Reading Today

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Abstract

A review of Claire Clivaz, Jérôme Meizoz, François Vallotton, et Joseph Verheyden, éds. *Lire demain: Des manuscrits antiques à l'ère digitale* [*Reading Tomorrow: From Ancient Manuscripts to the Digital Era*]. (Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2012). 978-2-88074-958-3.

This book is a collection of the proceedings of the colloquium organized at Lausanne University in August 2011 [Clivaz et al. 2012]. Chapters are in English or French; some of them (notably the introduction and Claire Clivaz's chapter about the *Common Era 2.0*) are in both languages. Other sessions were held in French and are available as videos and in English prose, such as Frédéric Kaplan's *How Books will Become Machines*.

[1]

The editors, together with the publisher (Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes), attempted to innovate in the way they published the book. Three elements are available: a printed book, an extended ebook version, and videos of the interventions that are still available both on the Lausanne University's website and on iTunes U [Université de Lausanne 2012].[1] The articulation between written and oral versions of some papers allows the reader to have several ways of reading and listening to the book in accordance with its subject (this review focuses on the extended ebook version). However, it is regrettable that the extended ebook sometimes lacks a bit of cohesion and coherence. The third to fifth parts are notably poorly articulated, mixing chronology and themes, where a clear choice for a thematic organization would have been more understandable.

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The colloquium, as stated in the introduction written by the book's editors (Claire Clivaz, François Vallotton and Joseph Verheyden), was organized (and the book written) in a triple context: the current technological revolution and the changes that come with it; the rise of the Digital Humanities including the creation of dedicated centers mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries; and the integration of digital resources and platforms within universities for both their teaching and research activities.

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The book is divided into six parts (Reading and literacies: history and representations / From Ancient Manuscripts to the Digital Edition / Antiquity, Literacies and Digital Culture / Early Christianity, Literacies and Digital Culture / Written Culture and Digital Technologies in Modern History and Literature / Tools and Concepts in Digital Culture). What those six titles suggest is confirmed by Claire Clivaz's first chapter about a *Common Era 2.0,* which is to be considered as the book's matrix. It defines the two great and novel aspects of this publication: how the digital age questions the previous era (the Common Era) in modifying some of its textual traditions, considered previously as fixed and irrevocable; and how the digital era helps us rediscover the reading and writing modes of Antiquity.

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The first part is centered on the book or its various forms (the novel), its evolution in the digital era, and the act of reading books. Christian Vandendorpe addresses the consequences of the migration of reading from print to screen on the future of the novel as a literary genre, answering, for instance, some criticism by Nicholas Carr of fragmented reading [Carr 2008]. He describes how, in the past, the novel adapted to various challenges. Confronting the novel and the incessant digital flow of information, Vandendorpe suggests that the novel should find an appropriate digital platform that integrates multimedia documents and Web 2.0 participatory and collaborative dimensions. This should give a new

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and active role to the reader.

Frédéric Kaplan's chapter on the evolution of the book (*How Books Will Become Machines*) is based on the use of the theory of evolution for technological systems. Analyzing how technologies such as encyclopedias and books can evolve towards mechanization, he observes that books are resisting this evolution (contrary to encyclopedias), but could survive only if they become "closed" applications. He concludes with the fact that our cognitive skills can be shaped differently depending on how the book evolves. The question, here, is how to experiment to find new applications for complex discourses.

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Philippe Kaenel questions the dialogue between text and pictures since antiquity, the role of visual culture, and the notion of "literacy". David Bouvier reminds us that Christianity transformed the book into an idealized object, while we are also the heirs of Plato's views on text, at a time (Ancient Greece) when there was no reason to believe in the book's ideal. Holt Parker explains *What is it that Philologists Do Exactly?*, reminding us that philologists question how the authors expect readers to read the work.

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Jean-Yves Mollier's chapter on *Lire, une pratique constamment remise en cause* is an excellent conclusion to the first part. Answering the frequent criticisms about the end of paper and the "book's civilization" because of the appearance of screens, Mollier argues that the act of reading, previously reserved to clerics, has always been contested, especially the access of masses to reading. Analyzing the role of reading online, including during the 2011 Arab Spring, he concludes that literature is the only part of reading that is endangered. In fact, the many forms of reading today will probably lead to the rise of new and creative forms of fiction.

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The second part of the book is dedicated to the notion of edition, from ancient manuscripts to the digital edition. Based on his experience, François Bovon explains the different steps from catalogue research to the establishment of a critical edition and notes that ancient manuscripts are entering into their third age, which is also the digital age: an age of digitization and preservation to facilitate access to them. Taking the example of the Qumran manuscripts, David Hamidović shows (both in French and English) one of the possibilities opened by the digital age for the study of ancient texts. Through the use of graphic software, he wishes to complete some lost parts of those texts and to study the ways scribes were writing. Exploring new possibilities for ancient texts is also fundamental in Mary Ebbott's and Leonard Muellner's chapters about Homeric epics: the fluidity and multidimensional quality of digital documents and tools are, in fact, very well suited to the Iliad's edition. This potential of digital tools will radically change the way we do research, argues Ulrich Schmid, based on the experience of the edition of the New Testament, where the reader becomes a producer of the edition. The last two chapters of this part investigate the bridges between Christian and Arabic documents, showing some possible investigations into post-colonial studies opened by Digital Humanities and, also, the limits of our Latin-centered digital tools. This investigation emphasizes, too, the question of the scholar's place in our world.

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The book's third part — *Antiquity, Literacies and Digital Culture* — is more centered on research practices in the digital age and on the (non-Christian) antiquity, though it partly harmonizes with the second part of the book. Thomas J. Kraus investigates how digital practices help find new research subjects. Mathild Cambron-Goulet shows how Greek philosophers were at the same time criticizing writing and practicing reading in a community linked to their oral tradition. MarieClaire Beaulieu, Francesco Mambrini, and J. Matthew Harrington (*Toward a Digital Editio Princeps: Using Digital Technologies to Create a More Complete Scholarly Edition in the Classics*) allow us to see what tomorrow's book will be: multimodal, interactive, multidimensional, multimedia. Some of their questions on the future of books are linked to Frédéric Kaplan's considerations. Alexandra Trachsel (*Collecting Fragments Today: What Status Will a Fragment Have in the Era of Digital Philology?*) considers three progressions in the ways fragments were transmitted to us: the creation of libraries, the Renaissance and, today, the digital era. Floris Bernard (*Byzantine Books Epigrams: From Manuscripts to a Digital Database*) shows how a text can be transformed into a database and why — in this case to understand a whole historical moment and its practices.

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The fourth part of the book is about ancient Christianity and its specificity: the hybridity of oral and writing traditions. Giovanni B. Bazzana investigates how a text is socially produced, through examples from the apocalyptic genre. Joseph

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Verheyden (*Read, Write and Correct: The Scribe and the Perfect Text*) discusses the mythical status of the Codex Sinaiticus. Simon Butticaz reminds us that the letters of Paul are the result of a society based on oral tradition and illiteracy. Corinne Egasse (*Le papyrus Oxyrhynque 840 et Jean 13: du manuscrit mutilé à l'eau purifiante*) investigates a specific text very closely. Benjamin Bertho's chapter (*Tradition orale et culture écrite: les Oracles sibyllins chez Théophile d'Antioche et dans la littérature chrétienne*) is an example of hybridity between orality and writing.

The fifth part — *Writing Culture and Digital Technologies in Modern History and Literature* — is focused on a more recent period. Sandrine Baume investigates the notion of transparency and its detractors, an interesting thought for our times of fear of a generalized transparency of our private lives. In studying writing and reading practices in modern religious orders, Fabienne Henryot gives us an interesting historical insight about how writing is a way to impose an orthodoxy / social order and a common tradition. Luis Pablo Núñez's chapter — *The Impact of the Digital Era on Dictionaries and Encyclopedias* — brings us back to the digital era and its advantages regarding a digital edition of dictionaries and encyclopedias, with its possibilities of mixing several editions and many ways of reading them. Here, again, he connects back to some of Kaplan's considerations. The following chapter about *ARQUIBANC* (Elena Cantarell Barella) is, in a way, a more traditional digital humanities paper. It is still a very notable contribution, as it is centered on the preservation of very hard-to-preserve archives — personal ones. Eliza Deac (*From Paper to Web Constellations: Between Stéphane Mallarmé's Un coup de Dés and Stephanie Strickland's V: Vniverse*) explains the many mutations of poetry along the technological evolutions. She points out the usage of the specificities of each medium by poets. Nelleke Moser (*Collecting Quotes, Connecting People: Towards a Diachronic Approach to Appropriating and Sharing Literature*) interrogates the usefulness of sharing and annotating texts and text fragments. This part, although made up of very interesting chapters, is probably the most incoherent in the book, unfortunately, mixing chapters of very different nature.

The sixth part — *Tools and Concepts in Digital Culture* — is more typically DH-oriented, with presentations of tools, such as the chapters on *The Project of a "Thesaurus Linguae Arabicae": Linguistic and Computational Issues* (Cristina Solimando & Giuliano Lancioni) or Alberto Roncaccia & Davide Picca's piece, *Interrogation Programme & SuperSenses Extraction: IPSE, une base de données ouvertes et flexible*. Lukas Rosenthaler's focus on VRE (*Virtual Research Environments: A New Approach for Dealing with Digitized Sources in Research in Arts and Humanities*) — is an interesting one, based on the JISC definition ("A VRE helps researchers from all disciplines to work collaboratively by managing the increasingly complex range of tasks involved in carrying out research."). SALSAH, the VRE described here, was conceptualized as an answer to the lack of tools to handle and analyse the consequent masses of digitized archives. Tobias Schweizer (*Development of a Topographical Transcription Method*) shows a practical use of the SALSAH framework. Thomas Naef (*New Testament Textual Criticism Bibliographical Data*) focuses on the *BiBil* (Biblical Bibliography of Lausanne) and the *New Testament Textual Criticism* (NTTC) projects. Christelle Cocco (*Catégorisation automatique de propositions textuelles en types de discours*) presents a statistical method, rather than a tool, in the field of speech analysis. She links morphosyntaxic categories with types of speech and texts annotated by experts, though those links are yet hard to interpret. Solange Ghernaouti-Hélie & René Berger (*Techno sacré, cyberespace et protéisme numérique: répondre autrement aux interrogations profondes de l'humain*)sketch what could be a philosophy of the digital age. This chapter could have been included in the first part, since it addresses foundational ideas. They question our capacity to handle computing and the Internet in order to avoid a sheer economic view of the digital age. They acknowledge the possibility of a happy merger between humanity and machines, reminding us of but being distinct (because it is more poetic) from transhumanism. This chapter, and the book that inspired it [Berger and Ghernaouti-Hélié 2010], could be read in parallel to Milad Doueihi's *Pour un humanisme numérique* [Doueihi 2012]. The last chapter of the book (Fabien Nobilio, *Le livre cosmique. Des Confessions de saint Augustin au culte de l'Internet*), which reads a bit like a conclusion, draws a parallel between Saint Augustin's way of considering silent reading, focused on self-consciousness, and today's need for transparency, a need which is very much linked to the Internet. In linking literacy (the use of a tool) and the symbolic dimension of the tool (whether the book or the Internet), Nobilio questions our capacity to use our knowledge as a path to freedom. In the end, Nobilio's question on whether the Internet will be an incarnation of a celestial book or the opposite is a very pertinent one: are we not at a crossroads between the network as a spy on our whole lives or as a way to achieve a better humanity?

For the readers who will read this book in its entirety — and particularly for the historian who wrote this review — there is one regret: two parts of our history appear as more or less dark ages. The 19th century appears in this book — and notably in Clivaz's *Common Era 2.0* — as an evil period of normalization of the book and reading practices. The Middle Ages — though sometimes lightly covered — appear, by their almost complete absence, also as a Dark Age. But they are not. As we are in the Digital Humanities field, let us consider what motivated Franco Moretti to theorize distant reading as a focus of literary studies on "big novels" in the 18th and the 19th centuries [Moretti 2007]. What Moretti says is, in fact, that those centuries — their literature — are not that well known. And this literature is probably more liquid, more mobile, less normalized than we think it is. Even for very well-known 19th century authors like Balzac [Gleize 2014], the articulation between novels published in newspapers in installments and the later publication of the novel as a book is not as fixed as the image of the 19th century depicted in *Lire demain*.

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This book is very rich and appeals to everybody interested in or a student of reading in the digital age, as well as everyone in the field of Digital Humanities. In the end, I have a single question: why "Reading Tomorrow"? Is this book not about "Reading today"?

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Notes

[1] See, e.g., the introduction and Claire Clivaz's intervention.

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