

50 years of reading Texts, worlds, and ourselves

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Abstract

This article serves as an introduction to the special issue of *Beyond Philology* entitled “Experiencing Textual Media: Contemporary Perspectives”. It takes into consideration the relative theoretical entrenchment that scholars tend to experience in their professional development, underlining its beneficial influence on the development of complex reading methodologies, while advocating for a revisionist position. The authors claim that the multimodal narrative culture of today demands systematic commentary that draws from tradition but responds to what is new. The long-standing schools of reading established at the Institute of English and American Studies are celebrated as foundational for the academic development of generations of scholars across Poland.

Keywords

media, text, narrative, reading, capitalism, academia

50 lat czytania: Teksty, światy i my

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi wstęp do specjalnego numeru czasopisma *Beyond Philology*, zatytułowanego „Doświadczenie mediów tekstowych: współczesne perspektywy”. Tekst rozpoczyna się od namysłu nad Bloomowskim „lękiem przed wpływem” doświadczanym w kontekście bogatej tradycji literaturoznawczej świętującego pięćdziesięciolecie Instytutu Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego. Autorzy sugerują, że lektura i interpretacja tekstów we współczesnym krajobrazie medialnym wymaga rozwinięcia nowej wrażliwości, która bazując na tradycji metodologicznej, opiera się jej w poszukiwaniu systematycznych odczytań tego, co nowe w kulturze tekstów. Tekst podkreśla wpływ założycieli Instytutu Anglistyki i Amerykanistyki UG na rozwój literaturoznawców i anglistów w całym kraju.

Słowa kluczowe

media, tekst, narracja, style lektury, środowisko akademickie

To engage with text is hardly a trivial business. To focus on it for more than a fleeting glimpse, to decode it (or attempt to do so), to become immersed in it, to respond to it (with affect, a spontaneous thought, a conversation, or a new text), to resist its charms and solicitations, to analyse and interpret it, to criticise it, to teach it, to run from it, and to perhaps return. These are some of the multiple difficult forms of interaction that texts invite us to – us, their audiences and their lovers. Infatuated, in all these activities we have given to texts what we perhaps offer only too scarcely to others: attention, respect, veneration, and time.

To engage in those intimate interactions in ways that will do justice to texts, provide us with a larger sense of intellectual satisfaction, and offer a platform for intellectual exchange, we have developed and curated methods and methodologies: of

reading, of playing, of watching, or of using texts. We have discussed the fine and finer manners in which texts can (should, must, may) be made sense of, and we have collided our very different inclinations in this respect to observe an astounding variety of styles, preferences, and approaches texts generate in the minds of their *afficionados*. We have produced theories – texts on texts – and have become enamoured with them, too, or with ourselves. Theories have often been possessive (Compagnon 1998), and – even more frequently – have become stories of their own origin and coming of age (Brooke-Rose 2007: 3–27).

And since self-love easily turns into self-complacency, we have depended on the dictates of habit and specialisation (Taylor and Saarinen 1994) – we have systematically and apathetically relied on our preferred theoretical superstructure, on the thematic preoccupations we have deemed our field of expertise, or on the oeuvres of a given set of authors who seem particularly fit for the apparatus we have polished in so many of our own texts on texts. We have chosen schools of thought, styles of reading, and theoretical traditions, and have relied on them out of respect (to ourselves, to our teachers), habit, and desire for comfort. We have subscribed to one tradition, or to many. It is, after all, always the easiest to read the way we always have. That relative ease is also a social lubricant that allows us to read with likeminded friends and colleagues, with students, and anyone who feels like spending time with us around the texts we all love.

Entrenchment in this pleasant form of epistemic allegiance has indeed produced marvellous outcomes. Theory has been such a fertile ground (and so diverse) for communities to emerge from (around particular styles of reading) and for critical and academic rigour to be maintained in. “The strong reader, whose readings will matter to others as well as to himself, is thus placed in the dilemmas of the revisionist, who wishes to find his own original relation to truth, whether in texts or in reality (which he treats as texts anyway), but also wishes to open received texts to his own sufferings, or what he wants to call the sufferings of history” (Bloom 1975: 3–4).

Our very own Institute of English and American Studies (of which *Beyond Philology* has been an important publication outlet for decades now) has witnessed the fantastic benefits of “reading with tools”. Over the last 50 years, schools of reading have been developed and cherished in our Institute that might very well serve as a lasting source of inspiration and instruction on what can be done with texts, and to what effect. Professor Andrzej Zgorzelski’s legacy is a crucial part of that tradition: with his insight on genres, and on the structure of the literary text, as well as the systematic demands of the rigour of academic discourse, this legacy has now influenced generations of literary scholars associated with Gdańsk’s English and American studies. Not entirely unrelated to personal merits, David Malcolm’s lasting impact has also been the effect of methodological consistency. His insistence on formalist, compositional analysis, with sharp focus on narration, linguistic registers, genre, the diachronic development of form, and the phono-semantic orchestration of texts, has been recognized as a prominent achievement in the study of British short fiction, and in writings on contemporary poetry. The irreverence of Marek Wilczyński, whose erudition is legendary both within and beyond the disciplines he has worked with, is the irreverence in the purest American spirit, only equipped with the continental perspective. The reverence of Jean Ward, whose readings of poetry and prose so many have tried, consciously or not, to imitate in terms of elegance and rigorousness, seems almost canonical now. Artur Blaim’s preoccupation with utopia and dystopia, and his erudite readings of theory, have defined a standard that has been recognized internationally. Mirosława Modrzewska’s insight on Romanticism, Ludmiła Gruszevska-Blaim’s writings on Coetzee and academic fiction, and their unfaltering sense of what duties we have towards the job and the community are a benchmark against which many have observed themselves and their work. All these intellectuals continue to illuminate paths of thought, and resonate with those who have followed them. In all of these paths, it seems, a spectre of Zgorzelski

always looms large. Halszka Lelen comments on this spectacular influence in the following manner:

It is impossible to describe in a short article all the influence he had on the study of English literature and culture, as well as on Polish literary studies and linguistics – including a large group of scholars whom he used to call the ‘Gdańsk-Lublin group’ (expanding into Olsztyn, too, in the 1990s)” (Lelen 2019: 158–159).

A small part of a large group of intellectuals that have shaped the direction, and pace, of the development of the Institute of English and American Studies over the last 50 years, the above list brings together some of our teachers, and colleagues. This double role they have played in the shaping of our ambitions – and the self-definition they have indirectly demanded of us, is pregnant with meaning. It is to them, therefore, and to ourselves, that we owe the following questions. How are we going to work with texts over the next 50 years – in the organisational environment of this Institute, and beyond? And what texts will these be? Will we continue as literary scholars, or requalify and place focus on related fields? What reading, playing, using, and watching traditions will we strive to develop, and through what “corrective movement” (Bloom 1973, Bloom 1975)? How will we stray from the legacies, and how have we already?

To ask these questions is to take a revisionist position, and engage in “a re-aiming or looking-over-again, leading to a re-esteeming or a re-estimating” (Bloom 1975: 4). No ill will stands behind such deliberations – no intention to refute the immense value of the schools and the traditions, of the achievements and developments, or of their lasting impact. Instead, there is anxiety of influence – an awareness that certain kinds of intellectual work in a given field will be only derivative, epigonous not because we are not capable of contributing to existing discourse in a relevant way but because these areas have been well mapped out and the discourse employed in the process has solidified already (and thus has forsaken its origin in *discurrō*).

With that anxiety, every systematic allegiance to a school of thought should make us cautious of this strong legacy we might be tempted to draw from – both in terms of actual methods of reading, and of the organisational, institutional means connected to them. We are cautious the same way children are cautious of the didactic, instructive discourse their fathers and mothers continue to address to them. We want to read well, but perhaps against the grain.

There are weaknesses to entrenchment that only become apparent once you have liberated yourself from it. Characteristic of conservatism (of the discourse that no longer “runs around”), the relative unwillingness or lack of readiness to be preoccupied with change, is an intriguing position to take. In the age of social acceleration (Rosa 2015), this stationary, stable, conservative approach might offer frustrations on the one hand, and respite on the other. As we are being increasingly exposed to further and further transformations in the cultural, political, economic, technological and interpersonal parameters of life in this world, it seems tempting not to ignore them. This world, it seems, is not what it used to be. At the same time, the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of the world around us has proven to have corrosive impact on the individual (Sennett 2008, Han 2015, Niermann 2024). In such circumstances, the academia – with its strong foundations in tradition – might very well offer respite and continuity when solid ground is so difficult to find elsewhere. In this sense, the systematic reliance on “how we have always read” seems a pertinent case of an anti-growth, anti-capitalist sustainability strategy. To put it differently: to read well, we do not need to accelerate (even academic managerialism seems to suggest otherwise). We do not need to be irreverent either, because, well, this world is exactly the same as it used to be. Only the arrangement of factors affecting us and texts is perhaps quite different.

Immense are the pressures placed on the literary by the visual. And so are the tensions resulting from the increasingly multimodal nature of our interactions with new emergent cultural

phenomena. When Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä claim in their introduction to “The Routledge Companion to Narrative Theory” that “it would be almost banal to assert that the twenty-first century is the age of narrative” (2023), it seems only reasonable to add that the narrative turn has been accompanied by a visual one. Thus, the narrative culture that is so widespread around us has taken multimodal and multimedia forms reliant on the image and the mechanics of the spectacle (Debord 1995) in the broader pursuits of attention (Crary 2001, Beller 2006, Celis Bueno 2017) stimulated by cognitive capitalism (Moulier-Boutang 2012). Indeed, stories are told, and texts are authored and consumed in a variety of ways, many of which depend on visual codes. Analogically, the impact of capitalism on reading cannot be ignored either. A radical factor in the manner texts are written, disseminated, and decoded, capitalism – with its platforms, rhythms, and production of taste (Wojtyna 2026) produces the technological, ideological (and perhaps cognitive) conditions texts are disseminated in (Rogers 2014: 1–37). Fictional worlds continue to expand beyond the literary and the verbal in ways that continue to remind us how complex interactions we might engage in with narrative texts. Poetic ones, in turn, take so many different forms with the help of, and against, technologies that have been in the dissemination of literature in verse. All in all, the study of literature and culture in our time demands a heightened sensitivity to both the intricacies of textual construction and the cultural matrices in which texts are embedded. These intricacies make the act of reading (in all media) a particularly challenging and rewarding process. Whether we analyse narrative fiction, experimental poetry, digital games, or social media narratives, we confront the same fundamental premise: texts are not isolated aesthetic objects but events in culture – manifestations of ideological, technological, and epistemological forces, of the conditions under which texts are produced and read today. All in all, it seems the nature of reading in the increasingly multimodal cultural landscape of digital cultural environments is incredibly complex. Not to respond to that

complexity with an evolving approach would be to misread the culture around us.

This special issue of *Beyond Philology* brings together articles that have been written after the discussions their authors engaged in during the “Experiencing Textual Media: Contemporary Perspectives” conference organised by Mikołaj Marks at the University of Gdańsk in January 2024. That conference, bringing together scholars from a variety of disciplines, reminded us that the relevance of texts in contemporary digital culture has never been more apparent. In an era defined by fragmented attention (Crary 2001, Celis Bueno 2017), “algorithmic production of taste” (Wojtyna 2026, Elliott 2023), and the commodification of identity, the question of how texts operate – formally, culturally, politically – takes on renewed urgency. We are living in a period of profound societal and cultural transformation: the destabilization of traditional media hierarchies, the proliferation of digital platforms, the rise of participatory and performative modes of self-expression, and the erosion of clear boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, private and public, user and author. Texts are increasingly multimodal, networked, and ephemeral, yet they remain central to how we construct reality and negotiate meaning. The current cultural moment is marked by paradoxes: a simultaneous crisis of truth and explosion of narrative; a hunger for authenticity coupled with the dominance of curated online personas; an intensified desire for political and ethical engagement in texts coexisting with the aesthetic flattening of content into commodified “content”. In this context, to study texts means not only to analyse literary and cultural forms but also to interrogate the ideological frameworks, technological infrastructures, and affective economies in which texts circulate.

Together, the essays in this issue form a conceptual arc. They begin with reflections on reading and capitalism (Wojtyna), move through structural experimentation in poetry (Trojak) and

ontological boundaries and ethical engagement in video game narratives (Marks, Bubnowska), and culminate in a philosophical exploration of the self-reflexive, hybrid figure of the author-critic (Krajnik). Miłosz Wojtyna opens the issue with “Reading, Capitalism, and Instagram,” an essay that reviews theoretical perspectives on the reading process and interrogates the mechanics of reading in the age of social media. Using a detailed case study of an autobiographical Instagram account, Wojtyna explores how platforms like Instagram reshape the act of reading into a form of attention management. He demonstrates that in digital capitalism, eventfulness is staged, immediacy is illusory, and comprehension is subordinate to sustained engagement. Through close analysis of multimodality, pseudo-eventfulness, and narrative lacunae, the article proposes that reading on Instagram is governed not by meaning-making but by the “economy of clicks” – transforming autobiographical narrative into a consumable identity spectacle.

Adrian Trojak’s article “Beyond Lines, Beyond Stanzas: Studying Unconventional Text Structure in American Poetry” offers an inquiry into textual form in general, and into American experimental poetry in particular. Trojak investigates the typographic and structural innovations of poets such as E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Mary Ellen Solt, and Anthony Cody. His central claim is that unconventional text structure is not merely an aesthetic choice but also a powerful rhetorical device that shapes the reader’s cognitive and emotional engagement. By disrupting traditional reading habits, experimental layout compels readers to reconfigure their interpretive strategies, turning the page itself into a semiotic field. Trojak shows how poetry becomes an interface where affect, politics, and visual form converge.

Mikołaj Marks’ contribution, “Metaleptic Experience of Literature in *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*,” extends the discussion of textual complexity into the domain of video games. Marks examines how literary texts embedded within a video game’s world acquire new interpretive and ontological functions. Through the

lens of object-oriented narratology and unnatural narratology, he explores how metalepsis – narrative boundary-crossing – operates within the game’s structure. In *Disco Elysium*, books are more than props; they are dialogic agents that shape both the character’s and the player’s perception of reality. Marks argues that the game performs literature in a way that dissolves distinctions between object, thought, and narrative layer.

Marta Bubnowska’s essay, “How Decisive Are You While Playing a Video Game? Empathy, Agency and Gender in Playable Texts,” offers a critical analysis of ethics, empathy, and gender in the narrative architecture of *Detroit: Become Human*. Drawing on game studies and feminist critique, Bubnowska questions the illusion of player agency in morally loaded choices. She explores how the game creates emotional investment through the portrayal of androids as marginalized Others, yet simultaneously replicates problematic tropes, particularly in its treatment of female characters. Despite its progressive veneer, *Detroit* ultimately reinforces conservative, heteronormative narratives under the guise of interactive freedom. Bubnowska’s essay is a compelling reminder that formal innovation does not guarantee ideological subversion.

The issue concludes with Łukasz Krajnik’s philosophical exploration, “Author-Critic: A New Archetype of a Current State of Postmodernity.” Krajnik maps the evolution of the “author-critic” as a cultural figure born of postmodern dissolution of boundaries. Through a wide-ranging discussion of psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, chaos magick, and theory-fiction, Krajnik shows how contemporary authors often inhabit hybrid positions – simultaneously creators and commentators, producers, and deconstructors. This figure reflects a broader cultural condition in which grand narratives are dead, and critical distance has collapsed into reflexive entanglement. The author-critic is both a symptom and a response to post-logocentric cultural anxiety.

Taken together, these essays offer a vivid picture of contemporary textual and narrative practices. They show how fictional worlds – be they narrative, poetic, or interactive – are constructed not only through content but through form, function, and medium. They illustrate how reading is shaped by forms and platforms, how agency is negotiated, and how authorship becomes inseparable from critique. Most importantly, they invite us to reflect on what it means to study literature and culture at a time when meaning is besieged, attention is monetized, and every text is embedded in a network of power.

It is no coincidence that these considerations are published in *Beyond Philology*, a journal that has addressed the multiple focus and the tensions characteristic of contemporary research on language and literature. Today, this sensitivity to what lies beyond traditionally defined research scopes and disciplines is all the more important. Through no coincidence either, authors of the articles in this special issue have all been educated (at least partly) in the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Gdańsk. Their contributions serve as probes to the potential capacity of students to refute their teacher's legacy, or to continue it. This seems a particularly apt moment to say: it has been a splendid 50 years. What is next?

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