves again, after having so totally identified emotionally with one of the characters on the screen. In La Lectrice, the degree to which a story can engross
us is shown when the businessman, whose total focus has been in having sex with the lectrice, uses the lectrice's bare buttocks as a book rest and continues to read, valorizing the reading experience over the real life experience and then lies there continuing to read after the lectrice has moved to the other side of the room. Likewise at the carnival, the lectrice gives her attention to reading rather than to the ride she is on.

There is a sixth level of perceiving the literary work that is not a part of this natural progression: it is what many of us spend our careers doing-analyzing and interpreting a literary work. But occasionally, after reading or seeing a work of fiction, we remain in that fictional or cinematic world long after the book is closed or the theatre lights go on. And I have to admit that I refused to take a shower or even a bath for several days after seeing Psycho: At first I could only take a sponge bath in the sink. And then I could only sit in the bathtub and bathe, but I couldn't draw the shower curtain or turn the shower on. That experience of remaining in the fictional world after the book is closed is what interests me about the film La Lectrice.

Today, I am interested in what can be the dangers of believing in escape fiction, because-admit it now-each of us has experienced, even if only as naive children, a response that goes far beyond any reasonable "suspension of disbelief" or "reasonable response" to a work of literature. It is the experience a little girl who, after have had Cinderella read to her or after seeing the film believes that she has become Cinderella, dressing up like Cindy and acting out Cindy's life. Little boys may become Spider Man or a Ninja Turtle or Harry Potter. This excessive suspension of disbelief is demonstrated vividly in Raymond Jean's La Lectrice. In La Lectrice, the heroine begins to read aloud to her husband, Phillippe. She reads a novel, also entitled La Lectrice, and notices that she and the heroine share certain qualities

In the embedded novel, Marie-Constance decides to become a professional reader who reads aloud to individuals who cannot or do not want to read to themselves. Each of these people's lives is in some way incomplete or unfulfilled. Each of these characters has an almost desperate need to experience the written word.

The lectrice's first customer/listener is a young adolescent boy who is confined to his
wheelchair and his home with an overly protective mother. He yearns to hear of wider experience and symbolically gives most of what he hears sexual implications. He even wants to get a cat after reading Baudelaire's "Les Chats."

The second listener is an elderly, bedridden, Hungarian expatriot whose life revolved around the communist revolution. To re-experience the excitement of her youth, she hungers to hear the works of Marx and Lenin. Showing that she has merged her memories of own history with what she has read, she recounts an episode about the belle of an aristocratic ball from *War and Peace*, as if she had experienced it herself. Other listeners include a stressed-out, sex-deprived businessman, and a child, Chlorinde, whose mother works, and an elderly lecher who wants to hear pornography.

In each case, hearing what they are interested in read to them not only amuses them, but affects their lives after the reading session is over. The young adolescent experiences sexual arousal in the presence of the *lectrice*, the elderly aristocrat gets up from her bed, dresses, and even goes out and participates in street protest. The businessman has sex with the *lectrice*. And the *lectrice* takes the little girl out of the house to enjoy a nearby street carnival. It is particularly interesting that the *lectrice*, who has no initial interest in communism, revolutionaries, and sex with strangers, begins acting out with her listeners whatever their fantasies are. At first she had been a mere conduit of the reading process, but she begins to act out in real life the activities about which she has been reading. She pulls up her skirt for Eric, joins Madame la General in the protest in the street, has sex with the businessman, and takes the little girl, Chlorinde, on an adventure outdoors after reading of Alice's outdoor adventures in Wonderland. Even people associated with the person read to are changed. Eric's mother buys him a book of love poems, Chlorinde's mother lets her wear her jewelry, and Madame Generale's maid begins to sunbathe and dress prettily, gits rid of her spiders, and leaves Arles to travel.

In each case, not only is the reader's real life changed by the reading experience, but so is the *lectrice's* life, because she shares their real-life adventures with them. But she refuses some
experiences. In both the novel and the film, she had read some pornographic DeSade to the old judge. But when she returns a second time and finds that she is expected to read to him and some of his friends, she refuses to read, because to do so would be to participate in their lechery. In the novel, that episode leads her to decide to give up reading and again become unemployed.

The film emphasizes that constructing one's life on the basis of a fictional world not only effects the lectrice in the embedded novel, it also effects the life of the woman in the frame who is reading the embedded novel to her husband. When she has read the last page of the novel she decides that she herself will become a lectrice. She says, I read very well. I have a lovely voice. I'm going to place an ad. Many people can't read-those who are too old, too young, too sad, or too lonely. I'm not through yet! Thus the frame story of the film emphasizes that one's life is inevitably changed by what one reads. And the implication of the frame story is that we, who see the film, La Lectrice, will likewise be changed by the viewing of it. The story suggests that "You are what you read." And as much as I enjoy La Lectrice, as pure entertainment, I think I must also recognize that it is a deadly serious cautionary tale. The novel may lead us to think about the fiction each of us as individuals read and view and how those fictions shape us. La Lectrice is a testimony to the power a written text may have-that even a single reading experience may permanently change a reader's life. But, most of all, La Lectrice is great fun. But, as the policeman cautions the lectrice, "Reading is fine, but look where it leads. When you read a book, anything can happen."

Works Cited
