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The Re-mediation of the Reading Experience

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Introduction

An increasing part of our daily lives is spent staring at screens. ‘Some of them, like cinema screens, are in public spaces while others are part of our privacy’ (Huhtamo, 2004). Nevertheless, the devices they introduce have grown to be the way in which we perceive and coexist with the world that surround us. ‘We are the society of a screen’ (Lev Manovich, 1995). We use screens to communicate with people we see in our everyday life in the same way we do with strangers across the country, and to access information on practicalities like our bank balances or an email from work. However, one of the main fuels of the screen culture today comes from the entertainment industry –how we decide to spend our leisure time is now fully adhered to a screen as a medium. The trend (or is it a need?) to materialize every human activity through a screen is rapidly changing human practices. Doing sports, dancing, writing, reading, all are activities whose screen-presented variation is quickly gaining a spot on its own. This asseveration does not mean that the physical engagement in activities of the sort is ceasing, but it is pivotal that we look at the exponential changes human practices are taking based on technology, to have a better understanding of what is we are seeking for in these developing means of communication.

The reading practices have been experiencing some changes in their core. Book mediation has been involved in several dilemmas since the advent of the internet and the digitized word. Some predictions towards the future of the printed book are catastrophic while others neglect to see the beneficial attributes of the digital format. The word out there is not final yet, it cannot be; but what is lacking is a remembrance of both phenomena. If these changes are radical or an organic development of the book itself, it is yet to be determined. I allow myself to rely on the physical and metaphorical materiality of the book as a screen to establish certain parallelisms between the book as a medium and the traditional screen as seen in our everyday devices. Perhaps it is possible then to reduce the gap between these two understandings of a screen, to ultimately find out if the book presented on a screen is indeed a revolutionary take of its form, or if, on the other hand, we are facing a sort of evolution of it.

As Anna Mangen points out, there is a substantial amount of research regarding the cognitive aspect of digital reading; “By comparison, we know far less about specifically emotional aspects of literary reading and how these may be affected by digitization. The possibility that digitization might also affect the reading of linear, sequential texts is rarely acknowledged” (Nakamura 2013: 3).

It is precisely a linear-text kind of reading what Goodreads.com presents to its users, with a representation of text that is as linked with the emotional as it is with the ergonomic aspects of the printed book’s reading experience; awarding a more significant weight to the establishment of the emotional bond through the social media aspect. In “Words with friends” Socially Networked Reading on Goodreads, Lisa Nakamura constructs a positive discourse towards the internet, describing it as “the largest social network site for readers, with over six million users, [that] does everything that Vinh (Khoi Vin–design director of The New York Times) says digital-reading technologies need to do and more (Mangen 2016: 247)”.

The aim of my research is to describe how Goodreads.com readapts the emotional aspect of literary reading through the digital media. With this paper, I intend to prove that the digital materiality of the phenomenal book in Goodreads.com is designed as a continuation of the sensorial and visual specificity of the printed book, and to describe how the social media aspect of Goodreads.com, might permeate the futility of the material adaption from print to digital format in the user’s emotional response to the literary reading in the platform. Using a mixture of social and media theory focused on the act of reading, ten conclusions will be taken out of the

theoretical framework, using the grounded theory methodology, to be represented in the form of questions in an interview to five participants. With the interpretation of the data, I will try to depict the combined experience of reading literature on a web platform as well as the reading and social implications of being immerse in a social media device as a reader.

I. The book as physical and phenomenal

1.1 The physical book as an interface

The book, in its physical form, has an intimate relationship with the reader. If the final aim of this research is to try to grasp how new digital media platforms, like Goodreads, are in a quest to readapt this materiality to establish an emotional and practical connections with new users, we must first understand the physical book as the presential, sensual experience conveyed in a codex form, the phenomenal book as the content, and the literary construction that, regardless the media is presented through, it is to prevail.

To David Miall, however, there seems to be an endangerment of the literary product itself by it being remediated into the digital format. He states:

It is far from clear whether the repurposing of literature for the electronic medium can continue to offer the same experience... Thus, it becomes more urgent to understand what literary reading is – what role it plays in the ecology of human culture and the health of individuals – before it is reconfigured or disappears in the face of new forms of electronic literacy (Mial, 2003).

While he stresses the importance of properly studying the role that literary reading continues to play today – whether it be a catalyser for social adequacy or empathy, or a cognitive enabler–, and hence, the importance of the reading experience in all its forms, he seems to provide a one-way channel conception of what literature is. In my personal view, literature is deeply rooted to our notion of the physical book, but with the phenomenal book, the construction of the narrative world is secured in our ever-changing human practices.

The practice of reading as we know it, involves the advent and posterior use of new technologies. “Reading is, fundamentally, human-technology interaction. This, in turn, warrants acknowledging the role of affordances of various reading devices” (Mangen 2016: 244). The implementation of the technology of print marked in such an iconic manner our conception of the book that it is easy to overlook its function as an interface (Mangen 2016: 246). The passing from the scroll to the codex exemplifies the reasoning behind the move of media. The scroll was the chosen interface to display high notions related only to religion, law, and literature in the classical world whereas the regarded wax-wooden covered tablets were for the mundane, which were also disposable. The use of the codex (bundled tablets) spread with Christianity, as Christians found a cheap, compact, and highly sharable format in it, or “information technology”. However, practicality was not the only input of the codex to the reading experience. Deeply attained to what we now seek when reading physical books, what the codex offered was the possibility of a non-linear reading (Grossman, 2011). Through non-linear reading, we are able to quickly turn pages to get ahead on the content, to mark one page and simultaneously another so we sustain a dual reading, or to arbitrarily choose a space –physical and metaphorical– to focus our gaze on. The scroll seems to be coming back in the digital form, accompanied by the limitation of linear reading. While technology is often associated to mobility –as web users are able to jump from one text to another by a single click– e-books follow the scroll functionality, a reminiscence that is present even in some of the nomenclatures of the media, as ‘scroll-up and down’ shows.

1.2 The digitization of the physical book

Following this first barrier of the digital book, that of the impossibility, or rather, the problematic experience of the non-linear reading, we must now deconstruct the remaining manifestations of its materiality. One factor that makes physicality deeply related with emotional attachment is the feeling of possession. A possession that might be only partially fulfilled by the digital file, which, much like the codex back in the day, provides a seductive practicality to its use, but that must overcome in this very attribute its biggest defamer; digital file is effortlessly organized and stored, however, this same materiality makes it appear almost as a disposable unit, that we can always regain within a blink of an eye, in contrast to the monetary and personal loss the damaging of a physical book might inflict to us. Even if this asseveration does not hold true, it reflects our general attitude towards the digital file; all due to its intangible physicality. “I have them [digital files], but I cannot own them” (Mangen 2016: 519).

To actively cover the remediation of the physical to the digital, we must set apart three basic aspects through which the physical book is entangled to our practices and, by that end, to our emotions.

Hypertextuality

It is necessary to address the most basic distinction between the printed book, in contrast to its digital expression. “Print...situates utterance and thought on a surface disengaged from everything else” (Ong, 2002). In opposition to this, the screen offers what the Microsoft executive Linda Stone popularised as “continual partial attention” to the reader, a syndrome that consists of the reader’s surrender to the external/internal distractions present on the media, such as web navigation, message sending, and, quite simply, any other interaction a click or a touch away provides (Rose 2011, 520).

This aspect of the screen sets a core element of the digital technologies: hypertextuality. While this feature comes at different degrees and extents – e-books often aim to reproduce a clean version of the printed book–, it certainly constitutes an inherent attribute of the screen media. Alexandra Saemmer comments:

“Whereas in classical rhetoric the reader has to content himself with the suggestion of a whole, in the digital medium the reader has access to the “whole” by activating a hypertext link” (Saemmer 2010).

That which in the past was linked by the physical connections the reader would have to manifest around the book, it is now conveniently displayed on the digital format. Intertextuality is a digital play out that serves as an access to another section of the library, as a notebook, as a pencil to highlight the text; the reader is confronted with the steadiness of discovering more and more virtual realities within the same digital page.

The Page

In the words of Andrew Pipers:

“The page is the atom of the book, its most basic building block. But the page is also a frame, that which marks a boundary [...] The first essential aspect of the digital is the impossibility to turn the page. In the early digital stages, the representation of mobile types took the form of the button, but with time we are slowly getting rid of it. Buttons convert human motion into an electrical effect. But buttons also resist. Perhaps is for this reason that we are moving away from the world of the button to that of the touch screen. From the ugly three-dimensionality of the mechanical apparatus we ascend to the fantasy of existing in only two dimensions” (Piper 2012).

It would seem the bet is to keep ascending until that single page would completely take the form of the virtual one. The aim of the screens has always been to be forgotten about, to represent without being represented. The book as portrayed on a screen has the same goal, to become cleaner and cleaner, until one would get into the third dimension without noticing its intervention. However, it is precisely the sensorial aspect of this intervention what most strikingly defines the reading experience. To ‘turn the page’ is an iconic notion by itself. There is an anticipation to the turn of the page that cannot be followed by the ‘scroll down’ system. As Ellen Rose notes:

“The page is sensuous--I can touch it, smell it and hear it rustling when I turn it. Without the materiality of the page, I am left with only the text qua text” (Rose 2011: 518).

It seems though that the digital page is simultaneously doing its self-nurturing with the reading practices and putting them on display for the reader; Generic interfaces –as well as the interfaces serving as digital pages– often follow the desktop metaphor.

Notes and progress

In the deconstruction of what they call “narrative motors” in the digital age, Philip Bootz and Sandy Baldwin point in regards of the desktop metaphor:

We can find documents, folders, a recycle bin, etc. We can suspect that those who designed such interfaces (the keyboard as a physical interface, the “desk-top” as a logical interface) could not or would not leave the traditional ways of working behind and producing and thus reducing the computer’s possibilities to a rather unstable mimic of tools that already existed (Bootz, Baldwin 2010).

The digitization of the physical book does its best at remediating its materiality by adding highlighting options, summary or comments sections on following interfaces, but none of these options are yet able to break the division between the screen and the reader. There is a feeling that the screen is unattainable, unreachable in its immaterial construction. While we have the certainty of the physical device in our touch or vision senses, our interaction is only reciprocal by activating predetermined algorithms of functioning, a tangible and personal driven gesture cannot affect the literary content of a screen. Ellen Rose comments that “to comprehend something fully is to take ownership of it”, an action she cannot physically fulfil on a screen (Rose 2011: 518).

On a more practical level, the progress marked on the physical book is more recognizable than the one in a digital format. In an empirical research by Anne Mangen, students were handed the same copy of a non-fiction and a fiction story in booklet and iPad formats. The findings of the research show that readers in the iPad scenario had a “poorer grasp of the text length.” She adds: “In addition, we obtained a medium main effect for the measure of medium awkwardness, in that readers in the iPad non-fiction condition reported feeling the holding and manipulation of the medium as more awkward during reading, than readers in the booklet condition” (Mangen 2016: 253).

The implementation of a new technology conveys a gradual adaptation to the media. However, in regards of reading practices, where the schemes to define literary reading are almost indistinguishably connected to the printed book, the materiality of the media becomes crucial to the reader experience and its further evolution to other channels of displayed literature.

II. The impossibility of Reading

In the previous chapter, the impossibilities that are inherent to the materiality of the phenomenal book as adapted to new media were outlined. As Galloway explains, ‘technical transcoding’ coexists with the new media in a ‘high level of ideological fetishism and misrecognition’; Galloway goes as far as to ask the reader if that in itself would not constitute the definition of every emerging technology (2012: 60). He also wonders if the fetishist logic would be the proper way to describe it, or if an allegory would be more accurate. In this new dilemma, he makes an interesting annotation, explaining that in Marx terms, a fetish “comes from the expressive and figurative logic of representation – how value appears in the form of something that it isn’t” (Galloway, 2012: 60).

The notion that some things take value in the representation of what they essentially are not, will lead us to explain the digital book’s urge to represent the printed one, and therefore, to determine all the factors that are in play for the sentimental attachment of the book as technology. Whether we are talking about a fetishism or an allegory, the consequences of this separation –between the printed and the digital book– go from the emotional to the tangible sphere, and not the other way around. Furthermore, another type of impossibility, one that is directly attained to the medium, needs to be addressed. Galloway explains how for T.J. Clark “the entire world is one of proximity” (Galloway, 2012: 10).

This is Stanley Cavell’s assessment too when, in the *World Viewed*, following Michael Fried’s 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood”, he likens painting to a certain desire for presence. Painting assembles a space...But painting offers a road down which one might travel to ascertain a certain quality shared by painting, photography, film, and a number of other art forms. It is the desire that the world be brought near to us (Galloway, 2012: 10).

Galloway continues to expose how in every human attempt to dissolve the gap between the world and us, we must dissolve ourselves with it. ‘The self becomes a viewing self, and the world becomes a world view’ (Galloway, 2012: 11). This paradoxical view of the world acts both as a bridge and as an alienator to the world, to the self, and to the social aspect of the media user, and consequently, to the reader.

2.1 The Construction of the Self

The practice of reading has been through multiple implications in the course of history. The imagery of reading often depicts ‘people holding or gazing at the mystery of an open book’

(Furedi, 2015: 52). As Furedi notes, this type of images has reinforced the act of reading as a spiritual and ethical endeavour, for which the books serve as a medium (2015: 52). 'Ever since the eighteenth century, which after all invented the idea of sentimentality, reading has been integral to our sense of both personal and political development' (Piper, 2012: xii). But previous to this sentimentality towards reading, there was, as Piper points out, a self-cultivating notion of reading that is still present to this day. The figure of St. Augustine was essential to the construction of this notion, as his path of conversion was also one of cultivation of self-identity. 'St. Augustine emerged in the Middle Ages as the idealized personification of the Reader' (Furedi, 2015: 46). While St. Augustine might have been the cornerstone to the practice of self-knowledge through reading, it seems to be a natural disposition to internalize the text. As Furedi notes about David Olson's study of the development of reading and writing on medieval times, 'meaning was as much an accomplishment of feeling and intuiting as it was of exercising the capacity to reason. It was the emotional impact of words and texts, and the insights and visions they stimulated, that provided some of the spiritual resources for interpretative reading' (Furedi, 2015: 49). The personification of the Reader was a constant during the Renaissance, when writers would perform this role in 'veneration for the written text' as part of a life focused on morality (Furedi, 2015: 54). There are other central figures that can help us understand the place of the Reader. The dream, for example, of the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, to put "the entire world in a single book" (qtd. in Piper, 2012: 156) is one that is in correspondence with the times he was living in, as the nineteenth century 'gave birth to our current obsession with books', especially to the contemporary 'investment in books as objects' (Piper, 2012: 156). Another illustrative example of the emotional bond of the book as an object started to establish with the reader can be found in the figure of De Bury, Bishop of Durham:

De Bury personified the book-lover of the late Middle Ages. Philobiblion says very little about De Bury's actual experience of reading: his real interest is evidently the collection of books rather than their study...De Bury's representation of books as the love-object of his semi-sacred passion resonated with a cultural imagination that regarded them as symbols of prestige and cultural status. By presenting its author as the lover of books, Philobiblion offers an early example of the eagerness with which some sought to cultivate a highly-respected identity through their possessions and relationship with books...The presentation of the self through the book was perceived as a medium through which individuals could elevate themselves and legitimize their persona with cultural capital (Furedi, 2015: 55).

However, the notion that personal legitimization is achieved through cultural, and specifically, literal devotion was, paradoxically, catalysed by the regulation of the literacy work. As it was mentioned before, the practice of reading has been under the lens of several interpretations, expectations, and fears. Socrates is famously the first historic figure to inflict a caution stigma upon the act of reading, which danger resided in the mechanical structure that gives form to the text- that is, writing. Socrates called writing a *pharmakon* -Greek word for 'drug'- and condemned reading as its only cure, one that could easily take the form of a poison in the wrong hands. In Socrates' perception, the written word was not meant to be read by everyone, and it was precisely that distinction between readers what constituted the danger of reading (Furedi, 2015: 3). Furedi extrapolates the Socrates notion to the present stating that, although Socrates' prohibitive tactics towards reading would sound outrageous in the present, inclusive democratic public culture, if we are to look closely, we will be able to still see the traces of Socrates' fears; The public is often portrayed as a 'powerless victim' of mass media, which now includes the book culture (Furedi, 2015: 4). The problem does not only reside in the adequacy of the reader, but in the proliferation of literacy, which demanded the inclusion of a regulatory state in matters of reading, a sort of authority to provide 'moralistic advice' to the reader, from ancient times to the

present. (Furedi, 2015: 5) The self-awareness in the reader –celebrated by writers as Milton’s in his *Paradise Lost*, dedicated to the ‘fit’ reader, or De Montaigne’s invitation to the reader to become the subject (Furedi, 2015: 66) – re-directed the judgement of the text towards the self, and less towards the authority, a transition that was only possible with the advent of the printing system (Furedi, 2015: 61).

The ‘awake’ reader has since then taken a pivotal role in book culture, fostered by a dialectical relationship with the figures of reading authority. Jim Collins comments on the character of Laura in Michael Cunningham’s *The Hours*:

Laura, as the incessantly reading suburban housewife, shares the same rarefied sensibility as the great Author and New York literary editor. Reading is as formative and transformative for Laura, the amateur reader, as writing and editing are for the professional literary types—the sensitivity of the reading makes it coequal with the sophisticated production of these words (Collins, 2010: 42).

Collins goes on stating that a handful, or rather, a handful of hundreds of thousands of Laura Browns are being targeted by the contemporary book culture, where connections based on emotion and ‘taste’ are the definitive factors for the interconnection of readers. The construction of ‘taste’ in the reader is deeply intertwined with the construction of the ‘self’. ‘People do not simply read’ says Furedi (2015: 159). People approach reading in the same manner their social groups around them have done before; Consequently, taste and practice are part of a community set of values, that allow the Reader to emit judgments of value in regards to the reading activity as such (Furedi, 2015: 159).

Since the advent of digitization, the tension between readers and the reading ‘authorities’ has come to a point in which, as it happened before with the shift to the printing technology, the Reader is re-gaining yet another form of emancipation. ‘...Buying the book is buying into the authority of an evaluative system that can no longer be trusted when it comes to the pleasures of reading’ (Collins, 2010: 40). Collins directly blames the systematization of culture in terms of capitalism, and the perception of the reader as a consumer target first and foremost, while raising a question impossible to ignore in the present cultural panorama: if the Reader cannot trust authorities like the *New York Times* any longer, who should they turn to? (Collins, 2010: 40). The question seems to be, to themselves; More specifically, to the community they are part of.

2.2 The Construction of the Social

The community, as described by Collins, ‘is not just an audience...but a set of interconnections in which the desire for a certain kind of reading pleasure becomes hardwired into a literary culture’ (2010: 45). The awareness of the self continues to be central in social merging; (1) as a definitive aspect of identification with the ‘other’, (2) as a form of evaluation of the ‘taste’ of the other, which results in the creation of new authority-like readers or, said in a broader sense,

culture consumers. The consumer's taste re-vindicated as worthy of trust and following is what Steve Johnson calls "curatorial culture":

Historically, the world of commercial music has been divided between musicians and listeners, but there's a group in the middle: people with great taste in music...They're curators, not creators (qtd. in Collins, 2010: 45).

Curatorial culture becomes central to the understanding of contemporary culture dissemination and to the current expectations of the reader. The literary choices of a reader act as an externalization of the self, which convey a need to be shared in order to (1) reinforce the conception of the self as a connoisseur reader, and (2) build a network of readers within the same aspirations. This aspirational element of the act of reading is the foundation of our need to share our literary discoveries. The finding of a 'good' book usually means that it is going to be read several times, by several people, in a practice of sharing. 'Books are the most important objects that we share with one another. We may largely read in isolation today, but we still wish for commonality when it comes to reading. This is part of the longing that is reading' (Piper, 2012: 83). The practice of sharing, on the other hand, is deeply associated with the satisfaction of the self; Like a boomerang effect, we expect that our sharing would be beneficial to the other, while reinforcing our idea of ourselves in an internal and external manner. The construction of the self by the habit of sharing is highly more noticeable in younger generations, and it is so because of the implications of their sharing. Social media interactions multiply the possibilities of the act of sharing. Jeff Gomez points out this differentiation based on a story in a New York magazine called "Say Anything," which described the main aspect of what in Gomez terms is the 'Generation Upload' in essence: 'they think they have an audience' (qtd. in Gomez, 2008: 97).

The practice of sharing, as mentioned before, was already part of the book culture, but digitization set forth its expectations:

Almost every major textual initiative today is structured around three overlapping notions of sharing: commonality, transferability, and sociability. We want other people to read the same thing we are reading (commonality); we want to be able to send other people what we are reading (transferability); and we want to be able to talk to other people about what we are reading (sociability) (Piper, 2012: 84).

The change in marketing tactics in the publishing industry helped to develop the practice of sharing in contemporary book culture. Jim Collins reflects on the experience of a fiction editor at Amazon.com who was still with the company when they moved to a personalization strategy. The system would track the buying history of the customer in order to select related titles and bring them to the customer's attention. However, Collin remarks that the real change came when voice was given to customers in the form of a review section. Suddenly, the job confined to the specialized reader was being placed in the hands of the common one, what 'seemed to validate all the rhetoric of Internet democracy' (Collins, 2010: 69).

Collin immersed himself in the list making of the reviewers of Amazon.com, which provided a first-hand experience of the medium and the use of it. Collin's description serves a kaleidoscope of the reader self-centred collectiveness. The customers in Amazon.com regard their authority to their devotion and dedication to reading; with a personal approach, these reviews are focused on the fellow common reader and on the exposure of the cultivation of the self (Collins, 2010: 71). Colling states: "They articulate their own identities not through role playing but by insisting on their singularity as reader-connoisseurs" (2010: 72).

The Cluetrain Manifesto (2000), published by what Furedi described as ‘an enthusiast [group] of the dot.com business ethos’, claimed that the Internet was a facilitator of a now extinct human global voice, stating that its true value lies in the re-connection of humankind through talk (Furedi, 2015: 22-23). The members of the The Cluetrain Manifesto are not alone in their notion of the proximity of a worldwide conversation through the digital. McLuhan introduced the global village concept to predict a ‘new sense of community’ that corresponded to ‘pre-literal oral societies’ (Furedi, 2015: 189), and Walter Ong’s second orality glorifies the sense of community in the electronic media era.

III. The Interface Paradox

The revision of the book as a phenomenological and physical medium, enables the understanding of its impossibilities as an inner construction of the practice of reading. If, as understood by Piper, reading is longing, then this longing persists also in the interface construction, which now holds the act of reading. The separation between the real and the world of representation is the reason of being for the medium while, at the same time, we can find in this aim its major impossibility. The medium is, then, paradoxical by definition, restricted to represent the real, without becoming it.

For Galloway, the interface constitutes a multi-layered paradox, as it conveys an incompatibility present in culture, in the medium, and in what is being represented. He refers to Frederic Jameson and his notion of cognitive mapping, which, in terms of Galloway, states that ‘culture is history in representational form’ (2012, vii). Galloway then explains that reading the present as historical means that it has to be somehow reduced or symbolized; therefore, ‘the truth of social life as a whole is increasingly incompatible with its own expression. Culture emerges from this incompatibility. The same goes for the interface: it emerges from this incompatibility; it is this incompatibility’ (2012, viii). He goes as to say that the cognitive map is also present in the act of reading, a notion I have introduced before with several authors that regards it almost as a natural

affection of the act of reading, and of the medium that holds what is to be read. Galloway completes this notion by pointing out that reading implies an ‘interpretive process’ that gives birth to a ‘subject-centred induction of world experience’ (2012, viii). The main point of this asseveration serves to situate the interface as a direct effect of this experience, as the interface mediates ‘thresholds of self and world’ (2012: vii-viii).

The deconstruction of the act of reading as a construction of the self and a sense of communality, is also central to Galloway’s theory in regards of the interface. While the accumulation of the practices of reading helps to construct the self –hence, the self has a direct contact with the medium in the form of the printed book– in the case of the interface, is not the self, but its own representation, that is in contact with the medium. Galloway firmly states that ‘profiles, not personas’ are in charge in a human-computer interaction (Galloway, 2012: 12).

When Galloway says that ‘the net is nothing if not the grand parade of personality profiles, wants and needs, projected egos, “second” selves and “second” lives (Galloway, 2012: 12)’, he is not condemning a practice of sharing, but a practice of creating a fictional self. For him, the interface constitutes an ethic, in the sense that it marks the beginning of a ‘practice, not a present, an effect, not an object’ (2012: 22). However, the real dilemma of this new set of practices is that they create the illusion of having an impact on reality, not on the world of representation. According to Galloway, interacting with an interface is to ‘being on the boundary (2012: 33)’, a boundary inherent to the medium, and to the act of reading itself. Based on this assumption, he states that an interface is an effect, ‘a process or a translation’ (2012: 33). The ultimate state of the interface paradox, is explained by Galloway as the aim of the interface to take a representative form only accomplished by a mathematical decoding, that is far away from cultural and social formations, but that, through practice, finds exactly those components (Galloway, 2012: 74).

IV. Reading practices in a social media platform

If ‘the edges of art always make reference to the medium itself’ (Galloway, 2012: 33), what type of reference is a platform like Goodreads.com providing in the literary reading experience? If we follow Galloway’s notion that ‘software is ideology turned mechanic’ (Galloway, 2012: 69), is it possible that we are able to find the ideology of the printed book continued in the new digital medium?

Following the grounded theory method, I interviewed ten people within different professional backgrounds, between the ages of 21 and 31 years old. The reason why I picked this demographic was based mostly on their age, as I was interested in getting to know the reading practices of a generation that is still in transition to digital media. (Of course, the main eligibility criteria consisted on people that were already familiarized with the site). The grounded theory method requires extensive answers from the participants in order to gather more data and encode it properly. Being in a face-to-face interaction, it gives room for improvisation and to expand on certain themes. The analysis of the participants’ answers was developed following an axial coding type of analysis. The transcript of each answer was decoded line by line into certain categories (e.g. social network facilities, taste distinction between readers, availability of the media, diversification of content, and manifestation of reading authority). The categories that were the most common in the global of the transcripts were treated as the focus categories and were linked directly to the theory and with each other.

The main finding was that the Goodreads platform is rarely used as a digital reading device, while it is widely used as a classification, storage, and discovery tool for literature material, efficiently powered by the classic algorithm resources present in social media for the personalization of the user experience. “I soon realized it [Goodreads.com] has a very extended database when I saw

myself consulting their page every time I looked for a book, and I was able to find everything I was looking for regarding the book there. Also, a main thing that attracted me to it was that they recommend titles according to your interests and previous reads.” (Mia, 24, marketing student). “I don’t know any other reading platforms and I consider it a useful tool to manage the books I’ve read and the ones I want to read, I also use it to discover new readings related to what I like.” (Ian, 30, shepherd).

In addition to this, the appealing of the interface is the mobility aspect of the medium. Users of Goodreads feel comfortable by constructing a secure network of people they already know, and in which they trust in regards of literary choices. “Many years ago I found out about that website from social networks and I was impressed by my friends’ profile”. (Niek, art history student, 25). “I have a specific groups of friends that I can agree in some terms about the good literature. They are the ones I follow advice from, but without having to ask them directly, it’s just there [in Goodreads.com]! I can save all the titles they’ve read as my own.” (Francine, 29, marketing consultant). The ‘shareability’ of the reading experience is upgraded by the social network dimension. Immediacy is central in this new sharing of information; The user of Goodreads does not have to engage in a literary conversation in order to get titles to read, and he or she is able to decide the level of participation in the site, by reviewing, commenting, or to simply act as a witness of external activity on the site. The Goodreads user is entangled in a constant conversation with other users with alike tastes, a conversation that would seem to be endless and always conducted as approachable to the reader. The social media interaction provides a dissemination of the reading material that reinforces the internet democratization. The reading authority that I have explored before, continues its trend to become a personal experience, and to have an interiorized focus. “I love writing reviews of the books I’ve read, it gives me the feeling to be some kind of critical reader” (Paola, 27, filmmaker). The Goodreads user does not regard the specialized opinion as pivotal, he or she rather relies on the reviewing and rating section of the site to select the titles to read and to broad their knowledge about the chosen reading material “If it weren’t for the reviews it would be hard for me to find good books that people with my same taste have liked” (Sara, 26, lawyer).

The global experience of Goodreads establishes a connection between people the user knows, and ‘unknown’ people that somehow feels close by some level of identification practiced by the sharing of the reading experience. “I follow my favourite artists’ advice on books, I haven’t been dissatisfied with it and I’ve read my favourite ones thanks to some of them. One of the most influential readers for me is Jimmy Murton, a plastic artist who paints, does graffiti, writes, etc. I have always liked his work, his writings always amazed me and I identified myself with some of his thoughts so whenever he posted some of his favourite books online, I chose one and I was obsessed, since then I trust his taste and follow his advice” (Mia, 24, marketing student). Goodreads provides access to a circle of people that would have been only accessible through the press, and that now is regarded as proximate and close to the reader. The act of reading is now displayed in public, but the intimate dimension is still present in the social aspect of the reading choices. Through social media, the reader is able to quickly grasp their circle reading choices and practices. The identity constructed by reading, is now made visible through the interface. I use the word ‘construction’ because the interface constitutes an eligible identity depiction by the making of a profile. The construction of the self by the act of reading is continued in the social media reflection, as users of Goodreads are much aware of the publicity of their reading practices. “Sometimes I spend many weeks or months reading one book and my friends can see it easily so it’s kind a shame.” (Paola, 27, filmmaker). In this construction of the interface self, the building of the identity of the other is also at stake, as the reader still has a belief of a ‘fit

reader', a classification that involves taste distinction and value judgment applied to the people they know. "There are only a couple of friends whose readings I find interesting to me. I like to see what people are reading but most of the times are books that I wouldn't read" (Davide, 30, teacher). "I think that the variety of genres, different levels of complexity and versatility of types of reading are linked to the intellectual resources of a person. I can easily identify which are or aren't my type" (Sara, 26, lawyer).

The remediation of literary material comes as a support for the on-print reading experience. There is a prioritization of the printed book above the digital book, as Goodreads users only read online titles that are not available on print, or that they have to read in a rush. Digital reading provides a practicality that is inherent to the medium, but it has not yet attained an emotional connection with the reader. Digital reading is often chosen by the reader because of the availability and mobility of the media. "Reading on the iPad free you from the burden of carrying a book, sometimes a heavy one, that frequently only gets damaged for being carried to thousand places without being read" (Mauro, 27, industrial designer). Surprisingly, the ergonomic aspects of on-print reading are in disadvantage against digital reading, in which the reader feels more comfortable by being able to manipulate the font, the lighting, or the length of the text. "I use Google Play Book and I find it very easy to manage font size, scrolling pages and switching to nocturnal mode." (Mathijs, 23, Math student). Hypertextuality plays an important role in today reading practices. "When I'm about to read I like to see the rating and some general comments about the title and the author, that drives me to see another books." (Yadir, 29, landscaper). "I feel more comfortable reading in an electronic device because I don't need both hands and I can also look up for a word that I don't know in the same app" (Mauro, 27, industrial designer).

Despite the perks of digital reading, users of Goodreads still show an emotional bond to the act of reading that is deeply connected to physical attainability and sense of possession, as the reader regards the printed book as a valuable object. "I feel like there is a much more enriching experience when reading a printed book, I don't really know why but I don't really feel like I'm reading for pleasure whenever I read an eBook, even though I sometimes do, I much rather read printed books. I think they're valuable for many reasons, the interaction is much more personal, the physical presence of it in your daily life is like a "cool" possession just like owning movies or paintings you like, also you can have it for generations to come as a memory" (Sara, 26, lawyer). "I usually think there are pages missing at the start, like critic's quotes or the authors note, and I wonder if the printed book has them" (Yadir, 29, landscaper).

"I like to imagine the books I've read as hunting trophies; the more trophies you have in your house; the better hunter you are. So I miss that thing with electronic reading, because I don't have all the books I've read in a physical space" (Mauro, 27, industrial designer).

Conclusion

Users of Goodreads showed a contradiction in their beliefs in regards of the reading experience. While all of them are used to electronic reading -Kindle, Google Play and PDF Reader were the most mentioned reading devices-, and they highlight with enthusiasm the perks of the medium, they still show a need to owe printed books, usually for their physical display, or for the phenomenological experience, that is not that much connected to the ergonomic aspect of on-print reading, but to the ideology behind the printed book. At the beginning of the interview, I asked each one of them, in a familiar way. “Why do you read literature?”. They were still relaxed as I assume they believed this question was just warming-up. Most of them shook their heads or shrugged their shoulders and provided truly simple answers like “I love it”, or “It’s good for me”. As if I was asking “why do you eat?”, their answers showed a pre-disposition to see the act of reading as an almost natural activity, and to regard to it some moralistic dimension. My next question was to describe what is literature reading, to which words like “healing” and “discipline” were mentioned. Throughout the interview, as we moved from the questions about the printed books towards the specific questions about Goodreads.com and digital reading, I noticed the participants’ mood was changed. Their answers were outlined in a more professional and descriptive way. At the end of the interview, I threw a bonus question that was surprising for them. “What is a book?” We have spent around twenty minutes discussing online reading practices and most of their answers still associated the word ‘book’ with words like ‘paper’, ‘turning a page’, ‘the smell of a bookshelf’; only some of them later expanded their answers to ‘content’, ‘a good story’.

The re-mediation of literature reading is not a re-mediation alone. It is an expansion of the reading practices, but not a supplementation of the printed book. On the contrary, I find that the Goodreads users are looking to reinforce the act of reading on print by accompanying it with the digital media support. The reader’s identity and the reader’s recognition of the other through the act of reading, now fragrantly displayed by the interface interaction, does not alienate the reader but establish a network in which the reader is able to discover more and a more reading incentives. My findings lead me to the conclusion that in the present, digital re-mediation is a tool, not the final aim of the act of reading. There is an evolution of the reading practices by accentuating the figure of the reader as autonomous in authority, all by the interface interactions.

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