

Narratives of literature in Print and Cyberspace:

A New Comparative Horizon

Annika Olsson, Center for Gender Studies, Stockholm University, Sweden

Read a Book, clean version, by Bomani D,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgcZNpmOKuk&feature=related>

”Some books are to be tasted, other to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.”

Francis Bacon, 1605

This paper will focus on the reading of literature and how the experience of reading is narrated in print and in cyberspace (You Tube).¹ Using narratives on reading from print and from You Tube I will argue that digital archives like You Tube open up possibilities to new comparative horizons that are invaluable to our knowledge about the uses of literature in our contemporary societies but also to our understandings of the concept of literature.² Narratives on literature, reading and books on You Tube, can function as a *verfremdungseffect* – helping us and making us see what is missing in our understanding of literature and in the dominant discourses of literature and reading.

Take a look at the helpdesk for reading books:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4IHJfnTrWg>

Or How to Read a Book

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hmzRB6Zln0&feature=related>

This differentiation, or richness, or variety of readings and functions and understandings of literature is the starting point of Rita Felski in her *Uses of Literature* (2008) as well as mine.

¹ This is a draft – a first version of what is becoming an article. I have focused on the narratives on You Tube.

² I am not going to focus on translated literature, as I was talking about in my abstract, but on literature and reading in general. This also means that the concepts space and place are not as essential as they would have been in a paper talking about translated literature.

She argues that we as professional readers also must start to discuss and analyze this wide spectrum of uses of literature and not least the uses of literature that have been looked upon with a suspicious eye for different reasons. Many of these uses are related to questions of gender, class and race/ethnicity – to questions of power.³ Inspired by Rita Felski I will try and use her four modes of textual engagement : recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock, to analyse and discuss how narratives on You Tube is a new and important comparative horizon for our understanding of literature and reading.

Recognition

The first mode of textual engagement Rita Felski is discussing is recognition. She starts of the chapter by asking the basic question: what does it mean to recognize oneself in a book?

(Of course then you also have to ask yourself what it means to not recognize yourself in a book, compare with Toni Morison: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUr_XoMCPFA)

Giving the reader many different examples of what it could mean Felski underlines that recognition is paradoxical – “brings together likeness and difference in one fell swoop” (Felski 2008, p.25). I am reading something and are suddenly seeing myself in the text, seeing myself from a different angle, are being addressed by the text, are seeing something that are not me in the text. This function of literature is not a new one but has become more and more important for us since we are living in an era where selfhood are based on being a self reflexive individual constantly exploring what it means to be a person – and not least to be Me. (Compare to Proust: “every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self”, Felski p. 26)

Recognition is about affirmation – but also about self scrutiny. It is joyful but also painful. It is about self intensification and about self extension. “Recognition is about knowing, but also about the limits of knowing and knowability, and about how self-perception is mediated by the other, and the perception of otherness by the self.” (Felski 2008. p 49)

³ There are a huge number of books discussing the use of reading, books and literature: see for example J. Radway *Reading the Romance. Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1984), M. C Nussbaum *Love's Knowledge* (1990), *Poetic Justice* (1995), J. Carey *What good are the arts?* (2005), S. Keen *Empathy and the Novel* (2007).

Going back to my initial examples – what do these different narratives tell us about recognition in relation to literature and reading? And compare these examples with the documentary from the 50th anniversary of the Nobel ceremonies, *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1950* – another kind of recognition related to literature:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rP5v5ixrMU0&feature=related>

And this video about the Nobel Prize: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auX5-j8uhcI>

Enchantment

Felski's second mode of textual engagement is enchantment. This mode is probably the most problematic one from an academic point of view since proper reading for a professional reader has a long story of being quite the opposite: an activity not involving the human body or feelings at all. To be intoxicated by reading and to give yourself up, as Felski is talking about, have as we all know been described as a wrong kind of reading by people who does not know what is good for them.

The classic example is of course, the adventures of Don Quixote:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cq6CH3lQdzw>

or *Madame Bovary*:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cvXbHwpg90>

or Pulp Fiction

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oymxDACLhZs>.

So we have to ask ourselves: What kind of knowledge does engaged reading produce? What happens when we become intoxicated? Why are all these feelings – modes depicted as being dangerous and harmful? What readers are being portrayed as good readers and what readers are not? As Janice A. Radway has pointed out, reading is not eating, which is very important to remember when you are discussing uses of literature.⁴ These questions are, I would argue, much more difficult to avoid when using narratives from cyber space. It becomes so obvious that literature can not be detached from the world, but is related to bodies and emotions.

⁴ J. A. Radway, "Reading is not eating: Mass-produced literature and the theoretical, methodological, and political consequences of a metaphor", [Publishing Research Quarterly, Volume 2, Number 3 / September, 1986](#), also see L. Price, "You are what you read", *New York Times* December 23 2007.

When Allen Ginsburg sings father Death Blues: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-pmFZJtS4E>

or Sylvia Plath reads Daddy:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hHjctqSBwM> the sensation of literature is something completely different from when you read Ginsburg or Plath by yourself, alone and in silence.

Knowledge and shock

The third mode of textual engagement is knowledge, which is a traditional and highly accepted and recommended use of literature.⁵ Literature makes us see things, helps us understand and make sense of the world. It fosters us into human beings.

The art of reading: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIL980jypc4&feature=related>

Virginia Woolf: Words fail me: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umrruuoNKXU>

Choosing Books and Reading aloud to children:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw4ebg0jV4o>

The forth mode of textual engagement reminds us that books and literature can and have to be disturbing and shocking as well.

Stephen King promises and uses terror and fear for different kinds of purposes:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JC7WGD8PaP4>

While Taslima Nasrin being attacked

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PqfFyhW__4

and demonstrations against Taslima Nasrin on the streets of Calcutta reminds us that writing and literature is not an innocent activity

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uo2fefUgkw&NR=1>

You Tube as a *evidentia* and *verfremdungseffect*

What I have wanted to do in this paper is to focus on the possibilities that narratives in cyberspace on literature has given us as readers, researchers and teachers. I want to argue that these different kinds of narratives springing from different kinds of sources not only function as a vital source of knowledge on literature and reading, but that they also make up a totally new kind of discourse, or discourses. The narratives can be seen as *evidentia* that function as a sort of *verfremdungseffect*. They challenge the dominant and traditional discourses on

⁵ See for example H. Bloom, *How to read and why* (2000).

literature and reading – not reading and literature in itself – in ways that are very useful for literature and for reading:

Mr Bean – Library: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyDY0hiMZy8>