

Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

What professional reading strategies are there?

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Apart from the two new lay reading strategies that we've had a brief look at so far, social reading and hyper reading, this course will also introduce you, or make you better acquainted with four professional reading strategies in the digital age. By professional I mean that they're mostly used by professionals, in this case, literary scholars. Two of these professional reading strategies, historical contextualisation and close reading have been practiced for decades, and are well established in the scholarly community. The other two, distant reading and surface reading, are more recently developed strategies, whose practitioners are still staking out their claims in the marketplace of ideas. Let's begin with historical contextualisation.

To many readers of literature, it makes eminent sense to place literary texts in their historical context. And indeed, it makes a lot of sense to ask ourselves how a novel, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, how these novels relate to their time. How do these novels reflect on, negotiate, and intervene in some of the social and political debates of their time, slavery in Harriet Beecher Stowe's case, the worries of the contemporary American middle class in Franzen's case? But historical contextualisation also means something in addition. It also means placing texts in their literary-historical context.

Thus, for instance, we could ask ourselves to what extent Harriet Beecher Stowe draws on earlier sentimental formulae of writing to engage her readers' sympathy with the plight of slaves. And with respect to Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, we could ask ourselves, to what extent it represents a return to 19th century realist forms of writing, such as that of the Brontë Sisters or Charles Dickens. Now, like historical contextualisation, close reading is part of the core business of literary scholars, but it works in very different ways. Close readers deliberately ignore all historical, social, political, and biographical contexts to focus on the text itself. Close readers seek to do justice to the singular literary text itself, by zooming in on the words on the page.

Close reading is a particularly precise form of reading that seeks to tease out all the subtleties of the literary forms, and devices, and structures that make up a poem, a play, or a novel.



Distant reading is a fairly recent coinage. It was introduced by the Italian scholar Franco Moretti. And it's formulated in direct opposition to close reading. The name already implies that. Whereas close readers focus on single individual literary texts, distant readers survey, analyse, and describe hundreds, even thousands of literary texts to identify general patterns and large scale historical developments across centuries and national borders. And in doing that, distant readers often draw on the methods of the natural and the social sciences. And some of their most interesting outputs are not interpretations of literary texts, but visualisations such as graphs, maps, trees.

Like distant reading, surface reading is a fairly new professional reading strategy. And like distant readers, surface readers are not interested in interpreting literary texts. Surface readers focus on a variety of things, but one of the most interesting things they focus on is the materiality of books, the stuff that books are made of. For surface readers, it not only makes a great difference, whether we're reading a print book or an e-book. It also makes a great difference, whether we're reading, say, a Shakespeare play in a folio edition, a leather bound first edition, a 21st century cheap reprint, a hardback, a paperback, whether we read any play, novel, or poetry collection in whatever kind of form, in whatever kind of materiality.

Surface readers claim that the material and haptic qualities of books, how they look, how they feel in our hands, exert a considerable influence on our reading experience. So these are the four professional reading strategies we'll have a good look at in our course. Next week, we'll start with close reading.