



Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

What is hyper reading? Part I

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Last week we've had a good look at a professional reading strategy, close reading, which is widely practiced by literary scholars and students of literature.

This week we'll have a good look at a type of reading that you practice every day: hyper reading. What is meant by hyper reading is the type of reading you perform when you look up anything on the world wide web. When you skim webpages, follow hyperlinks, perhaps download some files, and cut and paste some of the text you find useful. In his essay, *Hyper-Readers and Their Reading Engines*, James Sosnoski classes hyper reading as 'screen-based, computer-assisted reading practices.'

To this definition we can add that hyper reading for the greatest part takes place online and is a non-linear form of reading, where hyperlinks can take us into any kind of direction, instead of proceeding smoothly from page one to page two, and so on. Sosnoski's essay is especially helpful because it outlines eight different strategies of hyper reading: filtering, skimming, pecking, imposing, filming, trespassing, de-authorizing, and fragmenting. So, let's have a look at the first five of them. And let's begin with the first, filtering. Filtering basically means that as a hyper reader you're much more selective about what texts or what parts of the text you read than you are when you're reading, say, a print novel. The most powerful tools we have for filtering are certainly search engines and their indexing of the world wide web. With the help of search engines, we filter the countless pages that make up the world wide web and select but one or a few. In my case, the Wikipedia entry for Ezra Pound.

Now that I'm on the Wikipedia page, I notice that it contains quite a bit of text. Chances are that I won't read the text from top to bottom, but skim it for those parts that I find most interesting. And, of course, a table of contents is very helpful for skimming. Since I'm interested in close reading, I choose section 7, which promises to tell me more about Pound's writing style. So, what I've done is I've skimmed the Ezra Pound entry to light upon what really interests me.

Now, Sosnoski's third strategy, pecking, is a less structured and more random activity than skimming. With skimming, you follow the structure of the text and read some of it. With pecking, you randomly read a bit



here and a bit there, maybe something on X, then something on Y, then something on Z. When you peck a text, you do not respect its internal structure or coherence. Instead, you pick from it, whatever strikes you fancy in whatever order you please. Sosnoski's fourth strategy, imposing, is related to pecking, but stresses a more general characteristic of hyper reading. When we read any text, hypertext or print, we can ask ourselves where its meaning lies. Is it in the text itself?

Is it in the reader's mind? Or is it somewhere in between? But it seems clear that as readers, we attribute less coherence, less unity, and less authority to hypertexts, such as the Wikipedia entry, than we do to a poem or a novel. When reading a poem, say, by Ezra Pound, or Emily Dickinson, we tend to believe that there's some hidden meaning in there, that we're called upon to tease out. When reading a Wikipedia entry, we're much more likely to mine that text, for it's interesting to us to impose our interest on the text and use it for our ends, to impose our significance on it.

For instance, we might choose to focus on Pound's turn to fascism in the 1920s, and decide that this is what defines Pound, the writer, too. Thus, we impose a specific kind of significance on the text we read.

Sosnoski's fifth strategy of hyper reading is filming. By this, he means that hyper readers tend to privilege visual materials, images or films, over texts. Thus, in perusing the Wikipedia entry on Ezra Pound, we may first and foremost consider images and understand them as key guides to Pound's personality and writing. The photograph of a handsome young man, the photograph of a rugged old man, the photograph of his grandfather and mother, the photograph of Hilda Doolittle, the fellow modernist writer he fell in love with. As hyper readers, we tend to privilege such images over the texts we read. In Sosnoski's terms, hyper readers film hypertexts.

So, these are the first five strategies of hypertext readers that Sosnoski identifies. How do you make use of them?