Reading, capitalism, and Instagram

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Abstract

This article summarises theoretical considerations on the reading process, describes the processual mechanics of reading, and applies selected approaches to the study of an Instagram autobiography to prove that there are strong connections between capitalism, narrative composition of social media narratives, and styles of reading. The analysis of Marzena Marideko's narrative shows how the use of eventfulness, multimodality, and lacunae contributes to the construction of the process of reading as one in which attention is as important as signification, comprehension is not a necessary outcome, and intended tellability overrules narrativity. By studying the nexus of event, illusory immediacy, and elision, I claim the poetics of Instagram reading is essentially predicated on the mechanics and demands of cognitive capitalism.

Keywords

Czytanie, kapitalizm i Instagram

Abstrakt

Artykuł podsumowuje teoretyczne rozważania na temat procesu czytania, opisuje procesualną mechanikę lektury i stosuje wybrane pojęcia teoretyczne w analizie narracji autobiograficznej na Instagramie, aby wykazać, że istnieją silne powiązania między kapitalizmem, narracją i stylami lektury. Analiza autobiograficznej narracji instagramowej autorki Marzeny Marideko pokazuje, w jaki sposób wykorzystanie wydarzeniowości, multimodalności i luk informacyjnych definiuje proces lektury jako część ekonomii uwagi, w której nie liczą się znaczenie i zrozumienie, a zarządzane technologicznie podtrzymywanie uwagi. Autor twierdzi tym samym, że style lektury narracji autobiograficznych na Instagramie są bezpośrednim wytworem kapitalizmu kognitywnego.

Słowa kluczowe

narracja, tekst, media społecznościowe, style lektury, kapitalizm, wydarzeniowość

1. Introduction

What is reading? What activities does the process of reading consist of? Simply put: what does the reader do when confronted with the text? For literary criticism, literary theory, as well as media and culture studies, reading has always served as an inspiring phenomenon that spans mechanical, cognitive, interpretive, and social dimensions – an embodied, often fragmented experience of meaning-making shaped by historical and technological conditions. Observed through the lens of contemporary literary theory, reading is a process composed of a number of very different activities, an incomplete list of which could include the following:

- ocular and muscular activities – centring eye focus on signs on the text, moving fingers over Braille print, turning pages, scrolling, clicking, keeping your head up, eyes open, maintaining a certain body position (Yang and McConkie 2001, Justino and Kolinsky 2023);
- preparatory activities: choosing the text, eliminating distractions, managing attention, protecting the reading environment spatially, temporally (Poe 1846), and emotionally for the evacuation of the materiality of the text (Poulet 1969: 53, McGann 1991, Baumbach 2019);
- primary decoding: identifying letters, connecting letters into words, words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs (Prince 1982);
- secondary decoding: identifying words (phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc.) and their meanings (Wittgenstein, de Saussure, Lotman 1990, Eco 1979);
- tertiary decoding: identifying rhetorical figures, distinguishing between literal and figurative meanings: metaphors, metonymies, allegories, allusions, as well as the phonosemantic organisation of texts, and the meanings behind all these (Markowski 2019, Booth 1983, Eco 1979, Shklovsky 1917);
- managing structural semiotic interdependencies – character identity (Eaton 1976, Chatman 1978, Phelan 1989, Jannidis 2004), temporality (Sternberg 1993 [1978]), consecution and causality (Kafalenos 2006), sequentiality (Baroni and Revaz 2016), contradiction, aporias (Abbott 2013), lacunae (gaps, indeterminacies – Iser 1980, Ingarden 1980), omissions, irrelevancies, redundancies (Barthes 1974, Barthes 1975, Riffaterre 1990), as well as proportions – through concretization (actualization) of signs (Iser 1980, Ingarden 1980);
- identifying, analysing and interpreting extratextual phenomena: paratexts, references, etc., including those originating from the reader's own cultural resources and interpretive communities, as well as the politics of interpretation, and the economic, and historical contexts (Genette 1997, Genette 2010, White 1982, Foucault 1979, Wimsatt and Beardsley 1958, Phelan 2007, Phelan 2017, Fish 1980, Spivak 1982, Suleiman 1983, Said 1982);

- making judgements: interpretive, aesthetic, and ethical on the basis of textual and extratextual signals and norms (Phelan 1996, Phelan 2007, Phelan 2017, Rabinowitz 1987, Riffaterre 1990),
- following the plot: recognizing events, identifying instabilities, identifying eventful and non-eventful segments of the text (Brooks 1992, Phelan 2017, Schmid 2017, Alber and Richardson 2020);
- surrendering to transportation (immersion) into what is being evoked by the text – e.g. variously constructed fictional worlds and virtual realities (Pavel 1986, Ronen 1994, Doležel 1998, Ryan 2003, Juul 2011, Bell and Ryan 2019);
- processing beyond the act – seeking cognitive closure outside the apparent reading process (Zunshine 2006, Herman 2013, Nünning 2014), continuing to make interpretive effort after the end of the physical act of reading as such;
- sharing, commenting, discussing our readings in social situations – with friends, colleagues, other users of social media, etc. (Page 2012);
- doing additional reading, returning to reread a given text (Leitch 1997);
- reworking the text into new texts (Genette 1997), adapting it into other media (Hutcheon 2006, Chua and Ho 2023).

Although this list is far from exhaustive, it captures many of the most common activities associated with reading – activities that occur across genres, forms, and media. These can be observed not only on the printed page but also on screens, stages, in audiovisual formats, and across both digital and analogue platforms. Readers rarely engage in all of them at once, nor in a fixed sequence. Many are complex and often remain incomplete. Some are deliberate, others involuntary; some feel necessary, others optional. Certain activities require sustained effort and specialized competence, while others demand almost none. Some are overt, easily noticed by the reader; others remain hidden, unfolding without the reader's conscious intent.

The list could be simplified and the activities aggregated into three categories: mechanical, interpretive, and social activities.

Of these three categories, the first one has been studied by oculography and neuroscience, and the latter two – by literary theorists, semioticians, and philosophers. As the sources I have indicated above suggest, by far the largest part of theoretical and interpretive research carried out on these matters is related to or inspired by the reading of literature – predominantly of narrative fiction. The tendency to perceive theoretical aspects of reading "through the lens" of literary studies and with the conceptual apparatus of literary theory has been addressed by Brooke-Rose (1991) and Compagnon (1998), among others. Taylor and Saarinen, in turn, have opposed the dogmatic view that reading means reading literature and declared the end of that literature-centric culture ("Literate reason and the literary critic have become relics of the past" – 1994: philosophy 17) that – in their view – coincides with the growth of a competitive, image-centric one.

For a researcher whose work goes beyond the interests of traditional literary studies, some questions arise. Are the above parameters functional for the act of reading in a digital medium? Can the activities described as relevant to the act of reading literary narrative be considered relevant for the reading of narrative in, for instance, Instagram? To what degree is the process reformulated by the technological affordances of the digital age – and of specific technological solutions (apps, platforms) and user practices? What are the cognitive operations involved in the reading of digital texts? How are reading environments different, and what is the impact of those environments on the "social life" of texts and the interactions between readers?

In this article, I would like to address some of these questions, all of which I believe are pertinent for the discussion of how texts (and the worlds they evoke) are read across media, and how they are not. While I am hardly going to discuss all aspects of how reading works in all very different contexts, I will present some hypotheses that could perhaps be further developed in the study of specific textual phenomena and reading processes. To narrow down the material under discussion, I will

focus on how some of the above parameters work in the reading of Instagram publications (posts), by comparing the assumptions literary studies have made about the reading process with the phenomenology and mechanics of reading biographical Instagram narratives. I will analyse selected narratives, define their formal characteristics and thematic preoccupations, and then proceed to study the narrative rhetoric that stems from textual dynamics and readerly dynamics (Phelan 1996, Phelan 2007, Phelan 2017). On the basis of this analysis, I will claim that the reading of autobiographical narratives in a digital medium such as Instagram, while analogous to the reading of literary autobiography on the page in many respects, is organized by entirely different world-building principles and compositional techniques, and results in an altogether different set of cognitive activities that are mobilised by a nexus of extratextual power and technological relations that I will identify as capitalist. Again, I would by no means want to claim the hypotheses presented below are universally applicable. Instead, I want to encourage the reader to see them as points of departure for the study of what nuance, tensions, and intriguing processes can be observed in how we read today. Thus, one of the claims this article presents is that we do read differently whenever technology is able to exercise its impact on us (Taylor and Saarinen 1994, Casati 2013, Szczęsna 2015).

2. Instagram, capitalism, autobiography

When I used the word "technology" in the previous sentence, I was not being clear enough, and perhaps naively following formalist assumptions about the text as sufficient material for reading – material that provides all necessary (and the only reliable) signals for analysis and interpretation. I want to amend the statement: there is a system of power relations and prominent factors to be taken into account that are hardly explicit in the texts we read in digital media. To put it differently, the behavioural effects of technology (including the "things we do" as

we read) are not merely the outcomes of users interacting with devices and software – they are the outcomes of a systematic, strategic solicitation of users-consumers by various forms of contemporary capitalism. To ignore this factor as irrelevant or contributing to a peculiar version of "intentional fallacy" would be to misinterpret the power relationships between the readers of digital texts and the creators and administrators of the technological foundations of reading – foundations that are essentially predicated on attention management[1] rather than meaning-making. Clicks matter, not sense, in so many products of the capitalist industry of digital media and entertainment.

Instagram narratives are one category of such products. In what follows, I shall treat Instagram as a reading environment in which texts are disseminated in a variety of formats and forms governed by characteristic conventions on the one hand and by the (technical, creative) limitations the app sets for its users, on the other. In that environment, the reading process is organized in ways that partly coincide with those characteristics of the reading of literary texts, and partly depart from that model. To observe some of these affinities and departures, I shall have a closer look at the composition of a chosen autobiographical narrative presented in Instagram, and at what reading process that narrative – together with the platform itself – prompts the reader to engage in. The analysis presented below will concentrate on three aspects: 1) eventfulness and tellability, 2) multimodality, and 3) lacunae, in order to determine whether understanding (cognitive closure) remains a competitive alter-

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[1] Compare Crary, Jonathan, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London: Verso, 2013; Tiziana Terranova, "Attention, Economy, and the Brain", [in:] *The Lives of Images: Analogy, Attunement, and Attention*, ed. Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, New York: Aperture, 2021, p. 131–152; Beller, Jonathan (2006), *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England; Celis Bueno, Claudio (2017), *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time, and Power in Cognitive Capitalism*, London: Rowman & Littlefield; Crary, Jonathan (2001), *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Rogers, Kenneth (2014), *The Attention Complex: Media, Archeology, Method*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

native for the mere consumption of and marketing-driven exposure to Instagram narratives.

Of all possible genres of texts that are disseminated in Instagram, I choose to study the autobiographical narrative because I believe it is the most representative of the ideologies and aesthetics of social media that scarcely make use more social. Instead, they inspire two tendencies that distance us from social interaction – the "production of the self" (Ibrahim 2018)[2] on the one hand, and monadism (Niermann 2024)[3] on the other – two phenomena characteristic of an age in which individual identity has been commodified beyond the long-practiced rituals of personal image, PR, and personal brand. Today, it is who we are, what we think, watch, read, desire, click, eat, and buy that translates into our identity as perceived by digital capitalism. Today,

> the story of the self entwined with digital media platforms and imaging technologies in the digital age is one that is still unfolding in all its nuanced complexities. The self as a form of value entangled with the back operations of the web is implicated in both value creation and as content and commodity for mass and niche consuming audiences. Amidst these opportunities to be part of value creation and commodification, the self remains deeply aestheticized and consumed in its everyday settings. In the banal richness of the everyday, it performs to new forms of gaze and

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[2] Yasmin Ibrahim writes that "new media technologies and their appropriation into our everyday lives has created an intimacy with technologies where these have become an extension of our senses, slowly integrating into our bodily bio-rhythms as sensory organs. The self performed and visualised through the screen, and equally coded as data through tracking technologies, metrics and algorithms, reveals the complexity of identity creation and performance in thus cyber culture" (2018: 3).

[3] Ingo Niermann claims monadism is the defining feature of "the coming social order" in which individualism has been transformed by the digital into a set of defensive, self-curation practices that promote isolation and survival over interaction, mutuality, and communication. "In monadism, individuals shouldn't interact with one another, unless they do so with consent and care. [...] Monads avoid the implicit violence of random encounters. [...] The expansive liberal individual eats itself and is challenged by the self-sufficient monad" (Niermann 2024: 18, 21).

consuming publics curious of the other and curious in the other. (Ibrahim 2018: vii)

Further, Ibrahim claims that "the commodification of the self in this era of extreme self-curation and its co-mingling with capital symbolises exploitation of the human self and spirit while asserting a rhetoric of empowerment where the screen is presented as a democratising force for all" (2018: 4). Following this train of thought, the very act of reading – when conducted on screens – becomes part of the exploitation of readers (users) Ibrahim writes about. In her analysis of the identity-curation mechanisms, she looks at social media autobiographical narratives as essential products and tools of capitalism that is much more preoccupied with user control than user liberation and the democratization of discourse it claims is the main ambition of social media. While I rely on Ibrahim's argument here, I have chosen to study Instagram autobiography for another reason, too: to observe textual-performative structures and to study the textualisation of life and the digitization of reading as characteristic factors in social media narratives.[4]

Arbitrary and hardly representative for the astounding variety of texts available in Instagram, the choice of analytical material I make here might raise some doubt. Is Instagram a textual medium? Do we read Instagram material rather than watch it? To what degree are these synonymous activities? How

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[4] In his analysis of the textualisation of intimacy in social media, Kaźmierczak combines observations inspired by Guy Debord with a semiotic approach, and claims that "textualization becomes a process of transforming everyday life through signs (including digital signs as basic ones) and communication styles into a performance, a spectacle that is governed by the laws specific to the media and the communities that use them" (2015: 221). He connects textualisation (writing, reading) with capitalism when he observes that "communicative capitalism cannot [...] exist without the textualization of everyday experiences. [...] In the perspective of communicative capitalism, each user has the tools and opportunities to express their own opinions, from which they create stories – texts about themselves, about others" (2015: 217). This is supported by the earlier claims of Mejias, who wrote that "communicative capitalism does not stop people from expressing themselves but forces them to express themselves continuously" (Mejias 2013: 21).

do reading and watching overlap? I have proposed elsewhere (with B. Miceli and R. Zgierska – 2022) that (book) reading resonates as a prominent germinative intellectual activity that continues to influence the ways we perceive texts of culture (and ordinary messages) throughout our lives. Hence, some practices characteristic of literary reading styles and competences are employed in the reading (processing) of other forms of texts and messages.

There are other potential problems with the choice of material I have made here. For instance, to what degree does the autobiographical narrative of this local Polish instagrammer seem to be more representative of larger tendencies in the social medium than, say, the account of a globally recognizable "author"[5] who, perhaps, communicates in English rather than Polish to a global rather than local audience? Why would this individual account in this specific genre, with its specific thematic preoccupations be telling about the mechanism of reading in a medium that welcomes many other genres of texts, and, more importantly perhaps, offers a whole array of texts of various lengths and complexity levels that do not belong to any one specific genre at all? Why would the study of the Instagram account of a DIY and home decor influencer be instructive on how we read texts in social media in general? I deliberately choose an Instagram persona whose creative efforts attract the attention of relatively large audiences but who would hardly be considered original, unique, or influential enough to be preoccupied

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[5] Viewed in line with Michel Foucault's notion of author as a function of discourse, authorship in Instagram is an interesting instance of "the rules of author-construction" (Foucault 1979: 287). Foucault claims that "the coming into being of the notion of the 'author' constitutes the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas". The rise of instagrammers as aspiring "authors" – practitioners of specific types of discourse characteristic of the social medium they disseminate their publications in, and prominent figures whose social stature results directly from their creative activities – is confusing for literary scholars, perhaps, but not at all surprising to the sociologists of Internet or to digital marketers, who both confirm that the dissemination of discourses and the "proliferation of meaning" (Foucault 1979: 292) in digital media is most effectively practiced through autobiography (cf. Ibrahim 2018).

with meaning-making, policy, political agendas or ethical considerations. Such ambitions are absent from the text discussed here. And so are attempts at subverting aesthetic conventions, or at what could constitute any sense of avant-garde, experimental form. Instead, the analysis presented below relies on two assumptions in its choice of textual material: that there are numerous Instagram texts that are analogous in their composition, and that there are numerous Instagram texts that do not systematically present themselves as texts the way this one does – as a complex, continuous conglomerate of signs about a relatively homogenous subject.

3.   Marzena, MM, MM's narrative

Marzena Marideko is a Polish instagrammer (@marzena.marideko), whose account focuses on her family life, parenting, and the professional activities related to her account that she claims is about "Handmade Home Decor". Marzena is 37, lives in a detached house in Warsaw, Poland. She has a husband, a teenage son, and a baby. The house and the garden – and their aesthetics – are a major object of interest of her account, which connects the presentation of her handmade products with a focus on her life and personal biography. On 23rd October 2024, the account contains 5648 posts published since February 2015. She is followed by 807,000 users, and follows 721. The reels she has saved in her profile belong to the following categories (named in Polish and in English without any specific rule): "2months baby", "Deski", "Jesień 2024", "Taras 2024", "1month baby", "Baby gym DIY", "3 weeks baby", "2weeks baby", "Poród - 1 week", "baby room", "Q@a ciąża", "Tulipany", "Wianki cennik", "Taras 2023", "workshop", "Wianki ceny", "Advent inspo", "DIY Donice", "DIY Doorsidelite", "DIY-fireplace", "Wianki jesienne", "Cro2023", "Cro2023 2", "Skywalk Biokovo", "Small terrace", "DIY Vase", "New DIY", "Snowman", "DIY - ławka", "DIY wianek", "DIY ZaraLamp", "DIY dynapoducha", "Dreamcatchers", "DIY tv room", "DIY Bedroom", "DIY wallet", "Bieszczady",

"DIY chandelier", "Xmas 2021", "Dec.2021", "DIY xmastree", "DIY xmascake", "Xmas 2020", "Xmas 2019", "Jesień2021", "Garden", "DIY balcony", "DIY komoda", "Przepisy", "Winter 2021", "Happy New Year", "winer wallpaper", "Let it snow", "DIY łańcuch", "2GórskaOsada", "GórskaOsada", "Święta tuż tuż", "DIY choinki", "DIY dune", "Perfect weekend", "Giełda Bronisze", "Terrace 2020", "DIY Dreamcatchers", "zadaj mi pytanie", "symulator lotu", "autumn", "DIY dynie złoto", "Kotor- 2", "Kotor-Montenegro", "Dubrownik", "Mostar- BiH", "croatia3", "croatia2", "croatia", "mojaszwajcaria2", "mojaszwajcaria", "Terrace", "Dog Adoption", "Terrace cinema", "Budapest 3", "Budapest", "Budapest 2", "Milan/Samsung", "DIY blanket", "Energylandia", "Seeblogers" [original spelling].

Seen in their entirety, these categories (with some exceptions) are organized in a temporal order and follow the logic of seasons, holidays, and events in the life of MM,[6] as well as offer insight into the range of products she sells or helps to sell. They are representative of the thematic preoccupations of the narrative: family life, material objects, the safety and security of the home, the charms of manual work, travel, self-development, and the relationships with other Internet personas. There are some apparent paradoxes in the way MM navigates through these themes – for instance, the simultaneous celebration of recycling and consumerism, and the focus on the importance of family relationships synchronous with the constant preoccupation with the needs of MM's business operations and self-presentation. These contradictions do not seem to impact the general form the large narrative takes (perhaps they are in no way exceptional when compared to extratextual norms). The visual aesthetics of the publications is coherent and relies on the systematic use of the same colour palettes, similar shots,

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[6] I shall use the initials MM to mean the character-protagonist that is presented in the narrative rather than the actual person Marzena Marideko. A distinction traditionally made in the analysis of the literary text, it is essential for the understanding of the dissociation of person and discursive function that Instagram autobiographies essentially rely on.

similar tone of voice (in writing and in speech), as well as the same narrative tensions. The coherence hardly comes as a surprise if we realise that a vast majority of the material is set within the spaces of the home; at the same time, the systematic use of the same motifs and of coherent aesthetics shows MM's intended personality as diachronic (Strawson 2004)[7] and the narrative as reliable. "Autobiography in 5648 episodes (and counting)" would perhaps be an adequate subtitle for MM's narrative. The narrative reveals itself beyond the posts: it is essentially a multimodal narration – presented in words, photographs, videos, and combinations of these offered in stories, comments, and beyond the Instagram account.

In "stories", the relationship between narrating time and narrated time (Scheffel, Weixler and Werner 2014) is indicative of the sharp focus MM keeps on consecution, continuity, and authenticity defined as the insistent sharing of immense amounts of information. In her "stories" on 24th October 2024, she narrates the minute activities of her day (feeding the baby, the moods of the baby, the baby yawning, cooing, and looking at the camera), shares information on what her husband does in his wood workshop, and presents the Halloween decor of her garden. She links her historical reels about DIY posters, and meditates on the happiness parenting has provided her with. On 25th and 26th November 2024, she reports on a photoshoot she has organised for her baby, republishes photographs known from earlier posts, loops recordings of child toys and sunset (in the form of a boomerang of the same shot she has presented before), and expresses her elation at the birthday wishes she has received from her followers. She invites interaction and comments, and does celebrate input from users. Further com-

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[7] "The basic form of Diachronic self-experience [D] is that one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future—something that has relatively long-term diachronic continuity, something that persists over a long stretch of time, perhaps for life. I take it that many people are naturally Diachronic, and that many who are Diachronic are also Narrative" (Strawson 2018).

ponents of MM's autobiography are added at regular intervals in a variety of formats. While opulence, plenitude, and relative excess are characteristic of the aesthetics of the physical objects and spaces she presents, continuity, consistency, and redundancy are fundamental features of the rhetoric of how that presentation is organized.

4.   Eventfulness

A striking feature of MM's narrative is the use of events (type I and type II), non-events, and pseudo-events.[8] The distinction into type I and type II events was proposed by Peter Hühn (2009), and described in the following way:

> Both categories are characterized by the presence of a change of state—the transition from one state (situation) to another, usually with reference to a character (agent or patient) or a group of characters. The difference between event I and event II lies in the degree of specificity of change to which they refer. Event I involves all kinds of change of state, whereas event II concerns a special kind of change that meets certain additional conditions in the sense, for example, of being a decisive, unpredictable turn in the narrated happenings, a deviation from the normal, expected course of things, as is implied by event in everyday language. Whether these additional conditions are met is a matter of interpretation; event II is therefore a hermeneutic category, unlike event I, which can largely be described objectively. (2009: 80–81)

In this model, all events are hermeneutic categories – their specific nature and function in the text, as much as importance to the reading process, are constructed rhetorically through the nexus of textual and readerly dynamics (Phelan 2007). To put it differently, some events are prominent, and some are not – and the distinction matters to the process of reading.

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[8] More on the distinction between these notions can be read in Wojtyna (2018).

Non-events, in turn, are all parts of narrative that are not related to happenings – e.g. descriptions, dialogue, monologue, static shots in film, repetitions, etc. I have written about such static components of narrative elsewhere, claiming that they create "an alternative for the generally accepted predictive nature of narrative based on causality and change" (Wojtyna 2015: 121). Whenever we observe non-eventful components of narrative, we ought to remember that "the stasis of the world model or character identity does not necessarily result in stasis in the reading process – with its temporal character any act of reading is related to a specific narrative progression and dynamic" (Wojtyna 2015: 123). I want to iterate these arguments here and claim that even if the general discourse of social media autobiographical narratives seems to be promoting individual incidents and tellable pieces of the narrators' lives, the use of non-eventful passages is crucial to the act of reading as it offers material for the interpretation of character: in that material, "the status of particular attributes of a character" (which are inferred from non-eventful segments of the text) "is updated: attributes become dimensions, which, in some cases, are converted into functions" (Wojtyna 2015: 123). Paradoxically, then, it seems that even the non-eventful segments might add to the impression that the autobiographical narrative is dynamic and rich in tellable material – that it is specifically presented because of its eventful, extraordinary nature. Wolf Schmid recognizes this feature of narrative when he writes: "Whether a text is descriptive or narrative in nature depends not on the quantity of static or dynamic segments in it, but on the function which they have in the overall context of the work" (2010: 5). How the overall context of Marzena Marideko's narrative employs these nuanced interrelations is discussed below.

The third category has been defined by Daniel Boorstin:

A pseudo-event [...] is a happening that possesses the following characteristics:

(1) It is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it. Typically, it is not a train wreck or an earthquake, but an interview.

(2) It is planted primarily (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being re- ported or reproduced. Therefore, its occurrence is arranged for the convenience of the reporting or reproducing media. Its success is measured by how widely it is reported. Time relations in it are commonly fictitious or factitious; the announcement is given out in advance 'for future release' and written as if the event had occurred in the past. The question 'Is it real?' is less important than, 'Is it newsworthy?'

(3) Its relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous. Its interest arises largely from this very ambiguity. Concerning a pseudo-event, the question 'What does it mean?' has a new dimension. While the news interest in a train wreck is in *what* happened and in the real con- sequences, the interest in an interview is always, in a sense, in *whether* it really happened and in what might have been the motives. Did the statement really mean what is said? Without some of this ambiguity a pseudo-event cannot be very interesting.

(4) Usually it is intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The hotel's thirtieth-anniversary celebration, by saying that the hotel is a distinguished institution, actually makes it one. (Boorstin 1992: 11– 12)

To paraphrase Boorstin's argument, a pseudo-event is not an event in the strict sense even though it is shown as one or perceived to be one. As such, it is a peculiar form of a signifier without the signified. While in the light of fictionality theory it might seem inappropriate to perceive the third category as more staged (produced, fabricated for make-believe) than any piece of any other narrative, it is specifically that "stagedness" (simulatedness, virtuality, inauthenticity) of the culture that pseudo-events are characteristic of that attracts Boorstin's criticism, and that displaces genuine interest of readers in factual or fictional happenings perceived as turbulent transformations (as transitions from one state to another) with their interest in the continuous stimulation with empty signs (*signifiant sans*

signifié). I have claimed elsewhere that eventfulness in general, and the proportion between the three kinds of eventfulness phenomena in particular, are indicative of the preoccupation of social media narratives with attention management rather than with meaning-making or communication maxims (Wojtyna 2018). Instead, compositional principles that promote regularity, frequency, and repetitiveness of the components of story material (Instagram publications and authorial activities) are all centred around contact and response. As a result, the anchoring of identity-curation in the banal that Ibrahim (2018) writes about is made possible. But it is hardly the celebration of the banal, the mundane, and the ordinary as the opposite of the eventful that influences the apparent eventfulness of many autobiographical social media narratives. On the contrary, it is the staging of the ordinary and the mundane as eventful – and the subverting of the traditional parameters of tellability that serve as foundational of Instagram autobiographies. I shall now proceed to explain the implications of these assumptions for the reading of Marideko's narrative.

Targeted at soliciting response, the Instagram autobiography of MM is a conglomerate of events, non-events, and pseudo-events. All three categories seem to be important for the autobiography, and are distributed with a fairly equal proportion. They all stimulate the reader to continue searching for "tellable", "attention-worthy" bits of narrative material despite the fact that, in accordance with extratextual norms (including the general paradigms of storytelling), much of the material scarcely meets the criteria for eventfulness or tellability. These parameters are best defined by Wolf Schmid, and include the following: facticity, resultativity, relevance, unpredictability, effect, irreversibility, and non-iterativity.[9]

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[9] Hühn applies Schmid's parameters of eventfulness to his distinction into event types I and II: "First, facticity and resultativity are specified as necessary conditions. Eventfulness, that is to say, requires that a change actually take place (rather than being simply desired or imagined) and that it reach a conclusion (rather than having simply begun or being in progress). These

With this theoretical background in mind, one wonders: could MM's autobiography be approached with the intention of "reading for the plot" (Brooks 1992)? The generally low eventfulness of the narrative (little happens), when seen in the light of the paradoxically high intended tellability (there's lots of talk about what seems to be highly uneventful material) and the relatively systematic engagement of readers, all seem to suggest that the biography of Marzena is not predominantly read for highly turbulent changes of state but, instead, for minor changes in the otherwise ordinary, uneventful biographical narrative. The celebration of minor changes – and the presentation of them as worthy of the attention of readers – seems to highlight the overall insistence on the importance of long-term continuity and coherence rather than of development and restructuring. However, the regularity with which Marzena publishes texts about her life is related to the assumed motivations inherent in the story material that, it might be assumed, contains tellable material (if it did not, why would anything be published at all?).

Much of the textual material contradicts that assumption. Recurrence and repetition are characteristic strategies MM employs, and hardly any component of her narrative is unpredictable. The transformations of the space of her home she claims to be worthy showing are all reversible, and the relevance of the activities she engages in to the larger biography of hers is low or simply difficult to trace. In other words, large portions of MM's narrative do not meet any criteria of eventfulness. On the contrary, it discourages event-centric readings in favour of singular actions and activities that, while deprived of fundamental

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binary conditions are supplemented by five properties that can be present to different degrees and must also be displayed by a change, if it is to qualify as eventful in the manner of a type II event. Changes, that is to say, are more or less eventful depending on the extent to which these five properties are present. Specifically, the criteria are those of relevance (significance in the represented world), unpredictability (deviation from what is expect- ed, from the principles of the general order of the world), effect (implications of the change for the character concerned or the narrated world), irreversibility (persistence and irrevocability of the change's consequences), and non-iterativity (singularity of the change)" (Hühn 2009: 89).

existential value, offer an ersatz of transformation, a sense of pseudo-change. The implications of low eventfulness for the process of reading MM's narrative are complex. First of all, if the reader perceives MM as the peddler of "intentionally generated, allegedly tellable and only apparently eventful manifestations of bogus narrativity" (Wojtyna 2018: 135), they might certainly begin to doubt the ethics of what is told and how. Nothing in the responses to her narrative seems to suggest that kind of critical reading, though. On the contrary, neither the narrator nor the narratees seem to notice the dubious ethical dimension of consumerism MM celebrates, nor of the promotion of individual purchase choices to the status of tellable moments in the biography of an individual. Moreover, if eventfulness in the strict sense of the word is not an organising principle of MM's narrative, and neither is plot, the reading of her Instagram autobiography does not rely on the principles of curiosity, suspense, and surprise that Meir Sternberg (1993) has defined for narrative. What curiosity, suspense, or surprise could we expect of an account that systematically presents the same with a difference? Instead, reading consists in the managing of similarity, analogy, remix, or reworking.

5. Multimodality

The reading of Marzena Marideko's Instagram autobiography constitutes a gradual process of decoding the identity of a subject as it is being revealed and shown to be experienced by the subject itself ("shown to be experienced" is perhaps a key phrase here). The fabricated nature of the material is in no ways concealed (the presentation is ostensibly staged, edited, and curated) yet it maintains the aesthetics of naturalness and authenticity thanks to the multimodality of presentation and the multiplicity of components it is built of. For the implied reader, who navigates through all modes in which the narrative is presented (text, image, sound, gesture, hyperlink in posts, reels, stories, and comments), and perhaps goes beyond the medium

of Instagram itself to search for additional segments of MM's biography (in Tiktok, Facebook, and online portals that cover the lives of celebrities), the (ideal, intended, implied) act of reading transforms into a never-ending loop of "search-and-click-and-interpret" activities. There is an astounding amount of material to deal with, and that material is scattered through posts (text and image), stories (text, image, sound, gesture, hyperlink), reels (as above), and comments (text, icon, emoticon, hyperlink), as well as through other platforms and media. In some cases, the narrative unfolds in other people's accounts (e.g., Marideko's husband's). Despite regularity and high frequency, there is no routine as to when a given sequence is published (when it becomes available for further reading), and when there is no new content to be expected. MM seems to upload material at will. When, in a post of 17th October 2024, MM declares that more information about a given event in her life (about an activity she has engaged in) is presented in her "stories", she redirects attention to another component of her biography – one that, even though published synchronously with the post, has an entirely different status: it is ephemeral, temporary, only designed to last (to be accessible, "readable") for a few hours. Thus, she writes a double narrative about the same parts of her biography – both pieces differ in terms of form, but refer to the same temporality and the same narrative coordinates. The reader is required to redirect attention without leaving the fictional reality of her narrative. The shift in subject matter is often accompanied by a shift in the mode of presentation.

The resulting sense of immediacy is a key aesthetic outcome of the reading process here: the reader is encouraged to believe the life of MM is not only complex, but also being lived right now as they scroll and swipe. A post, a reel, a video, a telling comment – there is always another segment of the narrative to be discovered. Even though MM does not engage in live streaming, the systematicity and nuanced presentation of her life story material seems to produce an illusion that things are, indeed, happening live – and her life is being lived on display, ready for

consumption. Fabrication is effectively eliminated as a dominant aesthetic feature; instead, authenticity and immediacy appear to be key.

The multimodality of online autobiographical narratives strengthens the intended tellability of the material through the replication of the same, or similar, content across platforms. When MM shows a new cushion she has bought, she hardly ever does it once and in one medium only. She will take a photo of it, and publish it as a post. She will record a reel to show how the interior of her home has changed with the new cushion in it. She will add a segment to her stories devoted to the cushion, and perhaps ask her audience if they like the embroidery. Similar content will land in her Facebook and Tiktok accounts, too. The resulting impression is that of a major subject matter (a prominent event) that, in accordance with rhetorical principles of legacy media, is being covered with all possible diligence, and shown from a variety of angles for the best convenience and judgement of the audience. Inflated out of proportion, the purchase of a new cushion becomes that prominent event, a major component of her autobiographical narrative, a central element of the semiosphere (Lotman 1990) of MM's produced self (Ibrahim 2018) specifically because it takes a major portion of narrating time (and reading time) – even if its relevance to the larger autobiography is less clear.

6. Lacunae

I have claimed above that the high frequency with which the reader is offered new portions of MM's autobiographical material might produce an illusion of continuity and immediacy. With relatively high saturation (Doležel 1998: 169–184), it is tempting to assume – perhaps to maintain the suspension of disbelief – that the narrative is comprehensive and offers detail on the totality of relevant happenings from MM's life. That assumption, as theoreticians and readers know, is tempting but wrong. The design (UX and UI) of Instagram imposes limitations on

narrative continuity, "diegetic overkill" (Riffaterre 1990: 7) and "reality effect" (Barthes)[10] through the maximum length, quality, and size of the uploaded chunk of narrative information. To put it differently: it appears that Instagram's formal features render any profound sense of uninterrupted continuity to be unattainable, however frequent the posts and however intensive the narrator's activity. Since elisions are inherent features of narrative in general and Instagram narratives in particular, the reader is confronted with substantial lacunae (gaps) about the story material they are trying to reconstruct from the discourse. Very much like in the reading of a literary text[11], these lacunae pose an interpretive challenge to the reader, and might directly translate into aesthetic judgements. Since Instagram narrators seem to be well aware of all the above nuances, lacunae are, in this sense, something more than just zero-value absences of textual signals. They might very well serve as intentional omissions that contribute to the composition of the text and, therefore, to the experience of reading. That is, at least, what the reading of our analytical material seems to suggest. Let us now observe how the reading of MM's narrative is affected by gaps.

Inherent in the confrontation of the reader with the text (Iser 1980: 107), lacunae might be the product of narratorial selectivity (MM the narrator decides not to offer certain details about

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[10] Writing in a similar vein, Doležel describes the inevitable "gappiness" of narrative in the following way: "It would take a text of infinite length to construct a complete fictional world. Finite texts, the only texts that humans are capable of producing, are bound to create incomplete worlds. For this reason, incompleteness is a universal extensional property of the fictional-world structuring" (1998: 169).

[11] Meir Sternberg makes observations about the literary text that seem pertinent to our analysis of how social media narratives are read: "The literary text might be conceived of as a dynamic system of gaps. A reader who wishes to actualize the field of reality that is represented in a work, to construct (or rather reconstruct) the fictive world and action it projects, is necessarily compelled to pose and answer, throughout the reading process, such questions as, What is happening or has happened, and why? What is the connection between this event and the previous ones? What is the motivation of this or that character? To what extent does the logic of cause and effect correspond to that of everyday life? and so on" (Sternberg 1993: 50).

some portion of the story material), authorial inactivity (Marzena Marideko the author does not take the position of MM the narrator for some time), readerly selectivity (the reader skips certain portions of the story material), or readerly inactivity (the reader does not visit the profile). How do we account for the lacunae that arise in our individual act of reading if we fail to follow all the time? How are these lacunae made sense of? These questions seem to confirm that Wolfgang Iser's notion of "reader response" and Roman Ingarden's "indeterminacy" are as relevant to the reading of Instagram narratives as they are in the domain of literary texts. In both groups of texts, the reading process consists in the completion of some gaps, and the omission of others. This process, constitutive of text as a phenomenon that depends on the dynamics of textual signals and of reader response, is perhaps a most universal answer to my original question: "what is reading?". In the case of MM's narrative, the origin of lacunae in the four sources indicated above translates into the following conclusions the reader arrives at: 1) MM's narrative is relatively homogenous in terms of its thematic preoccupations and the aesthetic means employed; there is hardly any reference to subjects other than home décor, family, beauty, and pleasure; no political agenda is alluded to (other than the consumerist capitalist enterprise MM implicitly endorses), and no news from the extratextual world is mentioned. Analogically, there is no incompatible visual material – no dirt or mess at home, no imperfections. In other words, nothing escapes curation. Everything is edited to perfection, with the occasional exception of spelling, perhaps. 2) As MM bids farewell to her audience whenever she plans a period of inactivity, she seems to highlight her devotion to the audience and the impression that no detail will be omitted as she intends to report at a later date on whatever she will be doing while she is away. 3) Skipping some portions of the material is a natural process in a narrative that is so heavily reliant on repetition and recurrence on the one hand, and so complex in terms of multimodality and the sheer amount of information provided. 4) Periods of readerly inactivity

might be easily compensated for as MM's narrative contains numerous redundancies and only some rudimentary plot. With narrative progression scarcely reliant on events, gaps can effectively be omitted with the hope that Marzena is still herself, and, to put it crudely, nothing has really changed because it really never does in MM's narrative.

With all the processual nuance discussed here, another well-known dilemma should be confronted – one that will allow us to clarify one of the essential differences between the reading of a literary text and of an Instagram one. That difference is related to the obligations gaps put on the reader – the kind of cognitive effort they demand of whoever is reading. To show that difference I want to stress the fact that lacunae are the primary, essential characteristics of social media narrative not only because any narrative inevitably has to rely on them, but also because the reading process for the social media is constituted in the perception of fictional narratives as indicative of how the authentic lives of actual people are lived. This has been proven to cause distress to users (readers) as they tend to compare their own continuous, apparently lacunae-free biographies (the lives they live) to those edited constructs (the lives they read) (Ibrahim 2018, Han 2015). At the same time, this specific feature of social media narratives – the presentation of marketable synopses and eventful (or pseudo-eventful) compressed syntheses rather than the totality of experience – is the primary power of social media as capitalist vehicles for identity production and identity consumption. In other words, while the reading of literary narratives might pose interpretive challenges to the reader in the form of lacunae, the use of indeterminacy in social media narrative generates a more complex nexus of tensions: gap-filling is a response to the aesthetisation of "raw experience" aimed at the formulation of consumable biographical narratives that could make people click, scroll, and click again. Too many egregious lacunae pose a threat to that continuity of experience; too much decoding and critical reading might result in the questioning of the consistency and appeal of the story material. In

other words, gaps are there to stay, and missing information to be screened out for good. Lacunae are not a cognitive challenge in this sense; they are a condition of the capitalist enterprise that abhors difficulty. To put it differently still, if MM's narrative contained detail that departed from the systematically coherent aesthetics of her narrative (for instance, prominent events that would establish strong narrative threads, or any forms of de-familiarisation that could deautomatise perception in line with the postulates of Shklovsky), her autobiography would violate the rules established for it by the platform conventions. As such, it would become radically unreadable.

7. Conclusions

Is understanding an important part of the reading of Instagram narratives? Do autobiographies we read in social media encourage the completion of egregious lacunae, the decoding of textual signals, the reconstruction of causal connections, or the interpretations of actions as prominent changes of state? This article has analysed the eventfulness, multimodality, and gappiness (the use of lacunae) of an Instagram narrative to show that intended tellability, illusion of immediacy, and systematic elision are constitutive of the reading process in the social medium that has been characteristically associated with the image-centric appeal of contemporary culture. Immediacy and the illusion of uninterrupted continuity promote Instagram autobiographies as sites of identity-curation and identity-reading in a model that engages readers in a textually mediated para-social relationship – that is, the reliance on the text not as a generator of meaning but as a guarantee of illusory, perfunctory contact. It hardly matters, then, that plot-centric, argument-centric, or description-centric readings are made impossible by either the medium, or the narrator. What matters is the attentive attitude of the returning consumer, and the continuous production of texts-selves offered for consumption in the act of reading social media narratives. In this model, "the relationship between the

self and capital enters a complicit arrangement where the insatiable appetite for non-events and non-news drives an economy of attention seeking and deriving pleasure from the banal" (Ibrahim 2018: 57). Thus, the implied reader of Instagram does not intend to read it all – or to understand it all. They have no ambition to arrive at a comprehensive understanding; the narrative does not solicit such an ambition. Instead, social media narratives exploit their reader's capacity to be continuously engaged in the para-social reliance on the digitally mediated narrative to offer continuous, readily available reading material that, perhaps, offers respite from the resistant, recalcitrant text of actual life itself. Escapist as it always is, reading in Instagram imitates some functions of the reading of a literary text: it offers transportation opportunities, comforting aesthetic experiences, and cognitive tasks to engage in. These tasks, however, are not predominantly about sense-making, world-making, or, to put it differently, the secondary or tertiary decoding I described above. Part of the capitalist enterprise, they consist in the maintaining of contact and the mobilisation of attention that the platform relies on through its technological affordances. After all, it seems, every medium and every technology defines its own kinds of reading.

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