“The Literary Field and New Media”

An Analysis & Review of Recent Publications about Literature, Media, and (Higher) Education

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An overview and analysis of the (academic) discussion on the state of literary reading, the book, and literary criticism under the influence of new media, theoretical approaches and institutional developments
Data Collection

200+ books ... and growing

http://www.worldcat.org/profiles/Geert_VDM/lists/2560861

Year Range: 2000 – 2011

Topics: function of literature, literary institutions (library, university, ...), the future of the novel, ...
So why is information overload seen as one of the pervasive maladies of modern life? Media theorist Clay Shirky says many people confuse information overload with filter failure.

If you took the contents of an average Barnes and Noble, dumped it into the streets, and said to someone, "There's some works of Auden in there, there's some Plato in there. Wade on in and you'll find what you like."

If you waded in -- you know what you would get?

The reason we don't experience information overload problem in a bookstore or a library is that we're used to the cataloging system.
How to Catalogue?

Different Clusters
Publications are part of traditions of conflicts about certain topics
Reconstruct the Conversation
How to Catalogue?

A tradition “embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only to be recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings.”

- Alasdair MacIntyre, “Epistemological crises, dramatic narrative, and the philosophy of science”
Method
NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF LITERARY ARGUMENTS
“Conversations have storylines and the positions people take in a conversation will be linked to these storylines.”

– Harré & Van Langenhove, Positioning Theory, p. 17

“allows the people involved to negotiate new positions and so establish new storylines implemented through newly recognized social acts.”

– Harré & Van Langenhove, Positioning Theory, p. 10
Four Clusters, Four Narratives

1. Literature and Institutions
2. Literature and Readers
3. Literature and (New) Media
4. Literature and Science
Crisis of Narratives

an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (The Postmodern Condition, xxiv)
Narratives of Crisis

“Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science” (1977)

The individual (academic scholar) as Hamlet: what to do?

“the existence of alternative and rival schemata which yield mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around him” (p. 4)
“to reconstitute, to rewrite that narrative” (5).

This new sense of narrative cohesion could “[enable] the agent to understand both how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs and how he or she could have been so drastically misled by them. The narrative in terms of which he or she at first understood and ordered experiences is itself now made into the subject of an enlarged narrative” (5)

“his new forms of understanding may themselves in turn come to be put in question at any time” (5)
Four Crises - Four (Enlarged) Narratives

1. Repeating the same Crisis – Humanities across the Curriculum

2. Why Literature? – ‘Use’ of Literature

2. Media Competition - Intermediality

3. Two Cultures – Evolution & Cognition
1. Literature & Institutions

THE CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND TEACHING LITERATURE
Narratives of ‘CRISIS’

“il y a une parfum de crise”

GOOD NEWS
Crisis in Humanities vs. Death of the Book
The general crisis that has overtaken the modern world everywhere and in almost every sphere of life manifests itself differently in each country, involving different areas and taking on different forms.”

Repeating the Same Story?
Root Causes

- Financial/Political: Reforms, Cutbacks
- Economic: Neoliberal Capitalism
- Institutional: Tenure
- Social: Decreasing importance of Humanities
- Ideological: Blaming Postmodernism, Cultural relativism
- Technological: Information Age, Internet, New Media
- Generational: “today’s youth....”
“Has the hypochondriac finally come down with a life-threatening disease?”

- Daniel A. Bell, Reimaging the Humanities (2010), p. 69
“Too many observers now describe the current state of higher education, particularly of the humanities, as a crisis. I wish instead to characterize it as an ongoing set of problems, a distinction that might at first appear only to be semantic. The terms of the so-called crisis, from the academic humanist perspective, are always the same: corporate interests and values are poised to overwhelm the ideals of the liberal arts and to transform the university into a thoroughly businesslike workplace.

“ (1)
“In contemporary America as in Ancient Athens, liberal education is changing” (p. 2)

“We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. [...] No, I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a world-wide crisis in education.” (p. 1)
“For I believe that if we set aside the rhetoric of crisis and first look back at our situation as it existed a century ago and then forward from the present as far as we can see, our problems take on a wholly new complexion. They may, in my account, seem more ominous than they do in narratives about the humanities in crisis, but I think we ultimately benefit by looking at them through the widest possible lens, and by extending our attention to texts that fall outside the bounds of our intramural conversations.” (xiii)
Enlarged Narrative: Across the curriculum

Pleading for the humanities across the curriculum
“to argue for but also to invoke and demonstrate the “uses” of reading and of literature, not as an instrument of moral or cultural control, nor yet as an infusion of “pleasure,” but rather as a way of thinking. That is why, in my view, it is high time to take back the term literature [...] The result of such a radical reorientation of our understanding of what it means to read, and to read literature, and to read in a “literary” way, would be enormous. A better understanding of these questions is the only way to return literature to the center, rather than the periphery, of personal, educational, and professional life.” (p. 5)
Harvard University Course – A Literature of Social Reflection

“How literature can help us reflect on a broad range of social issues” (p. xxiii)
Undergraduate course “Rites of Passage” (Brown University)

“One of my chief reasons for teaching this course is to urge students to realize that their own experience of growing up is—surprisingly, rewardingly—mirrored in books from other time, other places.” (Weinstein 2011, p. xiii)
“There is a crack, a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in”

“epistemological progress consists in the construction and reconstruction of more adequate narratives and forms of narrative and that epistemological crises are occasions for such reconstruction” (Macintyre 6-7)
2. Literature & its Readers

SOCIAL / PRIVATE READERS & HOW TO READ
“Crisis”: Uses

- Over-emphasis on critical reading (academia)
  - Alienation of the ‘normal’ reader
“Crisis” (2): Ideology of Private Reading

• E.g. Marcel Proust: “Reading is that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude” (*On Reading*)

“the ideology of the solitary reader suppresses recognition of the infrastructure of literacy and the social and institutional determinants of what's available to read, what is 'worth reading,' and how to read it" (Elizabeth Long, "Textual Interpretation," 193)

• Digitalization: ‘sharing’ - For more, see Joachim Vlieghe - "Media and the Library"
Our students, meanwhile, are migrating in droves toward vocationally oriented degrees in the hope of guaranteeing future incomes to offset sky-rocketing college bills. [...] In such an austere and inauspicious climate, how do scholars of literature make a case for the value of what we do? How do we come up with *rationales for reading and talking about books without reverting to the canon-worship of the past?* (p. 2)
“it calls on us to engage seriously with **ordinary motives** for reading – such as the desire for knowledge or the longing for escape – that are either overlooked or undervalued in literary scholarship.” (p. 14)
“many readers in the United States today treat novels less as a source of aesthetic satisfaction than as a practical dispenser of advice or a form of therapy. They choose books that will offer strategies for confronting, understanding, and managing their personal problems.” (p. 1)
3. Literature & New Media

DIGITAL CULTURE & LITERATURE AS A TECHNOLOGY
Contra: e.g. *The Gutenberg Elegies*

“the place of reading and sensibility in what is becoming an electronic culture [...] are under threat in our age: differentiated subjectivity, reverie, verbal articulation, mental passion...3 (13)

Pro: e.g. *Imagologies*

“Literate resason and the literary critic have become relics of the past”
“If you read books, justify it”
Media Competition

“We can think of the matter in terms of gains and losses” (Birkets, p. 27)

Expected to lead to loss of (cultural) literacy and certain (humanistic) competences
“for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. [...] they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.”
“the fact that language and culture have been multimodal since the beginning of history as we know it, but also the fact throughout history the different media have been inter-related in terms of both structure and content, has been a blind spot to the human sciences.”

Enlarged Narrative

Convergence / Transmediality, Intermediality, Crossmediality

Affordances and constraints

“we select media for their affordances, and we work around their limitations, trying to overcome them or to make them irrelevant” (Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative Across Media*)
Re-evaluation of Past Beliefs

From within the enlarged narrative of multi- & intermediality

Narratives of loss: emphasis and idolization of certain affordances the old medium of the book?
Will multimedial perspectives also lead to an expansion of the concept of the ‘literary’?
“what used to be an exclusively print-based activity -and fiercely proud of it- has become an increasingly image-based activity in which literary reading has been transformed into a variety of possible literary experiences” (p. 4)
The “Literary” in other media (1)

The Graphic Novel
- Invention of the term
- Inclusion in literary awards lists & literature curricula

- Also see Vandermeersche & Soetaert "Intermediality as Cultural Literacy and Teaching the Graphic Novel." CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 13.3 (2011):
  http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb
The “Literary” in other media (2)

Literary Television: eg *The Wire* as Dickensian

the porter having let them in the door; thereupon they entered a bleak little place, lit only by a pale, sickly beam of sunlight streaming through the window. The meager accommodation did nothing to placate the dissatisfaction of Mr McNulty, who—having voiced this complaint to Mr Moreland before having entered the crime scene—despaired of finding anything to connect to his primary interest: that of Mr. Avon Barksdale, whom he knew to be corrupt.

Mr Moreland—having more stake in the proceedings, or rather less interest in pursuing what amounted to, in his opinion, a goose chase the likes of which only Mr McNulty would subject himself—put his cigar in his mouth and looked down at the sketches which they had obtained from Scotland Yard. Years of detective work such as this had compelled Mr Moreland into an attitude of complaisance; in most investigations his attitude was one of general affability and a charming lack of anything like concern. As he flipped through the sketches, however, he took out his cigar, and his tone was exactly that of a child at last being forced to chores when he said: “Aw, fuck.”

Knowing that Mr McNulty would share in his disgust, Mr Moreland referred Mr McNulty to the sketches. “Mother fucker,” said Mr McNulty, indicating by this succinct phrasing his understanding as to the work that would be required in order to make sense of the sketches and the heinous nature of the crime.

Accepting at last this call to duty, which was at the most
The Literary in Video Games

Minecraft

“Books are crafted from paper and currently serve no gameplay purpose [...] Their only use was to make bookshelves, which was used as a purely decorative block.” – Minecraft wiki

To learn more about Literature and Video Games:
Jeroen Bourgonjon - “Video Games in Education"
Transmedial narratology

"the question of how the intrinsic properties of the medium shape the form of narrative and affect the narrative experience" (p. 1)
4. Literature & Science

COGNITIVE & EVOLUTIONARY APPROACHES
Empirical Research: greeted with scepticism

On both sides of the Atlantic, the notions of "system" and "empirical" - the latter particularly so [...] evoke the criticism of neo-positivism, the accusation of "number crunching," the criticism of disregard for the primary properties of a literary text, [...] The argumentation that all these and other criticisms - mostly knee-jerk criticisms as Thornton suggested above - are based on misunderstandings, or, more often than not, on a superficial and/or dismissive reading of the theoretical and metatheoretical texts, has been presented often and loudly enough”

-Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, *The Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature and Culture as Theory and Application*, p. 2
Two “New” Enlarged Narratives

Why Stories? Function of Stories?

Cognition & Evolution

storytelling
“This is what my book does. It makes a case for admitting the recent findings of cognitive psychologists into literary studies by showing how their research into the ability to explain behavior in terms of the underlying states of mind—or mind-reading ability—can furnish us with a series of surprising insights into our interaction with literary texts.”
“why has the richest explanatory story of all, the theory of evolution by natural selection, been so little used to explain why and how stories matter?” (p. 1)
“when we experience anxiety we feel compelled to resolve it, and this resolution often involves the creation of a narrative; the narratives that we generate do not always have to be true in order to respond successfully to anxiety – in many cases counterfactual narratives work better than the truth; the “useful fictions” humans evolved to create in response to anxiety” (p. xv-xvi)
A Narrative for our Anxiety

“Converting the sound that we hear into a very simple sequence –“a tiger who wants to eat me is over there”- engages our cognitive capacity for creating narratives, in this case, what-if scenarios expanded by our storytelling capacity” (p. 55)
A Narrative for Crisis

Fight or Flight response

“to create a narrative that can guide our response” (p. 56)

“useful fictions”