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Virtual Communities Vs Imagined Communities: Twenty Years Later

Reading research between micro- and macroperspectives

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The title of this paper needs explanation: it refers to another paper I wrote in the year 2000 – a text which I regard today as slightly premature.

The whole story began in 1997, when a huge international conference was organized at the University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. International stars in the humanities gathered in Galicia to discuss the crisis of the field and to find a way out of it. As a follow-up, a doctoral summer school in the humanities was founded, which continued its sessions until 1999. It was there that I met the great German literary scholar Wolfgang Iser, world renowned for his phenomenological theory of reading.

Wolfgang Iser (1928-2007)

Since Iser was about to turn 70 the following year, we decided to honor him with a conference dedicated to reading theory in Sofia. After some discussions, the problem field of the conference was fixed as follows: *Reading in the Age of Media, Computers, and the Internet*. The conference was held between 26 and 28 February 2000 at New Bulgarian University, Sofia. It was an interesting event, full of vivid discussions. Iser attended it together with some of his friends and former students, now well-known names in literary theory in European and American Universities – Joseph Hillis Miller, Yale; Gabrielle Schwab, Irvine; Giuseppe Mazzotta, Yale; John Paul Riquelme, Boston; Stanley Corngold, Princeton; Marcel Cornis-Pope, Virginia University; Sanford Budick, Jerusalem; Fernando Cabo, Santiago de Compostela; Jenaro Talens, Madrid; Winfried Flux, Berlin. Among the participants were also my colleagues from Sofia and Plovdiv: Evgenia Pancheva, Cleo Protohristova, Julia Stefanova, Biliana Kourtasheva, Ognyan Kovachev, Michail Nedelchev, Bogdan Bogdanov, Boyan Manchev, Zhivko Ivanov, Dimitar Kambourov, Georgi Chobanov, Nikolai Gochev, Yordan Evtimov, and Ventzislav Arnaudov.

The proceedings of this conference were published in 2003 in a book entitled *Reading in the Age of Media, Computers, and the Internet* (in Bulgarian), Sofia: Figura, 2003. Today I can proudly note that at the time we were among the pioneers in digital reading theory without knowing it.

It was in this collective volume that I published my paper *Virtual Communities vs. Imagined Communities* (today I would prefer "virtual networks" instead of "virtual communities").

Twenty years later, it is easy to note that reading theory has shifted away from literary criticism and moved into new areas such as cognitive science and neurophysiology; the research of digital reading in particular has grown into a huge and autonomous research field, often using the exact quantitative methods of the hard sciences. During the last ten years the established research there has been dominated more by micro-perspectives than by macro-perspectives. One can lists relevant topics such as the phenomenology of reading on the screen; hypertexts and media multi-modality: the interchange between text, image, sound, games; emotional and motivational aspects of digital reading; the effects of reading across different media; new cognitive reading strategies such as surface reading or interactive reading; new techniques of processing information such as surfing, fragmentation, filtering, skimming, pecking, de-authorizing, juxtaposing, and scanning.[1] Neurophysiological and brain research added new problems here connected to brain plasticity[2] and changes in the psychological capacities of the reader, such as alterations in the structure and quality of attention, changes in concentration, memory, and empathy. Marketing research and advertisement theory added further problem areas connected with the so-called attention economy, the connection and competition between

[1] See the EREAD Bibliography https://ereadcost.eu/bibliography/, as well as the contribution of Alexandra Glavanakova in the current issue of the electronic journal *Piron*.

[2] See Glavanakova, commenting on Stanislas Dehaene's influential hypothesis regarding the "neuronal recycling" for numeracy and literacy here: "He claims that 'The invention of reading led to the mutation of our cerebral circuits into a reading device,' whereby existing circuits of neurons originally designed for different functions – such as vision, language, and cognition – owing to the plasticity of the brain, converged towards the reading circuit. Not being a genetically programmed activity, reading therefore relies on the formation of these newly re-arranged circuits, which are configured in accordance with the demands of a given language and the particular environmental factors. The ecosystem of reading includes the specific medium utilized for language transmission, which plays a crucial part in this process. The individual reading brain then is not only language- and culture-specific, but also depends largely on the personal choice of what, when, and how to read, which further complicates its investigation." (Alexandra Glavanakova, *Reading Fiction in The Digital Age*, Piron, vol. 20, 2020).

verbal and visual codes, etc. In the meantime, library science, book sociology, and literary criticism shifted their perspective toward the digital humanities, as well as toward communal, gender, social, or distant reading, moving away from the old close reading and micro-perspectives[3].

The field of reading theory still seems divided between elegiac[4], even "apocalyptic" visions[5] proclaiming the "end of reading," and optimistic visions[6]. Yet, during the last decade, a new group of scholars have appeared who are more cautious with generalizations. They speak about the decline of one type of reading skill and the emergence of a new one; erosion of the skills connected with attention, concentration, "deep" and close reading, and the rise of capacities answering the new demands of the digital world – flexibility, interactivity, quick orientation shifts in a multi-source and multi-channel environment, effective operations with numerous streams and levels of information. The consequences for teaching and pedagogy were also in view: how to improve reading skills and functional literacy (the influence of PISA here cannot be underestimated) of children and youngsters living in a digital environment (Barzillai, Thompson 2018). Which skills are "basic"? What is the place of the classic cultural literacy in the competing field of new competences and "literacies" (functional, digital, cultural literacy etc.)?

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[3] See Десислава Лилова, „Историята на Виктор Крум: националната идентичност в интернет", *Критика и хуманизъм*, брой 1 (2008), 115-139; Irmgard Maasen, "Mary Wollstonecraft: Romance and the Anxiety of Reading", *Romanticism*, Vol. 5 (2) 172 (2011). Edinburgh University Press; Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013; Anežka Kuzmičová, "Reading and company: embodiment and social space in silent reading practice", *Literacy* 52/2 (2018), 70-77; Ренета Божанкова, *Дигиталната хуманитаристика и знанието за литературата*. София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски", 2018; Alexandra Glavanakova, *Reading Fiction in The Digital Age*.

My personal research also moved onto new areas:

1. Canon building and reading the Classics. (Александър Кьосев и Бойко Пенчев (съст.). *Българският канон? Кризата на културното наследство*. София: изд. Александър Панов, 1998; Александър Кьосев, „Тайното място", *С възрожденски дух и модерен поглед. Сборник в чест на чл. кор. проф. Милена Цанева*, ред. Людмила Маринова, София: АИ-Проф. Марин-Дринов, 2012.).

2. Reading practices in Bulgaria, a collective research project which versions I led in 2009, 2014 and 2018; results will be published soon;

3. Theoretical work – in 2013 I published a book of different research paradigms, meeting and "quarreling" on the territory of reading practices (Александър Кьосев, *Каранищите около четенето*. София: Сиела, 2013; English synopsis here).

[4] See Sven Bikerts, *The Guteneberg Elegies. The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. NY: Fawcett Columbine, 1994.

[5] See Никълъс Кар, „Кара ли ни Гугъл да оглупяваме?", 2010; Георги Малинов, „Как спрях да чета, или теорията на трите страници", 2012.

[6] Of the type "we read more than ever," see Умберто Еко, Жан-Клод Кариер и Жан-Филип дьо Тонак. *Това не е краят на книгата*, прев. Силвия Колева, София: Ентусиаст, 2011; Bill Hill, "The Future of Reading", 28 January 2008, "Paper Dies – But Reading Lives: The Richness of Future Web Reading", July 2009, *Why Creating A New Word For Reading On Screen Is A Terrible Idea...*, 2009, online at http://billhillsblog.blogspot.com/

The macro-perspective seems to be slightly neglected; the hypothetical huge social changes following the digital turn in today's world are addressed much more by sociology, theory of globalization, and cultural studies and media research than by reading theory.

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Yet, without underestimating the achievements of micro-research, I still believe that the macro-perspective is crucial. We are living in a world where the old slogan "the medium is the message" is not enough – the digital turn changes not only the message, but the channel, the messenger, the addressee and the context simultaneously: the changes of the context unfold into a seemingly endless chain of other changes; it changes everything.

Therefore, studying the slow and gradual, albeit dramatic, shift from print media to digital networks should not be evaluated in simple "pro" and "contra" categories – it has a huge cognitive potential in two different, yet dialectically linked directions. First, the investigation of the changing social and technological frames of reading can better explain certain changes in the reading practices themselves. Second, information about the alterations of reading practices can help us understand the massive changes in the macro-social frame; it can offer unexpected insights beyond the purely technological evolution, into important dimensions of contemporary social life.

Clearly, this macro-perspective cannot replace the microscopic investigations into concrete problem areas such as scrolling on screen, functional literacy, filtering of information from many sources, or neurophysiological changes in attention. However, it can integrate the achievements of micro-research into another, much bigger frame, discovering specific homologies between changing reading techniques and global processes.

What is crucial here is to go beyond the methodological individualism of the micro-research perspective and its reified fetishism, which reduces everything to the simple juxtaposition of "reading on paper vs. reading on screen." Without being a Marxist, I use here the Marxian metaphor of "fetishism" because it is illuminating for the way it concentrates on the vehicles of "paper" and "screen." These technological reifications are far from self-sufficient and isolated. They are just two material carriers, the visible tips of two invisible, different icebergs of complex social, medio-technological, economic and cultural relations, which we call in short "modern culture, based on printing" vs "Internet galaxy."

No doubt, to study reading techniques in such a macro-frame is an ambitious, even overwhelming research program, far beyond the capacity of any single researcher or research team. I have no intentions to develop it here; my purpose is much humbler. First, I will demonstrate the existing imbalance between macro- and micro-research perspectives. Second, I will sketch the potential for reconnecting them. In the following pages, summarizing my research from 2000 till 2019, referring to important contributions, and reflecting on the digital turn, I will try to list and accentuate some major cross points between the micro- and macro-levels, which could serve as possible directions of a future research program.

* * *

Historical examples could be revealing here, and twenty years ago I started with them, describing how in the period between the 16th and 19th centuries, the spreading of print technology gave birth to new cultural, public, and educational institutions; mass literacy; and the standardization of cultural capital; and how, in turn, mass literacy, the growing book and newspaper markets, and educational institutions opened up possibilities for technological progress, for cheaper printing and mass publishing. This silent revolution, unfolding in more than two centuries, can help us understand the dialectical interdependence of the changing world, changing media, shifting individual and collective identities, and altered cultural techniques.

As far as reading is concerned, the major change, as it is well known, consisted in the fact that people started reading various secular books, newspapers, and documents instead of reading[7] mainly the one and only sacred book, the Bible[8]. The greater corpus of accessible printed books and reading materials gave space for rational comparisons and juxtapositions, developing in this way the potential of erudite critical thinking, intellectual combinatorics, and creativity[9]. In a paper published in 2000, I further developed these findings of the "history of the book" school, combining them with two other ideas: Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" and Wolfgang Iser's theory of the implied reader[10].

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[7] More often it was not reading but listening to sacred texts in a liturgical context.

[8] See Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution In Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2005; Reinhard Wittman, "Was There a Reading Revolution?", *History of Reading in the West*, Guglielmo Cavallo, Roger Chartier, Lydia G. Cochrane (eds.). Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, 284–312.

[9] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution*, 48-50.

[10] See Бенедикт Андерсън, *Въобразените общности*, прев. Яна Генова. София: Критика и хуманизъм, 1998; Wolfgang Iser, *Der implizite Leser*. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1972; Wolfgang Iser, *Akt des Lesens*. München: Wilhelm Fink, 1976.

My first point, at the time, was that modern reading practices have double potential for social change. On the one hand, they regulate the building of the "open" and unstable identity of the modern individual, training the reading person to re-position him- or herself in the multitude of various controversial perspectives proposed in the texts. The process of reading functions as a fictive "staging" of the emerging modern self and an imaginary interplay between different social roles; reading helped the individual to adopt and internalize the multi-perspective of the social universe and to find his or her place in the open, unstable modern society of competing values[11].

On the other hand, modern reading simultaneously helps the individual to integrate in an ideal community of non-hierarchical, horizontal solidarity – the emerging nation. The imaginary homogeneous national readership, a fictional society implied in the text, plays the role of a social instrument transforming the real premodern heterogeneous society into a new unified national society. The social imagination reproduced by printing disguises and hides the splits among the multicultural and socially divided populations and creates a legitimate base for the mighty homogenization and normalization techniques of the modern nation state. Moreover, reading books and newspapers results in the creation of a shared communicative field, and as byproducts, a unified public sphere, cohesion, patriotism, and solidarity. Thus, reading practices play an important role in the social construction of both modern individuals and of national communities.

However, there are particularities – the autonomation of the specialized and separated sub-spheres of modernity (science, economics, education, jurisprudence, media, etc.) simultaneously gave birth to and multiplied new reading techniques designed specifically for each of these sub-spheres. Serious reading of newspapers presupposes an approach to information very different from the emphatical reading of popular sentimental novels. Juridical reading of law codices uses rational procedures significantly different from the educational reading of lessons in textbooks. Thus, the tree of modern reading techniques grew, diversified, and specialized its branches. A large set of reading types served purely practical goals and were thus subjected to clear functional rules and procedures, specific to the different spheres of the

[11] See Богдан Богданов, „Четенето, писането и литературният текст като проблеми на културата", *Социологически преглед*, извънреден брой (1987); Богдан Богданов, „Литература, художествен текст и произведение", *Общуване с текста*, съст. Ангел Ангелов и Александър Кьосев. София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски", 1992; Александър Кьосев, „Четенето във всекидневния свят. Смяна на кадъра", *Общуване с текста*.

modern, disenchanted world – economics, law, bureaucracy, science, etc.[12]. However, in the "mature" modernity (1800-1914), there were two types of reading which slipped away from the dictum of functionality and the power of formal rationality; they were special and privileged with crucial cultural power.

The first one was a modern transformation of the ancient *reading of the great books*. During the medieval period and in early modernity, the secular canon of the great books was still based on Latin, i.e. it was readable and understandable for the whole Latin speaking pan-European elite[13]; it mixed pagan with Christian authors, producing a permanent challenge to the official church.[14]

During the nation-building period, however, this pan-European canon gradually split and was replaced step-by-step by a multitude of various national *golden treasures*,[15] separate national canons based on vernacular languages. The process of nationalization lasted more than two centuries and was mediated by the standardization of the national languages and national *grand narratives*' the emergence of separate book markets, newspapers and public spheres; and the flourishing of national cultural and artistic life; it was further reproduced by the national educational and cultural institutions (including schools, universities, libraries, along with their curricula, textbooks, catalogues and archives: it included the newly institutionalized national literatures themselves). The assertion of Benedict Anderson that this process, epitomized in the birth of the national novels, gave birth to different national imaginations and contributed to the building of new imagined communities, the nations, is well known.[16]

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After the year 2000, the focus of my research shifted to an attempt to explore the aforementioned privileged reading practices – I will call them "reading the classics." These reading techniques were expected to be ingenious because they had to mirror the ingenuity of the great books. The *chefs-d'œuvre* were expected to be complex semantic universes, bottomless

[12] See Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History". *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 85, No. 5 (Mar., 1980), 1145-1179.
[13] Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*. Bern: München Francke, 1993.
[14] It is symptomatic that the community of the Ancient classics (Homer, Ovid, Lucan, Horatius, Virgil) were still placed in Limbo by Dante – but their noble aura inexplicably lit up and changed the dark periphery of Hell itself).
[15] Francis Turner Palgrave's "Golden Treasury," 1861, one the first anthologies of the English poetry, displays this common metaphor, spread well beyond the boundaries of the English language, in its very title.
[16] According to Benedict Anderson, the combination of all these factors – book market capitalism, the rise of vernaculars and their transformation into standardized public languages, as well as the emergence of the new reading audiences, gave birth to a new type of imagined communities – the nations.

sources of deep and noble meaning, crucial for the national communities. Of special importance were *the secular scriptures*[17], i.e. the great national novels, which often functioned as modern national myths, providing plot, structure, and the personae of the grand national narratives. Reading these books was the practice of constructing the referential system of the modern national cultures; therefore, it was institutionalized by the nation states and their educational systems[18].

As the depths and importance of these privileged national texts was taken for granted, they presupposed a corresponding reading in accordance with their ingenious qualities and national significance. Thus, the norm of this privileged "reading the classics" prescribed that it should be devotional, penetrative, and imaginative, a procedure of sublimation and a secular analogue of the spiritual, multilayered reading and interpretation of the sacred texts. In the hierarchical pyramid of modern reading techniques, this "deep reading of the national great books" was regarded to be the most important and was naturally located above all other types of usages of the book. It was directly connected with the standardization of cultural capital, the homogenization of national models, and identity building.

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The results of this normative regulation of reading techniques were visible and dominant for about two centuries: the national public spheres and national educational systems reproduced the national canons and their corresponding reading norms. The young individual in a process of socialization was trained to read mainly in his or her mother tongue and preferably – the great national books. And as Jorge Luis Borges said in his famous essay on the classics, the readings should be in accordance to their greatness: deep, intellectual, and devoted, as if the national books were bottomless like the universe itself. Moreover, the young individual was supposed to use these books to build his or her identity in accordance with models handed down by the respective "fathers of the nation" – writers, philosophers, intellectuals. Hence, during the Enlightenment and later, during the nation building period, socialization required something more than emancipation and the achievement of certain professional skills: the young members

[17] See Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture. A Study of the Structure of Romance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

[18] Alexander Kiossev, "Grand Naratives and Imagined Communication. Literature and the Symbolic Patterns of Emancipation". *Neohelicon: Acta Comparationis Literaturarum Universarum* XXXI 2, Kiado, Budapest and Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, Boston, London, 2004.

of the nation were supposed to adopt and interiorize the specific narrative and symbolic repertoires carried by the classic legacy of the nation.

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The second reading type was very different and "privileged" for paradoxical reasons: because it was subversive. It was the untamed "reading for pleasure", performed by predominantly young readers (mostly unmarried girls), who found in passionate reading a tool to slip away from the rigid social control and to satisfy their chaotic passions – thus, sentimental bestsellers were crucial here. Far from being disciplined, devoted, and respectful, it was anarchistic, bricolage-like, and an act of poaching[19]; Yet, despite all the differences, this "reading for pleasure" had one thing in common with the other type of reading, the "reading of the classics" – the depth of reading, or to put it better – the imaginative deepening. Similar to the educational reading of the classics, the young emotional reader sunk deep in the phantasmatic texts (mostly popular love or adventurous novels), obeying more the pleasure principle than the principle of normatively regulated modern reality. Although this reading was certainly "deep," it deserved to be called "manic" rather than devotional: not led by any authority, the young untrained reader navigated freely across the pages with a devouring empathy and unlimited identification; this reader maintained no intellectual distance or rational discipline, using and abusing the text for the purposes of his or her own emotional needs. Thinkers in pedagogy and the philosophy of education in the 18th and the early 19th centuries were deeply concerned with this subversive type of uncontrolled reading and voiced publicly their anxiety about the reading of novels: they prescribed special pedagogical measures against such arbitrary and voluntarist behavior, performed in empty hours, when young individuals were outside the gaze of public morality, and were capable of escaping the normalizing cultural power of society.

[19] See Мишел дьо Серто, „Четенето: Вид бракониерство", *Изобретяване на всекидневието*, прев. Евгения Грекова. София: ЛИК, 2002, 266–282; Александър Кьосев, „Тайното място".

The real success of the nation-states in the 19th century was the fact that the consistent cultural and educational policies of their institutions managed to a certain extend to "tame" this type of reading and redirect its subversive energies into the channels of reading of the prescribed great books. Although rare in reality, this strange synthesis between mania and devotion had a normative power and was the genuine privileged model of reading in modernity: reading the classics for one's own entertainment and satisfaction (as Goethe's Werther reads Homer), whereby the reading process sublimates the wrong passions, teaches noble ideas and regulates and mediates the contradictions between society and individual, norm and pleasure.

Wilhelm Amberg: Girls reading Goethe's Werther, 1870

In practice, the previous tradition of close and devoted reading, the deciphering of sacred texts, was secularized, i.e. both "nationalized" and individualized; readers were trained to delve deeper into the "mysteries" and paradoxes of the national culture, to produce patriotic

interpretations and to adopt, internalize, and use the necessary symbolic and cultural repertoires for their personal socialization. In this way, the great books of the nation started playing a crucial role: they provided the "shared cultural currency"[20] of the imagined community, reproducing the modern horizontal solidarities among compatriots (today Castells prefer to call this "shared protocols of meaning,"[21]). Every educated individual reading in a particular national language was supposed to develop specific skills for operating successfully with these repertoires; this was the way for the nation to follow the emancipatory program of the Enlightenment and to develop its national "gebildetes Bürgertum" – the educated middle class.

On a pan-European level, however, the previous unity of the canon based on Latin was lost. The nationally educated elites ceased to have a common tool for communication – even the common legacy of the ancient classics was nationally re-interpreted and integrated in the bodies of different canons. The isolated print cultures and public spheres also generated fragmentation and separation. Gradually, and in a combination with real military conflicts, diplomatic rivalries, and colonial controversies, this led to a shortage of transnational cultural communication, and then – to the growing abyss between mutually hostile nationalistic ideologies. The universalistic (in fact, Eurocentric) longings for world literature were predestined to remain just dreams of particular intellectuals such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Thomas St. Eliot. If there was a global challenge to the power of national cultures, it came not from the universalistic utopias of the Enlightenment, but from the racist imaginations of the colonial era.

This short historical overview could end with the conclusion that modern print technologies (along with the rise of the vernaculars and book markets) played an ambivalent role for the European society in the long run: they did indeed open a huge space for communicating modern ideas and for developing the flourishing secular national cultures of the modernity; yet, they simultaneously supported the separation and isolation among public spheres, national intellectual elites, reading audiences, and national ideologies. Eventually, this created conditions for hostility among already isolated public spheres and isolated nations. In the years before WWI, this transformed the "imagined communities" into the huge "information bubbles" of the nationalistic, xenophobic, and racist pre-war propagandas.

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[20] See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
[21] See Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy*. *Reflections on Internet, Business and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

From the second half of the 20th century, the social, media, and technological situation changed drastically. The process of change lasted for decades; before WWII it began with cinema, jazz music, and the radio; after this, it was continued by television, then came the era of mobile phones, the World Wide Web, laptops, and social networks. Some scholars coined the label "mediomorphosis" for these durable changes[22]. Television and the society of spectacle, along with global popular cultural industries, caused the first wave of the slow decline of the isolated national public spheres, and simultaneously – the gradual devaluation of their previous "cultural currencies." The great books slowly began to lose their binding and unifying cultural power.

* * *

What happened to reading and reading skills in this changing milieu? How did late capitalism and the digital turn accelerate the changes in reading techniques, and vice versa – how did the changes in digital reading reverberate into distant and indirect social repercussions?

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Looking back on my paper written in 2000, it is obvious that just like a lot of other scholars, I was still fascinated by the liberating and democratic potential of the digital turn. The claim there was that the new high-tech trans-communication should no longer be called *a medium*, i.e. an intermediary, something in-between the sender and the recipient of the message, between the author and the reader, between the beginning and the end of the chain of the communication; the electronic networks were no longer a mediating channel, crossed by a message in a linear route, but multi-channel and web-like: a *space* rather than a *vector.* At that moment, the "admirable dynamism" of Internet communication was obviously a source of inspiration, and my paper, along with many others, offered an apology of the multiple and uncontrolled informational flows and "free surfing" users of the World Wide Web. I insisted that "...the messages seem to be hovering without a source and without an addressee in space, preceded and succeeded by similar messages, they have no beginning, middle and end, they are being forwarded but they are also mailed to one side, up and down across new regions of the net." And further "…Having lost their character of a mediator, the networks and messages lost their nature of artefacts, too, and revealed themselves as a dynamic virtual world, designed for virtual humankind. Or, even better – as virtual worlds for virtual humankinds." I claimed further

[22] See Roger Fidler, *Mediamorphosis: Understanding New Media*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1997.

that all this changed the social imagination based on printing, and therefore – all previously imagined communities: "…Unlike the abstractly universal and imaginable communities of the book (which are construed and localized within similar imaginary topoi), the virtual worlds preserve their individualized concreteness and heterogeneity across various "spots," "pages," "addresses," and "bases"; however, their chainlike linkages are potentially infinite."

In short, what I declared then, in 2000, was the end of the territorialized, print-based national cultures and the beginning of the free surfing virtual, network-based humanity. The only problem at that time seemed to be the unjust digital divide: the regrettable fact that at that time, not everybody (especially the poor, Africans, and vulnerable groups) had access to Internet.[23]

Today, this previous digital optimism seems not only premature, but also a little bit utopian. The digital networks and webs went beyond the dreamed global "space of communication." The process of colonization is completed: they *are* already Lebenswelt – our world for living, which doubles, penetrates, perplexes, and replaces the real one (or what we previously called "the real one"); at least two generations of "digital natives" were born and prepared for social life on the Internet. During the last two decades, all private human relationships – friendship, love, dating, sex, conflicts, intrigues, reconciliations, simple chats, etc. – were mediated by the digital dimension; they even seem impossible outside it, without social networks, Messenger, Viber, SMS messages, or e-mails. This is true also with regard to the practical tasks of everyday life such as shopping, ordering food online, using various services, healthcare, etc. Simultaneously, the digital world harbors alienated social and public mechanisms: it is simultaneously a marketplace and a place for advertising, a space for political actions and for the institutional and public spheres. Internet communication makes possible

[23] I quoted then a UN inquiry from 1998: "While 73% of white students own a home computer, only 32.9% of African American students own one. In mid-1998 industrial countries – home to less than 15% of people – had 88% of Internet users. North America alone – with less than 5% of all people – had more than 50% of Internet users. By contrast, South Asia is home to over 20% of all people but had less than 1% of the world's Internet users. …English is used in almost 80% of websites and in the common user interfaces – the graphics and instructions. Yet less than one in 10 people worldwide speaks the language. In the words of the UN report: Geographic barriers may have fallen for communications, but a new barrier has emerged, an invisible barrier that, true to its name, is like a world wide web, embracing the connected and silently – almost imperceptibly – excluding the rest. The typical Internet user worldwide is male, under 35 years old, with a college education and high income, urban-based and English-speaking – a member of a very elite minority worldwide. The consequence? The network society creates parallel communications systems: one for those with income, education, and – literally – connections, giving plentiful information at low cost and high speed; the other for those without connections, blocked by high barriers of time, cost, and uncertainty and dependent on outdated information. With people in these two systems living and competing side by side, the advantages of connection are overpowering. The voices and concerns of people already living in human poverty – lacking incomes, education, and access to public institutions – are being increasingly marginalized."

electronic governments and administrative services, water and electricity supply, defense systems and satellites, banking and stock exchanges, transport connections and tourism; it provides the infrastructure for the circulation of world news, the functioning of all possible organizations, of school and university lecturing; it makes possible the digitalization of the world's cultural heritage and the archives of libraries, museums, galleries … it harbors… everything else imaginable. "Internet is basic structure of social life," Manuel Castells wrote ten years ago, describing the network-like, elastic, and cacophonic structure of its myriad of multiple uses for incompatible purposes[24].

There were even more radical prophecies than mine: some scholars predicted that the new reterritorialized and decontextualized structure of global digital communication will relativize the power of the old national cultures, transferring it to the transnational "flows," the dynamic and ephemeral "landscapes" of a global digital communication with no escape, combining and rearranging mosaic fragments into new global "pastiches," "hybrids," and "cultural mélanges"[25].

However, the expected "global village" inhabited by a global and unified virtual community never occurred. Instead of giving birth to a free-surfing global mankind of mobile individuals with unstable identities, the digital turn (including the World Wide Web, social networks, algorithms governing Big Data, and the politics of "post-truth") produced fragmented and de-standardized communities, oscillating in the nowhere-land between global and local, between public and private. They all shared the bliss of digital communication, while at the same time operating with different, sometimes incommensurable, cultural repertoires. Moreover, even the previously obvious capacity of the Internet to produce freedom, transgressing limits and restrictions seemed threatened, if not overwhelmed, by its new capacity to produce control, surveillance, and isolation. The unexpected effects are well-known: a gradual decline of public media and disintegration of the public sphere into small isolated digital groups – bubbles, filtering information[26]. The process is connected with the decline of critical journalism and the

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[24] Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy*.

[25] See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*. *Cultural Dimension of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minessota Press, 1996; Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (eds.). *The Cultures of Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998; Jan Nederveen Pieterse. *Globalization & Culture*. *Global Melange*. Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield Publ., 2004; Scott Lash, *Critique of Information*. London: Sage Publications, 2002; Mark Poster, *Information, please*. *Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines*. Duke University Press, 2006.

[26] Dimitar Nikolov, Diego F.M. Oliveira, Alessandro Flammini, Filippo Menczer. "Measuring Online Social Bubbles", *PeerJ Computer Science* 1:e38 (2015) https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj-cs.38.

prestige of expert knowledge, the rise of fake news, and the flourishing of paranoid scenarios and conspiracy theories.[27] Digital piracy, as well as its opposite – state control over servers or corporative abuse of Big Data – posed another major threat to freedom.

* * *

These huge risks posed by the digital society, although extremely important politically, are not the topic of this paper. What is in focus here is how the digital world (and not "the screen" only) has transformed one basic cultural technique – reading. Not all effects are clear, yet certain hypotheses can already be formulated. In what follows, I will try to point out just a few of them, while at the same time sketching possible areas where micro- and macro-research of reading could meet.

Reading practices and temporality of late digital capitalism

The expression "digital capitalism" has at least two different meanings. The first one is connected to monopolies in telecommunication, social networks, and search engines: the Internet, which at its beginning had the chance to develop as a public good and to contribute to democratic access and freedom, was later conquered by big corporations such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Craigslist[28]. Relevant to this paper, however, is the second meaning: the digital turn embodies the next wave of acceleration in a process of speeding up, characteristic for modernity in general[29]. The global digital web was supposed to give birth to new "frictionless capitalism" (as Bill Gates famously put it), where time, capitalism, and society were equalized in the accelerated circulation of unthinkably fast and multi-channeled information exchange[30]; as early as 1988, Lyotard predicted that is would neutralize all events and deprive of meaning the vector-like nature of time.

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[27] This "post-truth condition" of the digital world participates in the flourishing of new types of new necessary "literacies": it requires the skill to differentiate, select, and evaluate the reliability of the endless flow of unreliable information.

[28] See Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism Networking the Global Market System*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000; John Bellamy Foster, Robert W. McChesney, "The Internet's Unholy Marriage to Capitalism", *Monthly Review*, 62/10 (2011).

[29] See Paul Virillio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1986; Reinhart Koselleck, *Future Past. On Semantics of Historical Time*, transl. Keith Tribe. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1985; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Lev Manovich, "New Media from Borges to HTML", *New Media Reader*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (eds). Cambridge Mass. London: MIT Press, 2003; Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration, A New Theory of Modernity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

[30] Жан-Франсоа Лиотар, „Времето днес", *За името и за превода - избрани статии от The Oxford Literary Review*, съст. Орлин Тодоров. София: Отворено общество, 1996; Scott Lash, *Critique of Information*.

Paradoxically, in such a situation, what increased was not freedom, but "time deficit"[31]. The individual was put under permanent pressure to be everywhere, always at disposal, to optimize his productivity in every moment, simultaneously consuming more and more. Scholars point out that this led to desynchronization between existential and historical temporal layers (discoordination among the time of everyday life, autobiographical time, and historical time). On the level of experiences of time, two seemingly opposite feelings mixed in a strange unity: on the one hand, digital acceleration neuroticized "die Lebenswelter" (life worlds), giving birth to the anxiety that one is always late and "catching up" is impossible; on the other hand, this was the feeling that "everything is the same" and we are living in a frozen world where nothing changes. This frozen universe was experienced as a claustrophobic world without horizon – neither back in the past, nor forward in the future.[32] Beyond psychological experiences, all this resulted in a transformation of the previous "regimes of historicity" into "presentism" – i.e. total domination of the present over the irrelevant past and the unforeseeable future[33]. In the new temporal regime, memories and plans lost their significance: the objective structure of the social world forces the individual to live for the instant. People are living in an unstable present, less predictable than ever. This gave birth to flexible and situation bound "liquid identities"[34] with no biographical and historical dimensions.

* * *

Summarizing this part, we can see some relatively clear temporal characteristics of the macro- change: acceleration, time deficit, desynchronization, presentism, flexible identities. What was their impact over the culture technique "reading"? Let me sketch some hypotheses.

* * *

Acceleration, along with the algorithmic control over personal data, made it possible to intensify and focus supply according to personal preferences in an unprecedented way. The new present was transformed into a field for intensive competition, where myriads of aggressive or seductive proposals for communication and consumption compete. Every minute, the individual is bombarded by countless tempting opportunities: advertisements, sexy images, TV programs,

[31] Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration, A New Theory of Modernity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
[32] In his fundamental book *Acceleration*, Hartmut Rosa summarizes the achievements of scholars working on theory of social time and acceleration – T. Eriksen, G. Freyermuth, G. Gleick, S. Breuer, F. Jameson, J. Radkau, P. Alheit, etc. (Ibid.)
[33] Франсоа Артог, „Сегашно и сегашност", *Около Пиер Нора: Места на паметта и конструиране на настоящето*. София: Дом на науките за човека и обществото, 2004.
[34] Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

videos, songs, games, memes, music, digital messages, phone calls, chats, reminders, warnings, invitations, news – all of them competing for his or her attention. "Free time," previously designed for the regeneration of labor power, rest, or slow entertainments beyond rigid social control, became an commodity; it made every "moment" expensive and transformed it into a field of competition. The previous "slow and empty hours," a temporal precondition for deep reading glorified by Rilke and Proust, had disappeared: they had become luxury. Reading became short in terms of temporal norms – not hours, but minutes and, if possible, seconds (it is not accidental that a lot of digital platforms explicitly indicate the time digital materials would take to read in minutes).

Reading lost the privilege of these "slow and long empty hours," as well as another condition for imaginative "deepening" and devotion – concentration. It became "flexible" - i.e. nervous, jumping, and distractive, mirroring the competing structure of the dominant temporal pattern. The new digital economy became an economy of attention: the client, owner of "free moments," was forced to navigate quickly among enormous multitude of competing stimuli, quickly appearing and disappearing. What was important in this hyper-dynamic competitive temporal environment was the overview of all opportunities: long-lasting concentration on a singular topic seemed a luxury, and "deepening" in any single one – a mortal sin.

Reading practices mirrored further the structure of the digital universe – they became web-like. Linear reading was already an exception: to read today meant to follow one hyperlink after another, then to stop and read a message in Viber, then to search for additional information in Google, then to play an online game for a while and to answer an urgent message before returning for short to the initial text.

The multi-stimuli and multi-channeled environment transformed reading on the screen into a multi-channeled, hybrid activity, combing verbal signs with visual images and interactive gestures. Reading lost the privilege to be passive (a noble "passive synthesis" on the site of "*vita contemplativa*"[35]) – it became impatient, active, and interactive.

We noticed that the new scarce temporal resources spared for reading are always under competitive pressure. Another consequence of this is that reading became in its very nature "substitutive." The act of reading, always exercised in a condition of time deficit, permanently

[35] This was the reading ideal of Proust, according to the deconstructive commentaries of Paul de Man (Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979, 57-78.)

reproduces its anxiety, deepening the very experience of deficit. Besides the concrete reading content, one additional meaning is ceaselessly reproduced: the depressing feeling that only *one* opportunity for consumption has been used at that particular moment – while many other possibilities are lost. Thus, the process of reading is a permanent experience of loss, performed on the background of its possible replacements by something else – something more useful, more attractive, and not so boring, difficult, or "time consuming." Easy replaceability became the usual background of reading.

Reading, rhythm, and quantification of time

Not only the speed and intensity, but also the regime and the rhythm of this new temporality changed drastically. Dominated by presentism, time lost any historical duration whatsoever. Thus, the previously institutionally reproduced hermeneutical duty – the historical link between the individual and the dead great authors, the necessary socialization by the texts and models from the cultural past – lost its self-evidence. The past was not capable of providing the quickly changing present with useful models any more. It ceased to be an obvious norm that the young individual should read the great books, the classics – socialization was already taking different presentist routes, models, and channels. The educational canons were under political and economic pressure, too: accused of colonial, racist, and patriarchal sins, the classics were attacked for being white, male, and dead; it seemed that they deserved to be forgotten once and forever. Reading ceased to be historical understanding**,** transcending the self-evident horizon of the present; it was no more the privileged technique of transgenerational communication.

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In the process of intensification of time consumption, each second was quantified and digitally calculated: time dispersed in a multitude of digitally programmed, manageable micro-fragments. This new temporality imposed its staccato rhythm on reading. The most visible example here is a common practice in the great megapolises: reading in the underground. The reader there is forced to synchronize reading with two different rhythms which have no common denominator. The first is the structure of the text itself: reading follows paragraphs, parts, chapters, episodes from the story etc. The other rhythm is the sequences of stations, the inertia waves of stopping and new departures. The second rhythm, a technological one, digitally calculated, is dominating: if you follow the chapters and episodes of the book, then you are

running the risk of missing your stop. The intervals of reading are following the mathematically calculated logic of the external world.

In this clip-like frame[36], nonlinguistic symbol systems and visual codes (logos, brand marks, avatars, images, memes, emoticons, short videos, etc.) gained a "natural" advantage over verbal codes and texts. The old dictum of saving time, developed and changed by the new economy of attention, required not only catching attention, but also instant acts of recognition and unimpeded, quick understanding – instant interpretative "insights." This norm, implicit in the digital turn, privileged images over words and texts: the digital turn was, in fact, a visual turn, too[37]. Besides, images were already in the epoch of quick and easy mass technical reproduction by cheap cameras, cell phones, and tablets – this facilitated the transformation of digital images into new universal codes of communication. Unlike national languages, they did not set borders and limitations and participated easily in the accelerated exchange of the "frictionless" new world. The new condition reflected back on the verbal codes: in order to be effective, to catch attention, and to immediately transmit their message, words, sentences, and texts would function in a new communicative regime and imitate the instant effect of images. Quick and unimpeded understanding is required, long sentences with sophisticated syntax are forbidden, hidden meanings or complex chains of precise arguments are considered redundant and ineffective. Twitter produced the model for such short messages, and soon this was regarded as a universal, self-evident norm for any writing and for any reading.

* * *

To summarize, in this new temporal frame, classic reading naturally lost its cultural prestige, previously taken for granted. The attentive and imaginative "deepening" into long texts, the traditional devoted interpretations and commentaries, the deciphering of complex symbols, the understanding of complex plots and sophisticated chains of arguments – all these once highly esteemed skills gained a new status of aberration. The new digital-and-temporal condition did not make them totally impossible, yet it changed the normative hierarchies and transformed them into something "against the grain of the times." Devoted classic reading of great books lost its status of a model and became a rare, substantive, and outdated technique in regime of cultural resistance.

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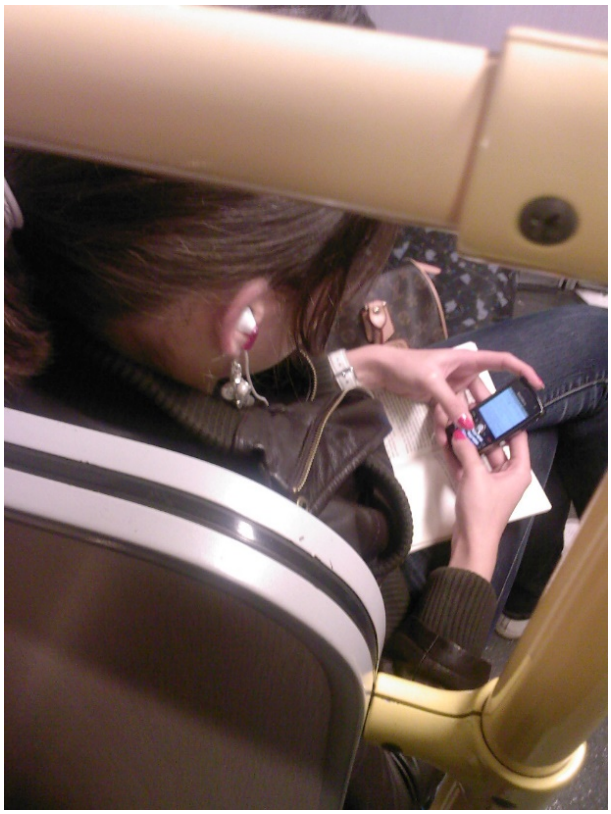
[36] Michael Geist, "The Rise of Clip Culture Online".

[37] Melvin Wevers and Thomas Smits. "The Visual Digital Turn: Using Neural Networks to Study Historical Images", *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 35/1 (2020), 194–207.

"American Girl Reading", 1872. George Cochran Lambdin (1830-1896). Devoted reading and daydreaming in the empty hours was a favorite plot for great numbers of paintings during the 18th and 19th centuries.



Reading in the underground is replaceble activity – any moment it can be substituted by another one: using the cell phone, chatting, listening to music, writing messages, etc. (pictire from a personal archive)

Reading in the underground follows the technological rhythm of transportation. (picture from a personal archive)

One can see on this picture what remained of the "empty hours": reading as leisure, a pure bodily rest during the holidays far from any intellectual devotion.
(source: advertisement of travel agency)

Digital reproduction of images, authorship, the culture of remix

Digital networks make possible multiple, quick, and individually specific usages of information by myriads of users; the sources of information were easily accessible and endless in number. As a result, there emerged a culture of mosaic appropriation, re-appropriation, and remixing of fragments[38]. In its environment combinations, appropriations, and re-appropriations, authorship becomes questionable, whereas the copy-paste approach spreads massively and triggers battles of copyright.

Once again, this has had consequences for reading. Previously, the classic texts were considered to be untouchable because of their ingenious authorship and their status of belonging to the "national spiritual treasure." The culture of digital reproduction and remix, however, challenged the wholeness, unity, and aura of the privileged classic texts; it invalidated old norms such as "always read a whole book from the beginning to the end" (great books again used to provide the model here: they should be read slowly and patiently, from the beginning to the end, sometimes even re-read). Digital reading became "democratic" and "negligent"; it no longer respects the unity and untouchable wholeness of texts, sealed by the genius of their creator.

Nowadays, reading becomes part of the cultural practices of remixing and appropriation. It filters and collects many fragments from different sources, arranging and assembling them in order to produce new plots and unexpected mosaic effects[39]. Born in the cultural universe of democratic, eclectic, and interactive consumption of myriad global users, reading becomes as "post-modern" as literary works themselves – combinative and pastiche-like, capable of instant recognition of various global cultural repertoires. In combination with its interactivity and new type of creativity, this challenged the clear differentiation between reading and writing.

The global dominance of English and the changed status of verbal codes

Although the digital turn did not create a limitless space for communication and understanding as was hoped in year 2000, it nevertheless spread the command of English on a global scale. This new dominance of *one language* (it would be appropriate to called it "digital basic English") had little to do with the previous cultural prestige of the rich imperial languages,

[38] See Lev Manovich, "New Media from Borges to HTML"; Красимир Терзиев, *Ре-композиция: Автор, медия и произведение в епохата на дигиталното възпроизводство*. София: Изток-Запад, 2012.
[39] See Десислава Лилова, „Историята на Виктор Крум".

but with the quick functionality of communication, global adoption of the basic levels of English, and ease of automated translation for crossing the "the language barrier". Literary production and consumption, as well as the book markets, split into two separate areas: global literature, global readership, and global reading materials and books in English vs. "relics," such as isolated national literatures, written and read in "small" languages, relying on national cultural traditions and limited local audiences.

Although the national public spheres in the second case were small and isolated, their book markets were not; they have been ceaselessly penetrated and even dominated by the production of the global market – English and American bestsellers sold directly in English or in translation into local languages flooded local markets. This created a clear model for the success writers: the good author was considered to be the one capable of jumping from the local literary field into the global one. During the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, such "jumps" were valued as important patriotic deeds. Great national achievements were thought to contribute to the imaginary treasure of world literature – as if they had been brought to the reading eyes of all cultures and generations, universal mankind itself. Nowadays such a jump is simply an isolated tactical marketing move of a single author dreaming of writing a bestseller of his or her own; there is nothing patriotic, nor universal, about it. Some writers, mediated by literary agents and publishing networks (some of them promoting self-publishing), manage to publish in English, thus gaining privileged access to huge audiences and the global book market – and that is all.

In order to perform this market jump, however, the authors should either write directly in English, or at least be "translatable" into the new "digital English." Thus, the success-oriented strategy of writing prevents in advance everything regarded as "untranslatable"; it cuts off by default all idiosyncrasies of the local cultures, including the cultural "abysses" and the national language. Even in case the author prefers to write in his mother tongue, he or she is forced to use it "as if" it were English, i.e. cleared of all which could impede free global understanding.

It is important to stress here that this unspoken norm is not an external and unimportant limitation to literary writing; it is not limited to filtering of random untranslatable insider details (such as specific names or sites known only by "natives"), nor is it limited to dialects, group jargon, archaisms, or colloquialisms. What is at work here is a much deeper intervention in the very medium of literary writing. From the point of view of the previous hegemon, the national culture, what has been filtered out here is the very core of the national cultural and literary

memory, the depths of the national cultural currency – the lasting national narrative and the "sacred" symbolic repertoires of the national cultural tradition. For several centuries, they have played the role of a frame of reference for every new literary work emerging in their cultural gravity, i.e. in the special national intertextual environment. Therefore, these repertoires consisted of dialogues and polemics between important national authors; of literary appropriations and re-appropriations of folklore; of reservoirs of ancient and modern European symbols, nationally reinterpreted; of sustainable repetitions of variations and transformation of certain myths, legends, stories, themes, motifs, topoi, personae, metaphors, quotations, allusions etc. All these were repeated, reproduced, and altered through decades and centuries, thus becoming important part of the shared "cultural currency" (yet they coincided with most elitist, complex, deep, "mysterious" part of it), which circulated among different generations, intellectual circles, literary groups, or political ideologies. I will address this crucial frame of reference – the silent dialog of the great national books – with the expression of "the great national intertext" in order to point out the trans-textual and trans-generational dynamics of its prestigious elements[40].

Mirroring the changes that affected writing, the reading public (including the highly specialized circles within it, the community of writers, literary critics, editors, and publishers) gradually lost their capacity to read the old national intertext. The screen is not designed for readers capable of deciphering the wealth of old-fashioned intellectual games to decipher their complex messages, possible associations, and connotations. Quick and combinative reading-scrolling affords neither the patience nor the capacity to follow something which radically opposes presentism and multi-channeled media – the historical chain of controversies, polemical replicas, or parodies sinking back in the past for decades and centuries. The digital reader reads in a flat, surface fashion: even when the reading material is a downloaded national "great book," all its hidden unique "canonical" and historical connotations and cyphers are lost. Both writing and reading gradually lose the ability to reproduce or use the old repertoires of the national intertext: globalization has conquered the cultural techniques.

[40] Александър Кьосев, „Преводимост и непреводимост в съвременната българска литература", *Надмощие и приспособяване*, ред. Надежда Александрова, Диана Атанасова, Мария Калинова, Румяна Станчева. София: УИ „Св. Климент Охридски", 2017, 21 -35.

The political consequences of digital reading

In the culture of global literary markets, the loss of national intertexts and cultural depths is compensated and replaced by two other repertoires. The first is not new: it consists of commercialized emblems of local exotics, successfully sold on all literary markets for centuries. The second consists of images, personae, plots, and symbols of the contemporary transnational popular culture, shared globally via advertisement and social networks. Mainly visible, part of the society of spectacle, they are flexible, sexy and unstable, which gave Appadurai reason to call them "global flows"[41]. The implied audience in texts operating with both repertoires no longer coincide with the national imaginary community; thus, it does not need the old "cultural currency" either. The new implied readership (should I say "viewership"?) in such texts is global, quick, flat, and flexible; it needs new reading competences. Therefore, the norm of reading ceased to imply deep and obedient understanding; what is needed is quick and functional orientation.

In turn, this weakens the old educational and cultural institutions of the nation and causes gradual processes of de-standardization and de-normativization of the old cultural capital. Teaching mother tongue and literature gradually lost its prestige and privileged place at the university and schools (despite the efforts of educational officials). This process is fostered by the loss of prestige and authority of all mediators of print culture: the editor, critic, commentator, public intellectual, and journalist.

The rise of new digital cultural "authorities" – bloggers, digital opinion leaders, social media influencers, YouTubers, leaders of spontaneous online communities, amateur reviewers – has little to do with the previous standardization of the cultural currency nor with reproducing canons and the training of devoted readers.

* * *

Approaching my last point, I need one final historical detour in order to gain contrasting perspective.

The printing press and the educational programs of the Enlightenment were designed to enrich every person with basic literacy and provide access to common knowledge and useful skills, including cultural narratives and repertoires of the "shared cultural currency" mentioned above. Yet, this was a program (to a certain extend utopian) for democratization of basic

[41] See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

intellectual goods and mass access to the dominant cultural codes and techniques (its utopian universalism does not hinder it from being at the same time Eurocentric and colonial, sometimes even racist).

Although the digital turn seemed in the beginning even more democratic (especially with regard to mass access), in reality, it proved to be something different. In fact, computers and digital networks operated simultaneously with two incommensurable codes requiring incompatible cultural techniques. The first one was the highly specialized mathematical and cybernetic language of programming, designed to produce instructions to the machines; the second was the repertoire of user-friendly, "intuitive" icons on the screen, designed to be easily "clicked" by laics. With the development of the technological base of the digital revolution, the split between the two idioms broadened more and more; nowadays, no lay user knows what happens behind the screen of his or her laptop.

In a way, this split between the two codes of the leading technology is mirrored by homological changes in all other realms, where expert hyper-specialization has produced similar non-democratic ruptures. The abyss between highly specific expert knowledge and laic consumption has grown in every possible social area: nowadays, many people in the world have problems with basic skills such as reading, arithmetic, and functional literacy; at the same time, small groups of super-experts command extremely sophisticated algorithms controlling satellites, operating with Big Data, or calculating profits on the stock markets. Advertisement and marketing strategies, made by well paid professionals and designed to seduce simpleminded consumers, are another example that easily comes to mind.

This process epitomizes the end of the era of shared literacy, understood as democratic access to basic codes, literacy, and numeracy. However, the crack opened in the cultural technique of reading was not limited to the disturbing "secondary illiteracy" or "functional illiteracy" of the young digital natives – it splits its elitist expert layers, too. Unlike the programming language, the elitist type of reading, previously privileged, lost, as we have demonstrated, its cultural power. The need of public investment in order to preserve the skills of deep, imaginative reading or erudite interpretations has not been obvious for politicians and decision makers for some time already: the benefits for the society seem unclear to them. Therefore, this type of reading has slowly become socially useless and obsolete; this species of expert readers was preserved in small academic "reservations", populated by professors of

literary criticism. By nationalistic inertia, schools and colleges in some countries continue teaching the great national books, yet with little or no success. Their students are in a schizophrenic situation: young digital users of Instagram or YouTube, consumers of global phantasms and cultural commodities[42], they are obliged to follow the obsolete official patriotic curricula – a situation which makes the deep and imaginative reading of the national classics almost impossible.

However, this marginalization of classic reading culture has had its unexpected political consequences. Here I will address only one of them.

During the last decade, the geopolitical situation has changed and populist conservative revolutions against neoliberalism have burst out almost all around the world. Under their flag, local patriotisms, nationalisms, protectionisms, and isolationisms, along with racism and xenophobia, have raised their heads again – and they were active users of digital communication in all its possible forms, too. It seems as if the isolated national states and their silenced conservative majorities are striking back against the global neoliberal network society.

The usual explanations are both economic and cultural: they point at the rising inequalities and uneven distribution of economic risks of global growth, as well as the lack of cultural recognition and the traumatized collective identities of the local "losers" from globalization.

In general, these explanations are possibly true, yet reading research could contribute here and explain in greater details the specificity of the new nationalisms. Being a populist in a digital world, using massively all the resources of the new digital turn: nationalistic websites, platforms, networks, digital clubs and communities, has flourished. These developments are not rooted in the previous national printed culture of the great books and in deep, critical reading, but in the global pop-cultural and digitally circulating popular imaginary; therefore, all their patriotic symbols and symbolling repertoires are reinterpreted and reframed accordingly. The identity-building process of the new digital generations is not based on devoted deep reading and adopting the paragons and models of the "classic" national culture, not to mention the "mysteries" and ciphers of the national canons and intertexts. For the new digital patriots, the

[42] In some countries today (Bulgaria included), young students in schools still read in a kind of split: they are supposed to read the national classics at school with patriotic fever; outside schools, they are typical consumers of electronic games, fantasy novels, and the global popular imaginary. They are competent, not in old reading, but in quick and easy usage of all popular genres, both verbal and visual. The interactive culture of sharing and mixing images and short messages in the social network make the educational situation even more split and schizophrenic.

previous cultural currency of the great books was useless; they were trained in easy usage of icons, avatars, and instant visual codes. Thus, the dominant language of the new populist patriotism shifted away from the intellectual depths of the institutionalized national tradition and moved in the direction of the visual culture of easy emblems. These emblems were national only in their surface value: national flags, emblematic portraits of national heroes, coats of arms, exotic rural and folklore signs in clothing, material culture of rural houses, etc; in fact, they were a negation of "the depths" of the national cultures. These visible and easy patriotic symbols were spread around all possible urban private and public spaces, hanging on the windows of houses, in public transportation and private cars, even transformed into patriotic tattoos on the patriotic bodies of soccer fans, racists, and activists leaning to the extreme right of the political spectrum[43]. A deep abyss between the two types of nationalism emerged – the old one, based on previous national printed culture, at least with pretense for intellectual achievements and spiritual depths, was marginalized and became unintelligible. The new one, based on limited textual literacy and much more on popular visual consumerism, conquered a lot of naïve young digital hearts. The new technologies, reproducing massively banal patriotic emblems and allowing the easy reproduction, exchange, appropriation, and remixing of images, strongly contributed to that process of simplifying the patriotic popular imaginary. The language of populist isolationist patriotism ceased to be verbal. It became visual, consisting of a limited number of banal national emblems, sometimes producing the effect of "self-exoticism." However, in its form and visual grammar, it reproduced at the same time the repertoires of the global popular imaginary. Sometimes this is true not only on the level of the global visual grammar of this imaginary, but also in terms of the content of the images: the patriotic emblems easily mix with the global emblems of the extreme right – swastikas, Nazi-eagles, military or heavy metal emblems, etc.

[43] See Александър Кьосев. „Преводимост и непреводимост".

Visual nationalism. Tutorages on the bodies of members of extreme right groups in Bulgaria – the national flag, the national blazon, and the faces of national heroes are mixed with Nazi-emblems. The "cultural currency" of nationalism lost its bond to the old verbal cultural repertoires, becoming visualized, flat, and global (the pictures are from the site https://hooligans.bg/; the platform of the Bulgarian soccer fans).

* * *

This sketchy paper ends here. I hope I have located some hypothetical crossroads between the macro-frame of social change and the micro-changes in the area of reading techniques. My point is that contemporary reading practices cannot be investigated solely in the reified framework of the "screen vs. paper" juxtaposition. They are part of a complex universe, where printing still exists and digital technology is chained to a series of other global changes – in supply and consumption, in late modern temporal patterns, in the new language situations and transformed literary markets, the populist political situation and its new popular imaginary. The above mentioned "crossroads" should be read as heuristic hypotheses only. I hope they could open interesting opportunities for future research.

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