the changing profession

Reading on the Move

LUTZ KOEPNICK

IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT PROPER READING RELIES ON THE ART OF TAKING A PAUSE: ON OUR ABILITY TO SUSPEND THE PRESSING RHYTHMS OF the everyday and allow ourselves to absorb, and be absorbed by, alternative structures of temporality. The clocks of the imagination do not run at the same speeds as the timetables of the real; to read is to inhabit the present at one's own pace and in the light of a multitude of unknown pasts and possible futures. Recent years have witnessed a swell in publications pondering the state of reading in our world of instant connectivity and shrinking attention spans. In one of these books, Jane Smiley, a Pulitzer Prize winner, considers the peculiar acts of writing and reading a novel as profound contributions to the process of enlightenment—a kind of enlightenment enlightened about itself and no longer repressing the other of reason: "The way in which novels are created—someone is seized by inspiration and then works out his inspiration methodologically by writing, observing, writing, observing, thinking through, and writing again—is by nature deliberate, dominated neither by reason nor by emotion" (176). According to Smiley, the act of reading a novel re-creates an author's deliberate negotiation of affect and rationality. As readers follow the lines of a (good) book, they remain in relative control over the speed of their reading, able to pause when necessary, to hasten forward when desiring so, to reread passages at their leisure, and to close the pages of the book when overtaken by exhaustion. Good stories rely on intricate plot constructions and narrative tensions, but they also situate readers as subjects freed from the temporal determination and teleological drive of other time-based media. Good books can certainly move readers, but—following Smiley's logic—they will not curtail a reader's freedom to move along the text at his or her own speed, and hence they will allow this reader to simultaneously bring into play emotion and reason, the absorptive and the distant.

Smiley's understanding of reading as a practice of deliberation and slowness is part of an older tradition that considers reading an intimate communion between text and reader, a private act of com-

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munication that largely rests on our ability to screen out both the distractions of the surrounding world and the urges of our bodies. Ever since Augustine in 386 was startled by the difference between studying sacred texts aloud and in silence (Manguel 44–47), reading has generally been seen as a silent and solitary affair whose cultural value rests on readers' willingness to extract themselves from the diversions of the everyday, whether material or mental. To be a good reader, in this tradition, was to use texts as portals to alternative worlds we could best appreciate when resting in silence and abstracting ourselves from the exigencies of the real. To read was to trade our sense of presence and mobility for the wonders of a world offering abundant experiences of being, becoming, and moving. Reading opened windows to other worlds precisely because it invited us temporarily to shut out the sounds, sights, and agitations of our present.

The recent surge of books offering counsel on strategies of good reading (e.g., Foster; Mullen; Sutherland; Ulin; and Wood; for a critical discussion, see Collins) is a clear sign that many today consider reading to be in crisis, not least because in our age of ceaseless electronic feeds and mobile computing neither stillness nor silence appears available any longer. The battle over attention may turn out to be one of the twenty-first century's most important battles, and our ability to become and be good readers—in the eyes of many pedagogues, politicians, and pundits—has been one of this battle's first casualties. To be sure, the increases in noise and mobility have not erased the conditions for attentive reading in modern culture. On the contrary, the book, designed to travel, underwent a virtual revolution in the nineteenth century, when in response to the advent of modern transportation systems publishers produced lighter fare—in content and weight—in order to appeal to train travelers and veer their attention away from the proto-cinematic spectacle of passing landscapes and the chatter of fellow passengers. The inexpensive paperbound books of Christian Bernhard Tauschnitz's *Collection of British and American Authors* (started in 1841), the emblematic small yellow volumes of Reclam's *Universal-Bibliothek* as they began to be disseminated in 1867, and, last but not least, the proliferation of mass-market paperbacks in the second half of the nineteenth century all provide robust testimony to the fact that accelerated mobility in industrial modernity, instead of making reading impossible, helped increase people's appetite for books, even good books. Yet many critics today believe that the rise of digital culture over the last two decades marks a qualitative rather than merely quantitative shift in society's sense of mobility and that this shift will drain the resources we need to attend to how novels invite their readers to roam freely in alternative worlds of the imagination. Surrounded by technologies of virtualization and simulation, we have lost our appreciation, these critics contend, of the promise of reading to carry subjects, leisurely and on their own temporal terms, into those worlds.

While our neurological systems might still need years or decades to readjust synaptic operations, there can be little doubt that reading over the past two decades has accelerated tremendously. In the 1990s academics hotly debated the so-called visual turn of postmodern society, applauding or lamenting how mediated images seemed to displace speech and writing in communication. Yet no age has written and read more than the one nursed on text messaging, *Twitter*, and *Facebook*. And no age has witnessed a quickening in the production, delivery, and consumption of written text comparable with the one launched by today's compulsive digital connectivity and its stress on unconditional instantaneity and cotemporality. Think of the astonishing velocity with which texters consume and fire off their missives while reading texts on other screens around them. Think of the compression of

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publication times made possible by technology, the ever-faster turnover of bestseller lists, and the fact that newspapers and magazines in their online presentation no longer exist as fixed editions but undergo continual updating. Thanks to the wireless magic of our e-readers, we can access books on the fly ("Start reading . . . on your Kindle in under a minute"), at all times and from almost anywhere. Much about this mobilization of the written word raises legitimate questions about the future of pensive, contemplative, or absorptive reading. But instead of asking, Does the flux and noise of digital culture destroy the conditions for good reading?, let me ask what I consider more productive—and more challenging—questions: How does the mobility of reading today change our concept of reading? What does it add to our understanding of how we read in the first place? And how does it invite us to see and revaluate past reading practices in a new light?

In the pages to follow, I provide some tentative answers to these questions by discussing the practice of listening to audiobooks. In 2012 the main commercial outlet for recorded books, *Audible*, offered to its customers a library of more than a million hours and more than 100,000 titles. The site's products have virtually nothing to do with their predecessors, books on tape, because today's audiobooks can be downloaded in all kinds of digital formats in a few seconds, immediately transferred to one or multiple listening devices, and consumed on the move without any of the restrictions and precautions associated with electromagnetic storage media. With the audiobook's conquest of iPod playlists, cell phone memory chips, and personal data clouds, digital culture's dynamic of miniaturization, dematerialization, and mobility has become universal. It is therefore tempting to consider audiobooks as not belonging to the species of the book at all: they have no weight or smell, no pages to turn.[1] When books are stored in invisible electronic circuits, the relation between content and container, medium and message becomes arbitrary, no matter how much we admire our electronic gadgets for their feel and appearance. Audiobooks no longer require a physical library to hold them; we cannot show them off proudly in our home's display bookcase; we cannot throw them on the floor when exasperated by an author's prose. No dictator's auto-da-fé will fully succeed in blocking their circulation. Audiobooks should be seen not as belonging to our Gutenbergian galaxy of printed matter but as late representatives of Walter Ong's age of oral culture and its privileging of memory and the cyclic over the linearity of the written word—or of Walter Benjamin's artisanal era of storytellers, with its emphasis on nonprivatized reception and on the participatory tradition of knowledge and wisdom ("Storyteller").

Like film before the arrival of time-shifting technologies such as the remote control, audiobooks, it might be argued, impress their tempos onto readers' minds, not least of all because an audioplayer's fast-forward and reverse functions are too cumbersome or confusing to be applied effectively to streaming audible text. Listeners must go along with the stream of spoken words instead of activating their imagination and determining their speed of consumption freely. Audiobooks collapse into a single dynamic the different temporalities involved in any process of reading—the time of plot and story, the factual time of reading itself, and the psychological and physical itineraries of the attentive reader—and in so doing replace a reader's freedom and durational experience with the linearity and immediacy of the sheer event of listening. All things told, audible books may not qualify as books at all, and—as many seasoned readers will agree—whatever we do with them may have little to do with reading in any rigorous sense, that intricate process by which we decode written signs in order to construct meanings at various interwoven levels.

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But what if, instead of understanding present technologies as the death knell of what we worshipped in the past, we turn our perspective around and ask how their advent might change our concept of reading? Let me discuss the inventive role of audiobooks in the history of reading in three interrelated theses.

First and foremost, audiobooks are designed for users on the go. These consumers can be seen driving cars, taking buses to work, catching flights, or walking dogs through suburban neighborhoods. Audible books fill in and refract the empty time of routine movements and repetitive tasks. They dim our view of what is all too familiar about the external world, yet unlike conventional books they do not entirely subtract the reader's attention from the material surrounds. With the audiobook, the consumption of text enters the age of unconditional and unapologetic multitasking. We perceive whatever we do through a veil of words instead of screening out the world and reducing it to a recliner chair, the glow of a reading lamp, the imprint of a word on a page. To listen to audiobooks is to experience the ingestion of text as a kinesthetic activity, one that at any moment may unsettle our perception of our bodies' boundaries or sensory extensions into the world. Listening to audiobooks on the move privileges the haptic aspects of reading over what previous centuries saw as reading's spiritual properties. As they commingle the private and public attributes of reading and ask us to shuttle between different diegetic worlds, audiobooks remind us of the extent to which bodies are the primary media of perception and experience, of being in and reading the world. Contrary to what Ong and Benjamin might suggest, audiobooks do not cast their users back into a pretechnological age of ritual orality and community, an age of unmediated presence and collectivity. Rather, to the extent to which audiobooks embed the consumption of text in physical movement, they invite their users to learn the art of coordinating sensorimotor functions, the conceptual and the haptic, and thus to explore their bodies' techniques and technologies of perception. Unlike the classical book, which mostly served as a prosthesis for motion, a portal for imaginary acts of displacement, audiobooks provide prosthetic devices in motion, involving users and world in a reciprocal dynamic of deterritorialization and regrounding.

Second, audiobooks can release the poetry of individual linguistic expressions by emancipating them from their dominant role of supporting narrative development and the presumed unity of a literary work. Unlike the traditional novel and somewhat like popular filmmaking, audiobooks fold the temporal exigencies of storytelling into the medium's inherent technological mandates. To think of audiobooks as a triumph of story over poetic quality, of the whole over the art of crafting details, and hence of mass cultural consumption over participatory and discriminate engagement misses the point. Simply check *Audible*'s product reviews, whether those of thrillers and romance novels or those of the 5,368 "classics" offered for download in fall 2012. When selecting versions of texts, users of audiobooks are picky about the grain, dramatic registers, speed, and energy of the reader's voice. Often they appear drawn more to the performer than to the author, to the dramatic aspects of the interpretation than to the novel's place in the canon of critics, scholars, or talk show hosts. While it is tempting to consider audiobooks simply mass culture's latest ploy to increase sales and capture the distracted minds of lazy readers, in truth they play a critical role in what Jim Collins has described as the complete reconfiguration of the relation between literary culture and the popular throughout the past two decades. Audiobooks liquefy the rhetoric that modern culture has devoted to the authority of work and author. They not only multiply a particular text's existence and complicate questions of authorship, they also invite new

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modes of appropriation and unpredictable rhythms of interacting with text. Far from mindlessly succumbing to the linear drive of a story, audiobook users may derive pleasure in attending to the movement of words and voices, to how reading animates the corpse of the text. In this way, audiobooks shed light on what is performative and nonnarrative about any act of reading, on how reading at its best may remain indifferent to content or meaning because the act of reading itself is the focus.

Third and finally, to engage with an audiobook and thereby explore its text through kinesthetic practice is to convert the book into a site of chance encounters, spatial overlays, and temporal multiplicities. Features of the story tend to attach themselves in our memory to spatial elements we encountered while listening. Our dimmed attention to the world around us allows perceptions to merge with the imaginary topographies of the story and form unpredictable landscapes between the actual and the virtual. Throughout the last two decades, no one has explored such surreal overlays of meanings and perceptions with greater originality than Janet Cardiff, a Canadian sound artist. Her so-called audiowalks mix actual recordings of the artist's path through soundscapes with fragmented story elements, recollections, anticipations, additional noises, and snatches of music. Then users—headphones over their ears—are asked to retrace the steps taken by the artist. The effect is perplexing. Narrative time, for Cardiff, emerges not as a string of distinct events or positions but as a dynamic layering of decentered stories, a geography we may traverse and temporarily inhabit but can never call our own or entirely subject to our intention, control, or will. Space, on the other hand, in Cardiff's world of mobile listening escapes any strategy of framing and containment; for the user, player and headphones beget an embodiment that nestles the actual and the virtual, memory and observation, the dreamlike and the real, the present's past and the past's future in one untidy whole. We are constantly caught off guard, prompted to question our normal processes of inhabiting the landscapes of time and space. As we follow Cardiff's haunting tracks and imaginary turns, the way we construct and coordinate meanings, perceptions, and movements slows down. Like any "reader" of an audiobook, Cardiff's peripatetic listeners engage their bodies as mobile media to join different stories and perceptions into a dynamic simultaneity of here and there, of now, then, and tomorrow.

"We read deeply for varied reasons," Harold Bloom wrote more than ten years ago, "most of them familiar: that we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we require knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are. Yet the strongest, most authentic motive for deep reading . . . is the search for difficult pleasure" (29). Audiobooks may reconfigure what Bloom and others have celebrated as the precondition of good reading: being solitary, in intimate, silent, and spiritual communion with a great author and his or her work. But audiobooks can actualize and even amplify what good reading has always relied on: they foster our ability to read between the lines; they invite us to absorb the intricacies of a text and be absorbed by the movements of a story; they animate letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs with unpredictable meanings, images, and ideas. Audiobooks might make it difficult to hesitate mid-sentence in order to contemplate possible interpretations, but the pleasure of kinesthetic listening they provide can be as difficult, unsettling, and energizing as Bloom's pleasure of deep reading. To read between an audiobook's lines—to read an audiobook deeply—means to open our minds and senses to the productive interplay of ears, eyes, and bodily motions during the act of attending to the movements of a text. Audiobooks do not accelerate our age's loss

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of attentiveness, its compulsive logic of multitasking, media zapping, and distant reading. Rather, they cause us to reconsider our very notion of attention, of what it means to focus on something; they teach us how to sense our sensing and relate a text's complex temporality to the sensorimotor operations of our bodies; they invite us to explore the difficult pleasures of negotiating the gray zone between words and worlds, mobility and the imagination. In doing so, they can galvanize what Benjamin once called a "literarization of the conditions of life" ("Little History" 527), as much as they ask us to approach the physical world like a text that was never written as such. Why not therefore understand all this as a promising new chapter in the long history of deep and deliberate reading?

Note

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