The Future of Reading? Memories and Thoughts toward a Genealogical Approach

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In the spring of 2013, I spent some beautiful and intellectually inspiring weeks with a group of eighteen undergraduate students at the Stanford Overseas campus in Santiago de Chile, under the mostly dark and famously starry skies of the Southern Hemisphere's fall and early winter. The majority of those students were juniors, none of them majoring in the humanities. Their academic interests and fields of emphasis ranged from international relations to political science, from geology and architecture to theoretical physics, from Earth science to human biology. Above all, I found those students capable of making good judgments whenever confronted with complex problems inside and outside their areas of studies, remarkably knowledgeable, and always eager to learn more and thus expand the horizons of their experience. Thanks to our discussions, I was making sub-

The questions and the argument developed in this essay go back to my contribution, on October 17, 2011, to the lecture series "How I Think about Literature," in the Division of Literatures, Cultures, and Languages, at Stanford University. I thank the division chair, Gabriella Safran, for taking the initiative and for inviting me to participate.

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stantial progress on my own work and learning agenda for the two courses I was teaching, one on the historical typology of intellectuals in Latin America, and the other on the cultural history of soccer in South America.

But while the considerable age gap that separated us—more than forty years—never turned out to be an obstacle for our conversations, I have never been so puzzled by the reading performance of the new generation. Most of my students were breathtakingly quick and agile in identifying the often complicated subject matter and key problems offered by the Spanish and English texts we were discussing, but, at the same time, these students seemed to exhibit no primary attention and sensitivity for the texts' rhetorical, stylistic, and, sometimes, poetic layers. Obviously, I am not referring to a lack of the kinds of tools used for textual analysis that one would expect a student majoring in literature to have. The difference between their and my reading skills was not one of nuance or degree but almost ontologically drastic. I had the impression that my students were looking right through the formal layers of the texts they were reading, as if to access their semantic and argumentative dimension with stunning immediacy. Against this background, however, I was surprised how easy it was to draw their interest toward syntactical structures, tropes of discourses, or configurations of metaphors—and whenever this happened I could observe a genuine joy, like the joy of discovering the Mediterranean, which in some cases almost reached a level of mild addiction.

At no moment did I feel tempted to interpret these observations in the spirit of classical cultural critique, that is, as a symptom of decay or of insufficient intellectual and existential investment. After all, these students spent their entire days reading, probably more than any previous generation I have seen—reading e-books, reading words on the screens of their computers and iPhones, and sometimes even on the printed pages of books or course readers. They were reading while writing, reading with exclusive focus, reading while listening to music or chatting with friends. Clearly, it was this overload of an uninterrupted reading practice that made them so capable of processing unheard-of quantities of text into "information." When I asked them, early on in both seminars, whether they wanted to focus on only part of the texts in our two voluminous course readers, they unanimously opted to not skip any of them, challenging my reading capacity perhaps more than their own. But, for the first time in my life, this decision also triggered the question of whether it was not deceptive, and therefore problematic, to use the same word for their reading habits and those of my generation.

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Of course, I am not stating anything new here. What used to be an intellectually elegant remark in a conversation fifteen or twenty years ago has long become a hard fact that influences our everyday life: the permanent use of electronic media, in their ever-growing technical differentiation and practical power, has produced, and continues to propel, a transformation of mental habits that, in the end, will likely be more profound than the one we can retrospectively imagine in the transition from the manuscript age to the age of the printing press. It is much less frequently mentioned, however, that, for those of us who make a living by honing the reading skills of future generations, this means we quite literally do not know anymore, and do not know yet, what "reading" exactly is for those whom we are teaching how to read. To make things worse, we do not even have any methods, within literary studies and linguistics, to start promising investigations about the future of reading.

Reader response theories, as they used to come in different positions and academic brands during their moment of academic glory in the 1970s, do not help here because, independent of whether they focus on different interpretations that historically different groups of readers have given to literary texts or on the types of conversations that literary texts can trigger in a classroom, they always presuppose but one homogeneous type of both form- and content-oriented reading that seemed to be "natural" only a decade or two ago—which is obviously no longer the one of our students today. The detailed reconstruction of past reading techniques realized in the work of historians such as Roger Chartier[1] may come closer to what would be required here. Its wider scope of interest relates gestures of bodily investment and details about the materiality of different text carriers to the production of meaning. But even this approach would need to be transformed in order to fit, above all, the more empirical needs of research referring to the present and the future of reading.

I am certainly not in a position to offer the necessary theoretical, methodological, and practical equipment for such research, let alone first insights or results. What I believe I can contribute is a different dimension of the problem. The electronic revolution hit the culture of reading under specific institutional conditions and within a particular historical context of

1. See, for example, Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the 14th and 18th Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

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epistemological and mental premises. These institutional conditions and epistemological premises have contributed to shaping the impact of new technologies on reading, and they have thus become a part of the new reading culture's genealogy. As they have also influenced my own professional socialization, what I will try to describe is largely based on personal memories. I hope to use these memories as a basis for further thoughts about the contexts in which this new reading culture has emerged, thoughts that ultimately may allow us to develop some qualified hypotheses about its future.

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My first immediate contact with the academic humanities in the United States goes back to two visiting professorships in the French Department and in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1980 and 1983, which turned out to be decisive for what was then my professional future, mainly because those stays at Berkeley obliged me to acknowledge and to see in perspective the underlying premises of my own work. I can still remember how deeply shocked I was when, after a lecture with the title "The Ever-Rising Bourgeoisie in Histories of Literature," which I gave for professors and graduate students of my departments, a colleague opened the discussion with the following words (to this day I can see his face, hear his intonation, and feel the discomfort of my embarrassment): "We expected you to offer an expert reading—but what you offered us was a foolish narrative." Deconstruction as an intellectual position was too new for me then to fully understand that the phrase "foolish narrative" implied a claim of identification with Jacques Derrida's discursive style. But I got a sense of how foundational—and indeed devastating—the critique of my reading technique was meant to be. "Reading" as a cultural practice, "Reading" as such, I learned, had an aura at American universities and in American society at large to which I was simply not accustomed. Similar, though slightly less poignant, remarks hit me seven years later, when I gave my inaugural lecture ("The Body as an Object of Literary Studies") as professor of literature at Stanford—and thus confirmed my impression of a deep and often overlooked cultural difference.

If today I am mostly astonished by the topics and titles I found attractive some thirty years ago, the reactions to my lectures then first made me aware that some sharp contrasts did exist within what now sometimes

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appears to have been the monochrome reading habit of scholars during the book age, above all the contrast between the Anglo-American and the more "hermeneutic" German reading modality. Without a doubt, the uniquely strong resonance that deconstruction found in American literature departments depended on the affinity between its meticulously "literal" reading focus and that of the tradition of New Criticism, as it had emerged as an academic legacy from the 1920s and 1930s. New Criticism, by its turn, was supposed to be grounded in the long-standing Protestant tradition of Bible reading.

This conventional association of the aura of New Criticism reading with the aura of Protestant reading, however, was problematic from the beginning: the same genealogy had long been claimed for the intrinsically different reading modality of German hermeneutics. If New Criticism and hermeneutics may both have taken their origin in the Reformation's programmatic focus on the text of the Bible (in its "literal" meaning and through its new translations into vernacular languages), they later diverged into almost opposite positions within the book reading tradition. Hermeneutics sees fulfillment in the existential fusion ("Verschmelzung," according to Hans-Georg Gadamer) between the world constituted in a text and its readers' horizons of experience, whereas for the New Critics, the text remains more distant from personal concerns and feelings. If a New Critical analysis ultimately emphasizes and elaborates the text's formal and semantic contours as an object and as a condition for multiple readings (this, I believe, is a description that converges with Paul de Man's concept of "rhetorical reading"[2]), hermeneutics wants to integrate changing but always individual interpretations or attributions of meaning (as a *Gehalt*, that is, the German word for the convergence of form and content) into the reader's most intimate core of identity.

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Such contrasts and tensions between different legacies of reading that slowly became visible on an increasingly international academic stage were only one of two incisive transformations that literary studies underwent during the 1970s and 1980s.[3] At the same time, those years saw a

2. The foundational reference is Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," *Diacritics* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1973): 27–33.

3. For the following remarks about the history of literary studies, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Tradition of (Academic) Literary Studies:*

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growing frustration with multiple attempts to develop both a metahistorically and transculturally valid concept of "literature," as they had been foundational for the emergence of literary theory as a subdiscipline of literary studies in the early twentieth century—and had accompanied and even triggered most of its internal debates. Michel Foucault's seminal essay "What Is an Author,"[4] with its claim that only a radical historicization of all concepts formerly considered to be metahistorical within literary studies was epistemologically acceptable, marked this decisive shift. As early representatives of literary theory, in particular the Russian formalists, had insisted that the legitimacy of academic disciplines depended on the possibility to build them on the ground of metahistorical notions, the new insecurity about the concept of "literature" initiated a (sometimes all too loudly) programmatic movement of transformation from literary studies toward cultural studies. Around 1990, a great number of literary scholars found themselves qualified to enlarge dramatically the range of phenomena that they were dealing with in their teaching and writing, from literary texts (which one then could no longer refer to as a homogeneous horizon of reference) to music, film, and art, from class, race, and gender to anything that one could call "cultural" (which, given the very open semantic extension of this concept, excluded hardly anything).

For a lack of more convincing alternatives, one might say, the champions of cultural studies continued to apply hermeneutic or deconstructive (New Critical) techniques of reading to a vastly increased pool of study objects, accepting and even encouraging a progressive erosion of what "reading" was understood to be. Both the specifically hermeneutic and the specifically New Critical claim of competence for literary reading was now transferred to the "reading" of phenomena, such as symphonies, paintings, or markers of gender identity. In many cases, the results of this hasty movement of academic conquest were so banal, so far behind their own claims to glory and the traditional intellectual quality standards of literary studies, that they inflicted permanent damage to the public prestige of the humanities.

With some embarrassment, I have to admit that my first book project developed in the United States started out under the premises of cultural

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Can It Set an Agenda for Today?, Transnational Lecture Series, no. 4 (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester, Institute for Transnational Studies in Languages, Linguistics, and Culture, 2009).

4. The original reference is Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?," *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, no. 63 (1969): 73–104.

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studies.[5] I wanted to describe the profile of a year in the past (1926 ended up being my year of choice), presupposing that any artifact emerging from that year or finding particularly strong resonance in it could be useful on the way toward its identity. This explains how surprised I was when, after finishing the first draft of my manuscript in the summer of 1995, it became clear that, in spite of cultural studies as a dominant institutional environment, the large majority of the texts I had been using were literary texts in the traditional—and then strongly challenged—meaning of the adjective. What had been the—supposedly preconscious—reason for my choice? Trying to find an answer to this question made me increasingly focus on the "concreteness" of literature, which is predicated on what literary theorists throughout the twentieth century, among them Georg Lukács (in "Theory of the Novel"[6]) had been referring to in their ultimately unsuccessful efforts to come up with a metahistorically and transculturally valid definition. But if predecessors such as Lukács had appreciated the concreteness of literary texts as a means to improve the potential they offered of understanding the past, it was my intuition that the concrete individuality of—fictional—characters, objects, and situations in the texts I had quoted had not helped me to understand the year 1926 but had simply made this year more present, had conjured it up, had altogether produced a more intense impression of immediacy. (And so, was there a place for "understanding," for identifying reasons of developments and the precedents for present phenomena, in an approach that focused on a year as a synchronic moment and not as a sequence?)

During the following decade (my book *In 1926: Living on the Edge of Time* had appeared in 1997), the notion of "presence" became progressively important to me in trying to shape a relationship with the past that was not focused on "understanding" and for a new conception of reading literary and nonliterary texts that was neither hermeneutic nor deconstructive[7]—not only for me but, on different paths and with different theoretical keywords, for quite a number of literary critics.[8] Within this movement, I

5. The end product was Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living on the Edge of Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

6. Georg Lukács wrote "Die Theorie des Romans: Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch ueber die Formen der grossen Epik" in German during the years 1914–15; it was first published in 1916.

7. The manifesto for this position was my *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

8. An interesting survey of such positions (and of different reactions to them) is available

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believe, a more general concept of "literature" became viable again. But it has probably been for the better that no programmatic efforts have been made to rehabilitate or even redefine it as an epistemological grounding for literary studies—not the least because the new, more presence-oriented way of reading, while mainly associated with texts we would spontaneously call "literary," does not come with the traditional, quite narrow focus on them. More personally, and within this larger context of the past decade, I have been trying to develop concepts such as the German *Stimmung* (that is, "atmosphere," "mood," "climate")[9] or, complementary with *Stimmung*, the notion of "latency"[10] as tools to describe the historically changing practices and the changing effects of reading literary texts. In an educational context, this different type of reading, with all its varieties and nuances, would no longer suggest literary interpretation or literary analysis to redeem the texts' formal and semantic potential (*Gehalt*) but, rather, would elaborate gestures of deixis. To draw potential readers' attention to certain texts and to make their reading desirable in multiple ways appears more appropriate, as a pedagogical practice, in our present situation than the inevitably authoritarian claims of saying what the texts should (or even must) "really" mean and how they were made.

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Now, the world of literary studies as an academic institution in its development toward the end of the twentieth century was just one intrinsically complex layer within the genealogical conditions under which electronic media have hit our and the new generations' reading habits. Together with the new interest of scholars in "presence" (and phenomena related to presence), the use of electronic media marks a much more profound change in the human condition, a change that happened, so to speak, "behind our backs," a change, above all, that concerns the institutional ways in which we relate to past, future, and present. To speak of such "social constructions of time," I use the word *chronotope*, slightly modifying

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in Sonja Fielitz, ed., *Praesenz interdisziplinaer: Kritik und Entfaltung einer Intuition* (Heidelberg: Universitaetsverlag Winter, 2012).

9. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012). Originally published as *Stimmungen lesen* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2011).

10. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Florian Klinger, eds., *Latenz: Blinde Passagiere in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Goettingen: Vanderhoeck, 2012).

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the meaning given to it by Mikhail Bakhtin.[11] I believe that the "historicist" chronotope, which, after 1800, had become successful to the point of being confused with time in and by itself—that is, the chronotope that made possible Hegel's philosophy of history and Darwin's evolutionism—has been challenged (and almost replaced) by the emergence of a different chronotope during the past fifty years, and that this new coexistence and tension between two chronotopes has had an irreversible influence on the ways in which we and the new generations are reading today.[12]

In all brevity, and largely relying on the historical work of the late Reinhart Koselleck,[13] I want to describe the five features of the historicist chronotope. First, the historicist chronotope always leaves the past behind, causing its orientational value to fade and obliging us to work through the past if we want to have an open future that we can shape. Second, and under the condition of having worked through the past, the historicist chronotope counts on the future as an open horizon of possibilities among which we can choose. Third, between a past that we leave behind and a future from which we can choose, the present becomes an "imperceptibly short moment of transition," as Charles Baudelaire wrote in his "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863). Fourth, for the historicist construction of time, this present is the habitat and the condition of a human self-understanding as subject and agency, that is, as being synonymous with the functional potential of consciousness (in the sense of Descartes's "I think therefore I am" and including acting, in the sense of *Handlung*). For it is in the present that, based on our perception of past experience, we choose among the possibilities of the future, meaning it is always and only in the present that we act. Finally, in this historicist chronotope, time appears to be an irresistible agent of change, which means no phenomena can escape their own transformation in time and through time, however fast or slow the pace of the specific transformation may be. Over the last few years, I have become convinced that such chronotopical descriptions can be used as tools for

11. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 84–258.
12. For a "historical" description and for philosophical arguments regarding the claim that a "change in the human condition" has taken place, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). See also Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Unsere breite Gegenwart* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011), which concentrates on what I am referring to as the "new chronotope." English translation forthcoming, Columbia University Press, 2014.
13. See, above all, Reinhart Koselleck, *Future's Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

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a new type of totalizing historical analysis. These chronotopical descriptions are totalizing because their complexity allows us to bring together a plethora of contemporaneous phenomena in one context but, different from traditional tools of totalization and due to the chronotopes' own complexity, these phenomena do not get subsumed under one dominant concept here.

Without any doubt, hermeneutic reading was—and still is—a product of the historicist chronotope. The "fusion" between the reader's existential situation and situations different from his own that he encounters in texts is an instance of the complex act of the historicist's choosing and shaping in the present a future based on past experience adapted to a present reality. Therefore, hermeneutic reading always occurs within the specific tension between the three time dimensions as it is constituted by the historicist chronotope. But the Cartesian self-reference that this chronotope produces has also been a key condition for New Critical reading. For if a self-reference as consciousness is the necessary condition for the hermeneutic "fusion" with the past, it also functions as a precondition for textual analysis and for a progressive mutual closure between the rhetorical reader (in de Man's sense again) and the text as an object. In this operation, it appears, the relation between past, future, and present is still "historical consciousness," but the dynamic produced by temporal tension seems to be on a much lower level of intensity.

In the new chronotope, by contrast—the chronotope I believe now dominates the everyday in contemporary global culture, the chronotope I associate with electronic communication without seeing electronic communication as its "origin" or "cause"—the future, instead of being an open horizon of possibilities, is occupied by threats that seem to come toward the present, that is, by visions of ecological, demographic, or economic catastrophe, whose arrival can be slowed down but cannot be ultimately avoided (and I am not making a judgment about whether such visions are realistic or not). Second, instead of being left behind by the present, the past of the new chronotope inundates the present—which means that nothing can ever be forgotten or replaced (the almost infinite memory capacities of electronic communication illustrate—and may be one condition for—this change). Third, between that blocked future and this past that refuses to wane, the new present becomes an ever-broadening present of simultaneities, a broadening present in which the dynamic vector of historicist time has disappeared. Fourth, if the narrow present of the historicist chronotope were associated with a Cartesian self-reference, that is, a conception of being human exclusively based on consciousness, we can assume that

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the drastically different structure of the broadening present allows for new varieties of self-reference (which may explain, for example, why the most recent decades have been so obsessed with both philosophical and practical efforts to bring "the body" and all kinds of sensibilities depending on the body "back" into human life). Finally, it goes without saying that in the new chronotope, time no longer appears to be a necessary agent of change; in other words, situations of continuity, new forms of being "conservative" (think the Green movements, for example), and even thoughts about permanent conditions of human life have become acceptable again.

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What would be the possible consequences of our new chronotopical situation, of this changing state in the human condition, for the future of reading? At the present state of reflection, I find the intellectual promise of this question more interesting than the first and very tentative answers I feel comfortable formulating. Therefore, rather than insisting on their analytic or even factual value, I hope that my concluding thoughts can be understood as an illustration of where a genealogical approach might take us if further pursued.

I start with a condition that has the status of a premise. If it belongs to the inherent "logic" of the new chronotope that no phenomena or institutions can ever be left behind, then this new chronotope will not progressively replace the old one; both will coexist in competition or complementarity. Seen from this angle, the situation of those seminars in Santiago, with their copresence of two deftly different reading styles, may well have been an anticipation of our future. Raised and educated in a massive environment of electronic communication, the primary reading style of my students was consciousness- and reason-based in a truly hyperbolic way, which explains their astounding performance in processing large quantities of texts and in transforming them into what they like to call "information." Within our broadening present, however, this consciousness-dominated role and self-reference, which computers only enhance and strengthen, are probably less exclusive and mandatory than they used to be under historicist conditions, that is, for the hermeneutic and New Critical reading styles. Therefore, I assume, my electronic-savvy students were often immediately impressed when I tried to draw their attention to the formal features of the texts we were dealing with and could be so easily tempted into ways of reading that made present for them past situations and alien

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cultures, with their specific layers of sensitivity and mood. Under conditions of the broadening present, communication seems to be less of the one-way street leading it away from concreteness and sensitivity than we normally imagine.

On the other hand, an affinity clearly exists for the ever-broadening present of simultaneities, a present in which literally everything is within reach, and for a form of existence that realizes itself in floating transitions between different modes of electronic communication, with no way out. This convergence between the broadening present and the ubiquity of electronic devices makes reading permanent and lets the act of reading lose contours, focus, and directionality. "Reading for," "reading for the plot" (or for any other kind or purpose)—a popular phrase for the description and distinction of different modes of reading only twenty years ago—no longer seems appropriate for the reading culture of the new generations.

To conclude, I want to mention a dimension that used to be central for the different reading cultures within the historicist chronotope, that is, the status of those texts we used to call "classics." "Classics" were texts capable of maintaining an appeal of freshness and immediacy against the erosion of time. What they achieved was the paradoxical exception within a chronotope whose present was constantly leaving the past "behind." In a broadening present of simultaneities, by contrast, and coupled with a technology that makes oblivion impossible, the presence and immediacy of texts from the past have ceased to be exceptional and exciting. While the aura of the "classics" is thus withering, their function as an institution becomes a matter of personal choice—which we should not necessarily have to consider as a symptom of loss or decadence. Rather, it could be understood as a belated fulfillment of that utopia of subjective freedom vis-à-vis the legacies and institutions of culture that Walter Benjamin was dreaming of in the final paragraphs of his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."[14]

Of course, it is not impossible to imagine a—quite remote—future of reading in which the heterogeneity of the present situation will have arrived at a more coherent picture that might turn out to be "the reading culture of the electronic age." Fourteen years into the twenty-first century, however, we can only state that the situation of reading seems endlessly complex,

14. For critical aspects of this vision, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, eds., *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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full of tensions, potential misunderstandings, and productive frictions, with no clear indication as to the direction in which it may develop.[15] My goal was to show how much this present of reading has been influenced by the specific institutional and chronotopical conditions under which the electronic revolution first occurred—and has ever since not stopped surprising us.

15. This impression is confirmed by a recent issue of *New Literary History* dedicated to new forms and motivations of reading in contemporary French criticism. See "The French Issue: New Perspectives on Readings from France," special issue, *New Literary History* 44, no. 2 (Spring 2013). The situation appears to be heterogeneous—and therefore intellectually and existentially vibrant.

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