Introduction to Literacy and Society, Culture, Media and Education

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Kris RUTTEN and Geert VANDERMEERSCHE

Introduction to *Literacy and Society, Culture, Media and Education*

In an age of digitality and mass media, perceptions about and practices of culture, the production and consumption of culture and thus also pedagogy and educational systems are undergoing changes and debate. Among other issues and developments, the impact of digitality results in new perspectives on literacy(ies). In the thematic issue *Literacy and Society, Culture, Media and Education* of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.3 (2013): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/> guest edited by Kris Rutten and Geert Vandermeersche, authors explore theories, practices, methodologies, and applications for the study of the interrelations of digitality and contemporary society, culture, and pedagogy including topics such as media and society, media and culture, media and education, digital humanities, and media and (information) literacy.

In *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse*, James Paul Gee describes literacy as a whole way of being in the world. People have to learn to use different kinds of literacies in society and so become members of different language and discourse communities. From this perspective, literacy is said to be constructed or negotiated in interactions framed in cultural models or schemata. Gee refers to this as the "social turn" within literacy studies whereby literacy is no longer described as a neutral and individual cognitive or technical skill, but as a "socially situated" practice (155). With the concept of (multi)literacies the New London Group aims to connect technological developments with the "social turn" in literacy studies emphasizing not only a multitude of cultures, but also a multitude of text forms, discourses, and media. New Literacy Studies are about literacy as an engagement with language in specific contexts (see Graff; Lee and Street; Willinsky). From this perspective, the acquisition of literacy is approached as a process of socialization situated in the context of the power structures of society and institutions. This led to a large corpus of scholarship on the situated nature of literacy from sociological (Barton and Hamilton), ethnographic (Lillis and Scott), and linguistic (Hyland) perspectives (see also Rutten; Rutten and van Dienderen). Situating literacy in the context of the power structures raises important questions: Whose literacies are dominant? Why are some literacies marginalized? What should we teach our students? What exactly do we mean by "we"? And thus the concept of literacy implies a focus on how human beings use symbols to construct and negotiate meaning (see Rutten, Rodman, Wright, Soetaert).

As Peter Mortensen argues, there is "a tendency in literacy studies — call it a disciplinary 'disposition' or 'attitude' — to claim ownership of the question: Does literacy have consequences, and if so, what are they?" (770). Of course, there is nothing intrinsically negative about asserting disciplinary expertise, "except when we fail to see that others outside of [these] disciplinary and institutional spaces are also engaged in discerning, even theorizing, what literacy is and what it does" (771). Authors in the thematic issue at hand aim to approach literacy from the perspective of (comparative) literature and (comparative) cultural studies. Donna Alverman clearly shows there has been a growing body of work that can be situated at the intersection of literacy studies and cultural studies (see Rutten, Rodman, Wright, Soetaert). In the last decade of the twentieth century, scholars of pedagogy started from earlier work in cultural studies that focused on audiences and their everyday uses of popular culture to explore young people's literacy by studying the intersections between popular culture and pedagogy (see, e.g., Alvermann, Hagood, Moon; Beavis; Moje). This was elaborated upon at the beginning of the twenty-first century in studies of young people's uses of digital technologies (e.g., Merchant; Squire). Indeed, "a proliferation of popular culture texts available in different formats across multiple media platforms, and a new literacies perspective on theorizing reading and writing as social practices, have linked the research on popular culture and literacy" (Alverman 548).

It is clear that both (comparative) cultural studies and new literacy studies are with focus on the complexity of our contemporary society and teach us that culture and literacy have exploded into many different high and low cultural practices worth studying (for an overview see Verdoodt, Rutten, Soetaert, Mottart; Soetaert, Mottart, Verdoodt; for a discussion on cultural studies and critical literacies see Luke, Comber, Grant; Rutten, Rodman, Wright, Soetaert). The topic of cultural literacy

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and its relation to education has been a subject of academic and public debate for many years. Both conservative (back-to-basics) and progressive thinkers have pointed out the problematic nature of culture and literacy in our contemporary society. Cultural Studies precisely problematized the distinction between high and low culture and New Literacy Studies focused on the politics of traditional — Western — notions of "literacy" and also criticized the idea that literacy often only refers to reading and writing. The focus has shifted to different kinds of literacies related to different media and networks. This critical perspective problematizes traditional concepts such as the literary canon: one form of literacy related to one specific medium, the book, and literature as a major genre. Specifically the idea that the literary canon is "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold 6) has been criticized for its elitist perspective and corrected from — amongst others — feminist and postcolonial perspectives (see, e.g., Rutten, Soetaert, Vandermeersche; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee).

From these perspectives, literary culture (and art in general) has been increasingly subject to criticism and correction. However, there is also a growing body of work that defends this same literary culture. Not only from conservative (back-to-basics) points of view with a nostalgic longing for an elite status of literary culture but paradoxically enough also from critical perspectives that question if the deconstruction of the literary canon has not caused an (exaggerated) neglect of the possible added value of literature and art in general. In *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth argues for focusing on ethics in our engagement with literature to explore not only the potential dangers, but also the ethical powers of works that are part of the literary canon. This discussion raises questions about the possible "functions" of literature and art in our globalized, multicultural, and media saturated societies. Why is a literary culture important? Does knowledge about art and literature make you a "more rounded" human being (related to the notion of *Bildung*) or is it instrumental knowledge (related to specific functions of literature)? Moreover, what is the status and politics of cultural literacy in our technological society and knowledge economy? In *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* Martha Nussbaum postulates that novels can be read as metaphors in order to understanding the stories of others and that literature should be used to help citizens to orient themselves as cosmopolitans and to stimulate their moral imagination and practice. More recently, in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* she argues that democracies need the humanities.

Literary culture and literature education have also been situated in the context of social structures. Terry Eagleton refers to the "ideology of literature" and claims that social structures such as the nation-state use literature as a "moral technology [that] consists of a particular set of techniques and practices for the instilling of specific kinds of value, discipline, behavior, and response in human subjects" (96-97). This technology produces a specific kind of knowledge which serves "certain functions of power" that are "vital to the ends of social order" (Eagleton 97). Eagleton emphasizes that this moral technology is not just the "simple communication of a range of practical moral values, such as authority is good or evil" (98), but that it is more subtle and elusive because it teaches one to "be" moral (on this, see also Rutten, Soetaert, Vandermeersche). Of course, the metaphor of literature as moral technology needs to be confronted with other contemporary potential moral technologies such as social media and video games. Scholarship about metaphor, the narrative, and narration is important for a such a contextualized analysis of literacy because "people make sense of their experiences by emplotting them in terms of socially and culturally specific stories which are supported by the social practices, rituals, texts and other media representations of specific social groups and cultures" (Gee, "The New Literacy" 2; see also Rutten). John Rodden asserts that a deeper understanding of the subtle dynamics of narratives can "shed a valuable light both on literature and on our lives" (149). We agree with Rodden that such a deeper understanding should focus on the ways stories edify us and at the same time explore the implication of this persuasion. Indeed, the question should be: "How do stories convince us?"

Over the past few years, there has been a small, but growing corpus of scholarship to explore rhetoric as an alternative framework to study literacy as a contextualized practice. A rhetorical conception of literacy implies a focus on "the influence of a particular rhetoric on what [people] choose to say [and] to acknowledge the influence of rhetoric on what people refrain from saying and the expressive possibilities that are foreclosed to them" (Duffy, "Letters" 227)). John Duffy describes

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literacy as "the rhetorical struggles of competing people, cultures and institutions seeking to impose meaning and establish authority in contexts of everyday life" (*Writing* 26). The aim of a rhetorical analysis is not to unmask a specific ideology or an attempt to subvert the purpose of education, but by analyzing these persuasive strategies the objectiveis to explore how literacy practices are defined, explained and negotiated in relation to different contexts. From the perspective of social media, John Hartley, Kelley McWilliam, Jean Burgess, and John Banks claim that currently "critical literacy" with regards to media is "not imagined as learning how to navigate the networks and gain mastery of these applications. It is, instead, a kind of 'ideology watch'" (63). However, they argue that it is imperative that "critical" should not always focus on the "bad" or "ideological" aspects of media in relation to literacy and schooling and should also take other practical, cognitive, and affective issues into account.

Digital humanities and the study of intermediality is another field of relevance to (multi)literacies because "intermediality influences the negotiation of culture and education (in theory and application), and how, in turn, cultural and educational practices shape the use of media and their social significance" (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1). In "On No Man's Land: Theses on Intermediality" Mikko Lehtonen posits that in the study of language and culture relatively little attention has been paid to the fact that "the past and present of contemporary culture and media are indeed part and parcel of multimodal and intermedial culture and media" (71). Not only has the (digital) processing of information become an important "communicative vehicle" of culture today, "technological applications and intermediality play an important role in developing educational and cultural policies and practices; expanding the stock of shared heritage while maintaining cultural diversity and the multiplicities of identity formation" (Tötösy de Zepetnek and López-Varela Azcárate 40). Science and technology have always influenced the practice and materiality of culture and our technological landscape is increasingly becoming multimodal and multifocal. This has important implications for exploring the concept of so-called digital humanities within the larger framework of (multi)literacies.

One important consequence of the emerging convergence culture and decentralized media landscape is that the increased cutting, pasting and re-mixing of information and content problematizes traditional conceptions of intellectual properties. In "Critical Literacy Lessons for the Intellectual Properties of Learning" John Willinsky and Johanne Provençal state that the realm of intellectual property is often absent in discussions about critical literacy for the "new information age" and they argue that it is of vital importance for a concept of intellectual property to be included in approaches to critical literacy. Further, they argue that intellectual property rights have become crucial to issues of access to knowledge today. In particular, they state that critical literacy should be a perspective that focuses on such rights to know, specifically in relation to learning (and teaching).

In *The Economics of Attention*, Richard Lanham explores what the current "information age" can learn from the humanities and he describes the new economy that defies standard economic analysis not only as an information-based economy but as an "attention economy." If we describe economics as the study of the allocation of scarce resources, we should be aware that the concept "information economy" is problematic because the growing availability of information on a variety of media platforms creates a new scarcity. The argument is that we live in an age in which attention is the commodity in short supply and that in all sectors of society — from commercial enterprises to public institutions — we compete for human attention. From this perspective, Lanham developed a central thesis, namely that "in an information economy, the real scarce commodity will always be human attention and that attracting that attention will be the necessary precondition of social change. And the real source of wealth" (46). Further, it is a central contention that specifically the (new) social media change the texture and flow of attention. Therefore, we have to focus on how a generation of digital natives changes patterns of attention in more multifocal and multimodal ways (on this, see, e.g., Rutten and Soetaert). Thus, in the new economy of attention the manipulation of attention is a basic skill. This, of course, also implies a critical engagement with, as well as on behalf, of these "attention structures": "in a world where stuff, and what we think about stuff are often at odds" education should make you comfortable with a bi-stable grasp of the world (Lanham 26). And this world is indeed confronted with different political, religious and economical differences. One way to achieve such a bi-stable perspective is by introducing art in education as a way for studying the symbols, language, and media with which we create meaning. From the perspective of an economics

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of attention, artists have always instructed us how to pay attention to the world: "artists are supposed to be, as our epigraph from Kenneth Burke reminds us prophets of things to come" (Lanham 63). A contextualized perspective on literacy also implies to explore what the implications are the results of current developments with regards to information literacy for the national, the supra-national, and the global level and how these levels are becoming fluid and problematic.

Authors in *Literacy and Society, Culture, Media and Education* discuss the above outlined problematics of literacy from several angles and in various contexts as follows.

In their article "Perspectives on Literary Reading and Book Culture" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/2> Geert Vandermeersche and Ronald Soetaert provide a narrative framework for analyzing literary scholars' argumentation in the debate on literature and the humanities. Starting from MacIntyre's narrative description of epistemic "crises" they analyze the stories authors construct and the positions they take and ascribe to others within larger developing (grand) narratives on the value and function of literary reading. Both traditional narratives and new alternative (i.e., enlarged) narratives are discussed in how they set up and frame the argument and how they create dichotomies.

In his article "Reading, Literacy, and Education" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/3> Mikko Lehtonen outlines a contextual approach to literacy. He asks how the changing relations of culture and economy, transformation of nation states and national cultures and changing notions concerning affect and cognition, transform notions of literacy and reading. Relying on the results of a recent Finnish research project on new reading communities and new ways of reading, Lehtonen highlights substantial continuities in the reading habits of the so called Google generation when compared to other generations of readers. Print media is not, however, connected self-evidently to cognitive reading among the said generation. Lehtonen concludes that the currently dominant ways of understanding reading are not necessarily the most useful when researchers aim at understanding the present ways of reading. Lehtonen calls for such research that would deepen the understanding of what media generations are, how the reading of printed texts happen in multimodal contexts, and what affordance various media forms, including print media, have for readers.

In his article "Literature, Digital Humanities, and the Age of the Encyclopedia" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/4> Gunther Martens takes his cue from Robert Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities* in order to discuss the way in which literature relates to new developments in technology. Martens argues that it is useful to situate some of the fears accompanying literature's renewed exposure to media and technology against the background of similar discussions earlier: the historical perspective allows to identify and link three specific discourses underpinning the debate on the future of reading and the book, namely: education, rhetoric, and the concept of the encyclopedia. The encyclopedia and encyclopedic literature comprise and announce such strategies as metadata, collaborative authorship, and transliteracy. Further, Martens elaborates on new conceptions of connectivity, conversity, and interoperability as hallmarks of transliteracy within digital humanities. He argues that the new methods and tools developed by digital humanities have a history in the study of rhetoric and in the cultural history of the encyclopedia as a tool for organizing and visualizing knowledge.

In their article "Rhetoric, Citizenship, and Cultural Literacy" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/5> Kris Rutten and Ronald Soetaert start from concerns in contemporary educational debates about a growing lack of civic literacy. These complaints are raised both in the public sphere, in institutions of pedagogy, and in scholarship about the form, content, and function of civic literacy and civic education. Although there is an ongoing debate about the alleged decrease of political interest and the current state of civic literacy, it is clear that civic education has become an important focus of different governmental initiatives. Rutten and Soetaert aim to move away from a straightforward definition of citizenship in general and civic literacy in particular by developing a rhetorical framework for a broader and contextualized understanding of civic and cultural literacies by exploring what this implies for a contemporary humanist and liberal education

In his article "About the Destruction, Continuation, and Transformation of Art" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/6> Frank Maet offers an answer to the question raised

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by Arthur C. Danto's thesis how to discern art from non-art? Maet considers art from the perspective of a technologically mediated reality and he distinguishes three different views on contemporary visual art: the destruction, the continuation, and the transformation of art. Maet considers these three artistic views as different strategies to deal with our current technological condition and evaluates the merits of each of them. He argues that our thoroughly designed reality turns the strategy of artistic destruction into a dangerous and sometimes even life-threatening strategy and that existing theories of art advocating the continuation of art fall short in taking into account popular and commercial products. According to Maet, we have to opt for a radical transformation of the concept of art and redefine art in light of the current digitalization as a specific kind of technology.

In their article "Rhetorical Analysis of Literary Culture in Social Reading Platforms" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/7> Joachim Vlieghe and Kris Rutten present a case study of the discourse surrounding literary phenomena which are emerging within social media. The case study is part of a methodological exploration within literacy studies whereby the social media's transformative effects on literary literacies are studied by focusing on language as symbolic and situated action. Vlieghe and Rutten identify unique social reading platforms based on a prolonged study of the social media environment. The analysis of the developers' discourse on social reading platforms shows how developers are formulating new instructions on how to talk and to act in relation to literature by changing the scope of concepts related to literary phenomena within the "social media" system.

In their article "Video Games and Citizenship" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/8> Jeroen Bourgonjon and Ronald Soetaert argue that digitization problematizes and broadens our perspective on culture and popular media and that this has important ramifications for our understanding of citizenship. Bourgonjon and Soetaert respond to the call of Gert Biesta for the contextualized study of young people's practices by exploring a particular aspect of digitization that affects young people, namely video games. They explore the new social spaces which emerge in video game culture and how these spaces relate to community building and citizenship. Bourgonjon and Soetaert also examine whether these social spaces can be a source for different types of capital (Bourdieu) and reflect on the ethical dimensions of video gaming.

In her article "Using New Media in Teaching Greek Roma Students" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/9> Fenia Frangoulidou discusses the use of media material as a supplementary teaching tool in a Roma classroom. Since 2011, Aristotle University has been running a European Union funded project that deals with a wide range of supportive measures for Roma students. Sociologists, social workers, and educators are the primary participants responsible for its implementation. Frangoulidou discusses gender relations and racism and presents an analysis of the participation and interaction of high school students in a mixed class of students. The purpose of the study is to acknowledge the significant role of media culture in creating a sense of belonging and participation and to use popular culture in developing young people's understanding of social values and cultural norms.

In their article "Integrating Social Media in Education" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/10> Hadewijch Vanwynsberghe and Pieter Verdegem propose a framework in order to integrate social media literacy in an educational setting. In today's networked society students are new media users and hence the relevance in curricula to include social media literacy. Vanwynsberghe and Verdegem propose a multidimensional conceptual framework of social media literacy that includes the practical, cognitive, and affective competencies needed to deal with information of social media, to communicate with others through social media, to create content on social media, and to handle the consequences related to these three activities. On the theoretical level, the construction of social media literacy including its link with the educational system is based on the notion of cultural capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu.

And in her article "Practical and Theoretical Implications of Digitalizing the Middle Ages" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/11> Roberta Capelli discusses scholarship about and the teaching of medieval culture in digital humanities. While every medieval manuscript is an individual entity, displaying a series of unique and unrepeatable material, structural and aesthetic characteristics, digital devices are able to generate only two-dimensional photographic reproductions.

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However, the digital medium brings about some major improvements in the study — and teaching — of medieval manuscripts because the hypertextual nature of its applications allows us to analyze synchronic and the diachronic dynamics simultaneously. From a theoretical point of view, the difference between the state of the manuscript taken as a material object and its status as a vector of intellectual values brings to light similarities between the notions of intellectual property and originality in traditional print and digital cultures. The increasing number of critical editions of medieval texts and manuscripts in digital form asks us to reshape the theoretical and conceptual-linguistic frameworks of textual criticism as a discipline. Capelli postulates that "hypertextual criticism" represents the study of philological theories and practices in light of new literacies and technologies.

Last, but not least, the thematic issue contains — compiled by Kris Rutten and Geert Vandermeersche — a "Selected Bibliography for Work in Reading, Literacy, and Pedagogy" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/12>.

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