



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

Video transcript

What are hyper reading and social reading?

PHILIPP SCHWEIGHAUSER:

In the previous activity, we've had a look at some of the media we use for reading literature in the digital age: e-book readers, tablets, smartphones, and would you know it, print books. For the remainder of this week, I want to look at some of the strategies we use for reading literature in the digital age. And precisely this will be the main focus of this course. Each week, we'll have a look at one or two different strategies for reading literature in the digital age. And along the way, we'll encounter close reading, hyper reading, social reading, distant reading, historical contextualisation, and surface reading.

One of the ways of grouping the different reading strategies is to say that while some of them are used on a daily basis by a vast number of people, others are practiced by a much smaller group of professionals called literary scholars. In other words, we can distinguish between lay reading strategies and professional reading strategies in the digital age. In this video, I want to briefly introduce you to the two lay reading strategies that we'll consider in this course in Week 3: hyper reading and social reading. Let's start with hyper reading. Hyper reading is clearly the much more widespread activity than social reading. You and I are avid hyper readers. Whenever we look up a phrase or a word on the world wide web, whenever we read emails, whenever we check up on the changed status of a Facebook friend or Facebook ex-girlfriend, whenever we do any of these things, we are engaging in hyper reading. Hyper reading usually takes place online and in front of a computer screen. The major tool that hyper readers engage with is hyperlinks that allow us to move rapidly from texts to other texts, to images and sounds.

Thus, unlike the linear reading that a print novel demands from us - we tend to read it from beginning to end - hyper reading is a non-linear reading strategy that can take us into multiple directions which cannot be foreseen at the beginning of the reading process. Now, for all of us, hyper reading has become such a habitual, everyday practice that we hardly realise what we're doing anymore. Thus, apart from trying to define hyper reading, we should try to describe as accurately as possible the various strategies we use when we read hypertext. In Week 3, we'll have a good look at 10 hyper reading strategies identified by James Sosnoski and Katherine Hayles.



For now, let me just sketch two of those strategies. The first is filtering. We do filtering whenever we use a search engine and filter the megatext of the world wide web for those parts in it that are most relevant to our concerns.

The second hyper reading strategy that I want to mention now is juxtaposing. In juxtaposing, we open two computer windows and place them side by side - say an internet browser and a word-processing program - to cut text from the website and paste it into a Word document. Or we could compare the contents of two windows, and so on. Now, as I said, filtering and juxtaposing are but two of the 10 hyper reading strategies that you and I will have a look at in Week 3.

But one of the questions we can ask ourselves about all of these new reading strategies is this: what are their costs and what are their benefits? Of course, hyper reading especially is an extremely efficient and very economical way of reading, but some say that hyper readers lose the ability to gain a deep understanding of texts. And some scientists have even argued that frequent and prolonged exposure to hyper reading changes the neuronal networks in our brains for the worse.

Now, I'm sure that the second lay reading strategy that I will talk about is much less familiar to most of you compared to hyper reading. I'm talking about social reading. Social reading is a collaborative form of online reading in which several readers, sometimes hundreds, read the same texts, post comments on them, and respond to other comments. Glose is a quite popular commercial social reading website.

The Golden Notebook Project is a sophisticated example of a social reading site. In the Golden Notebook Project, seven women share their reading experience of one novel: British writer Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*. And some of the questions we can ask ourselves about these social reading sites are these: does the collaborative practice of social reading truly enhance our understanding of literary texts? Does social reading allow for a free exchange of equals? And will social reading ever replace the solitary reading that we're all used to? I'm much looking forward to discussing with you these and other questions about the two new lay reading practices of social reading and hyper reading.