



Facebook Critical Distance Reading

Happiness courts us in her best array? An old friend, 70, after a perfectly successful career as a curator of nineteenth-century sculpture, has been reborn as a Facebook post-er. So many good posts, often several in a day, sometimes featuring photos she has taken, sometimes bits from the news, the Web. She is French, lives in Paris, and while in past decades I have, from New York, listened to French radio and read *Le monde*, now, for the first time, I feel that, thanks to my friend's posts (and thanks to Facebook), I have a *feeling* for contemporary life in Paris. I am keeping up in a way I never was before.

Second and third examples. One of *Zeteo*'s long-time contributors, a young man who teaches sociology at a community college, is also a great Facebook post-er, and, although I like the rather longer pieces he writes for *Zeteo*, he often seems more alive, more present, more engaged by his Facebook posting. And there is another man—I do not know how we became “friends.” He reminds me of a character in one of Alain Tanner and John Berger's movies—an aging radical who now engages, by himself, in idiosyncratic political actions. This third Facebook post-er's action has become this posting. And it may well be that when his unconscious whispers to him that his posting will do little to advance any political cause (besides that of Facebook), he responds by posting more. A dozen times a day sometimes. Like a child at the seashore, the washing away of his constructions inspires a furious, joyous building.

That heaven should practice stratagems upon so soft a subject as myself. I enjoy the work of these three post-ers, and they also help me get in touch, however uneasily, with my own alienation. A decade ago my father commented that I was trying to reinvent the intellectual essay. I was doing something for which human beings might still have a use, but neither time nor place. Now, ten years on, to write any kind of analytical piece that is longer than an op-ed column (750 words), . . . Shouting into the wind?

I read that we live in a “post-literate world (in which people can read but won't).” The other day a tenth grader very dear to my heart told me how he prepared for a test on *Romeo & Juliet*. Not by reading the text. He had seen the play performed, seen the movie. So loving-jealous of his liberty, why do more? (Mind you, I have told this young man how I got an A in my ninth grade world history class. At the end of the semester we had to submit a

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list of the books we had read on the subject. My list was the most impressive, and doubly so since, in fact, I had not cracked a single cover. I was rewarded—as, indeed, in the real world, people often are—for my chutzpah and imagination, and for knowing how to tell people what they are eager to hear.)

Tenth graders are now being taught another stratagem: “active reading,” which is not reading at all, but a way, through skimming, of identifying “key points.” This is rather different from, say, lingering over sentences, searching out the course of a writer’s reflections or of one’s own. But it hardly stops the students and their teachers from talking animatedly in class about whatever ideas and feelings come into their heads. And the students learn to show, with vigorous highlighting and marginal noting, the activeness of their “reading.”

We are not far here from the way busy executives read—in an airport, or just before a meeting starts, quickly getting some gist, bullet points that they can fire off at a meeting or on TV. Insight or, say, intellectual stimulation is irrelevant. He jests at scars that never felt a wound. The exec above all wants to reassure others of his or her mastery, however improvised it may be.

While others accept such masters and maintain some sense of autonomy by posting on the Web clever sayings, cartoons, photographs, I take refuge in citations, ruminations, and the too-clever layering of them (as if to tease archaeologists)? One of my favorites this month is “keep it in the day.” I believe this line, or something like it, comes from Alcoholics Anonymous. And my interpretation is that we, or the more vulnerable among us, should try not to get carried away by larger worries—global warming, the possibility of losing one’s job, an adolescent’s testing the limits and his own cleverness. Try to ignore, too, one’s personal shortcomings and other reasons to feel anxious or weak. Just deal with the tasks at hand—first and foremost, getting through another day without drinking.

What I like best about this dictum is the wording. It sounds so good: Keep it in the day. Of course armed with a similar mantra, and likely a good deal of alcohol, “good Germans” were able to perform the various daily tasks involved in killing 6 million civilians—men, women, and children. Some, for sport, testing their aim, threw babies in the air and tried to shoot them before the bodies returned to earth. Less dramatically, but not inconsequentially, it may have been some combination of a keep-it-in-the-day-like philosophy and various forms of tranquilizers that helped any number of oil-company employees work to counteract the evidence of global warming, and even though it was their own scientists who had first given them news of it. Keeping it in the day may keep the sushi on the table, yet not be nourishment enough.

Adversity’s sweet milk, philosophy. I have had, and retain, an idea to write a piece about “critical distance”—the value and current lack of it. The piece is to involve

reflections on Frederic Jameson's 22,000-word, 1984 essay, "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." But—here, too—there is a sense in which critical distance—"perspective" is another word for it—has become an artifact, a potsherd. "Get over it," as we now say. "Go with the flow," we said not too long ago. (A line recently read and cherished: You can sin against the Decalogue, but not against the status quo.)

We might imagine Facebook and similar venues like the agora of Athens: public places where people by accident and on purpose run into one another, exchange a few words, usually seeking out friends and encouraging and agreeing with them, occasionally wandering into a more ambitious grouping to try their hands at dialectic—friendly but competitive conversation. Thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes.

But of course there *are* differences. The cyberspace conversations are not oral or face to face. Images are often exchanged and words are often few, pithy at best. As Jameson would likely note, history is set aside; there is rarely reference to old texts and ideas or appeals to their authority. And yet I can't help thinking that much remains the same; people are seeking to be and feel part of a community, to find themselves liked and others they like, to have their "voices" heard, their opinions registered.

The grey-ey'd morn smiles on the frowning night. 1,134 words! I should have what readers remain gone, and yet would pluck you back again, for a few lines more.

Increasingly as I age I find pleasure in assembling: not with people; I am referring to the craft of putting together words, sentences, whole texts, images often brought in as a kind of counterpoint. I would like to think that some of my pleasure is communicated to readers and gives you pleasure. I am reminded of people who have gone back to making handmade books or who still develop their own, non-digital photos in a darkroom. (What a pleasure this can be!) As much as Web posting, such activities are ways of being human, of having fun, of being engaged and diverted by one's engagement.

There is certainly a craft to Web posting, and it may include the complexity of combining words and images. It tends to be *à l'improviste*, catch as catch can, with little reconsidering or editing involved. Could an analogy be drawn to Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, or to throwing seeds in the air and leaving it to nature to determine which, if any, may grow and bear fruit? (I encounter parents who seem to have something like this attitude. "I" provide the seed and the ground; to chance and child to do the rest.)

My old-fashioned approach likely involves more learning—to include learning a kind of love—from other people's writing and thus, also, from reading. Yet I am happy, too, with my three Facebook post-ers (and I try not to subject myself to more than three such vigorous ones). And I am happy to be able to wander away from the electronic agora and into agoras past, and to find uses of language that may be ignored by busy adolescents and

our self-involved times. Rash, unadvised—like the lightning, which doth cease to be ere one can say it lightens.

Credits & Links

The Tanner-Berger movie is *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* (*Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*, 1976).

The line about our post-literate world is from University of Reading professor Peter Miskell, “Historians and film,” in P. Lambert, P. Schofield, (eds.) *Making history: an introduction to the history and practices of a discipline* (Routledge, 2004), 245–256. As quoted in Richard Maltby, “New Cinema Histories,” in R. Maltby, D. Biltereyst, and P. Meers (eds.), *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

The line about sinning against the Decalogue is from the Irish writer and diplomat Conor Cruise O’Brien. It appears in his *Writers and Politics: Essays & Criticism* (Chatto & Windus, 1965).

As of December 2015, a [copy of Jameson’s essay](#) was available, inter alia, via a University of Virginia website.