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## TO MOVE, TO TOUCH, TO LISTEN

### MULTISENSORY ASPECTS OF THE DIGITAL READING CONDITION

#### Abstract

The article discusses modes of reading that emerge from reading situations that involve literary digital interfaces and digital audiobooks. Building on analyses of sensorial characteristics of the act of reading a digital audiobook and a literary digital app respectively, the article presents and defines the concept of multisensory reading. This concept emphasizes the literary work's material and performative features as well as the experienced reading situation. The article explores how the digital literary interface changes reading situations, and argues that new reading habits create a need to renegotiate what it means to read in a digital age. In particular, this article argues that sensory aspects can be understood as integrally involved in what we term the digital reading condition.

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The ways in which we meet literature are rapidly changing in contemporary media culture due in large part to processes of digitization. As literary texts are published using the multimodal affordances and network capacities offered by digital media, existing concepts of literature and the practices of writing and reading shift toward using different semiotic resources (e.g. language, voices, gestures, images) and modalities (e.g. visual, aural, somatic). The *sensorial* modes (listening, seeing, touching and interactively engaging with digital texts) through which reading takes place in this literary media landscape change the act of reading itself and challenge us to rethink how to understand and define reading as a mediated practice. In what follows, we will present cases of digital reading that make it evident that this attention towards mediacy in the reading situation also sheds new light on the importance of the sensory aspects of reading printed books.

This article examines the impact of digitization on reading practices by taking two specific reading examples as its point of departure: the reading of the digital audio book *The Testaments* and the literary digital app *Pry*. The analysis foregrounds how the materiality of the literary work, perception and the human sensorium become integral to the reading practices. The article outlines the qualitative characteristics of multisensory reading of literature in a digital age, asking: How does the digital literary interface change the current reading situation? And how can sensory aspects be understood as being part of the digital reading experience?

## Reading digitally - two vignettes

1.

When you open and close James's eyes with your fingers by touching the screen, you can hear the sound of paper being curled into a ball. James, the protagonist of *Pry*, is looking at the ceiling (and so are you) which is gray and dirty with dark stains. You see a lamp and a fire alarm. You hear a whisper and an eerie whistling intensifies your sensation of lying on a bed, looking up. On the screen it says, "Right, can't move". When you close your/James's eyes, there is a new sound, this time an instrumental tune, and then words – patience, sleep, typical, in, damage, waking – flicker in a box in the middle of the iPad screen. The words are interspersed with black-and-white close-ups of various objects: an eye, an instrument to measure eye strength, fragments of Snellen charts.

The alarming and eerie atmosphere in the story is affecting, and influences the way you think of your own surroundings. You are reading a work of digital literature: *Pry* by Danny Cannizzaro and Samantha Gorman from the art and game studio Tender Claws (2015-2016). It is described as a "cinematic novella" by the authors, and it could be characterized as a prose piece at the border between a short story and a novel. However, *Pry* also relates to other forms such as films and computer games. Most obviously, it experiments with using the touch screen on mobile devices as an interface for reading. If the reader excuses our pun, the work is indeed prying – perhaps uncomfortably for some readers – into the ways literary texts can be realized digitally.

You continue your reading of *Pry* the following day on the train. Now you are reading from a smartphone with earphones. Again, you become engrossed by reading about James's experiences and his thoughts from his sickbed; the flashbacks to his childhood and to the war. You become occupied by rereading several chapters, since you can earn diamonds after each chapter, depending on how thoroughly you have read the chapter. This is reminiscent of the logic of computer games and the ways in which they foreground progress through game-play. So now you try to probe every corner of the story and you discover that it is being realized in different ways depending on how long you open and close James's eyes or in which direction your finger moves big fragments of text.

2.

You are late, running down the stairs from your third-floor apartment, but you take your time to open the *Audible* app (the Amazon-owned audio streaming service) on your smartphone and press the play-button for the audiobook *The Testaments* by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. You are using noise-cancelling headphones to shut out the sounds of morning traffic. Settling into a stable walking rhythm, you slowly leave the hectic morning behind and attune to the fictive theocratic dictatorship Gilead in

a futuristic Northern America, which is in sharp contrast to the modern urban life that surrounds your 40-minute walk through the changing scenery of Montreal. From the quietness of the Old Port through noisy roadwork and construction in Chinatown and the city center to the vivid campus life around McGill University at Rue Sherbrooke.

Today, you have reached chapter three and you are listening to the performing narrator, Bryce Dallas Howard, giving voice to a report of Witness 369A, the 8- or 9-year-old girl Agnes Jemima. Howard speaks in a neutral and relaxed manner as an adult looking back on her past, but makes her voice high-pitched and girlish when directly representing the girl. The voices in your ears change during the walk, which makes it easier to differentiate between the characters of the written dialogue, something that can be difficult in audiobooks. Suddenly, you recognize Atwood's own voice introducing Part III, and the atmosphere changes radically with Aunt Lydia's deep mature authoritative voice as the narrator of Part III (performed by actress Ann Dowd). *The Testaments* is the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, a novel from 1985 that was made into a television series 2017. The noise of sirens on a passing fire truck at Rue Sherbrooke suddenly penetrates the noise cancelling function of your headphones. After having your attention divided between the fictional world of Gilead and the physical world around you for a while, you now turn your attention to another day at the office. With the restricted and fundamentalistic society of Gilead still resonating in the back of your head, you appreciate living in a democracy with broad access to education while being surrounded by young students who freely enter the campus area.

These introductory vignettes, detailed descriptions of specific reading situations that involve literary digital interfaces, are meant as an introduction to the sensorial, contextually specific characteristics of the act of reading a literary app and a digital audiobook respectively. The examples describe concrete uses of specific interfaces and the experiences of reading that these afford. Our analysis in what follows focuses on literary works' material and performative features and what kind of reading emerges, rather than in-depth hermeneutic or formal analysis of these works of art, although we see such studies as complementary to our focus.

### **The Reading Condition: Theoretical Points of Departure**

The two examples of reading experiences involve several senses, in distinct and different manners: *Pry* prescribes a reading experience that involves touching, listening and seeing. The multisensory aspects of this situation are inherent in the affordances of the digital media itself. The digital audiobook offers different sensory reading possibilities, so the multisensory aspects of the mobile reading situation described above are related to a specific use of the digital audiobook. The backdrop of our investigation of a set of digital texts is of course the general influence of digitization on texts – from writing and

production to publication and consumption. This changing condition has been well researched in the past thirty years by textual studies and literary scholars (Bolter 1991; Striphos 2009; Svedjedal 2000; Hjarvard & Helles 2015). National and international organizations have mapped the impact of digital technologies on reading habits and literacy.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, digitization has created new conditions for the book as a medium as well as for literature as an institution. When it comes to production, distribution and consumption, we witness changes in the traditional circuits of the book market, for instance the conflation of formerly separated roles, such as when readers become content creators or publishers (Murray & Squires 2013).

It is a commonplace in research on literary materiality to note that during the past several hundred years, literature and much of literary scholarship have become inextricably connected to the printed book, whereas other forms have been largely overlooked. The history of the book has been traced within media and communication studies, textual studies, book history and publishing studies, in which the mass production of text is emphasized as the decisive factor in the change from a media matrix characterized by orality to one dominated by printed words and visual reading (McLuhan 1964; Eisenstein 1979; Ong 1982; Meyrowitz 1985; Finnemann 2005). McLuhan described this development as a cultural transformation from an acoustic to a visual space of perception, with a communicative separation in time and space (McLuhan 2006). The general mediatization of literature as a cultural shift was explored by Hjarvard in his research project on e-books (2013) as well as by literary scholars such as Hayles (2002, 2008, 2010; Hayles & Pressman 2013) who have studied electronic literature as a born digital phenomenon with ties to print cultures.

Generally, research on reading follows two main tendencies: on the one hand, research that primarily focuses on the cultural impact of digital reading as a “new media” phenomenon (for instance Baron and Hayles), and on the other hand, research in didactics or national education contexts that focuses primarily on teaching children in primary or secondary school. Reading practices have been addressed from aesthetic, cognitive and historical perspectives (Kukkonen 2017; Manguel 1996, 2010; Olsson 2015), from reception aesthetics, which includes the concept of reader positions (Iser 1976; Olsson 2015). As regards reading in a digital culture, Naomi Baron has conceptualized reading as an aspect of electronically-mediated communication and technology (2010, 2012). Baron (2015), Hayles (2002, 2004, 2008, 2010), Hayles and Pressmann (2013) and Manguel (2008, 2013, 2014) all emphasize that materiality and technology matter when we read.

While many digital texts on screens that mimic conventional print layouts may seem to continue the visually dominant reading mode, digital texts more often foreground the multimodal

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<sup>1</sup> These reports include but are not limited to the Danish reports *Bogen og litteraturens vilkår* (2016) and *Danmark læser* (2015), the American reports *Reading at Risk* (2004) and *Reading on the Rise* (2009), and the Swedish report *Läsandets kultur* (2012).

affordances that web pages and applications offer. Text and images are prevalent in current media contexts, which allow for cheaper printing costs of images as well as digital modes of publication that can facilitate interactivity, still and moving images and sound. Research into multimodal educational tools is fairly well developed as is the understanding of reading as multimodal in terms of literacy (Illum Hansen 2010; Kress 2010; Jewitt & Kress 2003). At the same time, we see new multimodal forms of literature emerge in digital forms that require a different set of reading strategies, often ones that address most of the human sensorium. By adding and foregrounding the sensorial reading perspective of these emerging digital texts as an aesthetic and hermeneutic quality, we wish to nuance theoretical positions on reading, constructing a path between the educational context and the digital reading conceptions in media and literary studies.

One poignant example of the shifts in reading practices in recent years is the remarkable rise of the audiobook, often referred to as the “audiobook revolution” or “the silent revolution” (*Bogens og Litteraturens vilkår* 2016). The limited research that has been done so far on audiobooks clearly concludes that audiobooks until recently have been aimed predominantly at children, weak readers, and the visually impaired (Rubery 2011; Have & Pedersen 2016). Mobile audio reading has simply been regarded as a shortcut to “real” reading (Kozloff 1995). Only recently has it been suggested that audio can promote literacy, increase reading accuracy, and improve motivation as well as comprehension, hereby emphasizing the learning potentials of sound (Toms 2016; APA 2019). However, reading with the ears is still often met with a biased conception of listening as a second grade, lazy way of reading (Kozloff 1995; Have & Stougaard Pedersen 2016). On the contrary, we argue, reading with the ears or reading through touch and movement are competences that need to be refined and developed, and that require analytic attunement.

Even though post-phenomenological researchers such as Don Ihde (2007) have long considered technology in the everyday life as agents in meaning production, we still find that there is a lack of studies in current academic research of the importance of sensorial dimensions when reading and understanding digital literary media such as audiobooks and apps. Not contending with rhetorical questions such as Baron’s “does it matter what medium we use for reading” (2015: ix), we ask instead how it matters to read via media that actively call upon a number of human senses as part of the reading situation. In fact, there is an emerging interest in how the multisensory aspects of digital reading give rise to a growing focus on the reading situation involving the printed book, whose layout and reading conventions have been made transparent or conventionally naturalized. This trend is however beyond the scope of this article.

## **“Full-bodied” understanding of reading**

Reading has always engaged several of the human senses. We read a print book as an activity that primarily means seeing the text with our eyes, turning the pages with our hands and being aware of our body while registering our auditory surroundings. As Wolpert has noted, reading is already in itself multimodal (Wolpert 1971). We listen to words (auditory faculties) as well as pronounce them (kinetic faculties) while we learn to spell and read. However, digitization has changed contemporary reading practices, even for the very young, and the prevalence of purposefully multisensory reading is increasing. When analysing the current moment of multisensory, multimodal digital ways of reading as the digital condition, we are obviously influenced by literary and textual scholar Jerome McGann’s influential concept of “the textual condition” (1991). McGann argues that textuality constitutes material and social acts that become a matter of inscription and articulation situated within particular historical and cultural contexts. Increasing use of visual, auditory, tactile and motion registers in digital literary texts as a deliberate part of inscription requires an analysis of what we call “the digital reading condition.” Current acts of reading are fundamentally conditioned by changing materiality in a digital age. We need to develop more dynamic models of multisensory reading that take into account what Hayles has called media-specific analyses for both print reading and digital reading (2002, 2004).

Partly based on studies of digital literature which by way of its penchant for material experimentation has foregrounded multisensory mediations, we explore here how it matters to read media forms that activate most, if not the whole of the human sensorium. The sensorial aspects of reading through digital interfaces are at the heart of our inquiry, whether those interfaces be employed for aesthetic purposes as in *Pry*, or to widen the distribution channels and have a wider access to literary works as in the case of *The Testaments*. We ask how digital affordances affect our conceptions of reading. Reading – commonly understood primarily as the decoding of letters on a traditionally printed page along with an intellectual engagement with the text presented – is challenged when more senses are mobilized to achieve a reading experience that include listening, seeing, walking, tapping, and scrolling. Moreover, when reading can take place while the reader is engaged in another activities, such as walking or driving while reading an audiobook, the perception of being in the world seeps into the overall experience. The reading condition changes when we need to use more senses actively. Consequently, we argue that a reconceptualization of reading as a practice is called for, prompted by the now multiple digital reading practices that have emerged in the wake of digitization of literary production and distribution.

The meaning of various sense perceptions as reading presents us with a challenge when we talk about reading a literary app or an audiobook. Scholars such as Birkerts, Carr, and Baron have in different ways pointed to how digital reading, particularly in a web context, can create distraction. The materiality of a text is often invoked when questions of deep or concentrated reading are posed: can

the reading of an audiobook or an app even when the reader concentrates allow for the same kind of concentration and focus as concentrated reading of a printed book? Deep reading has been defined as a quality belonging to print based literature, a quality Birkerts described as “the slow and meditative possession of a book” (Birkerts 1994: 146) whereas digital media like apps and audiobooks appear to engage their reader on different terms.

When Birkerts and Carr lament a loss of deep reading, they are reacting to what they see as changed reading conditions due to digital networked media that, according to them, primarily invite distraction and immediacy. Reading contexts that Maryanne Wolf has suggested invite us to become “mere decoders of information” (Wolf 2008). Digital media offer other affordances for the creation of literary experiences, however, than just ease of access or the speed of information retrieval in networked media. At the forefront are, we suggest, sensorial, perceptual and phenomenological dimensions. With this in mind, concepts of literary and performative materiality (McGann 1991; Hayles 2002), or Böhme’s notion of aesthetic sensory atmospheric experiences (2001), and Koepnick’s concept of (acoustic) resonance (2019) inform our conceptualization of digital reading. The digital is, in the case of our examples, rather than a busy network of potential distractions, an interface to experiences. What Johanna Drucker has called “a constitutive boundary space” (Drucker 2013a) by which we understand our “study object” as a mediated meeting or situation, a structuring interspace with aesthetic and cultural reach in reading processes.

Our emphasis on the sensory aspects of reading corresponds to some of the points frequently made by David Howes regarding sensory studies in the face of logocentrism. Howes has argued that we challenge the long history of hierarchies of sense perception where language and writing have been unequivocally dominant in terms of understanding social systems. In its stead, he advocates for a “full-bodied understanding of culture and experience” (Howes 2005: 1). Listening, seeing and touching take part in the meaning creation of culturally situated processes of multisensory reading. Reading an app includes interacting with a touchscreen, which uses predefined multi-touch finger gestures like tapping, pressing and scrolling. Listening to an audiobook foregrounds the auditory sense while sight and the listener’s body are liberated for possible mobile activities. As our brief description of the listening of the audiobook version of Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* reveals, we find different affordances: it is a sound recording of a book performed by several performing narrators, as well as the author herself. There are technical aspects to audiobooks, which must be taken into consideration in the analysis, such as how the novel is accessed (through a mobile device, headphones, streaming or downloading)? Eventually, the sensory situation as a whole should be considered: what do we do while reading? What is the concrete, possibly mobile situation we find ourselves in while reading, and how does the reading affect our experience of time and space? (Have & Stougaard Pedersen 2016, 2018).



Rich descriptions of these multisensory and complex reading situations are required and call for concepts that address what happens.

### **The Reading Condition: Atmosphere, Attunement, and Resonance**

The way in which we conceptualize the reading condition includes the reading act and experience as a process that unfolds in (a particular) time and space. A sensorially pregnant reading situation that emerges in part from the affordances of the medium, suggests a phenomenological stance. In particular, we are influenced by the concept of “aesthetic atmosphere” by the German philosopher Gernot Böhme (2001) as well as Lutz Koepnick’s concept of “resonance” (2019). According to Böhme, a space can appear to us both as a medium of representation and as a space of bodily presence. Böhme argues that it is possible for a specific space to produce a certain affective atmosphere that is not the result of projections of the subject’s inner sentiment. The atmosphere of a space is something that can affect us when we step into a certain physical room, for instance a church, a museum or a bar. The concept of atmosphere relates to the notion of attunement, which has gained great popularity within sound studies (Højlund 2017; Thibeaud 2017), and describes the ways in which we engage with, gain knowledge from or otherwise tune into and pay attention to sounding environments. The affective dimension of attuning to an aesthetic atmosphere is difficult to articulate analytically, but nevertheless remains part of the overall reading situation and its “moods.” We become attuned to the phenomenological situation that includes both the mediation and the lived world. In the above vignette about a reading experience of *The Testaments*, the aesthetic properties of the literary work in audio form inflected and interacted with the reader’s experience of the world around them.

More specifically related to the context of reading audible digital interfaces, Koepnick has introduced the concept of acoustical resonance, insisting that audiobook reading takes place in a multisensory complexity, which is necessary to take into consideration in order to better understand the complicated cognitive frameworks of perception and attention (2019: 3). Koepnick discusses the role of listening as reading in the landscape of attentional economies of new media. For Koepnick, the reading of audiobooks is not considered a withdrawal from the world but an activity that “transforms books into matters of the world” (2019: 5) as also illustrated in the introductory vignette. The audiobook, in Koepnick’s words, offers not an uncritical consumption but a resonant reading: “...of engaging and being engaged by literary materials in the expanded field of digital culture” (2019: 10).

Building on Koepnick’s concept of resonant reading in the context of audiobooks and digital literary apps, we suggest that reading with the ears and reading through touch, alongside other senses,

become kinds of reading that support and intensify the relation between reader, interface, and the world.

The intensity of reading an audiobook or reading a literary app can be very different from the experience of reading a printed book. There can be ludic elements in the app-reading that deepen the reading experience in intense shorter moments. Regarding the audiobook, the rhetorical dimension of a performing narrator addressing a listener can be experienced as intense. It can enhance the audible aspects of language itself, attract the listeners' attention to the sounds of the words and the rhythm of the reading voice and the language itself. However, the opposite can also be the case, that the voice is primarily good company that makes you relaxed – the experience of the voice adds a soothing sound filter to your other activities. In order to better understand how resonance, atmosphere and attunement function in the multisensory reading conditions of our two examples we need to address them in closer detail.

### **Reading *Pry*: A Literary App**

*Pry* tells the story of James who was in the Gulf War of 1990-91 and whose life has changed dramatically. He is losing his eyesight; he is tormented by memory flashes from the war, and his relationships with his brother and a woman are complicated. Throughout several chapters, the reader drives the plot forward by opening and closing James's eyes on the touch screen, sharing his point of view and getting direct access to his subconscious when the eyes are closed. In this way, his inner and outer world become one and the reader experiences his perspective on the world from his sickbed very intensely; this is part of the reason that it may take the reader a long time to realize that James may be an unreliable narrator.

In *Pry*, as the earlier vignette described, you do not move forward by turning the page from the upper right corner but by touching the interface and thereby moving around in picture and text sequences, and activating sound and film sequences. The number of diamonds determines the realization of the text in the appendix. The chapters are based on different premises: one is predominantly cinematic, another is written predominantly in Braille, which is overtly paradoxical as the reader would not be able to decode normal Braille text on the flat glass screen of the device. When you touch the writing, however, the words are read out and film fragments and old photos are seen behind the Braille. Thus, the sensory diversity of the reading is thematized; you read based on sight, hearing and touch. Reading the interface of this literary app is an exploratory, relational and haptic experience in contrast to the generally more convention-bound experience of reading a paper-based novel or watching a movie, both media forms that have well established reading and viewing practices.

*Pry* is, as described, an experimental form of literature in app format. Apps, short for applications, are often defined technically as computer software programs that are well suited for

interactive media-rich content, particularly when created for mobile devices (Scolari, Aguado and Feijóo, 2012). Works that take into account the affordances of mobile devices can consequently create a digital interface that affects the reader's experience of the text both materially and (multi-) sensorially. This coexistence and simultaneity of the layers of mediation, of narrative expression, impact the sensory shape that the reading experience can take, in particular because the mediation can appeal to visual, auditory and touch senses. *Pry* creates a spatial environment with reverberating sounds and visuals that convey the sense that the reader is in the rooms with James, now and then "borrowing" his sight and emotions. The work's multimodality draws on various art forms like film, photography, computer games and music alongside the text. It generates digressions in the temporal progression and many of the chapters express moods like restlessness, confusion and anxiety, mixed with fragments of flashbacks from James's childhood and his time during the Gulf War. Although *Pry* appears to be linear the first time you open it – it seems to have a straightforward construction of seven chapters, a prologue, an appendix and an epilogue all placed on a horizontal line – the act of reading it quickly confounds expectations of narrative structure and temporal coherence. Even after several re-readings and movements back and forth between and in the chapters, *Pry* strikes one as narratively disjointed and unresolved.

In its app format, the work often exploits the juxtaposition of expression forms to demonstrate that spatial staging can take place not only verbally but, by using sound and film sequences, the work can create depth and spatiotemporal narrative rooms that we experience as much as "read." An example can be found in chapter three, the title of which, "Jacob and Esau," emphasizes the importance of brotherhood in the work. The entrance to the chapter is a film sequence that shows a book – probably a Bible – and a plaster head being shot at (shooting is a recurrent motif in *Pry*). This sequence is repeated endlessly until the reader touches the interface and begins reading the chapter. The chapter is written in Braille which means that reading can only occur when the readers move their finger over the points. In physical form, Braille is of course reliant on the reader's fingers interpreting the embossed surface. Here, the same physical action on a flat screen activates a voice that narrates the text while video clips from the brothers' childhood and the war flicker in the background. The juxtaposition of text, moving images, the touching of the interface and reading speed determined by the movement of the fingers mimicking the usual actions while reading a braille text become a complex multisensory reading experience (Henkel 2017).

Reading *Pry* is thus a reading experience which depends on your finger movements across the touch screen. Therefore, a certain sense of arbitrariness prevails and the reading experience changes a bit every time a new chapter is opened. *Pry* seems to offer an open and labyrinthine reading path where the reader can realize the story with variations and be invited to reread chapters to earn more diamonds. Readers who have experienced the hypertexts of the 1980s and 1990s, for instance Michael Joyce's

*afternoon: a story* (1987; 1990), will perhaps be reminded of these forking paths among semiotic units, or what was sometimes called lexias (borrowing Roland Barthes's terminology) that moved the reader through stories that multiplied, converged and diverged.

Aesthetically, *Pry* is often characterized by a repetitive structure and peculiar rhythm, or layers that lie one on top of the other. The entrance to the appendix is a burning book that rotates to the sound of crackling fire until the reader touches the screen. Then, the fire increases until the reader lets go of the screen and a seemingly endless text appears, prompting the reader to retrieve text from all directions in a document that seems to lack edges. This repetitive structure has a suggestive effect on the reader who is not primarily invited to focus on temporal progression or causality between various parts of the work, but rather on atmosphere and sensation.

*Pry* exemplifies how the reading of a digital interface can lead to a complex sensory and material interaction with literature, impacting on the act of reading and the reading situation. The digital mediation of a literary app has various aspects. In *Pry*, meaning is created in the interaction between text, image, sound, music and film sequences, which together make up the narrative about the relationship between brothers, about love and lust, about memory and going through traumatic experiences. Another meaning making mediation depends on how the app is read via affordances of an iPad or smartphone, specifically the haptics by which the reader realizes and interacts with the work. The fact that the reader's fingers seem to touch words and get a reaction become part of a resonant reading experience (Koepnick 2019). Hayles's definition of literary materiality foregrounds the impossibility of an unmediated object; no matter how transparent an interface might be, the mediated immediacy will position the reader in a specific relation to the fictional world (Hayles 2002: 107). This is also the case in *Pry*, where the reader is drawn into the fictional universe through many senses: seeing, listening and feeling how the app in a metafictional and media-reflective way thematizes what a narrative can be and do, offering the reader an opportunity to pry into the possibilities for realizing literature in the digital age.

### **Reading *The Testaments*: A Digital Audiobook**

The audiobook of *The Testaments* (Penguin Audio 2019) lasts 13 hours and 18 minutes in this unabridged version structured in three parts and 71 Chapters just like the original printed book. *The Testaments* is an example of how a multi-cast can be used in digital audiobooks. Instead of only one consistent performing narrator, the recording includes one narrator for each of the three main female characters in the story: Bryce Dallas Howard gives voice to Witness 369A, a woman who grew up in Gilead and whom we follow from a little girl to an adult through the novel. Mae Whitman performs Witness 369B, a teenager in Canada who, as her dramatic story progresses, realizes that she has ties to Gilead. Two male voices, Derek Jacobi and Tantoo Cardinal, read Professor James Darcy Pieixoto and

Professor Maryanne Crescent Moon, two scholars who speak at an annual Gileadean studies conference long after the fall of the Republic in the book's epilogue. The sixth performing narrator is Atwood, the author, herself. She introduces the book, the 27 parts and the last reflections and credits. The three parts represent the three women. The voices performed by Howard are distinctly performed: for instance, the character Agnes grew up with three servants, the so-called Marthas: "Zilla was my favorite because she spoke very softly, whereas Vera had a harsh voice and Rosa had a scowl". These voice qualities are clearly audible in Howard's presentation. In that sense, this specific version of *The Testaments* adds an audiobook-specific affordance related to the polyphony of voices of the text. We meet the voices of the text as a concrete example of a way to actively orchestrate how the novel performs and enacts different narrated positions.

As the article's second vignette illustrates, the reading of *The Testaments* attunes to the shifting atmospheres of the urban spaces of Montreal. A reciprocal listening situation emerges: the story shapes your attention towards the surroundings, and your walking body in a shifting urban land- and soundscape continuously affects your experience of the story. The moving reader is engaged in two worlds that dynamically merge and demand variable degrees of attention. In Koepnick's terms, this is an example of resonant reading, where the literary experience resonates and becomes interwoven with the specific surroundings and therefore must be analyzed as a multisensory, multilayered dynamic complexity.

The specific technology (and the quality of it) also matters when analyzing the intellectual and physical access to literature through mobile devices, headphones and apps of streaming services (Have & Pedersen, 2018). It may be easier to be immersed in an audiobook through hi-fi, ear-covering noise-cancelling headphones than through low-fi earplugs that let in surrounding sounds and might distract by drawing attention towards activities in the physical surroundings.

Koepnick's concept of attentive and engaging resonant reading resonates with media scholar Kate Lacey's arguments in the book *The Listening Public* (2013), where she rethinks the broad evolution of media and communication in relation to listening. She differentiates between "listening in" as a receptive and mediatized communicative action – when we listen to specific media texts, and "listening out" which is an attentive and anticipatory communicative disposition similar to Koepnick's term resonant reading. Lacey further discusses the difference between the *reading* public (people with the critical skill of literacy) and a more open and attentive *listening* public. Lacey's main argument is that listening, as a communicative and participatory act, is also political in the Habermasian sense. The notion of a listening public that emerged with sound media at its infancy at the turn of the last century has tended primarily to be associated with particular texts or media, with no connotations of latent critical practice. Lacey uses the term 'listening' in a metaphorical sense as a more attentive and participatory way of perceiving and engaging in the world. Just like Koepnick uses the audiobook to

develop the more general concept of resonant reading, she uses the term listening in a broader discussion of critical, public reception.

There is a tendency within the field of Sound Studies to focus on mobile listening as something subjective and individualized, partly because of the context in which mobile listening happens (Bull 2007). Lacey's notion of a listening public is opposed to this. With Lacey, we would argue that the key is the turn to an acoustic rather than a visual register in understanding the mediated world, which can shift our attention from the subjectivity of the individual to the intersubjectivity of the public, plural world (Lacey 2013). Thinking through the question of addressing the audience as a listening public might then be productive for how we think about a whole range of questions about the media, both contemporary and historical (and about listening, not from a micro- but from a macro-perspective).

In line with Koepnick, we study the audiobook not only as a story read aloud or as a remediation of a written text, but also as a part of digital, mobile audio culture and a tertiary orality afforded by digital media (Have & Pedersen 2016). As the vignette from the beginning of the article illustrates, audiobooks invite a "hearing [that] both occupies and evacuates us, fills us up and spreads us out" (Connor 2008: 1) in a reciprocal process between listening to the narrative, attending to the atmosphere in the novel while being physically present in a body that moves through the environment. Koepnick argues that the audiobook can combine a concentrated mode of listening – being immersed in a story – with a more differentiated engagement with the world around you, "reading as a mode of reciprocal entanglement" (2019: 16). The experience of intensity while reading will change due to the character of the specific interface the reading takes place in as well as the different media types, and technologies will afford different processes of intensity and absorption. When the audiobook is used in a mobile setting, the rhythm of walking intertwines with the rhythm of the voice reading. These specific multisensory aspects of the audiobook experience are not inherent affordances in the medium itself. The audiobook offers a number of different possibilities for audio reading – reading in your bed, reading while knitting or reading on the move. However, as previous investigations of digital audiobooks have shown (Have & Pedersen 2016), reading while being on the move is often foregrounded when informants are asked to describe their audio reading activities.

### **Literary Materialities: Reading Digital Interfaces**

In order to understand digital multimodal tactile reading and the reading of audiobooks as resonant and atmospherically influenced, we need to further articulate the relationship between the reader and the interface. Tuning into the sensorial aspects of the reading situation marks a shift from what a text *is* to what a text *does*. That is, a shift toward literary-material analyses. Approaching a literary text as

a meeting between text and reader is nothing new; this approach is evident in scholarship such as reader-oriented theories by Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Jonathan Culler and Louise Rosenblatt. Drawing on John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, Rosenblatt described reading as transactional (Dewey's term); an ongoing process in which the reader and text are conditioned by and conditioning the other (Rosenblatt 1978). The reciprocity of literary materiality and how readers "work" the text becomes all the more evident when the material in question is no longer a conventionally printed text, but rather what Lori Emerson has called reading/writing interfaces (2014): literary works that demand attention to their interfaces in order to be accessed at all. The touch screen of an iPad and the curiously haptic reading of a work such as *Pry*, or the mobile reading of an audiobook and its sonic interweaving with the physical environments through which the reader moves, all become part of the digital reading condition.

A similar sensibility in relation to the dynamic relation between text and reader can be observed in scholarship that foregrounds literary materiality, albeit concerned with very different kinds of literary texts. McGann's definition of text foregrounds its non-static nature: "'text' is not a 'material thing' but a material event or set of events" (McGann 1991: 21). Nagel similarly suggests that this event occurs in the field of tension between text and reader in a context-dependent situation (2014: 232-233). In scholarship concerned with the particularities of digital textuality, Hayles assigns a significant role to the reader in the creation of meaning in the interaction between text and reader: "materiality depends on how the work mobilizes its resources as a physical artifact as well as on the user's interaction with the work and the interpretive strategies she develops – strategies that include physical manipulations as well as conceptual frameworks" (Hayles 2002: 33). To regard reading literature as an event was already suggested by Rosenblatt in the 1940s – however it is further foregrounded today with digital interfaces through which the reader experiences several levels of interaction as well as a specific multisensory address. Meaning emerges as the interface's material prompts the readers and activates their perception. Reading an audiobook takes place via sound through (most commonly) a digital device: the sound of a performer's voice is transferred to the reader who is possibly on the move or relaxing in their home. Although not referring specifically to audiobooks, Johanna Drucker's notion of the digital interface as part of a performative materiality resonates well with our example works: "... the performance constructs meaning as a result of engagement, the text is performed, rather than received. Materiality provokes the performance..." (Drucker 2013b: n.pag.). Further, she argues that "performative materiality suggests that what something *is* has to be understood in terms of what it *does*, how it works within machinic, systemic, and cultural domains" (Drucker 2013b: n.pag., original emphasis). Shifting from what a text is to what it does, i.e. how it works and acts, opens up for addressing its sensorial and situational dimensions. Enhancing the interface perspective of the reading situation, both reading an app and an audiobook emerge as media-specific

acts or performances of reading – underlining that these experiences are different in their structure and that we need to address the discussion on how we read media, including printed books, from a material and sensorially sensitive perspective.

## **Concluding Remarks and Further Perspectives**

The two literary works that serve as our main examples for the digital reading condition are but two of many similar works whose material configuration and resulting reading practices show that there is a need to understand reading situations, reading habits and reading practices on new terms due to digitization. We argue that understanding the reading of literary works such as those that we have described as events and as multisensory experiences is paramount to establish a theoretically suitable framework for today's digital reading condition. This concept of reading emphasizes the relational as well as sensorial aspects of reading without displacing the role for further understanding the cognitive side of reading, which has not been our focus in this article.

In a literary context, the idea of performative materiality involves the reading process and the act of reading. This view emphasizes what and how literature does something rather than what it is. Therefore, meaning making does not reside solely in the artefact; it emerges in the material address to the reader and in the concrete situation that unfolds through the reading situation. This act of reading, scrolling, touching, listening, walking, is taking part in the meaning making process that reading is, and it produces certain resonances and atmospheres.

Given the new ways in which we engage with reading literary apps or audiobooks, our definitions of deep reading experiences demand further reflection. If “materiality matters,” then reading an audiobook deeply or reading an app deeply is not only possible but will take on a different structure than with a printed text, and we could profitably take this aspect into account by putting forward a more curious and less normative concept of reading. Concepts like intensity and immersion need to be continuously renegotiated – you can be intensely immersed in an app in shorter periods and you can be immersed in reading an audiobook as an interplay between the protagonist, the voice reading and the relation to the world. As Koepnick argues: “Resonant hearing or listening, in this respect, is to experience reading as a mode of reciprocal entanglement with matters of the world, matter of multiple worlds” (2019: 13).

In our broadening of the reading concept to include a more multisensorial landscape there can seem to be a post-hermeneutical claim of meaning production that takes place on a number of different levels. Multisensory reading means remaining inquisitive towards aesthetic, affective registers of reading and allowing for these registers to have literary as well as cognitive value. Being present at the



edges of attention, or even allowing these new works to take us there as readers, might actually help us gain and maintain a curiosity towards different reading experiences. Remaining curious and avoiding a normative attitude to a reading condition that moves beyond current conventions could be said to be a key element in our strivance toward a concept of multisensory reading. In that sense, our intentions of creating a conceptual framework for understanding multisensory reading resonate with what Rita Felski has called “post critical reading” (2015). Post critical does not mean abandoning critical reflection altogether, but rather than performing a critique of suspicion, Felski suggests regarding reading as not just “a cognitive activity but an embodied mode of attentiveness that involves us in acts of sensing, perceiving, feeling, registering, and engaging” (Felski 2015: 176). Allowing sensory affordances, the actual lived reading experiences as well as the technological aspects of the digital interface, to claim a place of their own – as actors in the meaning making process – provides the ground for a reconceptualization of reading in a digital landscape. Being curious about reading, then, is to evoke a certain sensibility towards the material and situational aspects of the digital reading condition as well.

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