Review

Anouk Lang (ed.), *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the turn of the twenty-first century,* **Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. ISBN 978-1-55849-953-9. 272 pp.**

This edited collection presents a range of outcomes from an AHRC funded project on transliteracies. The key themes addressed are in keeping with the funding body's concerns – the shifting nature of cultural authority, the social conditions for the production and consumption of text and how best to account for the practices of reading at this point of transition. The transition is framed as two-fold – a temporal 'crossroads' – the turn of the century and as partly determined by technology – providing 'exciting possibilities' for readers and scholars. However, the value of the research conducted and shared in this collection lies in its bearing witness to the continuities in reading practices from one time period and technological context to another.

For example, in exploring the structural forces at work in framing literacy, the editor observes that the impact of the reductive reading practices privileged in formal education cannot 'be undone overnight' by the affordances of online reading communities and transliteracy transgressions. Equally, the 'analogue age' works of Bourdieu, Grafton and De Certeau remain the key theoretical tools for understanding the complex hybridity of contemporary on / off line reading, both for the editor and the authors of individual chapters, Bourdieu, for example, is put to work on digital networks providing new 'architectures of connection' for Toni Morrison's readers and Science Fiction book groups. The appropriation of research methods for mining digital reading and network data is also a recurrent theme. Allington and Benwell use ethnomethodology to understand readers' descriptions of reading experiences as 'accounts constructing reality' (218), in itself not so distinct from the majority of 'situated' reception approaches – critical discourse analysis, for one. But the authors explain the process of examining the sequential ordering of 'turns' in conversations and exemplify this with a detailed analysis of a book group discussion around Jackie Long's *The Adoption Papers*. As responses get validated to a greater or lesser extent in the conversation, so we can see accounting as subject to hierarchical arrangements of discourse and, importantly, the authors propose convincingly such a focus as equally pertinent to online and 'physical' reading networks, in keeping with the book's attention to hybridity and continuity, as opposed to a clear-cut 'paradigm shift', as "..with its reading groups and mass literacy events, "lit blogs" and book rating sites, twenty-first century

literacy culture arguably provides readers with more opportunities than ever before to persuade one another, and be persuaded in turn". (231)

For the field of audience and reception studies, the importance of this book is clear and three elements seem to be the most prominent, each of which are 'well-trodden' in recent discussions and debates around how communities of practice might be 'regrouping' for the digital age.

The exercising of power within complex and hybrid configurations of gatekeeping and hierarchy is assessed in relation to cultural and geo-political change, along with technological shifts. Jim Feng traces the consumption and exchange of Chinese popular fiction online, whilst Molly Abel Travis looks at tensions and contradictions arising from attempts to develop a national culture through reading in South African education. In the latter analysis, we are reminded that digitization of literature serves mainly to reconstitute divisions of access, with under 7% of the population online.

Academic and research disciplines – and the challenges presented by the internet for long-standing insulations between modes of each – are discussed by Fuller and Sedo in their account of a mixed methods approach to the 'One Book, One Community' project, for which quantitative surveys, participant observation, interviews and focus groups were used in combination, as "in order to produce a nuanced analysis of this transnational cultural formation focused around shared reading, it is necessary to gather data by using a multilayered, multisite approach that honors the standpoints of differently positioned actors" (p246). Like the aforementioned description of 'ethnomethodology', this chapter is typical of the book's central assertion – that the hybridity and complexity of contemporary reading practices 'in transition' require a mirroring approach to research paradigms and methods and thus we should also consider ourselves 'in transition'.

Textual authority and attendant regimes of value are most notably traced in David Wright's analysis of 'list culture' and associated patterns of taste and influence. Responding to Chris Anderson's over-blown theory of the 'Long Tail', here the 'heteronomization' of the literary field is understood to be at once liberating and stifling with, naturally, Bourdieu's work on 'distinction' brought to bear. Here, the interplay of commercial imperatives and peer-to-peer listing is described as 'recasting of cultural engagements as a form of competition' (p115).

Reading this collection, it quickly struck me as being a 'bridge between two other texts exploring similar themes – Jim Collins' *Bring on the Books for Everybody* and Cousins and Ramone's edited reader about the *Richard and Judy Book Club*. It has one weakness, which it shares with these other contributions in its failure to really explore the nature of contemporary literacy beyond text in character form (of whatever flavour, printed or HTML). There is no research here into videogame play as a form of reading, for example, or the topical and much debated hypothesis that coding might be understood as a form of writing. In this sense, it might be accused of paying lip service to the complex, hybrid nature of twenty-first century reading but only going halfway. But that this shortcoming should be something the collection makes no claims to attempt is testimony to the quality of Lang's

book, which is entirely research-based, consistently theorized and never guilty of lapsing into 'paradigm shift' simplicity.

Another gap is the lack of a concluding 'afterword' to draw the key themes back together and suggest the next chapter for this ongoing project of researching reading practices in their socio-cultural contexts. Again, this is a criticism drawn from a desire to read more, as opposed to a problem with anything presented.

In the end, *From Codex to Hypertext* states a clear objective, to map the continuities in reading from mass literacy, through the analogue age and into the digital and, most importantly, to offer research from a broad range of contexts, only some of which are online (in this sense the title might mislead the potential reader into assuming a '2.0' position which is never taken). This objective is entirely met and the outcome is a wealth of key data with which to discuss what it means, for different people in different spaces and places, to read and participate in culture in 2013.

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