

“High Culture as Entertainment”: Hybrid Reading Practices in a Live Book Club

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Abstract

The Bushwick Book Club (BBC) is a live book club in which invited pop musicians perform musical interpretations of a predetermined literary work in a nightclub environment. What can a typical BBC show, with its strong emphasis on popular music and performance, teach readers about the uses of literature? This case study will investigate which reading practices are at work and in what ways they challenge traditional ideas of the forms, functions, and values of reading. Another important aspect concerns how the borders between high and popular culture, and between the printed word and other media are renegotiated. Based on the findings of the case study and supporting theory, the article argues for a radically broadened conception of reading.

Keywords

reading practices; new media landscape; book clubs; popular literary culture; literary performances, Bushwick Book Club

The dominant conception of reading is the solitary, concentrated, and silent reading of a print literary text (Long, “Textual Interpretation as Collective Action”). Given the crisis of reading and declining scores in large-scale reading tests such as PISA, this dominant conception of reading is further underscored. However, this reduces the multiple uses of literature. In a similar vein, the collective, bodily, and material dimensions of reading tend to be forgotten in the theories and practices of literature instruction. In the multitude of passionate reading practices flourishing outside of the educational system, it is precisely these dimensions that are essential (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 1–3). Reading practices in the new media landscape should be seen as inscribed in a vast network comprised of artifacts, new and old media technologies, people, institutions, places, and affects, as highlighted through empirical evidence from a case study of the Bushwick Book Club (BBC).

BBC is a live book club in which invited pop musicians perform musical interpretations of a predetermined literary work in a nightclub environment. Founded in 2009 in New York City, BBC has established new chapters in Seattle, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. The one branch outside the US, focused on in this article, is in Malmö, Sweden.¹ A regular show in Sweden lasts approximately two hours; the founders and producers of BBC Malmö, Thomas Teller and Kristian Carlsson, function as hosts. A specific book, usually a novel, is the focus, and the selection of books leans strongly to high-quality contemporary fiction, although theme nights with classics such as *Frankenstein* and *Orlando* also occur. The producers/hosts generally invite three pop artists or groups, who must write at least one new song inspired by the novel in focus. The artists also play some songs of their own; the musicians usually discuss their impressions of the novel between songs. Since it began in 2012, BBC Malmö has produced between six and seven shows each year. On its webpage, BBC is described as a live book club, and its producers explain the following:

If there’s something we really like, it’s to try out new things: new combinations and mixes of genres. What always characterizes Bushwick Book Club is that a book (or a literary work of some sort) inspires musicians, artists, writers, etc., to create new works to perform during a thematic, entertaining, and interesting evening. And

remember: it works just fine to come to the show if you haven't read the book in advance. (Bushwick Book Club Sverige)

BBC offers multiple points of view on literature in a single setting and gives rise to a number of interesting questions regarding what characterizes a reading practice and where its borders and limits can or should be drawn.² What can a typical BBC show, with its strong emphasis on popular music and performance, teach readers about the uses of literature? Which reading practices are at work, and in what ways do they challenge (or confirm) traditional ideas of the forms, functions, and values of reading? How are the borders between high and popular culture and between the printed word and other media renegotiated?

As part of a larger project about passionate reading within and outside academia, I have conducted a case study of BBC. I attended six of BBC Malmö's shows during one year, and I conducted interviews with the two producers, Teller and Carlsson. I also interviewed the founder of the original BBC, Susan Hwang.³ Accordingly, my empirical material consists of interviews, field notes from the shows, and a vast number of texts in various media from the Swedish and the American BBC websites.

The Performances

An important point of departure for this article is that ideas concerning reading must be broadened to take into account its collective, social, material, and bodily dimensions. Taking BBC as an example can hopefully serve this purpose well. Despite its simple premise, BBC is a complex and difficult-to-classify phenomenon, and it could thus be approached from a number of different theoretical strands, including intermediality, cultural studies, musicology, or sociology of literature.

There are similarities with traditional book clubs (typically meeting in the homes of its members), in terms of the emphasis on socially sharing a reading experience (Long, *Book Clubs*) but the performative and public dimension is usually not in play in such instances. BBC is best understood as a popular cultural performance in which the simultaneous physical presence of artists and audience and the strong elements of play and ritual give new meanings to reading (Fischer-Lichte 38–40; Schechner 52–122). During a BBC performance, the values of reading and literature are renegotiated in ways symptomatic of what Jim Collins calls the popular literary culture in the new media landscape:

What used to be a thoroughly private experience in which readers engaged in intimate conversation with an author between the pages of a book has become an exuberantly social activity, whether it be in the form of actual book clubs, television book clubs, Internet chat rooms, or the entire set of rituals involved in "going to Barnes & Noble." 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. (Collins 4)

In this new media ecology, where "high" literature is increasingly being packaged and consumed in ways earlier primarily associated with popular culture, the power of literary judgement has been multiplied and decentralized. Literature and reading are redefined and given new values in social contexts, and this process is carried out by actors not belonging to the old literary establishment (i.e., professional critics, literary scholars, and so forth); on the contrary, these actors often take a distanced position towards the traditional arbiters of taste. To assert that one does not have to read the book—as BBC does on its homepage—could very well be perceived by these traditional arbiters as a provocation lacking respect. Further, as show producer Kristian Carlsson explained in an interview, BBC's conceptualization concerns "high culture as entertainment." The selection of literature is dominated by serious contemporary literature and classics, but it should be transmitted in an unpretentious and pleasurable manner.

What does a typical Bushwick performance look like, and which reading practices can be discerned in it? As mentioned earlier, the shows follow a structured format, alternating between the performances of the invited artists and the hosts. The atmosphere at the shows is relaxed and jolly. When one group has finished its act, the hosts comment on what they have heard and discuss their own approaches to the book. Throughout the evening and through various means such as humor and direct audience interaction, the hosts strive to create a feeling of

what performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte singles out as the most important sentiment of a performance: the feeling that we are all part of a unique community, albeit a temporary one (20, 24–29). Other recurring features of the show are shorter oral readings of the book and Thomas Teller and Kristian Carlsson performing two new works—one musical and one literary—based on the book of the evening. They explain the latter as follows: “Especially the fact that we write ourselves, as well—that’s very important for maintaining the pleasure and energy of the project. ... It would have been creative anyway, but it’s something completely different when you yourself shall join in and interpret the book” (Teller).

The producers contend their own active participation strengthens the role of the book in the show; otherwise, there could be a risk of the literature being less important than the music. However, to return to Collins’ argument about literature in the new media landscape, it is precisely this open relationship to the printed text that is significant. Reading literature in the context of BBC is always a strongly mediated affair, in constant play with other media technologies. Accordingly, it is not surprising that a Bushwick show can also include screenings of shorter films, multimedia installations, or, occasionally, a group of acrobats. This cross-fertilization of different art forms and media is, as Denise Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo have contended in their study of contemporary mass-reading events, typical of new collective reading practices:

The multiple mediation of the text through various kinds of formal performance by authors and experts, theatrical, cinematic and visual art adaptations, visits to the built or natural environment, and other participants may, of course, add to or alter an individual reader’s interpretation of the selected book. But it is the emotional connections and social intimacies that these multiple mediations make possible that intensifies the pleasures of learning about the world of the text. (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 243)

On a general level, BBC can be seen as part of a long historical chain of reading communities (Rehberg Sedo) and oral performances of literature: from rhapsodes and bards to literary salons and the poetry slams of our own time (Lönnroth). Bushwick has certain similarities with poetry slam in particular, even if the key element of competition is missing. At BBC, as at a poetry slam, the person (producer or artist) is in focus rather than the poem. The audience is given an active role, and the whole concept is performative rather than text-based (Gregory 24). In these respects, both BBC and poetry slams differ from another important form of oral literature: the (academic) poetry reading. As Helen Gregory points out, there is a tension between these two arenas that can be characterized as a conflict between popular and legitimate cultural capital; however, this conflict should be seen not as absolute but as open for negotiation and exchange. In his historical study of American poetry readings from the 1920s and onwards, Lesley Wheeler points out academic poetry reading is fairly rigid in terms of structure and framing; it changes only slowly (128-130).

At an academic poetry reading, the audience is quiet and is seated in orderly rows. The props are very few and typically include nothing more than a glass of water and a microphone. The performer’s clothes are tidy and proper. BBC incorporates an important, albeit brief, element from academic poetry reading: the recurring feature of a piece of new written literature (often poetry) being read (by Kristian). Gregory and Wheeler both emphasize that the literary establishment has criticized poetry slam and other forms of popular cultural oral performances of literature. Wheeler writes: “Even when the poems themselves allude to and sometimes express yearning for the audible world, the poets themselves, their critics, and some audiences resist the mixing of poetry and mass culture. To read aloud is to hawk not only the words but one’s very body in public marketplaces” (Wheeler 11-12).

An example of this attitude is Harold Bloom’s verdict on poetry slam, which according to him is equal to “the death of poetry” (qtd. in Gregory 69). A more nuanced diagnosis is given by Dana Gioia, who points out that the printed literary text is backgrounded in performance poetry and poetry slam but that this also leads to a new and enhanced author function which she calls “the amplified bard” (29). BBC, thus, incorporates elements both from slam and the academic poetry reading, piecing it together into something new, a totality in which media technologies and art forms other than printed (and spoken) literature also play crucial roles. The boundaries between literary text, author, interpreter, and audience become less sharp (cf. Kolodziej 17-18). Further, the borders between “high” and “low” are disrupted, not least because most literary works taken up by BBC belong to “high” literature but are worked upon by pop artists and placed in a popular cultural context. This transgressive dimension returns when one more closely examines the artists and their interpretations of the literary works.

The artists' musical interpretations of literature are at the heart of BBC. This is what makes the show unique and is what can be presumed to constitute an important part of the attraction for the audience. Musicians being inspired by literature is of course not a new phenomenon: in popular culture, such exchanges have been comprehensive and intense.⁴ From an intermedial perspective, BBC can be seen as an example of "musico-literary intermediality"; more precisely, it can be viewed as a "hidden" form of intermediality, where "literature may be transformed into, or appear in, music" (Wolf 54). Another way of putting it is that we have a "post-text" (the BBC-song) interpreting a "pre-text" (the literary work in question) (Lund 20). What these concepts and distinctions miss, however, is the performative dimension and the songs being part of a larger—and, intermedially speaking, even more complex—whole.

As mentioned, BBC values transgressive and unexpected mixes of genres. On a basic level, this is a foundation of the event itself, but it sometimes becomes particularly clear. During one BBC-evening, the novel *Towelhead* (2005) by Alicia Erian was in focus. It is a dark but humorous story about an Arab girl, Jasira, growing up in the US; its primary themes include sexual awakening and abuse. Three bands were invited to interpret the book: singer songwriter Anna Jadeus, a "murder ballads"-band named Your Saviour, and Floridaz, a band that parodies the specifically Swedish low-brow, cheesy, and sentimental music genre called "dansband." Already, this mix of music styles says something about the eclecticism prevalent in BBC.

The artists approached the novel in radically different ways. They all felt it was a dark and unpleasant story. Anna Jadeus said her band usually "gets down to angst, but that this book was almost too heavy and dark." Jadeus played a handful of her own compositions that clearly connect to the novel's themes of young and fragile love, and she finished with a song written for the occasion and about the novel. The producers introduced the next band, Your Saviour, in the following manner: "Now we will finally see some of the evil characters in the book suffer." The band consisted of two young women playing guitar and accordion, both wearing old white victorian dresses covered with lace. They told the audience that they indeed had some problems with the book and that they would let the music talk for itself. Dirty men were then "executed" in their songs, as if on an assembly line. Their final song was an example of explicit reinterpretation in the form of a dreadful portrayal of the neighbor, Mr Vuoso, who sexually assaulted the young female protagonist.

Floridaz' front man began the performance for the last band of the evening by saying, "it's hard to find a dansband-angle on anxiety" and they, therefore, would start off by acquainting the audience with the "vocabulary of the genre." The musicians' costumes were in-line with the corny aesthetics of the genre, the stage had new props (including a big green plastic palm), and the songs performed were musically faithful to the genre.⁵ However, the crooner's voice and exaggerated vibrato, along with an increasing sentimentality and accentuated halting rhymes, made the performance a clear example of parody rather than pastiche, something to which the setting itself also contributed (the venue is usually a hip rock club). The song written for the evening, "My Safe Place," employed a more unobtrusive form of irony; it was a celebration of Jasira's supportive and caring neighbor, Melina.

Based on these details of a BBC-show, its transgressive and eclectic dimensions are clear. It is striking how radically different the musical and textual strategies adopted by the participating artists are. As Susan Hwang states in an interview, the concept itself enforces both interpretative pluralism and increased creativity:

It's so interesting to see how people will use the same material but come up with their own, and to respond to the same material in so many different ways. And of course you can have three different songwriters writing on the same character and each song is from a completely different perspective. Yeah, it's fascinating.

An important feature of contemporary popular literary culture is the complicated interplay between old and new ideals of reading. We not only see a transformation of individual reading practices into collective and multimedial ones, we also see a rebirth of the Author and the belief in literature as an existential and therapeutic project of identity and Bildung:

This culture may indeed rely on twenty-first-century technologies of scanning, storage, and downloadability, but it also draws on early-nineteenth-century notions of reading as self-transformation, filtered through late twentieth-century discourses of self-actualization, all jet-propelled by state-of-the-art forms of marketing "aesthetic

experience". (Collins 10)

The author is not, as the new critics and post-structuralists claimed, dead but is a source of wisdom and aesthetic pleasure. This also holds true for the authors (writers and artists) of popular culture. In both cases, the question of authorship concerns complex and varied interrelations between strong notions of originality, on the one hand, and more sociologically inclined explanations, on the other (Negus 608–616). The rebirth of the author is, not surprisingly, accompanied by a new focus on the role of the self in reading practices—something that also becomes quite clear in BBC. The differences between the novels selected for the show can be great, ranging from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* to Valerie Solana's *SCUM Manifesto*, from Alice Munro's *Too Much Happiness* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. A common denominator, however, is that the chosen literature allows for strong personal reading experiences with rich possibilities for effect and existential reflection. What can be discerned, despite all the differences, is an ethos of reading, a belief both in the passionate reader and in literature as a fountain of insights into the deeply human. This ethos appears in the producers' own interpretations of the literary works as well. During the *Towelhead*-evening, elements of autobiography and confession were employed.

In his oral performance, Kristian Carlsson movingly told attendees about his parenthood and about how his and his child's nightmares seemed to be synchronized at night. Thomas Teller's song evolved into a melancholy and self-ironic account of what it was like to be the same age as the girl in the novel. To increase the emotional strength and authenticity of the piece, the song was preceded by Teller reading from his sister's twenty-year-old (authentic?) diary. Explicit or implicit autobiographical elements were recurrent also during other shows. These can be viewed as markers of authenticity, but the self-revealing and confessional content is also constantly balanced with humor and irony. In conclusion, reading is about exploring and representing the self.

As Collins notes, the reader has been upgraded to an active co-creator in the new popular literary culture: "The fully empowered reader is a given—why else would they be passionate readers if they weren't making books meaningful, and pleasurable, on their own terms?" (31). This is clearly the case for the producers and artists of BBC, but it is also the case, by extension, for the audience, as well; they can be presumed to share the same ethos.

It is not easy to summarize the multitude of reading practices that become (more or less) visible during a typical BBC-show. Several are obvious: the producers reading aloud from the book, the producers' and the artists' literary and musical adaptations of the novel, the producers' and the artists' comments on the book, members of the audience chatting about the book during the intermission, and the actual reading (or non-reading) of the book before or after the show. Does this list not widen the concept reading practice too much? Most people would probably agree that listening to an audio book is, in some sense, an instance of reading. But can the performance of a pop song really be considered reading? Not in the traditional, narrow sense of reading, but certainly in the sense that is foregrounded by Collins', Fuller's and Rehberg Sedo's theories of social reading beyond the book. It is perhaps significant that the most traditional reading practice among those mentioned above, reading aloud, is at one point deprived of its monologic form. During the show on Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour tristesse*, the audience was suddenly asked to shout out a number of a page and a line in order to reveal an "especially important passage of the novel." A member of the audience shouted "page 34, line 12," and Teller quoted, "Women were spotted on the path of the goats." Laughter erupted, and Teller concluded, "Isn't it nice to read aloud!" Thus, old reading practices are both reproduced and parodied, and new ones are created and hybridized. A necessary condition for this venture is the collective and social dimensions of passionate reading.

The Producers

The producers of BBC are independent cultural workers. BBC has no formalized ties to existing cultural institutions and is dependent on various forms of temporary cooperations and alliances. Funding is insecure: BBC in Malmö has received public funding a couple of times, while BBC in New York City relies on unpaid work and ticket sales. Advertising in newspapers is too expensive, so, both for BBC Malmö and BBC New York, social media is a necessary platform for marketing and information and for documenting the project (songs, film clips, lyrics, and so on).

Asked if they considered BBC to be a reading promotion project, the Swedish producers Teller and Carlsson state that they cooperate with public libraries, but they distance themselves somewhat from the term reading promotion, suggesting it could have a deterring or even intimidating function: “In our applications for grants we mention reading promotion, but that’s never our public face. I think it’s important to stress our cool and conceptual starting point” (Teller). To maintain a distance from explicit reading promotion can have several causes, but one plausible interpretation is it can signal duty and work. Also, at the bottom of many reading campaigns lies what has been called the literature myth, according to which the reading of good literature will make you a better person (Persson, “The Literature Myth”). Not wanting to be associated with this myth became apparent during one show when the singer of the garage rock band Baboon said the following to the audience concerning his not very positive experience reading the novel of the evening, *The Tiny Wife* (by Andrew Kaufman): “I still think I’ve become a much better person by reading this book, but it was nice that it was so short.”

Despite the producers’ skepticism towards reading promotion, they hope their project contributes to an increased interest in reading. Teller mentions that many in the audience approach them afterwards to tell them not only that they really like the concept but also that the concept has opened their eyes to the multitude of possible connections to and interpretations of the same book.

Even though one primarily associates reading promotion with idealistic activities outside the education system, it is still interesting to take part of the producers’ views on their own earlier experiences of reading literature in school. Both Hwang and Teller have positive memories of literature instruction in school, and they mentioned the value of committed and broad-minded literature teachers as positive role models. Conversely, Carlsson was more critical; avoiding his school’s literature classes stimulated his interest in literature: “The best way to develop my own reading was to jump class and stay at home to read, something I practiced quite a lot in high school. ... I had more important things to do. But libraries and school libraries are extremely important. There you find this broad selection of books. I remember picking up Ginsberg’s *Howl* at my school library.” Carlsson made the same observation regarding his university studies in comparative literature: “I guess it was the same thing there; the reading you did by not going to class was better than the lectures.” He contended the ideal reading practice stems from freedom and from strong inner motivation.

BBC is, then, involved in a form of reading promotion “undercover” or “in disguise” and avoids any kind of duty, discipline, or morality which could lead the thoughts either to traditional reading campaigns or to literature instruction within the education system. However, this does not imply the producers would encourage a relativistic view on literary value—quite the contrary. As mentioned, the selection of books is very broad, both in Malmö and in New York. The producers further indicated that there is not any kind of literature that could absolutely not be part of a BBC-show. Susan Hwang said, “I don’t think there’s anything too high or too low.” The selection is in part random and is sometimes the result of current affairs, as when they chose Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* on its 150th anniversary. Besides novels (one by Kurt Vonnegut every year), she has, amongst others, chosen a photography book and a dictionary of synonyms and wants to choose a cookery book for a future event. Teller and Carlsson do not see any limitations when it comes to genre, either. The only important factor is good language and literary quality: “It must be good and very well-written. And it, of course, is based on us two, who are very different kinds of readers. But we must think that it’s fun to do it” (Carlsson). Both emphasized there are many factors to consider before making the choice: length, availability, profile of the invited artists, variety, an exciting mix of genres, originality, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

A founding idea is, as mentioned, that high-quality literature must be presented in an entertaining manner: “We want the audience to understand that the prestige lies not in exclusivity but in quality. Not in the demand to be serious, to just sit quietly and not respond, as if it were in a classroom of comparative literature” (Carlsson). Here, a sharp dividing line is drawn between BBC and a central actor of literary evaluation: the academic discipline comparative literature. Simultaneously, Carlsson also draws a line between BBC and mainstream popular literature, albeit implicitly. According to BBC, you cannot compromise with literary quality. Consequently, there are no examples of popular, feel-good novels, bestsellers, or what Collins calls Lit Lit: a kind of popular highbrow literature that thematizes and celebrates the healing power of reading. As mentioned earlier, BBC Malmö welcomes books on the darker sides of humans—books that encourage existential reflection. These may

appear as subtle distinctions, but they are crucial for BBC's views on literature.

An interesting question is how the producers describe themselves as readers, and if they see any difference between their reading for BBC and their private reading (in terms of technique, purpose, and interconnected activities). Susan Hwang explained she studied creative writing in school, and she has always loved to read. Reading for BBC, however, is special; she always performs herself, so she has not only to read much and regularly, she has also developed a special technique of reading. Susan reads with a pen in hand and underlines specific phrases. After reading, she collects the underlined phrases, and sometimes an idea for a song emerges based on patterns in choice of words, symbols, and scenes. This reading technique may seem to have much in common with the one practiced in the close reading of literary studies, but it is also an intensely bodily reading. Susan stated the song often comes to her before the whole reading is finished, an experience she compared to an orgasm: "I tend to focus on the words first. Sometimes as you're falling asleep, or on a train, or sometimes in a dream, or whenever you're relaxed, you hear something, and [you're] like, 'My god, that's the song!' It's nice when that happens, but it doesn't happen all the time." Here, it is clear how reading is widened to encompass a host of other interrelated activities of varying degrees, such as writing, underlining, compiling, composing, dreaming, travelling, and falling asleep. Hwang's narrative resembles the French author George Perec's plea for a more comprehensive conception of reading:

Would it not be right in any case to investigate the environments in which we read? Reading isn't merely to read a text, to decipher signs, to survey lines, to explore pages, to traverse a meaning; it isn't merely the abstract communion between author and reader, the mystical marriage between the Idea and the Ear. It is, at the same time, the noise of the Métro, or the swaying of a railway compartment, or the heat of the sun on a beach and the shouts of children playing a little way off, or the sensation of hot water in the bath, or the waiting for sleep. (Perec 181)

Both Teller and Carlsson emphasize that the boundaries between their professional and private reading are fluid. Carlsson states:

BBC affects what I want to read. My private reading is never just private. Everything enriches each other. There is no such thing as private reading, and at the same time there is no clearly defined public reading either. ... It is not both, and it is not either or, it is something else. Reading for BBC does not imply duty and discipline in any traditional sense. Despite one having to read widely and deeply with pencil in hand as a producer for BBC, this method of reading could also be considered freer: I have always been a reader, underlining and making notes, which you do for Bushwick, as well. And as a publisher I read a lot, and I'm an author myself. I feel rather that because of Bushwick I now can read more novels for pure pleasure, something I previously had to set aside in favor of poetry. Reading is more a goal in itself now. Even though we have to make a selection, there's still more free reading. (Carlsson)

To the question what their ideal reading experience or reading situation would entail, all three producers responded that they prefer the printed book instead of Kindles or iPads. This corresponds to observations made both by Fuller and Rehberg Sedo in relation to participants of various mass-reading events and by Christina Olin-Scheller in relation to fan fiction: Despite the practices being intensely multimodal and virtually unthinkable without social media, the printed book is still singled out as the original and superior source. At the same time, the BBC producers distance themselves from the idea of reading being all about discipline and hard work; instead, they emphasize surrounding factors such as place, reading position, and various artifacts linked to reading.⁶

When you mention school, it's sort of the opposite, sitting by a desk reading, and that definitely doesn't appeal to me. I read lying on the sofa when everybody else is sleeping. I guess that's ideal. (Carlsson)

I like that I have to focus, [to] put everything else aside. ... It's more of a mood I have to be in. If I'm preoccupied by other stuff, I first have to make a to-do list, and then I can begin to read. My surroundings don't matter that much; I can be on a bus with loads of people. But it's also about making it nice and comfortable: The sofa is great. You want to reward yourself a bit, like, "now, I'm going to disappear for a while." (Teller)

The producers' reasoning about themselves as readers complicates several strong ideas on the differences between professional and "ordinary" readers. Literary sociologist John Guillory's influential discussion on this distinction (31-32) is clarifying but also problematic (cf. Persson, "On the Differences between Reading and Studying Literature"). According to Guillory, the differences between how one practices reading within and outside of academia have evolved into an unbridgeable gap. Professional academic reading is characterized by hard work, by analytical distance, through reading techniques that take years to master, and by reading that takes place in a collective context in dialogue with other professional readers. Conversely, ordinary reading—or "lay reading," as Guillory calls it—is characterized by its taking place in your spare time, by it not being institutionally framed, by it being driven by pleasure, and by it being an individual activity.

When Guillory discusses professional reading, he is referring only to the kind of reading practiced in literary studies. There are many other professional readers (librarians, teachers, book reviewers, and so on) in other arenas, where the conditions for and evaluations of different kinds of reading may differ. The reading carried out by the producers of BBC must also be considered professional, albeit in a slightly different manner. One cannot criticize Guillory solely on this ground, of course; he isolates two different ways of reading and clarifies many factors. One must also take into account the changes in the literary sphere since his article was first published; for instance, what Collins and other scholars refer to as the new popular literary culture has certainly gained in importance since then.

However, based on the interviews with the producers of BBC, one can definitively conclude the borders between professional and ordinary reading seem less well defined than Guillory asserts. There are features of academic reading in the producers' practices, not least the thorough close reading with a pen in hand or the commitment to literary value. This means the characterization of ordinary reading as only concerning pleasure must also be nuanced. The producers testify it is hard to draw any clear distinctions between professional and private reading. Close reading and a bodily and affective reading for pleasure do not preclude each other; rather, they function as fertile prerequisites for one another. Ordinary reading can no longer be seen as an isolated individual reading practice; on the contrary, events such as BBC show that reading literature can be—and often is—an intensely social, collective, and multimedial practice with fleeting boundaries between different actors, texts, media, genres, technologies, activities, and places.

Pedagogical Implications

A starting point for this article was the need for the predominant view on reading to be widened. Reading can mean and involve so many other and more things than the solitary reading of a printed literary text. The case of BBC provides an abundance of examples of how reading in its narrower sense is now interconnected with a plurality of other practices, media, places, and artifacts. The reading of a literary text is here transformed into a popular cultural performance where the scenic and dramatized meeting between the spoken and printed word, and music, becomes crucial. In this meeting, other media technologies and art forms are also very important. Focus is shifted from the literary work itself to its manifold "stagings," from the text to its performers and performances. The social dimension becomes important, partly from the presence and participation of the audience, and partly because the event itself can be seen as a collective project, a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Total Work of Art) where the vantage point is still a specific book, but where, through the hosts' and artists' interpretations, it is inscribed in new constellations and networks in terms of medium, genre, style, and cultural circuit ("high" or "low"). Members of the audience might be drawn to the show because of the book, of course, but they might as well be there because of the performing artists. In either case, new and unexpected constellations of literature and music will unfold.

There are no pedagogical quick fixes or obvious moral lessons to be drawn from this case study. Nevertheless, BBC offers a rich map of different ways of working with literature in pleasurable and innovative ways. The producers distancing themselves from the term "reading promotion" is not surprising, for the term connotes utility, duty, and work. The challenge seems to be to invoke genuine motivation for literature without expecting too much of a service in return.

The relationship between pleasure and achievement is especially critical in school and higher education. How does a teacher bring about optimal conditions for passionate reading at the same time as being obliged to

evaluate and grade exactly these achievements? The challenge is a well-known one within literary pedagogy, and it has grown more important in these times of New Public Management, with increased focus on test scores and quantification of knowledge. This challenge must be addressed. Without passionate readers, there will be no critical readers and probably no high achievers in large-scale international literacy tests (such as PISA), either (Bruns 62-63). Trying out new and creative ways of mediating literature could be a start. A crucial insight to be learned from BBC is precisely that reading has amorphous boundaries to other cultural practices. A creative exploration of these boundaries has great aesthetic—and, by extension, pedagogical—possibilities. There are no guarantees the slogan “you don’t have to read the book” works for all. In school and college, you still have to have read the book, of course. These unavoidable compulsory elements could be balanced by a more open and curious approach, highlighting both the singularity of reading literature and its intimate dependence on surrounding factors and practices. This would also be in better harmony with the changing conditions for reading in the new media ecology. Reading should no longer simply be seen as threatened by new media; on the contrary, it should be seen as a (both specific and amorphous) kind of media experience in itself (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 248). Further, even if the book sometimes seems to completely disappear in favor of other competing media during a BBC-show, the particular literary text in focus is the catalyst for the particular evening’s unique and complex media experience.

End Notes

1 In 2013, a local chapter with a similar design was started in the city of Helsingborg, and in 2015 in Gothenburg.

2 The concept reading practice has in recent years been theorized and applied most extensively within the field of new literacy studies, see, e.g. Barton. In literary and cultural studies, the influence of De Certeau cannot be overlooked.

3 The interviews were semi-structured, conducted by the author, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

4 See e.g. Ganetz; Lindberg; Olsson for overviews and case studies.

5 For a discussion and rehabilitation of this genre, see Trondman 198–235.

6 Cf. Persson, “Reading around the Text.”

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