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Reading crisis: reading, a new idea in the digital age?

The case of works of fiction and their online comments

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The title of the thesis alludes to a question about the consequences of digital technology for reading. With increasing importance in our lives, the development of digital technology is seen by some as a revolution,[1] which feeds old concerns about a book crisis and a reading crisis: the printed book would be replaced by fragments of digital texts, the reading practice would decrease, the mode of attentive and critical reading would be replaced by superficial and fragmented reading, etc. This general concern, represented by the term "crisis" in the title, is not new (it dates back long before digital technology influenced our everyday lives) and takes many forms, including surveys, books, book chapters, scientific and journalistic articles and blog entries. The work is based on a questioning of the often defeatist discourses on the mutations of reading in the digital age.

Reading in the digital age, as considered in this thesis, is not so much a new idea generated by digital technology as an activity enriched by new forms. The digital in the title is not to be considered as a "technical object": In the digital age, readers can leave new (written) reading testimonies, such as online comments. In a context where the value of contemporary reading practices is questioned, the contribution of new *empirical* sources—online comments shared by ordinary readers—should be highlighted and examined. More than on reading practices themselves, the comments give us access to personal reading experiences that are publicly shared: Not the act of reading, but the subsequent discourse is observed. The collection and analysis of online reviews is also a significant step forward in the research and understanding of reading experiences and written culture in the digital age.

As Robert Darnton points out in his article "First Steps Toward a History of Reading" from 1986, we have answers to the questions of *who* is reading *what*, *where* and *when*, but the *why* and *how* we read is still a matter of concern.[2] Online comments sharing reading experiences seem to be relevant sources when trying to explore aspects of contemporary reading. The online comments examined for this thesis are a selection of comments from ordinary readers who have shared them in the largest francophone online reading community, Babelio. The comments, named 'reviews' ("*Critiques*") on the Babelio site, refer to *Les hommes qui n'aimaient pas les*

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femmes[3] by Stieg Larsson, *Fun Home : une tragicomédie familiale*[4] by Alison Bechdel and *Soumission*[5] by Michel Houellebecq.

The thesis pursues two objectives: On the one hand, it is about online comments on books and reading, about the publication contexts—especially on the Babelio platform—their forms, content and the reading experiences shared through them. On the other hand, the aim is to construct and apply a qualitative-quantitative mixed-methods methodology, to describe it in detail to enable the reproducibility of the results, and to serve as documentation of the application of a database and text statistics software, Iramuteq. This software is rarely used for the analysis of reading comments. Finally, its relevance for the analysis of comments and thus its ability to answer questions about the *why* and *how* of reading in the digital age has to be tested. There is no ready-made method for text analysis: computer-assisted methods are in constant development, their application is only just beginning to become more general; specific methods must be developed by trial and error, leading to a trial-and-error approach which must start from the research sources. The aim is to show the potential and the limits of this methodology, its time-consuming implementation, but also its feasibility for literary scholars without previous knowledge of computer-assisted methods, such as text statistics or the query language SQL (Structured Query Language) for querying a MySQL database.

Methodologically, a decisive moment is experienced: on the one hand, computer-assisted methods have not yet found their proper place in the humanities; on the other hand, there is a paradigm shift in the humanities. Digital technology is questioning their epistemology, calling them into question as "disciplines", transforming the conditions of knowledge production and circulation. Digital technology becomes a tool, a method, a field and an object of research. The thesis considers all the transformations that digital technology brings to literary studies: Its method consists in the use of digital tools; its field of research is the online reading community Babelio; it examines the reviews and their metadata as a research object; finally, the research data[6] are made openly accessible on the internet.

The thesis is divided into four parts:

1. A selective overview of the state of research in several disciplines—literary studies, sociology, information and communication sciences—on both reading and literary exchange on the Internet. This also serves the methodological and hermeneutical positioning of the thesis.

2. A brief introduction to the fiction books that serve as a starting point for the review selection, the explanation of various aspects of literary exchange on the Internet—content production by amateurs, critical authority on the Internet, literary sociability—which finally leads to a classification of Babelio among the diversity of places of literary exchange on the Internet.

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[3] Stieg Larsson, *Les hommes qui n'aimaient pas les femmes. Millénium 1*, trans. by Lena Grumbach and Marc de Gouvenain, Arles: Actes Sud, 2006.

[4] Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home : une tragicomédie familiale*, trans. by Lili Sztajn and Corinne Julve, Paris: Denoël Graphic, 2006.

[5] Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission*, Paris: Flammarion, 2015.

[6] Cora Krömer, "Expériences de lecture – Babelio (Version 1.0.0) [Data set]", in: Zenodo [online], 2020, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4066684.

3. A documentation of the collection and processing of the online reviews in a database, its use, and the preparation of the texts for statistical text analysis with Iramuteq and finally, an explanation about the creation of an annotated list that compiles and classifies terms evoking reading experiences.

4. The analysis and interpretation by four approaches: a statistical analysis of the metadata on the reviews; a search for different keywords to show the content diversity of the reviews; three forms of analysis provided by Iramuteq—list of active forms, word cloud and top-down classification—to capture the thematic content of the reviews and, based on these, two case studies on the mention of the authors and characters in the reviews; an analysis of the annotated list of terms to demonstrate the diversity of shared reading experiences: *readers's subject* (*sujet lecteur*), the mention of different *premises* (*prémisse*), information about *reading media* (*médium*), and reading *session* (*session*), possibilities presenting *content* (*contenu*), as well as elements of *reader-response* (*réception*), such as *cooperation between text and reader* (*coopération*) and *immersion* (*immersion*), and finally reading *effects* (*effet*), such as *judgements* (*avis*), *reading pleasure* (*plaisir*), *emotions* (*émotion*) and *subjective* and *objective impacts* (*impact subjectif/objectif*) of reading.

The appendices contain some reviews and their comments when their totality is relevant in the dissertation, some explanations and analysis results of the top-down classification to avoid too many technical details in the main text, as well as the list of terms classified by notions. In addition, the appendices contain detailed summaries in German and English.

The most important results of this thesis consist primarily of its methodological contributions: The importance of an approach that combines knowledge from different disciplines in order to take into account a phenomenon as complex as reading and online comments is emphasised; a qualitative methodology including computer-assisted methods is used to demonstrate the relevance of their use in the study of literary criticism in search of reading experiences; the selected reviews and the annotated list of terms are made available for reproductibility and for further analysis for the purpose of *Open Science*. Its hermeneutical contributions consist in a selective survey of knowledge about reading and literary exchange; in the confrontation of terms and concepts from reading theories (Hans Robert Jauss,[7] Wolfgang Iser,[8] Umberto Eco,[9] Michel Picard,[10] Vincent Jouve,[11] Jean-Louis Dufays[12]) with new *empirical* sources, such as the comments of non-professional readers, in order to validate the continued relevance of the various terms and the research interest to continue their empirical investigation; in the critical examination of literary sociability, which in the case of Babelio follows primarily a commercial interest, comparable to that of generalist platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter; in the relativization of the—often defeatist—discourses on the mutation and decline of reading in the digital age.

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[7] Hans Robert Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1977.
[8] Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, UTB 636, Munich: Fink, 1976.
[9] Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula: la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*, Milan: V. Bompiani, 1979.
[10] Michel Picard, *La lecture comme jeu : essai sur la littérature*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986.
[11] Vincent Jouve, *L'effet-personnage dans le roman*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992,
[12] Jean-Louis Dufays, *Stéréotype et lecture : essai sur la réception littéraire*, Liège: Mardaga, 1994,

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